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Abstract

This thesis is a study of liberal Islam in Indonesia. In particular, it is an examination of how freedom and reason have been expressed in the Mu’tazilite movement of the 8th century, in the writings of the 20th century Indonesian Muslim scholar, educator and neo-Mu’tazilite Harun Nasution and in the principles and program of the Liberal Islam Network formed in Jakarta in 2001.

According to Asaf Fyzee, who in all probability first coined the term ‘liberal Islam’, freedom is humanity’s greatest gift. Writing in 1963, he asserted that Islam as a religious doctrine does not allow freedom of thought and that unless it does so, the faith will continue to be fossilized. Noted scholars of liberal Islam, Charles Kurzman and Leonard Binder, have also observed that there is a perception that freedom and Islam are not compatible.

It will be argued here that in fact freedom and reason have occupied a significant if often unorthodox position in Islam since at least the 8th century in the theology of the Mu’tazilite movement. It is the Mu’tazilites who should be the starting point for any study of liberal Islam rather than developments in the faith since the 18th century, upon which scholars such as Binder and Kurzman have focused. Mu’tazilite liberal-rational theology was of little influence in Islam by the 13th century and received minimal attention, if any, in Indonesia until the late 1960s when it was restated by Harun Nasution. Finally, a similar theology and orientation in the faith has been given a radical, practical and prominent expression in the archipelago, especially in its capital city Jakarta, by the Liberal Islam Network from 2001.

In general the literature on liberal Islam has ignored or understated the role and importance of the Mu’tazilites and the Indonesian liberal Muslim Harun Nasution. In addition the Liberal Islam Network has only been in existence for eight years and as such has attracted limited academic attention in the English speaking world, especially here in Australia. This thesis aims to expand our understanding of this discourse on freedom and reason in Islam. It asserts the connection between freedom and reason as proposed by Aristotle and later by the Mu’tazilites who were influenced by Greek philosophy.

It will be argued that a liberal rational theology offers much potential for Islam, as it does for all religions, in confronting the challenges of ever changing contexts in history, culture and geography, as well as dealing with issues such as democracy, human rights, gender equality, social justice and pluralism. It will be shown how this theology and these ideas have been and
are being expressed in Indonesia through the writings and teaching of Harun Nasution and the principles and program of the Liberal Islam Network.

This thesis will also examine the degree to which the ideas of liberal Islam have been absorbed and adopted by the current generation of younger activists. Presently these ideas are the preserve of a metropolitan, highly educated elite and my interviews with mostly young self-confessed liberal Muslims will reveal the extent to which they embrace a liberal, rationally based faith.

Finally, it will be argued that ideas of freedom and reason within Islam need to be defended and extended in the face of the increasingly prominent profile of religious conservatism and fundamentalism. There are convincing historical precedents for a liberal position within the faith. While these ideas are controversial, unorthodox and sometimes provocative, they should be permitted and encouraged. If freedom and reason are not exercised and expressed they can be more easily emasculated and suppressed.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

the thesis comprises only my original work towards the M.A.

due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

the text is approximately 30,000 words in length, exclusive of glossary, bibliography and appendices as approved by the Faculty of Arts.

Signed...............................................................................(Philip John Gill Bool)
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Notes

All years quoted are common era.

Words marked with an asterisk (*) on their first use are included in the Glossary. Foreign proper nouns are written normally and other foreign words are italicized. The meanings of foreign words are either given in the text or elaborated in the Glossary. Spelling variations of words used in quotations, especially those of Arabic origin such as Shari’a and Asharite, have also been included in the Glossary.

Some Arabic words, such as jihad and Islam have been naturalized into English, while for others such as Qur’an and Mu’tazilite I have added glottal and guttural stops (‘). There is some variation in the spelling of Indonesian proper nouns resulting from the fact that in 1972, Indonesia and Malaysia changed their previous spelling conventions (old spelling) to create a unified system (new spelling). The names of Indonesians born prior to this date can vary from old spelling, for example, Soekarno and Soeharto, to new spelling, Sukarno and Suharto.

All translations from Indonesian into English are my own, using A Comprehensive Indonesian-English Dictionary by Stevens and Schmidgall-Tellings. Direct, sometimes edited quotations from the interviews in Chapter Four have been translated into English in the text and a transcription of the original statements in Indonesian has been included in Appendix 1. Details of the interviews (dates, places and minimal individual information) can be found in Appendix 2. In accordance with ethical considerations pseudonyms have been used for all those interviewed for the research in Chapter Four. A CD-rom of the original interviews has been lodged with the University of Melbourne together with this thesis.
Glossary


Abbasids – The second dynasty or Caliphate of the Islamic Empire which succeeded the Umayyads. Abbasid rule lasted from 750 to 1258. It is referred to by some Muslim scholars and commentators as ‘the golden age’ in the faith.

Ahmadiyah, Ahmadiyyah – A heterodox sect within Islam founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908) in India. He proclaimed himself as the Mahdi or rightly guided one, who had been appointed by God to reform and restore Islam. Many orthodox, Sunni Muslims regard the Ahmadiyah as heretics. The sect has been banned in Pakistan since 1984 as un-Islamic. In 2008 in Indonesia, as a result of pressure from conservative and fundamentalist Islamic groups, the Government decreed that followers of Ahmadiyah were prohibited from spreading their beliefs. The decree also orders the 200,000 Ahmadiyah in Indonesia to turn to the beliefs of mainstream Islam. However the Government stopped short of banning the sect. In 2005, the M.U.I. had declared the sect as heretical. As a result, followers of Ahmadiyah have been subjected to physical and verbal attacks from various Muslim groups who want the sect proscribed. Other groups such as JIL, support the rights of Ahmadiyah to practis their faith, claiming that the Constitution guarantees their right to do so.

Ash’ari, Ash’ariyyah, Ash’ariyyah, Asharites, Ash’arism – one of the four mazhab or schools of theology in Islam. Founded by Abu-l-Hasan Ali al-Ashari (873-935). He was a polemicist against the Mu’tazilites and he united philosophical methods with traditional discourse, returning Islamic theology to what was considered the true tradition. He is considered to be the founder of orthodox, Sunni theology.

Caliph, Caliphate – The Caliph was the head of the Islamic community - elected, appointed or hereditary. The Caliph was regarded as the successor to, or substitute for, Muhammad. The Caliphate is the office, jurisdiction or empire of the Caliph.
Darul Islam – The name of an Indonesian political movement which in 1948, declared Indonesia a Muslim state subject to Islamic law. In various forms it has been in opposition, sometimes violent to the Indonesian Republic ever since.

Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia – Indonesian Council for the Propagation of the Islamic Faith. Set up in 1967 by Mohammad Natsir to advance Islam in Indonesia. In recent years it has become more fundamentalist and reactionary in its outlook.

Hadith, Hadis, Hadits – speech or report in Arabic. Collections of reports of the deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. These reports are used as a basis for Islamic law, Qur’anic interpretation and early Islamic history and lore.

Hanafi – One of the five Islamic Schools of Law based on the teachings of Abu Hanifa (d. 767). This school gave a greater emphasis to reason as opposed to literalism in interpreting the law than the other schools. It is the dominant school in the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia and Turkey.

Hanbali – One of the five Islamic Schools of Law based on the teachings of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d.855). This school relies on an interpretation of Islamic law based on a more literal reading of the texts of the Qur’an and Sunnah than the other schools. This school of law is predominant in Saudi Arabia.

Hijab also Jilbab – Arabic for veil. A Muslim woman’s head covering that exposes only the face. Worn as an outward sign of Islamic piety, although it can also be worn as an expression of cultural identity or fashion.

I.A.I.N. – Institut Agama Islam Negeri (State Islamic Institute). Part of the tertiary system of higher educational institutes for Islamic studies operated by the Indonesian Department of Religion. There are fourteen of these throughout Indonesia with faculties of Islamic culture, law, education, principles of religion and propagation of the faith.

Ijtihad – Intellectual striving or endeavour by Muslim scholars to derive judgements, rules or laws from the texts of the Qur’an and Sunnah based on reasoned interpretation of the texts to keep them alive and consistent with intellectual, political,
economic, legal, technological and moral developments in society throughout history and according to different cultural contexts.

**Jemaah Islamiyah** – A jihadi Islamic Southeast Asian terrorist network set up by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba’asyir when they broke away from Darul Islam in the early 1990s.

**Jihad** – Arabic: striving. Used to describe the personal struggle to be a better Muslim as well as a just war to defend the faith.

**Jihadis, Jihadists** – Used here to describe those Muslims who, in the present, global political context, believe in the justice and necessity of defending and extending the faith by military or other violent means.

**Kalam** – means ‘speech’ or ‘dialectic’; applied to Islamic scholastic theology.

**Khawarij, Kharijites, Kharijis** – in Arabic the ‘seceders’. A theological position in Islam which traces its origins to around 657. The Kharijites believed that any Muslim regardless of ethnic background or social status could be the Caliph. They had a puritanical and uncompromising view of the faith and held that anyone who did not believe as they did was an infidel. The Kharijites held that a mere profession of faith was not enough to make one a Muslim and that one could lose one’s status as a Muslim by committing a sin. They were in opposition to the Murji’is.

**Maliki** – One of the five Islamic Schools of Law, based on the scholarship of Malik ibn Anas (d. 795). He tended to support a literal reading of the text over reason in determining the law. He especially relied on the practice of the Prophet and the original faith community at Medina as the most authoritative sources of legal interpretation. This school is most dominant in North and West Africa.

**Masyumi, Masjumi – Madjelis Sjuro Muslimin Indonesia** – The Consultative Council of Indonesian Muslims. The major political party of an Indonesian Muslim group in the 1940s and 1950s. It represented the ideas of modernist Muslims and was strongly supported in West Java and parts of the Outer Islands of the archipelago. One of its leaders was Muhammad Natsir (1952-59). The Party was banned by Indonesia’s first
President, Soekarno, in 1961, partly because of perceived links to regional rebellions against the Indonesian National Government in 1958.

*Mazhab, Madhab, Madzab* – ‘movement’ in Arabic – used to refer to the four major schools of Islamic law in Sunni Islam; the Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shafi’i. The word can also be used for one’s doctrine, creed or philosophy and so has been applied to theological schools in Islam such as the Murji’ites, Kharijirites, Asharites, Mu’tazilites, Maturidis, Shi’ites, Qadaris and Sunnis.

*Maturidiyah, Muturidiyyah* – Named after al-Maturidi (d.934) this is one of the two orthodox Sunni schools of theology. This theology is quite similar to that of the Asharites except that for the Maturidis God punishes or rewards humans according to their deeds, whereas the Asharites believe that God’s will is unfathomable in these matters.

*Mecca* – the holiest city in Islam, located in what is now Saudi Arabia. Mecca is the object of the annual pilgrimage or Haj, one of the five pillars or ritual obligations of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca and received his first revelation there in 610.

*Mihnah* – Arabic: test, trial. Refers to the inquisition imposed by the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma’mun (786-833) to test his subjects’ adherence to the Mu’tazilite belief that the Qur’an is created and not eternal. This inquisition lasted from 827 to 850.

*Muhammad* – The founder of Islam, born in 570. Received the revelation of the Qur’an through the intermediary archangel Jibril. Muhammad is regarded as the final prophet by orthodox Sunni Islam.

*Muhammadiyah* – Founded in Indonesia in 1912, the Muhammadiyah organisation represents the modernist Muslim outlook with a membership of around 30 million. Involved in religious, educational and social welfare activities.

*Murji’is, Murji’ah* – in Arabic postponement or deferment. A theological position which developed in Islam in opposition to the Kharijis. The Murji’is believed that Muslims who committed a sin did not cease to be Muslims, that a person’s belief should not be
based on their actions, but on their words. This theological position was attractive to many Muslims from the 7th century on and formed the foundation for the development of orthodoxy in the faith or Sunni Islam.

*Nahdlatul Ulama* – The Renaissance of Religious Scholars, Indonesia’s largest Islamic association founded in 1926 with around 50 million members, mainly consisting of traditionalist *ulama* and their *pesantren* communities. It has been the main advocate of traditionalist views, that is, views which seek to preserve classical Islamic scholarship and certain aspects of folk religion such as mysticism and seeking the intercession of Muslim saints. However, this has been gradually changing as younger, better educated members begin to influence the movement.

*Pesantren* – an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia, led by an *ulama*, mostly linked to N.U. and rural based. In the past *pesantren* provided a traditionalist Islamic education, though this has been changing in the past three decades with an increasing focus upon modern, secular subjects as well as religion and Arabic language.

*Qadari or Qadariyyah* – from the Arabic *qadar*, ‘power’ or ‘will’. A minority group of Muslim theologians who upheld the notion of free will against the advocates of predestination who were the majority during the Umayyad Caliphate.

*Qur’an* – The primary scripture of Islam which Muslims believe was revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad through the medium of the archangel Jibril (Gabriel). Muslims believe the Qur’an was a miracle and it serves as a guide for human conduct.

*Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabian style of Islam* – The Saudi Arabian ruling royal family follow a version of Islam known as Wahhabism, named after its founder Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1787). Wahhabism is a puritanical, fundamentalist interpretation of Islam relying on literalist readings of the Qur’an and Sunnah and very strict enforcement of Shari’a law and public morality. Wahhab branded all who disagreed with him as heretics and apostates, allowing him to declare holy war or jihad on other Muslims. This tendency of intolerance toward its opponents, even if they are Muslims, is still a feature of Wahhabism. Saudi Arabian wealth and power deriving from oil
revenues has helped increase the influence of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam throughout the world.

*Shafi’i, Syafi’i* – One of the five Islamic Schools of Law based on the scholarship of Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi’i (767-820). For adherents of this school, Islamic law should be based on the Qur’an and the Sunnah. This is the predominant school of law in Southeast Asia.

*Shari’a, Shari’ah, Syari’a, Syari’ah, Syari’at* – The path, the way or the road set by God and communicated by the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad for Muslims to follow to achieve salvation. The term is often associated with Islamic law.

*Shi’a, Shi’ites, Shi’i, Shi’ah* – The partisans of Ali. They believe the family of the Prophet Muhammad and his descendants should be the leaders of the Muslim community. About ten percent of Muslims are Shi’a, most located in Iran. They have developed a distinctive theology within Islam, believing for example that the Qur’an is created unlike the Sunni majority who believe it is uncreated.

*Sunnah, Sunna* – The way of the Prophet Muhammad; writings and traditions describing his beliefs, behaviour, style of life and religious observances.

*Sunni* – Arabic: follower of the Sunnah – The orthodox position in Islam, reflecting the position of the majority of Muslims in matters of faith, theology, creed, history, interpretation of the Qur’an and jurisprudence. Sunni Muslims believe religious authority descends from the Prophet and from his companions as opposed to the Shi’i, Shi’ah, Shi’a or Shi’ites who believe authority derives only from the Prophet Muhammad, his family and his descendants.

*Taliban* – Arabic: seeker, student. The Taliban is a radical Sunni movement which governed Afghanistan from 1996 until late 2001 and implemented an extremely strict fundamentalist interpretation of Shari’a law, influenced in part by Saudi Wahhabism, during its six year reign.

*Taqlid* – Arabic: literally ‘to hang around the neck’, evolved to mean ‘imitation’. Often interpreted as ‘blind acceptance’ of the teachings of a school or *mazhab* or
unchallenging, strict acceptance of past patterns of behaviour or Qur’anic interpretation.

_**U.I.N.**_ – Universitas Islam Negeri - State Islamic University. New name of the former I.A.I.N.

**Ulama** – Scholars of the Islamic religion and generally acknowledged leaders of the community in matters of the faith and in local religious education.

**Ummayads** – The first dynasty or Caliphate of the Islamic Empire which lasted from 661 to 750.

**Usul** – Arabic: principle or root. Used for the five principles or beliefs of the Mu’tazilites.
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Chapter One – Introduction

1.1 Background

During the Abbasid* Caliphate* in eighth century Persia, a group called the Mu’tazilites emerged from within the Islamic faith. They believed in a rational God who created human beings as free agents. In twentieth century Indonesia, the Indonesian scholar and influential academic, Harun Nasution, promoted these Mu’tazilite ideas of reason and freedom in Islam through his teaching and leadership in the Jakarta State Islamic Institute (Institut Agama Islam Negeri – I.A.I.N.*) and in various publications and textbooks. These ideas influenced a generation of young Indonesian Muslim scholars educated in the I.A.I.N. system, particularly but certainly not exclusively in Jakarta. In 2001 the younger generation of Muslim scholars and activists, including some who had been educated in the I.A.I.N. system, founded the Liberal Islam Network. In fact around half of the core founders of the Network were graduates of the Jakarta I.A.I.N. (El-Dardiry 2005: 23). This organisation was the first self-styled liberal Islamic group formed in Indonesia. Its main aim was to develop and promote a liberal and rational interpretation of Islam (*Jaringan Islam Liberal* website 2009).

These three developments provoke two questions: What is the place and significance of reason and freedom within Islam? How is this reflected in the Mu’tazilite movement, the ideas and work of Harun Nasution and the Liberal Islam Network? What follows is an attempt to answer these questions. At a superficial level an association between Islam, reason and freedom may not seem immediately obvious, a point noted by Western scholars such as Leonard Binder (1988: 2 and 299) and Charles Kurzman (1998: 3 and 7). However, this study will demonstrate that there is nothing new or surprising in a liberal-rational orientation in Islam such as that currently espoused by the Liberal Islam Network and that ideas crucial to this position have a significant historical precedent in the faith. To this end, the Mu’tazilite movement,
Harun Nasution and the Liberal Islam Network will be studied to demonstrate how freedom and reason have informed their beliefs, values, ideas and actions.

At the outset it is necessary to explain how the concepts of freedom and reason in religion are related, especially in the context of the theology and ideas of the Mu’tazilites, Harun Nasution and the Liberal Islam Network. The basic concern of the liberal-rational orientation reflected in the position of the Mu’tazilites, Harun Nasution and the Liberal Islam Network is freedom - freedom which is linked directly to reason. According to this position, God has created humans as free agents and does not pre-ordain or determine what they do. In addition, under the influence of Greek philosophy, the Mu’tazilites stressed the crucial relationship between freedom and reason. To paraphrase Aristotle: to reason is to choose (Aristotle, from the *Nicomachean Ethics* in Audi 2006: 50-51) and to be able to choose is to be free.

The implications of the liberal rational position in Islam can be seen clearly in the attitude of Muslims to the Qur’an*, the holy text of their faith. Text-based religions such as Islam present an immediate dilemma for their followers. Most or all of the faithful would believe in the divine inspiration of the text, but is the holy book the literal, pre-ordained, eternal and inerrant word of God, or is it a creation in time and space which is open to interpretation, debate and rational inquiry? Is it literally true for eternity or is its truth metaphoric and could parts of the text even become obsolete and no longer applicable? In Islam this dilemma has led to two approaches to textual interpretation or *ijtihad*.

One approach sees the text, the Qur’an, as infallible while human understanding of it is problematic. The other sees the text as a creation in time and space and as therefore subject to fallibility, a position taken by, for example, the Muslim scholar Asaf A. A. Fyzee (1963: 104). In Islam the former approach is more orthodox while the latter is more liberal (cf Binder 1988: 244) and, as Fyzee states, “unorthodox” (1963: 89-90). The liberal approach is free from authoritarianism, tradition and convention, with a non-literal, open minded attitude to belief and textual interpretation based on reason and individual freedom (Trumble and Stephenson 2002: 1583-1584). As will be seen in
Chapter Four, the Indonesian Muslims who were interviewed for this thesis understood the word ‘liberal’ in these terms.

On the other hand, the orthodox and, to a greater extent, the fundamentalist responses tend toward a literal acceptance of the holy text or creeds and the maintenance of their inerrancy by authority or tradition (Trumble and Stephenson 2002: 1050). If there is fallibility, it is not in the text itself but in the human interpretation of it. This is the orthodox basis for *ijtihad* which allows for some re-interpretation and contextualization of the holy texts. Thus, Muslim scholars may offer different interpretations of the text which in itself is still seen as inerrant and eternal. As the influential Muslim scholar and teacher of the eighth and ninth centuries, Ibn Hanbal, asserted when commenting on the infallibility of the holy text, the Qur’an is “...uncreated from cover to cover” (Glasse 2001: 334).

The Mu’tazilites of the eighth century provided a liberal-rational template for Islamic theology, contrary to the position which became orthodoxy after their demise. They asserted that God created humans as free agents, that the holy text of Islam, the Qur’an was created and therefore limited by its historical context and was consequently not an eternally perfect document and that God was above all a rational being. Influenced by Greek philosophers, in particular Aristotle (see Chapter 2), the Mu’tazilites believed that reason is good, that to reason is to choose and that to choose is to be free. This is the definition of ‘liberal’ used in this thesis. Other definitions discussed in the Literature Review (Section 1.4 below), have generally not stressed the crucial role of reason in the liberal position and consequently have not seen the Mu’tazilites as so important. This theological connection between reason and freedom is of vital significance in this context. The Mu’tazilites, described as ‘the defenders of reason in Islam’ by Martin, Woodward and Atmaja (2003), were proto-liberals whose theology and philosophy directly influenced Harun Nasution. There are also key commonalities between their ideas and the basic ideas and aims of the Liberal Islam Network, although members of the network do not explicitly claim a direct link with the Mu’tazilites or Nasution. This study will focus on the key similarities and suggest some possible indirect links that can be inferred from connections between Network members and Harun Nasution’s teachings.
Studies of Islam in Indonesia have rarely dealt with these inter-related matters for several reasons. First, the Mu‘tazilites were an obscure movement in Islam and their theology was seen as highly unorthodox if not heretical by the Sunni* majority. For example, Martin van Bruinessen has noted that Mu‘tazilite theology is a taboo subject in Nahdlatul Ulama*, the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia (Van Bruinessen 1996: 144-145). Second, the Mu‘tazilites have not been generally considered in the literature on liberal Islam and it will be argued that this is an oversight. Third, until the late 1960s in Indonesia, a liberal orientation in Islam was rarely discussed using the specific term ‘liberal Islam’. Fourth, the ideas and influence of Harun Nasution were limited to the field of higher education and were not widely publicised or well known outside academic circles. Fifth, the Liberal Islam Network was not founded until 2001 and has a small membership base. Crucially, the Network has rarely openly acknowledged the importance of the Mu‘tazilites or Harun Nasution to their version of liberal Islam. Finally, as has been implied, Mu‘tazilite theology and ideas were, and still are, highly controversial if not dangerous in the Islamic world in general and Indonesia is no exception to this, as will be shown in the following chapters of this study. Scholars of Islam in Indonesia have rarely focused on the theology and ideas of the Mu‘tazilites and the neo-Mu‘tazilite Harun Nasution, nor have they explored the similarity of their positions to that of the Liberal Islam Network at any length.

1.2 Thesis Arguments and the Significance of the Study

The main argument of this thesis is that freedom and reason have a significant place within Islam and one way of demonstrating this is through a study of the Mu‘tazilites, Harun Nasution and the Liberal Islam Network. This argument will be further developed with three propositions. The study of liberal Islam should begin in the eighth century with the liberal-rational theology proposed by the Mu‘tazilite movement. This theology was introduced, developed and institutionalized in Indonesia from the 1970s on by the neo-Mu‘tazilite Harun Nasution. In 2001 a similar but independently developed liberal-rational perspective in Islam was expounded by the Liberal Islam Network.
This study is significant for five reasons. Generally, studies of liberal Islam have traced the origins of this position in the faith to the beginning of the eighteenth century rather than one thousand years earlier. Harun Nasution has received relatively little attention as a significant pioneer of liberal Islam. Rarely has the Liberal Islam Network been studied in the context of the liberal-rational theology of the Mu’tazilites and the ideas and teaching of Harun Nasution. To date research into the ideas, motivation, perceptions and attitudes of rank and file liberal Muslims has been very limited. Finally, the study of a liberal-rational position in Islam is important to balance a one dimensional image of Islam and Muslims which has been portrayed in the Western media and is promoted by some Muslim organizations themselves which claim to speak for the one true Islam. As has been stated by Harun Nasution (1996: 33) and a founder of the Liberal Islam Network, Lufthi Assyaukanie (2007: 97-98), the Prophet Muhammad* was reported as saying that “Differences among the believers are a blessing” (Nasution 1996: 33). In fact, Islam is a multi-dimensional faith encompassing many positions including liberal-rational theology.

The main focus of this study will be the similarity between the liberal-rational position of the Liberal Islam Network, (Jaringan Islam Liberal/JIL), the Mu’tazilite movement and the Indonesian academic, Harun Nasution. The Liberal Islam Network, formed in February 2001, was chosen because it is the first self-styled liberal Islam organization in Indonesia. The Mu’tazilites provided a liberal-rational perspective within Islam from very early in the history of the faith. Limited but significant references made to the Mu’tazilites by Indonesian liberal Muslims will be explored to trace the influence of this group. In addition, a study of the ideas and theology of Harun Nasution is, it will be argued, essential to any examination of liberal-rational Islam in Indonesia.

Finally, liberal-rational Islam in modern Indonesia has emerged in the context of increasingly literalist, exclusive and strident versions of the faith in Indonesia and overseas, so the critics of liberal Islam will be examined. These critics have written extensively on liberal Islam and some have actively, and occasionally violently, demonstrated against liberal groups.
Of course there are many Muslims who would describe themselves as progressive, rational, inclusive, pluralistic, democratic and tolerant, who belong to the main Islamic organizations in Indonesia, the Nahdlatul Ulama (‘Renaissance of the Religious Scholars’) and the Muhammadiyah*. However these two organizations are umbrella groups and are not specifically dedicated to the liberal cause. According to Gregory Barton, N.U. for example, covers a wide range of views from liberal to conservative Islamic thinking (quoted in Bush 2009: 12). The role of modern, liberal, progressive Muslims in Indonesia who have been associated with these and other large Islamic organisations has received significant scholarly attention. Studies of Islam in Indonesia from the 20th century on, while not always mentioning the specific term ‘liberal Islam’, have extensively discussed modern, progressive interpretations of the faith as well as its more traditional variants (see Barton 1995, Barton and Fealy 1996, Hefner 2000, Hooker and Saikal 2004, Baso 2006 and Feener 2007, for examples).

In fact Fealy, Hooker and White have noted that the task of categorizing the Indonesian Islamic community has evoked “strong debate” (2006: 39). According to them there are five categories of Indonesian Islam: abangan, santri, traditionalist, modernist and neo-modernist, with the latter three being sub-sets of santri. Santri Muslims are those who adhere to the tenets and practices of classical Sunni Islam as opposed to the abangan whose beliefs and observances are far less devout and more or less nominal (Federspiel 1995: 232). Fealy, Hooker and White have observed two defining characteristics of the traditionalists: their respect for the authority of medieval Islamic scholarship and their tolerance of local customs (2006: 40). This respect for traditional scholarship has at its extremes led to an unquestioning acceptance of decisions and precedents set in the past or taqlid*, the opposite of ijtihad. The aspirations of the traditionalists in Indonesia have been represented by Nahdlatul Ulama. The Modernists, sometimes referred to as reformers or revivalists, view the traditionalists as deviating from the original teachings of Islam and tending toward a blind adherence or taqlid to medieval dogmas. The Modernists aimed to revive a stagnating and corrupted faith by returning to the original sources of Islam, the Qur’an and the Sunnah and by learning from Western advances in education, science and politics. The main modernist organization in Indonesia is the
Muhammadiyah (Fealy, Hooker and White 2006: 41). The last and newest category, neo-Modernism, “combines the knowledge and respect for classical learning with a receptivity to modern, including Western influences” (2006: 41). Members of both the Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama as well as other Muslim organizations, can be found in this latest classification.

Charles Kurzman has noted that the liberal Islam of the nineteenth century “is generally known by the rubric of ‘Islamic modernism’” (1998: 9). Liberal Islam in Indonesia in the twentieth century has been referred to as “neo-Modernism” (Barton 1995: 9). However, given the scope of this thesis, the following literature review will only focus on scholars who have referred specifically to ‘liberal Islam’ and who are seen as the pioneers of this position as acknowledged by its contemporary proponents and practitioners. Furthermore, the liberal Islam movement can be analysed from a perspective other than that of ‘traditionalism’, ‘modernism’ or ‘neo-modernism’. The focus of this thesis on the liberal-rational thought of the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution and the similarity of their ideas and those of the Liberal Islam Network is an attempt to take this approach.

1.3 Literature Review

Before discussing how studies of Islam in Indonesia have dealt with the similarities between the Mu’tazilites, Harun Nasution and the Liberal Islam Network in a liberal-rational context, we need to examine the origin of the general concept of ‘liberal Islam’. As has been noted above, only works which specifically use the term ‘liberal’ in the Islamic context and which inspired the soi-disant liberal Islam movement will be discussed. Professor of Indonesian and Malay at the Australian National University, Virginia Hooker (2004: 237-238), has observed that members of the Liberal Islam Network have been influenced by the works of Charles Kurzman, Leonard Binder, Albert Hourani and, above all, Asaf A. A. Fyzee in formulating their understanding of liberal Islam. Indeed these are the key scholars on what is specifically known as ‘liberal Islam’. They are the scholars mentioned by Luthfi Assyaukanie, one of the founders of

### 1.3.1 Liberal Islam

According to Nicolaus Harjanto (2003: 11) and Charles Kurzman (1998: 4), the term ‘liberal Islam’ was first used by Asaf Ali Ashgar Fyzee (1899-1981) in his work *A Modern Approach to Islam* (Fyzee: 1963). Fyzee, an Indian born Islamic scholar and jurist, looks to the birth of a newer “protestant” Islam in conformity with conditions in the twentieth century, “cutting away the dead wood of the past and looking hopefully at the future. We need not bother about the nomenclature, but if some name has to be given to it let us call it ‘Liberal Islam’” (Fyzee 1963: 104). According to Fyzee, the greatest gift of the modern world to mankind is freedom and, he continues, “what does Islam do, so far as religious doctrine is concerned? It closes the Gate of Interpretation…no freedom of thought is allowed” (1963: 107). He adds that Islam is fossilised. However, in his opinion, “Islam cannot thrive without freedom” (1963: 104).

His book is a call to Muslims to understand and interpret the Qur’an for themselves (1963: 110). His most radical proposal is that in addition to many Qur’anic verses being temporal and open to reconsideration and interpretation (1963: 103), certain verses, for example those relating to men being in charge of women, should be seen “as being no longer applicable in modern life” (1963; 104). Fyzee’s position is that the Qur’an should not be seen as a text “which imprisons the living word of God in a book and makes tradition an infallible source” (1963: 100). Finally, Fyzee believes that “After serving the cause of civilization for some seven centuries, Islam came under a shadow. Its spirit was throttled by fanaticism, its theology was gagged by bigotry, its vitality was sapped by totalitarianism” (1963: 112). He adds that it is only in the last two centuries that Islam has begun to free itself from these strictures (1963: 112). Fyzee does not mention the theology and ideas of the Mu’tazilites in his book, but as will be seen in Chapter Two, his case for a liberal-rational approach to the Qur’an is very similar to the Mu’tazilite position.
Continuing the idea that Islam only began to confront the issue of freedom in the last two centuries, in his 1962 work *Arabic thought in the liberal age 1798-1939*, the historian Albert Hourani argued that the liberal age in the Middle East commenced with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. One of Napoleon’s aims was to apply the principles of freedom and equality in Egypt (Hourani 1986: 49). Muslims responded by either rejecting or seeking an accommodation with these aims (1986: viii). Hourani’s main purpose was to show the relationship between Islamic modernism and Arab nationalism (1986: viii). In this context he examined the Islamic reformism and liberal secularism promoted by scholars like Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Rida (1865-1935). They called for the separation of religious and civil authority and for governments to protect the freedom of the individual (Hourani 1986: 343-344). Their calls for reform “took place under the stimulus of European liberal thought, and led to a gradual re-interpretation of Islamic concepts so as to make them equivalent to the guiding principles of European thought of the time” (Hourani 1986: 344). They reflected a feeling that Arabs and Muslims had to follow the Europeans so as to be their equals (Hourani 1986: 346).

Unlike Fyzee, Hourani made several direct, albeit brief references to the Mu’tazilites. He refers to them as representing “that early Islamic rationalism which had been first sponsored and then suppressed by the Abbasid Caliphs” (Hourani 1986: 142). According to Hourani, Muhammad Abduh, the one time Grand Mufti of Egypt (1889) and member of the Supreme Council of al-Azhar University in Cairo, believed that “Islam exalts reason and freedom, encourages progress, and rejects all intermediaries between man and God” (Hourani 1986: 372). Hourani acknowledged the significance of liberal-rational theology in 19th and 20th century Islam, without focusing in detail on its origins in the eighth century. It is also important to note that Hourani was not quite satisfied with the use of the word ‘liberal’ in the title of his book (Hourani 1986: iv). He was using the word to describe European ideas, which were not always about “democratic institutions or individual rights, but also about national strength and unity and the power of governments” (Hourani 1986: iv). Hourani’s work was not primarily about liberal Islam but about the reaction of Muslims in the Middle East to the influence of European ideas and colonialism.
In 1988, Leonard Binder’s *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development* Ideologies, in contrast to Hourani, focused more directly and uncompromisingly on liberalism in Islam and its possibilities. His book originated in a research project with the Muslim scholar and academic Fazlur Rahman, entitled ‘Islam and Social Change’ (Binder 1988: ix). In his introduction Binder states that “Islam and liberalism appear to be in contradiction” (1988: 2). He asks “whether the discourse of the Islamic liberals has not been a form of false consciousness” (1988: 5), a surrender of some Muslims to the European liberal paradigm which, as Hourani posited, emerged in the Middle East with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. Despite the post second world war collapse of European colonialism, according to Binder, Islamic liberalism continues to exist, but is in a shaky position (1988: 2). Binder defines liberalism as an approach which legitimizes a “diversity of opinions about opinion” (1988: 2) or freedom of thought. He is “primarily concerned with the emergence of a liberal Islamic discursive formation which poses a challenge to the existing scripturalist and fundamentalist alternatives” (1988: 10). Islamic liberalism promotes a rational discourse based on freedom of thought unbound by the literal reading of an eternal and inerrant religious text. Binder focuses on the relationship of Islamic liberalism to political liberalism (1988: 19). His main concern is to explore the possibility and viability of Islamic liberal government in the Middle East. He concludes that “Until the circumstances render the concept self-evidently meaningful to mass and elite alike, the prospects for Islamic liberalism will remain dim” (1988: 359).

Binder states that political liberalism is not indigenous to the Middle East (1988: 2). In fact, he later adds, “the practical example of the liberal West encouraged the liberal interpretation of Islam” (1988: 5). He does not acknowledge that the Mu’tazilites established a significant indigenous liberal-rational tradition in Islam. He does refer to the Mu’tazilites as exponents of rationalism in Islam (1988: 163). He notes that their failure is sometimes “taken as a reason why Muslims have fallen behind the Christians in the advancement of science and technology” (1988: 221). Binder does not see the Mu’tazilites as exponents of freedom, although he does note that it is the “bourgeois liberals’ who may regret that Islam rejected the Mu’tazila” (1988: 163). However he does not elaborate on these statements to any significant degree. Islam in Indonesia
rates only a relatively brief mention in Binder’s book and he makes no reference at all to Harun Nasution.

In 1998, Charles Kurzman, then Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina, produced an anthology entitled *Liberal Islam*. Kurzman collected and edited pieces written by thirty-two prominent Muslim scholars and activists including Fazlur Rahman, Ali Abd al-Raziq, Shabbir Akhtar, Mohamed Arkoun, Muhammad Iqbal, Nurcholish Madjid and Fatima Mernissi, on the theme of liberal Islam or, as he describes it, “a tradition that voices concerns parallel to those of Western liberalism” (1998: 4). His anthology covers a period from the 1920s to the 1990s and includes Muslim thinkers from, among other countries, Egypt, Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, Morocco, the United States, India and England.

According to Kurzman, it was only in the nineteenth century that liberal Islam began to distinguish itself clearly as such (1998: 8). Liberal Islam emerged out of an eighteenth century movement known as ‘revivalism’ which sought to rid Islam of unIslamic local practices and beliefs and return it to the original sources of the faith: the Qur’an and the recorded actions and examples of the Prophet Muhammad or the Sunnah*. Unlike the revivalists, the liberals sought to expand the practice of interpretation or *ijtihad* in order to find congruence between their faith and modernity (Kurzman 1998: 8); in short he aimed to show how Islam is “compatible with – or even a precursor to – Western liberalism” (1998: 6). Kurzman used ‘liberal’ as a descriptor of a position in Islam, unlike Binder who used Islam as a descriptor of a position in Liberalism. Binder was focusing on liberalism as a force which could help bring democracy and modernity to the Middle East via Islam, whereas Kurzman concentrated on Islam, which through indigenous liberal influences could confront and incorporate modernity and transform the religion itself.

In his introduction Kurzman, like Binder, begins by saying that “Liberal Islam may sound like a contradiction in terms” (1998: 3). His anthology seeks to belie this perception. Kurzman identifies three “modes” of liberal Islam (1998: 14-18). These modes are focused on the Shari’a* - Muslim law based on the Qur’an – and on the Sunnah - the divinely inspired practice and example of the Prophet Muhammad. The
first and most influential mode, according to Kurzman (1998: 14), is the liberal Shari’a. This position asserts that liberalism or freedom is specifically and divinely sanctioned by the Qur’an and the Sunnah and thus liberal Islam predates Western liberalism. Kurzman cites Muslim scholars who claim that the Qur’an contains the world’s first constitution, that the Prophet granted rights to non-Muslims living under Muslim rule, that the Qur’an prefigures methods of rational scientific inquiry and that the Shari’a establishes freedom of thought (1998: 14).

The second mode is called the silent Shari’a. It proposes that Muslims are free to innovate and adopt liberal positions on issues and subjects left open or not mentioned by the Qur’an and Sunnah. For example, the Qur’an does not dictate the adoption of any particular form of government, thereby allowing for the establishment of liberal democracies (Kurzman 1998: 15). Finally, the third mode, and the one Kurzman sees as being closest to Western liberalism (1998: 16), is the interpreted Shari’a; “In this view the shari’a is divine but human interpretations are conflicting and fallible” (1998: 16). For example, the Prophet Muhammad is quoted as saying that differences of opinion are a sign of God’s grace and that the Qur’an itself is capable of many types of interpretation (1998: 16). According to Kurzman, this mode is the least orthodox of the liberal positions and “orthodox scholars can only respond to the ‘interpreted shari’a by casting it out of the bounds of permissible debate” (1998: 18)

Kurzman does not refer to the liberal-rational theology of the Mu’tazilites in his introduction and he does not include any writing by Harun Nasution in his anthology. This is surprising given that, unlike Binder, who compared the thought of Muslim scholars with Western traditions, Kurzman proposed the opposite tack “to examine liberal Muslims in the light of Islamic tradition” (1998: 13). Why did he then neglect the liberal-rational tradition of the Mu’tazilites and the contribution of their modern Indonesian disciple, Harun Nasution? In addition, although Kurzman noted A.A.A. Fyzee’s formulation of the term ‘liberal Islam’ (1998: 4), he did not include any of Fyzee’s writing in his anthology. Kurzman does include pieces by two Indonesians: Muhammad Natsir and Nurcholish Madjid. Natsir never described himself as a liberal, while Madjid was a prominent progressive Muslim scholar who was comfortable being described as a neo-Modernist (see Barton 1995: 9). It is not clear why Kurzman ignored
the work of Nasution, especially given that, as will be shown, he was one of the most prominent and radical Indonesian exponents of the ‘interpreted shari’a’ mode.

1.3.2 The Indonesian Context: The Mu’tazilites and Nasution

Studies which follow the theme of liberal-rational thought in Islam from the Mu’tazilites through to Harun Nasution and the Liberal Islam Network are not common, one outstanding exception being Halid’s Ph.D. dissertation *Liberalisme Islam Indonesia* (2008), but many scholars of Islam in Indonesia have made reference to this issue, albeit in a relatively brief manner (see below). However, it must be noted that reason and freedom in Islam are major themes in the work and writings of many Indonesian and Western scholars of Islam. For example, this has been well documented by the Australian academic Gregory Barton (1995). Nevertheless, in this work, Barton only refers briefly to the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution. He includes the Mu’tazilites in his glossary, stating that they are regarded as heretical but that many progressive Islamic thinkers “have been challenged by aspects of Mu’tazilite thought, especially in the area of human responsibility and ‘free will’” (1995). However he does not pursue this issue further. Barton mentions Harun Nasution several times, stating that the progressive Muslim scholar Nurcholish Madjid was significantly influenced by, among others, Nasution (Barton 1995: 57). Elsewhere he describes Nasution as an outstanding modernist Muslim figure (Barton 1995: 374). He notes that Nasution played an important role in the development of the National Islamic Institute or I.A.I.N. Syarif Hidayatullah, attended by Nurcholish Madjid (Barton 1995: 388). However Barton does not give any detailed description of Nasution’s thought or comment on his changes to the I.A.I.N. curriculum and what the nature of his influence, if any, may have been on Nurcholish.

R. Michael Feener, Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, discussing the rational interpretation of Islam by Muhammad Abduh, refers to an “explicit rationalism of the kind sometimes referred to as Neo-Mu’tazilism” (2007: 44).
However Feener does not elaborate on this, apart from footnoting several authors who have dealt with the rationalization of Islamic religious thought, among them Harun Nasution. Elsewhere he notes that Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid consulted with Munawir Sjadzili (Indonesian Minister for Religious Affairs 1983-1993), on a textbook for students at I.A.I.N. Jakarta about the relationship between Islam and the State. This textbook, *Islam dan Tata Negara*, later published in English as *Islam and Governmental System*, mentioned sectarian interpretations of Islam, including Mu’tazilism (Feener 2007: 146). Feener provides no further detailed explanation of Mu’tazilism or the contribution and influence of Harun Nasution as a Muslim scholar and educator.

Martin van Bruinessen, Chair of Comparative Studies of Modern Muslim Societies at Utrecht University and of the international Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, has written of prominent progressive Muslim, Nahdlatul Ulama (N.U.) leader and ex-President of the Republic of Indonesia, Abdurrahman Wahid, that “He had expressed appreciation for Shi’a* Islam and the rationalist theology of the Mu’tazilah – both taboo in N.U. circles – and claimed that Islam need not be Arab but could legitimately be Indonesianized” (Van Bruinessen 1996: 145). Van Bruinessen provides no footnote or further explanation of this comment. What the Mu’tazilah and their rationalist theology are and the reasons they are taboo in Nahdlatul Ulama circles is not explained.

In his work *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, Professor and Director of the program on Islam and civil society at Boston University, Robert Hefner, makes only one reference to Harun Nasution and the Mu’tazilites. He describes Harun Nasution as returning home with a Ph.D. gained overseas and “preaching” a variant of “Mu’tazilah rationalism” (Hefner 2000: 110). In a footnote to this, Hefner provides some brief details about Nasution but nothing about the Mu’tazilites apart from the fact that they were rationalists. Also, Nasution was a teacher rather than a preacher and his reluctance to involve himself in public debate and controversy has been commented on by those who knew him: “Unfortunately, Harun did not like publicity so much and chose to avoid any controversy which could reach the mass media” (Halid
2008: 294). His main concern was with his students, academic studies and teaching (Halid 2008: 294 and Hidayat 1989: 295 & 298).

M.B. Hooker, Professor of Law at the Australian National University has commented in some detail on the ideas of Harun Nasution about reason and freedom in Islam (2004: 206-208). Hooker describes Nasution as a proponent of “rational Islam” (2004: 208) and notes his adoption of the Mu’tazilite position that one can know of God by reason, not just revelation (2004: 208). He states that as a lecturer and later rector of the I.A.I.N. Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, Nasution’s “contribution to Islamic education was, and remains, notable” (2004: 206). According to Virginia Hooker (2004: 206) “In Indonesia, Harun Nasution and others have reopened the possibilities which Mu’tazilite perspectives can offer modern thinkers” (2004: 243). She also believes that further study of the Mu’tazilites could inspire creative Islamic approaches to contemporary issues.

Harun Nasution and the Mu’tazilites in the context of Islam in Indonesia have been examined in great detail and significant depth by Martin, Woodward and Atmaja (2003); Saiful Muzani (1994); Fauzan Saleh (2001) and Halid (2008). These works, as well as a collection of writings celebrating Nasution’s seventieth birthday (Suminto 1989), will be referred to throughout this thesis. It must be noted that Saleh was one of the first scholars to connect the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution with the modern, progressive interpretations of Islam which began to emerge in Indonesia in the 1970s (Saleh 2001: see Chapter 2).

There is little reason to doubt Martin, Woodward and Atmaja’s assertion that “There is no evidence that Mu’tazili thought was ever taken seriously (in Indonesia) prior to Harun Nasution’s return from McGill University in the mid-twentieth century” (Martin et al 2003: 140). It is worth noting, however, that the Indonesian academic Deliar Noer has indicated that Indonesia’s first President, Soekarno, had an appreciation of Mu’tazilite philosophy and theology, quoting his statement that “many other Muslim countries have freed themselves from rigidity by giving renewed value to reason as in the era of the Mu’tazilah” (Noer 1980: 301). For similar references to Soekarno see also Halid (2008: 274) and Nasution (1996: 155). Muzani concluded that Nasution was
able to “advocate and disseminate the rational theology of the Mu’tazilah, and to influence thousands of the sociologically agrarian based students of the IAIN” (1994: 130). Not only that, according to Muzani, Nasution’s ideas and opinions have also been widely spread amongst the Muslim community and the intellectual elite (1994: 130). Saleh concludes that “it was only through the works of Harun Nasution that the notion of ‘rational’ theology became widely familiar to Indonesian Muslims” (Saleh 2001: 302).

1.3.3 The Indonesian Context: The Liberal Islam Network

Formed in 2001 in Jakarta, the Liberal Islam Network (J.I.L. – Jaringan Islam Liberal) has promoted freedom and reason in Islam as one of its raisons d’etre. This will be discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis. However a survey of the literature on the Network reveals little examination of any concept of a congruence of ideas between it, the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution, with the outstanding and recent exception of Halid’s *Liberalisme Islam Indonesia* (2008) which will be discussed below.

According to a lecturer at I.A.I.N. Syarif Hidayatullah, Muhamad Ali (2005: 21) and Ramy El-Dardiry, a Ph.D. student from the University of Twente, the Netherlands (2005: 8), the Liberal Islam network was initially formed to counter a perceived increase in Muslim fundamentalism in Indonesia in the 1990s. According to one of the founders of JIL, Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, “We’ve seen radical Islam grow militant, systematic and organized, while Liberal Islam has been unorganized, weak-seeming, not militant, not resistant and unassertive in giving voice to its perspective. The Liberal Islamic Network was in fact motivated by the appearance of these radical Islamic movements” (Munjid 2005: 28).

However, Munjid (ibid: 27), Harjanto (2003: 17, 42, 46 & 76) and El-Dardiry (2005: 16 & 35) acknowledge the roots of JIL in the ideas of Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid; that is, in what has been termed the neo-Modernist movement in Islam in Indonesia, comprehensively documented by Barton (1995). Generally, studies of JIL do not mention the role of the Mu’tazilites or Harun Nasution when discussing its origin
and ideas. Exceptions are El-Dardiry and Munjid. El-Dardiry noted in passing that “The philosophers under the name of the mu’tazilla are a frequently mentioned group by which many liberals are inspired and looked upon as an Islamic example of how reason and Islam are perfectly compatible” (2005: 13). Among those who “nourished the seeds of Islamic Liberalism during the first half of the Soeharto era in the 1970s” Munjid mentions Harun Nasution (2005: 12). He does not expand on this or give any further explanation.

Finally, the recent Ph.D. dissertation by Halid tends to confirm the main argument of this thesis - that any study of liberal Islam in Indonesia should include the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution. Halid’s thesis, Liberalisme Islam Indonesia was completed in late 2008 at U.I.N.* (Universitas Islam Negeri – State Islamic University) Syarif Hidayatullah, formerly known as I.A.I.N. Jakarta. Halid’s supervisors were the Rector of U.I.N., Professor Komaruddin Hidayat and Professor Bachtiar Effendy and an examiner was Professor Azyumadi Azra, all three variously regarded as sympathetic to a number of the ideas and causes of liberal Islam (Assyaukanie 2002: 36, 96 & 124, Azyumardi 2010 and Handrianto 2007: 96, 116 & 189). This dissertation, which will also be referred to in Chapters Two and Three, refers to Harun Nasution as one of the pioneers, if not the first proponent, of liberal progressive Islam in Indonesia (Halid 2008: 120). Halid takes the view that the founders of the Liberal Islam Network were successors of the liberal thought of their predecessors such as Harun Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid and were not just reacting to Islamic fundamentalism (2008: 131). Halid also devotes significant space in his thesis to detailing the influence of Mu’tazilite rationalism on Nasution (2008: 39, 44, 58, & 60-61). However, his explanation of Mu’tazilite philosophy and the history of this movement does not highlight the importance of freedom to it and the implications of this for the thought of Harun Nasution (see Chapter Two). Halid sees the Mu’tazilites as rationalists (2008: 39) but he does not make a connection between reason and freedom in their theology or explain why the Mu’tazilites were rationalists. Also, he does not explain how some of the important Mu’tazilite beliefs are connected to a liberal-rational perspective in Islam. He does mention that the Mu’tazilite belief in the Qur’an as being created leads to contextual and dynamic rather than literal and textual interpretation or *ijtihad*
Also, Halid makes a connection between the Mu’tazilites and the Liberal Islam Network (2008: 39). Halid’s thesis is a significant and novel development in the academic study of liberal Islam in Indonesia in that it gives prominence to the ideas, influence and role of the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution in this movement. However Halid does not acknowledge Saleh’s work on the Mu’tazilites, Harun Nasution and their connection to neo-Modernism in Indonesian Islam.

1.4 Methodology and Structure

The research for this study is based on critical reading augmented by fieldwork. Reading material consisted of books, magazine and newspaper articles, material from the internet, transcripts of radio broadcasts, academic papers and publications and material from the Liberal Islam Network. This material provided the information necessary to support, sustain and evaluate the main arguments of this thesis.

The fieldwork involved sixteen interviews with individuals who described themselves as liberal Muslims. The interviewees were selected with help from secretarial staff of two organizations - the Liberal Islam Network and the liberal oriented Paramadina Foundation and by the snowball technique. An attempt was made to gain a cross-section of ages and gender balance in the sample. Consent was gained from each interviewee and, because of the relatively small group, anonymity was guaranteed to the respondents. The research involved a recorded interview lasting up to half an hour and a written questionnaire for each participant. The aim of the interviews was to gain some insight into how the participants understood the concept and history of liberal Islam, why they considered themselves liberal Muslims and how they came to this position. They were also asked to evaluate the achievements and prospects of their liberal Islam and to respond to some basic questions about their faith. Finally, they completed a written questionnaire which dealt with their personal background, providing information about their family, education, employment, hobbies and aspirations. Comparative analysis of the findings produced important information for conclusions about the status and prospects of liberal Islam in Indonesia.
This study consists of five chapters. This first chapter has introduced the main arguments of the thesis, its significance, a literature review and the methodology and structure of the work.

The second chapter deals with the origins of the liberal-rational position in Islam in the Mu’tazilite movement beginning in the eighth century. A brief history of the Mu’tazilites, their ideas and their subsequent influence will be examined. This will be contrasted with much of the academic work so far on the origins of liberal Islam, which dates this tendency’s origin to the late eighteenth century and tends to ignore or be dismissive of earlier liberal propositions which emerged in the faith. Critical, in this sense, will be an examination of the work and ideas of Harun Nasution. It will be argued that the Mu’tazilites proposed a liberal rational theology for Islam, that Harun Nasution restated this theology in the Indonesian context and incorporated it in the curriculum of the State Islamic University system there and that he was a pioneer of Islamic modernisation and renewal, albeit from an unorthodox perspective.

Chapter Three deals with the history, ideas and significance of the Indonesian liberal Islamic organization which is the focus of this thesis: the Liberal Islam Network. Theology, Shari’a, pluralism, human rights, secularization, inclusiveness, gender equality and democracy are the main issues discussed and promoted by the Network and these will be examined in some detail. It also aims to show the varied influences on and origins of the Network’s ideas and principles and to indicate the areas of commonality between this organization and the ideas and thought of the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution. It will be argued that the Liberal Islam Network was the first self-styled ‘liberal’ organization in Indonesia which has attempted to publicise and implement a liberal rational agenda in Islam. In addition, criticisms of liberal Islam in Indonesia will be detailed to show the context in which the movement operates and the extent of its influence. It will be shown that the Network is a numerically marginal, metro-centric organization which has, and continues to evoke, significant controversy and opposition.

Chapter Four seeks to investigate some of the motivations, perceptions, beliefs and experiences of a limited sample of individuals who are connected to liberal
organizations, through the interviews conducted in Indonesia. Due to time constraints I was not able to interview a larger sample of people outside of the key organisations focused upon in this thesis and many of these interviewees are from similar circles of influence. However, the interviews reveal the extent to which some followers of liberal Islam are aware of the historical precedents of liberal thought in their faith, their commitment to and understanding of the cause and their awareness of the limitations as well as the importance of their movement.

The final chapter evaluates the achievements, failures and prospects of the liberal-rational position in Islam in Indonesia as reflected in the Mu’tazilites, Harun Nasution and the Liberal Islam Network. It will be argued that freedom and reason in Islam have been institutionalized in tertiary education in Indonesia, that liberal Islam provides a basis for Muslims to find congruence between their faith and modernity and that despite its numerical limitations, the liberal movement stands as a force for human rights, gender equality, democracy, tolerance and pluralism as well as being a bastion of freedom and reason within the faith, in the face of increasing militant fundamentalism and conservatism in Islam in the archipelago.
Chapter Two – Liberal-Rational Islam: the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution

2.1 Historical Background

What is the origin of a liberal-rational orientation in Islam? Is it a relatively modern phenomenon dating from the exposure of Islam to Western ideas and colonialism, in particular Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1789, which “shook the Muslim world” and “showed that Islam could no longer avoid European modernity” (Kung 2007: 414), or does it date back to the origins of that faith in the sixth and seventh centuries in the Middle East? What connection is there between this historical position and the present?

In all probability, according to Abdullah Saeed (2006b: 60-61), during the Prophet Muhammad’s time there were only rarely theological debates. “The Prophet also reportedly asked Muslims not to debate the nature of God” (Saeed 2006b: 61). However when the first non-Arab Caliphate, the Abbasids, came to power in Persia in 749, theological discussions or *kalam*, had already begun to develop in a way which led to a ground-breaking view of the Qur’an, if not a revolution, in the way some Muslims approached their faith. A liberal-rational blueprint was proposed for Islam, which predated such an orientation in Western Christianity by half a millennium.

According to a commonly told story (Saeed 2006b: 63-64), in Basra in modern day Iraq in the early eighth century, the well-known Muslim teacher and ascetic, Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), was discussing with his pupils whether a person who committed a grave sin could still be considered a Muslim. The orthodox view at the time was that the sinner was still a Muslim. While al-Basri thought about his answer, one of his students, Wasil ibn Ata, (d.749), became impatient and said; “I do not say that the person who commits a major sin is an absolute believer or an absolute non-believer. For me he is between two states (belief and unbelief). He is neither a believer nor an unbeliever.’ Wasil then left al-Basri’s study circle, at which the teacher reportedly said, ‘He broke
away from us.’ The word al-Basri used for this was i’tazila (broke away, seceded), from which it has been claimed, came the name Mu’tazila” (Saeed 2006b: 64). Al-Basri and his students were also known for believing that God created humans with free will to choose between right and wrong. Such a view was earlier proposed by a group in Islam called the Qadaris*, who challenged the orthodoxy of the time which stated that humans do not control their actions, but that they are predetermined by an omniscient God (Saeed 2006b: 8).

Wasil was joined in his withdrawal by a number of Hasan’s other students, including Amr ibn Ubayd (d.762). Wasil and Amr formed a group that later became known as the Mu’tazilites. Over the next five centuries, the Mu’tazilites developed, refined and expounded five theological principles which became the basis of their position in Islam. One of these was the original reason which caused Wasil and Amr to leave Hasan al-Basri’s group: that a grave sinner is neither a believer nor an unbeliever, otherwise known as the ‘intermediate position’. The other principles were: the absolute unity of God, divine justice, reward and punishment and the commanding of good and prohibition of evil (Saeed 2006b: 65-66). These principles will be explained in detail in the next section of this Chapter. Suffice to say, the most controversial belief of the Mu’tazilite rational theology was a corollary to the ‘unity of God’ principle: that the Qu’ran is created and not uncreated as had been and continues to be asserted by the orthodox, Sunni* majority in Islam. This principle is critically contentious even today. By the end of the age of Abbasid influence in the thirteenth century, the Mu’tazilites were no longer an intellectual force in Islam, only existing in remote areas of the Caspian region of northern Iran and in northern Yemen. From this time on, the spirit of Mu’tazilite rationalism was dormant but not dead. Indeed Harun Nasution (1996: 8) and Jonathan Lyons (2009: 201) believed it migrated to Europe. In the Muslim world “Mu’tazili texts would be read again centuries later by those seeking to find Islamic answers to the problems posed by modernity and change” (Martin et al 2003: 41).

If the first Islamic Empire, the Ummayads* (661-750), were inward-looking Arab desert kings, the second Empire, the Persian Abbasids (749-1258), were more outward-looking and cosmopolitan. “Under the Abbasids, the genius of the Persians fused with Arab-Islamic civilization to reach a first high point. Outstanding accomplishments in the
fields of medicine, science, literature, and art date from this epoch” (Glasse 2001: 11). During the Abbasid Caliphate, the Mu’tazilite school of thought reached its apogee. In fact, in 827 under the Caliph al-Ma’mun, the Mu’tazilite rational theology was adopted by the Empire and for about twenty-three years, the principle that the Qur’an was created became state orthodoxy which was tested by an inquisition or *mihnah**. The orthodox scholar and jurist Ibn Hanbal (780-855), was the most famous victim of this inquisition and suffered imprisonment for his initial failure to submit to the doctrine of a created Qur’an. Around 850, the next Caliph, al-Mutawakkil, reversed the inquisition and restored the uncreated status of the Qur’an, or in the words of Glasse “restored orthodoxy” (2001: 12). From then on, the influence of the Mu’tazilites began to decline. They became increasingly elitist and isolated from popular support (Kung 2007: 295). However, as has been noted, their impact continued to be felt until the thirteenth century, albeit in a limited way.

The Mu’tazilites introduced concepts from Greek philosophy and other sciences into Islamic theological discourse. The second Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur (754-775) had established a royal library in Baghdad, later known as the House of Wisdom or Bayt al-Hikma, where Arabic translations of classic works of Hindu, Persian and Greek scholars were collected (Lyons 2009: 63). Thus, works by Greek philosophers like Plato, Hippocrates, Galen, Euclid, Ptolemy and, most significantly, Aristotle would have been readily available to Mu’tazilite scholars (Nasution 1996: 131).

Important contributors to Mu’tazilite theological views were men such as Dirar ibn ‘Amr (d.815), a rationalist thinker who maintained the ‘intermediate position’ during the reign of the anti-Mu’tazilite Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid. Dirar may have studied with Wasil ibn Ata (Martin et al 2003: 27). Dirar was followed by his student Abu l-Hudhayl (b.752), who some modern scholars see as the consolidator of the Mu’tazilite theological school of thought (Martin et al 2003: 27). His ideas about physics and atoms (V. Hooker 2004: 243), anthropology and Qur’anic hermeneutics were so advanced as to astound no less a figure than the modern Christian theologian Hans Kung (2007: 283). Finally, ‘Abd al-Jabbar (d.1024), described by Martin, Woodward and Atmaja as the last great thinker and theologian of the by then waning Mu’tazilite school of thought (2003: 35), produced several seminal works on
Mu’tazilite theological discourse which discussed and defended a broad range of doctrines, in particular the five fundamental beliefs, which characterized this movement (2003: 59).

2.2 The Mu’taṣilites as Liberal Theologians

This thesis contends that the five principles of the Mu’taṣilites represent a blueprint for a liberal-rational theology in Islam. They are based on reason and choice, echoing Aristotle’s philosophy. The rejection of Mu’tazilite liberal-rational thought led in part to the situation where in 1789, Islamic governments were ill-prepared to deal with the onslaught of Western power initially based on principles of reason and freedom (also see Binder 1988: 221) which, it has been argued, was powerfully stated in the Islamic theology of the Mu’taṣilite era. For example, studies of the theology of the English poet and republican, John Milton (1608-1674) demonstrate how a liberal-rational approach to religion in Western Christianity based on Aristotelian notions of reason and choice was being asserted at the onset of the Renaissance (Lerner 2004: 187 and Fallon 2008: 5, 6 and 8). In fact, around five hundred years earlier, when Mu’tazilite liberal-rational theology had already experienced its zenith, the founder of the University of Paris, Pierre Abelard, described as a true Renaissance man centuries ahead of his time, was introducing logic and rationalism into theological study and “rediscovering” the classical rationalism of Plato and Aristotle (Horne 2002: 11-12).

As Harun Nasution has observed, Islamic ideas about rational theology shifted to Europe from the Middle East as early as the 12th and 13th centuries and returned to confront Muslims in the 18th century: “When the Muslim world came into contact with the West in the 18th century, they were astonished to witness its advanced development. They did not suspect that in fact Europe had learnt from Islam in the 12th and 13th centuries” (Nasution 1996: 8). The transfer of knowledge and technology from the Muslim world to Europe at this time has been described in detail by Jonathon Lyons, currently a researcher at Monash University, who has asserted that it was “Arab Aristotelians” who proposed “a peaceful coexistence of faith and reason” in the
Abbasid era and it is this which “stakes the Arabs claim as inventors of the West” (Lyons 2009: 201) This union of religion and reason was the outstanding feature of 

Mu’tazilite theology of the Abbasid Caliphate. What then was the liberal-rational basis of Mu’tazilite theology?

The first proposition or usul* in the Mu’tazilites’ theology was the absolute unity of God. They believed that God was pure essence, uncreated and eternal, to which no human attributes could be assigned. The majority of Muslims before and after the Mu’tazilite period ascribed various attributes to God. One of the most important in this context is speech. The Qur’an is the speech of God, therefore, for the orthodox believer, it is uncreated like God. According to the Mu’tazilites, this was compromising God’s unity. Put simply, they were concerned that the Qur’an (and one could add the Sunnah of the Prophet), would be seen as ‘God’ in much the same way as Christians see Christ and the Holy Spirit. Islam has always seen a danger of polytheism in the Christian dogma of the Trinity and yet, according to the Mu’tazilites, Muslims were putting themselves in a similar position by ‘deifying’ the Qur’an. “To say that the Qur’an is the divine uncreated Word which manifests itself in time in the form of Arabic speech, is equivalent to saying what Christians say about the Incarnation: that Christ is the divine uncreated Word who manifests himself in time in the form of a human being” (Saeed 2006b: 65). The Abbasid Caliph al-Ma’mun did not mince words when he described the belief that the Qur’an is uncreated as “This perverted opinion” (Esposito 1992: 72).

From the Mu’tazilite point of view, it is this ‘perverted’ opinion which has been the orthodox position in Islam since 850. It is this ‘perverted’ opinion which has allowed the literalist position to maintain its influence on orthodox Islam to the present. If the Qur’an is the uncreated, eternal word of God, then it cannot be tampered with. For the fundamentalist and the orthodox alike, the Qur’an is perfect; it is human understanding of it that is sometimes imperfect. That is the only door open for interpretation or ijtihad for a majority of Muslims. For the liberal-rational Muslim, the Qur’an is a creation just like humanity and is susceptible to imperfection. Asserting this view, the modern Indonesian Mu’tazilite, Harun Nasution “explicitly rejects the modernist position that the Qur’an is a ‘complete and perfect text’ including all that is
required for the development of modern society, scientific thought and technology” (Martin et al 2003: 166). This belief is the most controversial element of the Mu’tazilites’ theology and this will be dealt with in the next section of this chapter and in Chapter Three. It is interesting to note that the ‘createdness’ of the Qur’an is a belief still held by the Shi’ites, who comprise about ten percent of all Muslims.

The second usul, divine justice, affirms that God is just, good and reasonable and has created human beings who are capable of doing good or evil. God does not create evil and injustice. He only wills what is good for humans. However, humans are not his puppets; God has created them free to choose between good and evil and he has sent Prophets to earth to provide an example for humanity (Saeed 2006b: 66). The notion of human free will was a feature of Mu’tazilite theology which was already present in the Qadari view of Islam. The American orientalist and lecturer at the Hartford Theological Seminary, D.B. Macdonald (1863-1943) described the Mu’tazilites as “daring and absolutely free-minded speculators” (Macdonald 1965: 141). This belief in freedom was also controversial in orthodox Islam which, especially in Indonesia, was influenced by fatalism and a determinist notion of God’s all-powerful control and knowledge of human destiny (see Nasution 1996: 115, 119 & 162). According to Nasution, on occasions one could get the impression from Indonesian Islam that “It is as if God himself is like a dictator or Sultan of ancient times” (1996: 162).

The third usul was about the promise and the threat (Saeed 2006b: 66). Believers who obeyed God and repented of their sins would be rewarded in the afterlife and those who did not, even if they were self-confessed Muslims, were eternally damned. This again was, and is, highly contentious in orthodox Islam. According to the orthodox view, the Mu’tazilites were in effect asserting that God has no choice - he has to punish the unrepentant sinner. The orthodox Sunni belief is that God is all-powerful and merciful and mere humans cannot discern his mind. God can do whatever he wills. God can save an unrepentant sinner should he so choose. This usul was highly controversial, because it detracted from God’s absolute power. A day after the unrepentant Bali bombers, Amrozi, Imam Samudra and Ali Ghufron, who had murdered 202 innocent civilians (a number of whom happened to be Muslims), were executed by firing squad, the Indonesian Islamic oriented daily, Republika, editorialized
“We pray that all the sins of the three departed souls be forgiven by God the Almighty and Most Worthy of Praise” (2008: 6). This is simply a statement of orthodox Sunni belief. However, the Mu’tazilite position would be that God could not possibly forgive unrepentant sinners and, if the Bali bombers had not repented they were eternally damned.

Associated with this, the fourth usul, commanding good and prohibiting evil, stated that as humans have a God given capacity to reason, they ought to know good from evil, especially given that the Prophets sent by God provided a paradigm for the faithful (Saeed 2006b: 66). Who was to decide what was good and what was evil presented a problem upon which the Mu’tazilites could not agree (Saeed 2006b; 66). For some, religious leaders should decide, for others, it was the consensus of the community of believers who would be the final arbiters and for a third group, a combination of the two was the best method. In Shi’ite Islam, which was to some extent influenced by the Mu’tazilites, it is the religious leaders who decide. During the twenty year inquisition established by al-Ma’mun in 827, the authority of the Caliph, the political leader, was paramount. The literature does not provide decisive historical evidence of communal consensus as the ultimate power. In any case, the Mu’tazilites were convinced that reason was God’s gift to humanity, the exercise of which would provide solutions to this problem.

The fifth usul and the original principle which led to the formulation of the Mu’tazilite position was the intermediate state of the grave sinner. That is, the sinner who does not repent is regarded as neither a believer nor a non-believer (Saeed 2006b: 66). After death this situation would be resolved: “The intermediate position in this life resolved itself into the status of an unbeliever in the next (and everyone agreed that unbelievers would receive eternal punishment)” (Vasalou 2008: 6). There is a belief among some orthodox Muslims, that the Mu’tazilites were proposing a limbo-like state for unrepentant sinners in the afterlife, but this is not the case according to Vasalou (2008: 6). Again, this principle was contentious for the orthodox, in part because of a misunderstanding and in part because of a basic theological difference. The Mu’tazilites believed that the faithful were justified by deeds. For them “it is external acts that are the primary bearers of value and the ingredients of faith, possessing
decisive significance for one’s posthumous treatment” (Vasalou 2008: 7). Their orthodox opponents “gave primacy to the internal, cognitive act of belief in God’s unity as a criterion for faith” (Vasalou 2008: 7). The polemic over justification by deeds or by faith reflects the tension between reason and freedom and revelation in Islam and other religions, including Christianity. As rationalists, deeds were more decisive for the Mu’tazilites than a confession of faith based on spiritual revelation. For them “human beings cannot know God by the senses but they can know God by the mind” (Kung 2007: 287). Reason freely exercised rather than revelation alone was the path to knowledge of God for the Mu’tazilites.

While the Mu’tazilites did not use the word ‘liberal’ to describe this orientation, one of the main arguments of this thesis is that the Mu’tazilites were liberal, or at least proto-liberal, in all but name. Harun Nasution certainly saw their theology as liberal in tendency (see below and Chapter Five). The Mu’tazilites asserted that God was reasonable, that God created humans who were free to choose between good and evil and that humans should use the gift of reason to interpret the holy text, the Qur’an, which they regarded as a temporal creation which was nonetheless divinely inspired. Freedom, reason and choice are the hallmarks of this liberal theology in Islam. This was the position taken by Harun Nasution and, it will be argued, by the Liberal Islam Network. However in this context, the Mu’tazilites were implicated in a notoriously illiberal act: the inquisition or mihnah. In this act lay some of the seeds of their eclipse in the broader, orthodox Muslim community.

2.3 The Failure of the Mu’tazilites and its Implications

The Mu’tazilites had been an elite, opposition theology until the rise to power of the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma’mun (813-833). His interest in a synthesis of Greek philosophy and Islamic theology paved the way for the ascendancy of the Mu’tazilites under his rule. In 827, just five years before his death, the Caliph ordered that all religious scholars and jurists submit to the new dogma of the created Qur’an. Those who did not submit were dismissed and, in some cases, imprisoned and tortured. This policy
continued under the succeeding Caliphs; al-Mu’tasim (833-842), al-Watiq (842-847) and initially al-Mutawakkil (847-861). However, around 850, al-Mutawakkil reversed the inquisition or *mihnah* and reasserted what has been the orthodox position ever since: that the Qur’an is the eternal and uncreated speech of God (Kung 2007: 293-295). The Mu’tazilite theologians became increasingly marginalized. Their association with the inquisition permanently tainted their reputation. The alliance of proto-liberals with the State had ended in disaster. In Indonesia from the late 1960s, liberal Muslims began to reject the idea of an Islamic State and proposed another controversial principle: the ‘separation of Mosque and State’ and a process of secularization in Islamic societies. As the modern Indonesian Islamic scholar Nurcholish Madjid (d.2005) asserted in a 1970 speech described as a “bombshell” because it advocated secularization in a predominantly Islamic society (Barton 1995: 46): “Islam, Yes, Islamic Parties, No” (Madjid 2008: 226).

The implications of the failure of Mu’tazilite theology for the development of Islam since the ninth century have been noted, albeit briefly, by a diverse number of commentators and scholars. Fazlur Rahman (1982: 51-52) notes the influence of Mu’tazilite rationalism on two influential modernist Muslim scholars and teachers: Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898). According to Binder, the failure of the Mu’tazilites “is sometimes taken as the reason why Muslims have fallen behind the Christians in the advancement of science and technology” (1988: 221). Saeed observes that the failure of the Mu’tazilites led to the triumph of literalism and textualism in the interpretation of the Qur’an (2006a: 55). Akhtar, noting the power of fundamentalism, revivalism and activism in modern Islam, observes that, apart from the Mu’tazilites and Islamic philosophers associated with them, Islam has not had any liberal reformation (2008: 47). He concludes in a no less uncompromising manner “There is no philosophical movement among modern Muslims resembling the work of the Mu’tazilite theologians or the Muslim philosophers of the past: no philosophy of religion, no natural theology, no theodicy, and no conscientious atheism. Revivalist and activist movements and a haphazard attempt to update Islamic legal provisions currently exhaust the genius of this once fecund civilization” (Akhtar 2008: 348).
In summary, these scholars and commentators acknowledge that with the eclipse of the Mu’tazilites, Islam lost a powerful voice for a rational, humanist, scientific and liberal approach to the faith, which left it ill-equipped when it confronted post-Enlightenment European power in the eighteenth century. In the face of Western, Christian and Imperialist expansion in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, Islamic governments, societies and cultures were seen, and often saw themselves, as weak, backward and unable to compete with Western science, technology and power (Nasution 1996: 168). In reaction, Muslims either advocated learning from the West or reviving the pure Islam of the Prophet and the Qur’an in order to reassert their identity and power and expel the foreign invaders and occupiers. Very few looked to the Mu’tazilites for inspiration, especially as most orthodox Muslims saw their theology as ‘beyond the pale’, if not anathema.

As we have seen, Martin, Woodward and Atmaja have stated the relevance of Mu’tazilite thought to the problems faced by Muslims in the face of modernity and change (2003: 41). Hans Kung notes that Napoleon’s invasion of the Islamic heartland of Egypt in 1798 caused the authorities in Cairo and Istanbul to realise, that unless they could compete with the scientific, technological and economic power of the West, Islamic societies would be open to colonialist and imperialist domination. However any successful competition would involve a “radical change of mentality without which modern science and a modern economy cannot function. Islam now felt the effect of the rejection in the ninth century of the Mu’tazilites, with their emphasis on reason, free will and the need to understand the Qur’an in a historical context” (2007: 607-608). In a similar vein, the commentator, writer and political activist Tariq Ali asks why Islam has become petrified and not undergone a reformation (2003: 4). He concludes, “We are in desperate need of an Islamic Reformation that sweeps away the crazed conservatism and backwardness of the fundamentalists” (2003: 338). Ali finds the seeds of some of the ideas which could lead to such reform, in the philosophy and theology of the Mu’tazilites (2003: 161).

According to this thesis, the reformation referred to by Tariq Ali, based on an Islamic theology of reason and free will, has been occurring in Indonesia since the late 1960s and an example of this can be seen in the ideas and work of Harun Nasution and the
Liberal Islam Network. The marginalization of Mu’tazilite theology was partly due to the inquisition (see also Nasution 1996: 138), even though the mihnah was instigated by the Caliph al-Ma’mun and not by the Mu’tazilites. In fact according to the Indonesian Muslim writer and N.U. activist Ahmad Baso, the Mu’tazilites would have been quite discomforted by the mihnah, which violated their belief in freedom (2006: 83). However, primarily this eclipse was a consequence of the radical and controversial nature of their beliefs and principles which failed to find any widespread, popular traction and support, a situation not unfamiliar to Nasution and the Liberal Islam Network, as will be seen in the conclusion of this thesis.

2.4 Modern Day Indonesian Mu’tazilite: Harun Nasution

It is often instructive and rewarding to pick through the historical detritus of discarded and outmoded ideas and theories. From time to time these ideas resurface literally, when ancient manuscripts are found in buried pots or hidden in caves, discovered by archaeologists, shepherds or building workers. In 1950 a team of Egyptian scholars discovered and microfilmed a cache of Mu’tazilite manuscripts in Yemen (Martin et al. 2003: 128). This led to the publication of Mu’tazilite works and renewed the interest of some Muslim scholars in this movement (2003: 128 and Nasution 1996: 129). It was probably a decade after this that the Indonesian Islamic scholar and teacher Harun Nasution began to develop an awareness of and interest in the Mu’tazilites (Muzani 1994: 98).

The following biographical information is summarized from details provided by Muzani (1994: 93-103) and Martin, Woodward and Atmaja (2003 160-168). Harun Nasution was born in Sumatra in what was then the Dutch East Indies in 1919. His father and mother were traditional, orthodox Muslims. Both spoke Arabic and had made the pilgrimage to Mecca*. His father was a trader and was also employed by the Dutch Colonial Government as a religious functionary. An elite family, they were able to send Harun to a Dutch Primary School and then to a Modern Islamic Secondary School. He continued his further education in Egypt. His family upbringing and education caused
an inner conflict between “the traditional world of Islamic piety and the modern world of rational, empirical knowledge. Nasution describes both his academic career and his life as an attempt to reconcile these opposing currents” (Martin et al 2003: 161).

After Indonesia gained its Independence in 1949, his initial career was in the diplomatic service, but, as an anti-communist, he was dismissed from his post and blacklisted in 1960 as a consequence of the rising power of the Communist Party of Indonesia under Indonesia’s first President, Soekarno (Martin et al 2003: 163). Nasution went on to return to his studies in Cairo in 1960 and then at McGill University in Canada in 1962. His doctoral dissertation, supervised by the scholar of Islam Toshihiko Izutsu (Uchrowi and Thaha 1989: 37), was on the theology of the Egyptian Islamic reformer Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). His thesis was that Abduh was a proponent of Mu’tazilite theology (Martin et al 2003: 165), despite the fact that Abduh had never described himself as such. He concluded that Abduh was “committed to the rational or liberal traditions of Islamic theology, namely the Mu’tazilah or Qadariyyah” (Muzani 1994: 100).

When the anti-communist, Lieutenant-General Soeharto officially became President of Indonesia in 1968 after the failed 30th of September Movement of 1965, Nasution would have felt comfortable about returning to Indonesia and he did so a year after the completion of his doctoral studies in 1969. He became a lecturer at the Jakarta State Institute for Islamic Studies or I.A.I.N. at Ciputat and was the Rector there from 1973 to 1982. He continued as a teacher at this I.A.I.N. until his death in 1998. He was also an occasional lecturer at I.A.I.N. in Padang, Medan, Surabaya and Ujung Pandang (Testriono 2009a: 9).

2.4.1 The Ideas and Influence of Nasution - Background

From the 1950’s on, Nasution’s theology gradually crystallized to the point where he would describe himself as a neo-Mu’tazilite. He was able to resolve the conflict between the traditional, revelatory faith of his parents and his early attraction to reason and science, through the discovery of an Islamic liberal-rational theology which
dated from the early years of the faith. The Dutch education system stressing history, science and rational inquiry which inspired the young Nasution was condemned by his grandmother as heathen: “In Heaven they speak Arabic. If you speak Dutch in the afterlife you will go to Hell” (Martin et al 2003: 160). In the Mu’tazilites he found a way to reconcile religious revelation and his commitment to reason and freedom. The Mu’tazilite theology postulated a God who was reasonable, whose word was formed in history and who created humans endowed with free will. In his doctoral dissertation Nasution argued that contrary to the generally held belief that Muhammad Abduh was an orthodox Sunni Muslim, a detailed study of his work revealed that his theology was Mu’tazilite in all but name (see Testriono 2009a: 8).

Nasution did not publish his 1968 dissertation in Indonesia until 1986. The reason was simple. His work was considered dangerous because it actively promoted Mu’tazilite theology (Martin et al 2003: 167), which was seen as highly controversial if not heretical both in Indonesia and abroad. He was even warned by Indonesia’s first Vice-President Mohammad Hatta and the leader of the Islamic political party Masyumi*, Mohammad Natsir, that his work was too shocking to be published at the time (Uchrowi and Thaha 1989: 37-38). Indeed, the Director of the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University, Professor C.J. Adams, had told Nasution in 1967 that discussing the Mu’tazilites was dangerous (Uchrowi and Thaha 1989: 37). However, Nasution believed that his neo-Mu’tazilite views were important to the development of a modern Islamic theology and in fact had their origins almost a millennium before European Imperialism began its subjugation of Islamic countries and cultures (Muzani 1994: 106). As he said in an interview first published in 1989: “I was not influenced by orientalist thought. I was influenced by rationalist thought from within Islam” (Uchrowi and Thaha 1989: 34). (‘Orientalist’ here refers to the views of Western scholars of Islam). Be this as it may, eighteen years after 1968, Nasution felt that Muslim intellectuals were more receptive to studies about the diversity of Islamic theology and philosophy. One of those who had helped create this receptiveness was the progressive Muslim activist, educator and scholar Nurcholish Madjid, who was incidentally accused by some of his opponents of being a neo-Mu’tazilite (Husaini and Hidayat 2002: 44). Madjid had helped ‘soften up’ Indonesian Islamic discourse in the
1970s, to the extent that ideas like rationalism, secularization and free will were openly debated. Also, since 1972, Nasution had been gradually familiarizing generations of students at the I.A.I.N. with Mu’tazilite theology through his courses and textbooks.

Nasution’s basic mission was to demonstrate that a theology of reason and free will was present in 8th century Islam and came to influence European Christian thought, laying the foundations for the Enlightenment, and that this orientation returned to Islam in the 18th century with Western Imperialism and Colonialism (see Nasution 1996: 8-9). His main aim as an educator was to expose his students to the variety and richness of Islamic theology and philosophy. His ultimate purpose was to modernize the Indonesian Islamic elite by replacing the orthodox Sunni-Asharite* fatalistic, revelatory theology “with Mu’tazilah or rational or liberal theology” (Muzani 1994: 114). To this end, in his time as Rector at the Jakarta I.A.I.N. he wrote new textbooks and courses promoting rational and liberal Islamic theology and philosophy. Under his leadership the curriculum of the I.A.I.N. was modernized with the aim of creating “an ‘Islamic state of mind’ through a modern, rationalized model of education” (M.B. Hooker quoted in Van Doorn-Harder 2007: 28). Nasution was also “able to advocate and disseminate the rational theology of the Mu’tazilah, and to influence thousands of the sociologically agrarian-based students of the I.A.I.N.” (Muzani 1994: 130). Martin et al describe Nasution as “among the stellar figures” of Mu’ tazilite theology (2003: 172) and Muzani states that he is “one of the most acclaimed Indonesian Muslim intellectuals” (1994: 130). According to Saleh, Nasution was the most notable independent scholar not associated with mass religious organizations, whose greatest contribution to Indonesian Islamic discourse “lies mainly in his attempts to introduce the rational theology of Mu’tazilism in a more comprehensive manner” (2001: 197).

2.4.2 Harun Nasution and Rational Islam

Nasution wrote at least five works on Islamic theology and philosophy, four of which were used as textbooks or references at the State Islamic Institutes. In 1972, his
Teologi Islam (Islamic Theology) was published. It was a collection of his lectures from the Jakarta I.A.I.N. and an edited version of his Ph.D. thesis on the theology of Muhammad Abduh and the Mu’tazilites. The 153 page work was intended primarily for tertiary students of Islam, especially those from the I.A.I.N. It compared the various schools of thought in Islamic theology on the basis of which ones were liberal, traditional or in between the two (Nasution 2008: xii). The primary aim of the work was to show the breadth and variety of Islamic theology to readers in Indonesia, where one school of thought, the Asharites*, had tended to dominate (2008: x). It is interesting to note here that Nasution referred to ‘liberal’ Islamic theology sixteen years before Binder and twenty-six years before Kurzman used this description. However, Nasution did not acknowledge, or was unaware of, the formulation of this term by Fyzee (Fyzee 1963: 104).

Nasution’s two volume work Islam ditinjau dari berbagai aspeknya (Islam analysed from its various perspectives), in all 245 pages, was published in 1974. As with his first book, the aim of these volumes was to dispel the impression in Indonesian society that Islam is a limited and narrow faith (Nasution 2005: iv) by presenting a brief history of the religion examining and analysing the various schools of thought in Islam apart from the Sunni, Asharite-Shaf’i* school which dominated the faith in Indonesia (see below, pp. 38 and 40). Again, this work was intended for use by students of the Islamic religion, especially those at the fourteen I.A.I.N. throughout the archipelago.

Six years later, in 1980, the 109 page Akal Dan Wahyu Dalam Islam (Reason and Revelation in Islam) was published. It was based on an academic lecture Nasution had delivered to the community of the Jakarta I.A.I.N. on the occasion of his academic promotion. Once again the work was intended for study by University students. The book aimed to explain revelation and reason in Islam, the role of reason in the Qur’an and Hadith, the development of knowledge in Islam and the position of reason in Islamic theology (Nasution 1986: v).

By 1986, Nasution felt the time was right to release an edited version of his 1968 Ph.D. thesis from McGill University in the form of a 99 page book entitled Muhammad Abduh dan Teologi Rasional Mu’tazilah (Muhammad Abduh and the Rational Theology
of the Mu’tazilites). Nasution believed that a rational and dynamic theology such as that promoted by Muhammad Abduh and the Mu’tazilites was a necessary basis for the social, educational and economic development which was being implemented in Indonesia at the time (Nasution 1987: vi). All of the above works are still being used as textbooks and references by students and lecturers of Islamic studies in tertiary institutions throughout Indonesia (Testriono 2009a: 27). Again, according to Testriono, Nasution succeeded in spreading and “institutionalizing” liberal-rational thought among students and academics effectively and extensively for the long term. “The theology of the Mu’tazilites which had been previously thought of as forbidden and alien took its place as a familiar and legitimate school of thought in Islamic studies throughout the archipelago” (2009a: 28).

The following examination of the most comprehensive work by Harun Nasution, *Islam Rasional – Gagasan dan Pemikiran* (Rational Islam – Concepts and Thought) first published in 1995 (463 pages), will provide more detailed insights into his position as a liberal-rational exponent of Islam. This collection of his writings is by far his most lengthy and wide-ranging work and represents a synthesis of his previous academic output. The main themes of *Islam Rasional* are: that one of the great achievements of Islam from its origins was the development of a theology based on freedom and reason; that Islamic history can be divided into three periods marked respectively by success, decline and defeat; that Western culture learnt from Islam when it was successful and that these lessons helped create the conditions for the Renaissance and Enlightenment in Europe; that to be successful again Islam needs to re-discover the theology which characterized its golden era; that in Indonesia the dominant Asharite Islamic theology has been an obstacle to modernization and development; that since the 1970s this dominant theology has been under challenge; and that education has been and will continue to be a crucial basis of this challenge. According to Nasution (1996: 112), the Classical Age, which he often refers to as the ‘Golden Age’ (e.g. 1996: 91), lasted from 650, when the Qur’an was canonised, until 1250, when the Abbasid Caliphate was in its final years. The Middle Age covered the period from 1250 until 1800, just after Napoleon’s invasion and occupation of Egypt and the Modern Age extended from 1800 until the present.
The Classical Age was characterised by the development of an Islamic theology of reason and freedom, especially under the Abbasid Caliphate (Nasution 1996: 113). According to Nasution, this theology which grew out of the meeting of Islam with Greek culture (1996: 7), has six characteristics: a central position of reason, human freedom of will and action, freedom of thought only limited by a small number of basic teachings contained in the Qur’an and Hadith, a belief in natural law created by God and causality, metaphoric interpretation of revelatory texts and dynamism in attitudes and actions (1996: 112). This was the theology of the Mu’tazilites, which created the conditions which led to the Classical Age (1996: 135-137). It is remarkable to note that, in his discussion of Mu’tazilite theology, Nasution does not refer to their belief in a created Qur’an. In fact it is difficult to find direct references to this principle in Indonesian studies of the Mu’tazilites until Halid’s dissertation (2008: 39). However Nasution does assert that 95% of the teaching of the Qur’an and Hadith is not absolute; it is relative and open to interpretation and rational analysis; it is not dogma (1996: 90).

During this Classical Age, Islam, especially under the Abbasid Caliphate, experienced a golden era. Nasution describes the Islamic Sates during this period as superpowers which extended the sphere of influence of the faith to Spain in the West and the borders of China in the East. An Islamic civilization emerged, influenced by Greek philosophy and science, which was unparalleled in its achievements (Nasution 1996: 103). In philosophy, science, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, chemistry, optics, geography, zoology and theology, Islamic civilization made great discoveries and laid the foundations for the Renaissance in Europe hundreds of years later (Nasution 1996: 103 and Lyons 2009: 55-78 and 103-125). As Nasution says; “The Abbasid Calipate was not only a political and economic superpower, but also a great empire of learning and culture. At the time, Baghdad was the capital city of the world” (1996: 103). Providing the spirit of the age which underpinned these achievements was the rational-liberal theology or ethics of the Mu’tazilites (1996: 137).

Unfortunately, according to Nasution (1996: 116) the end of the Classical Age and the beginning of the Middle Age saw the eclipse of rational-liberal principles in Islam and the emergence of an absolutist theology based on a low appreciation of reason, no
The advances towards modernization of Nasution’s philosophical introduction of Islam and modernization of the Qur’an and Hadith and stagnation of attitudes and thought (1996: 116). He goes on to say that these were the characteristics of the Asharite school of thought which has dominated Indonesian Islam to the present (1996: 162). Islam became focused on the afterlife; achievements in science and philosophy disappeared. “Islam in all fields experienced a decline, whereas Europeans were enjoying rapid advances in science, politics, economics, military power and so on” (1996: 118).

The Modern Age began with a series of failures for Islamic States. In Egypt, Turkey and India, Islamic governments suffered defeat and colonization at the hands of European nations (1996: 118). As a result, in the Middle-East and India many Muslim scholars and leaders began to return to the liberal-rational theology of the Classical Age, through the adoption of modern education, to compete with the West (1996: 119). However, Nasution was of the opinion that Indonesian Islam continued to be influenced by a traditional Asharite, non-philosophical, non-scientific, non-rational, absolutist theology (1996: 119). In fact, he believed that so-called modernist organizations such as Muhammadiyah were only superficially modern but were in fact more influenced by Asharite thought and did not adopt any aspects of liberal-rational theology necessary for development and modernization (1996: 155-156). Ideas of freedom and reason in Indonesian Islam in the first 70 years of the twentieth century “could not be found” (1996: 154). It was only in the 1970s that a rational, scientific and philosophical theology began to be studied seriously in Indonesia, particularly with Nasution’s introduction of a new curriculum at the fourteen National Islamic Institutes (1996: 121).

Nasution saw the dominant Islamic theology in Indonesia as being an obstacle to modernization because of its traditionalism and narrow-mindedness (1996: 116 and 157). He gave three examples of this reflected in Islamic attitudes to certain animals, bank interest and insurance (1996: 157-158). In Islam certain animals are regarded as forbidden as food or as generally impure. According to Nasution, dogs, regarded as impure by most Muslims, would be very useful and economical as guards or to assist police. This attitude to dogs hampers development in the areas of security and efforts
to combat crime. To take one example which has contemporary relevance in the 21st century, sniffer dogs can play a pivotal role in the detection of explosives and illegal drugs. Also, the fact that certain animals such as pigs, snakes, frogs and so on, are regarded as inappropriate for human consumption, restricts the armed forces, who in the field of operations should be able to eat whatever is available. Furthermore, Muslims see bank interest as forbidden by the Qur’an and their reluctance to participate in a modern-interest based banking system obstructs economic development. Finally, life, disaster and accident insurance are seen as contrary to the belief in divine predestination; accidents are part of God’s preordained plan for humanity and any attempt to lessen the consequences of fate are a denial of this belief. Consequently, Muslims’ reluctance to take out such insurance retards economic progress. It must be noted here that while this was Nasution’s perception in the early 1990s, since then there have been many positive changes in the attitudes of Indonesian Muslims on these matters, especially in respect to banking and insurance. For example, in 1991 a Muslim Bank operating according to Shari’ah law was established in Indonesia. By 2007 there were three such banks and nineteen private banks which operated Shari’a sections of their operations (Wikipedia Bahasa Indonesia: Perbankan syariah).

Nasution asserted that a liberal-rational theology would remove what he then saw as three obstacles to economic and social development in Indonesia (1996: 160-162). He believes that within Islam there are various schools of thought on these matters and Muslims should accept the school of thought which is most amenable to their needs and the demands of modernity. He states that Islam in the Classical Age was broad and liberal in its interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith “not narrow and not traditionalist in its attitudes like Islam now” (1996: 164). According to Nasution, several changes need to occur in Muslim community attitudes so that Islam in Indonesia does not become an obstacle to progress and modernization. The Islamic community needs to broaden its mind. Muslim education needs to include the study of all schools of thought in Islam in the curriculum. In addition, Muslims need to reject the traditionalist and legalistic interpretations of the faith which have dominated Indonesian Islam in the past. New and modern interpretations of the Qur’an and
Hadith are needed to give Muslims greater freedom of action in confronting the challenges of modernization and development (1996: 166).

According to Nasution, the main means of achieving these changes was through religious education which included the study of all schools of thought in Islam (1996: 174). To this end, during his time as Rector of the Jakarta I.A.I.N. (1973-1982) Nasution introduced the study of the various schools of thought in Islam or mazhab* into the curriculum there (1996: 178). Up to that point the teachings of one theological school, the Sunni Asharite - and one legal school, the Shaf’i - had dominated Islamic education in Indonesia (1996: 160 and also Anwar 2008: 1). Nasution introduced the study of other Islamic theological mazhab - the Mu’tazilites, Khawarij*, Shi’ites, Murji’is* and Maturidiyah* - and legal mazhab - the Hanafi*, Hanbali* and Maliki* schools of thought - into the curriculum, to expose the students to all aspects of an Islam which was truly broad in its horizons (1996: 160). In a book used as a text at I.A.I.N. first published in 1974, he wrote that Islamic theology “does not only have one school of thought but several: there is a liberal school of thought which stresses the power of reason rather than belief in revelation and there is a school which is traditional, that is which only slightly uses reason and depends more on revelation. Between these two schools of thought there are schools which are not too liberal yet also not too traditional” (Nasution 2005: 27). Also he oversaw the beginning of post graduate studies at the Jakarta I.A.I.N. in 1982, to promote rational, scientific, academic and philosophical approaches to Islamic higher education. Underlying all this was Nasution’s own commitment to a liberal-rational theology of Islam (1996: 178).

According to Saleh (2001: 237), Nasution’s concentration on philosophy and theology led him away from commenting on the real social and cultural problems faced by Indonesian Muslims. However, as can be seen from the above discussion of Islam Rasional, Nasution did give some thought to how a liberal-rational Islam could contribute to development and modernization in Indonesia in an effective and practical way. He was a supporter of democracy and a non-sectarian state in Indonesia (1996: 216-224). He believed in religious pluralism, inter-faith dialogue (1996: 266-288) and salvation from within what he regarded as monotheistic religions - Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism (Muzani 1994: 109). He supported secularization
in society as long as secularism did not become an ideology which replaced religion (Nasution 1996: 188-194). His tolerance extended to inviting someone regarded as an atheist to give a presentation at the Jakarta I.A.I.N. (Muzani 1994: 103). He supported inter-faith marriage (Halid 2008: 294). Nasution favourably acknowledged the emancipation of women, co-education and the right of a Muslim female not to wear the veil (Nasution 1996: 295). He was also sympathetic to the notion that a Muslim could not expect physical pleasure in the after-life, such as heavenly food and drink and attendant beautiful maidens, but that pleasure in the hereafter would be purely spiritual. As a result, physical pleasure should be enjoyed in this life whenever possible (1996: 163). A further and telling practical example of his theological liberalism was his view that sex change operations were acceptable from an Islamic perspective (Uchrowi and Thaha 1989: 43).

In a discussion of the Mu’tazilites, Nasution referred to one of the main themes of his religious life: the relationship between revelation and reason. He did not consider that the Mu’tazilites put reason ahead of revelation, but that they believed that reason and knowledge come from revelation and that revelation is needed to give strength to reason (1996: 133). Not only is revelation in harmony with reason, they are necessary to each other. According to him, the purpose of God’s revelation “is to help humanity gain knowledge” (2008: 102). Nasution believed that the blind acceptance of revelation without reason led to the decline of Islam and that it is only when they are combined that Islam, particularly in Indonesia, will be successful and effective in the modern context.

In conclusion, Nurcholish Madjid has observed that Harun Nasution’s “obsession” with the Mu’tazilites was related to two things - their commitment to reason and their belief in free-will (Madjid 1989: 106). Nasution’s radical postulation of freedom of thought in Islam has been commented on by the present Rector of the Jakarta State Islamic University, Komarrudin Hidayat. He quotes Nasution’s comments to his students: “As long as you hold to the six pillars of faith and the five pillars of Islam you can think whatever you like” and “You have the right to establish a new school of thought in Islam as long as you have a strong basis. There is one Islam. But the faithful
and their leaders are many. So differences and clashes of opinion are normal” (Hidayat 1989: 293).

Nasution’s ideas about freedom and reason in Islam were institutionalized in the curricula of the State Islamic Universities in Indonesia from the 1970s, especially in Jakarta. From 2001 on, they have found a powerful and more public restatement in the first self-consciously liberal organization established in the archipelago, the Liberal Islam Network.
Chapter Three – The Liberal Islam Network

3.1 Historical Background

The Jaringan Islam Liberal or Liberal Islam Network referred to hereafter by its commonly used acronym JIL, was formed in Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia in early 2001. It was, as shall be seen, an organization committed to the ideals of freedom and reason in Islam, ideals similar to those initially developed and espoused in the 8th century by the Mu’tazilites and then restated and institutionalized in Indonesia in the last three decades of the 20th century by Harun Nasution, as shown in Chapter Two. In fact almost half of the founding members of JIL had been educated at the I.A.I.N. where they would have become familiar with Nasution’s courses and writings.

JIL grew out of an internet mailing list and a subsequent discussion about Islamic liberalism led by one of its founders, Luthfi Assyaukanie, on the 21st of February of that year (Harjanto 2003: 62). By mid 2001 the name Jaringan Islam Liberal was being used as the title of the group which had established an internet site, office and secretariat located in the east Central Jakarta suburb of Utan Kayu. The Utan Kayu Community (Komunitas Utan Kayu) complex was established by the poet and journalist Goenawan Mohamad in 1994 after the banning of Tempo Magazine, which he founded and edited, by the Soeharto Government (El-Dardiry 2005: 8). The ban lasted four years and was finally lifted after Soeharto resigned and was replaced by B. J. Habibie. The Utan Kayu Community complex became a centre for freethinkers, artists and journalists committed to freedom of thought and expression, in the light of the Government’s attempts to repress these through the banning of Indonesia’s foremost weekly magazine. The complex included a cafe, bookshop, library, offices, gallery, theatre and, eventually, a radio station. Associated with the complex was the Institute for the Study of the Flow of Information (I.S.A.I.- Institut Studi Arus Informasi) which was formed to encourage and create non-government controlled journalism, again in
the context of the aforementioned banning of *Tempo* (El-Dardiry 2005: 8). One of the founders of the I.S.A.I. was Goenawan Mohamad. A staff member of the Institute was to become a founder of JIL - Ulil Abshar-Abdalla (Handrianto 2007: 108 and 261).

Since it came to power, the Indonesian Government under President Soeharto had exercised strict control over and repression of Muslim organizations and groups such as Darul Islam* (suppressed in 1965), which since the inception of the non-sectarian Indonesian Nation in 1945, had been campaigning, sometimes violently, for the establishment of an Islamic State based on Shari’ah law. In 1998, when Soeharto stepped down as President of Indonesia after considerable community unrest and rioting, those Muslim groups which wanted Indonesia to be an Islamic State based on Shari’ah law found a new freedom to organize and express themselves. For extensive explanation and background to these and events described below, see Hefner (2000: 167-213). According to Nuradin: “After Soeharto’s downfall in 1998, the ensuing euphoria of freedom brought renewed vigour and hope, not only to political parties in Indonesia but also to various socio-religious organizations, including radical ones. They believed that Soeharto’s resignation was a good chance for them to express their interests, particularly their aspirations to implement syaria (Islamic law) in Indonesia. While Islamic political parties challenged the secular parties through the ballot box, radical Muslim groups expressed their agenda through ‘street politics’” (2005: 21), or as Luthfi Assyaukanie described it, “pavement Islam” (2007: 177).

As the new Government under President Habibie (1998-1999) began to relax controls on freedom of expression, radical Islamic groups began to gain ground and operate more openly (Barton 2005: 45). Generally these groups were committed to the establishment of an Indonesian Islamic State and the implementation of Shari’ah law. Their theology was puritanical, authoritarian, patriarchal and based on a literal reading and interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith and their strategies for achieving their goals were more or less militant. Groups and organizations which represented this militant Islam included: M.M.I. – Majlis Mujahidin Indonesia (Indonesian Holy Warriors Council), F.P.I. – Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front), Laskar Jihad (Holy War Corps), Jemaah Islamiyah (Islamic Congregations), Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Independence) and K.I.S.D.I. – Komite Indonesia untuk Solidaritas Dunia Islam
(Indonesian Committee for Islamic World Solidarity). Attacks on bars, brothels, gambling, alcohol and pornography outlets, armed involvement in inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts in Maluku and Sulawesi, anti-Chinese and anti-Israel actions and demonstrations, the bombing of Christian churches and the persecution of Islamic sects such as the Ahmadiyah*, were carried out by one or another of the above named groups from 1998 on (for details see Nurdin 2005: 21-22).

Against this background and arising from meetings and discussions, progressive, liberal Muslim intellectuals in the I.S.A.I. decided to establish a mailing list under the title ‘Islam liberal’ in early 2001 (Harjanto 2003: 62). This rapidly led to the formation of JIL in the same year. It could be argued that JIL was formed in response to the increasing activity of the above mentioned radical, militant, puritanical groups. It can also be posited that JIL was a logical continuation and development of previous progressive, reformist and liberal-rational ideas in Islam both in Indonesia and abroad (see below, section 3.4)). In addition, the banning of Tempo helped set up conditions which facilitated the formation of JIL. According to Luthfi Assyaukanie “In March 2001, I and several friends in Jakarta set up the Liberal Islam Network (JIL), a discussion group which afterwards attracted considerable controversy. In fact the aim for establishing JIL was to continue a tradition of thought which had already been initiated and developed by Muslim renewers” and also, he continues later “the emergence of JIL was simultaneous with the occurrence of violence and radical movements in the name of religion” (Assyaukanie 2007: xvii).

According to El-Dardiry, a Dutch student from the University of Twente who spent a three month internship with JIL in the summer of 2005, the founding members of the Network included: Goenawan Muhammad, Ahmad Sahal, Nong Darol Mahmada, Ulil Abshar-Abdalla (the first Co-ordinator of JIL), Ihsan Ali Fauzi, Hamid Basyaib, Taufik Adnan Amal, Saiful Mujani and Luthfi Assyaukanie (2005: 8). Also, JIL listed a group of individuals they regarded as Liberal Islamic campaigners from Indonesia and abroad, among them: Nurcholish Madjid (a Rector of the Paramadina University in Jakarta), Azyumardi Azra (a Rector of the State Islamic University – previously I.A.I.N. - in Jakarta), Ashgar Ali Engineer (Indian Muslim Scholar and writer), Mohammad Arkoun
(French Muslim scholar, academic and writer) and Charles Kurzman (American scholar of Islam and academic), (Nurdin 2005: 26).

The name ‘Liberal Islam’ was chosen by the group to reflect their interpretation of Islam which stressed individual freedom and emancipation from oppressive social-political structures (JIL website 2009: 2). According to Nurdin, the term ‘Liberal Islam’ was popularized in Indonesia through the publication of the eponymously titled books by Binder and Kurzman and was then “picked up by the young Indonesian Muslims who called their group Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL) or the Liberal Islamic Network” (2005: 24). The group chose the term ‘Network’ to show its open, non-authoritarian nature. In fact, JIL could be most accurately described as an ‘affinity group’. This term was used by the Iberian Anarchist Federation in the 1930s to describe a form of organization which was small-scale, autonomous, anti-authoritarian, communal, democratic and based on empathy, friendship and solidarity arising from commonly held principles and ideas. Affinity groups were meant to function as catalysts in society, not as vanguards “they provide initiative and consciousness, not a ‘general staff’ and a source of ‘command’” (Bookchin 2004: 144). This is quite an accurate description of the way JIL actually operates. It is not a bureaucratic, authoritarian, party political or highly structured organization. It is a fairly loose network, a free association of individuals based on affinity.

3.2 Aims and Ideas of JIL

The following information is taken from the JIL website as of August 2009. In particular two sections will be referred to, one entitled ‘About the Liberal Islam Network’ and the other ‘The Program of JIL’. The former defines ‘Liberal Islam’ as an interpretation of Islam based on six principles. The first is ‘Opening the door of interpretation on all dimensions of Islam’. According to this, JIL believes that the subjection of the texts of Islam to logical reasoning should be paramount so that the faith is always relevant in all ages and conditions, that this critical thinking should be applied to Muslim social
interactions, rituals and theology and that without this form of on-going *ijtiadh* Islam will decay.

‘Prioritizing an approach to texts based on a religious ethical spirit rather than a literal reading’ is the second principle. JIL believes that literal readings of the Qur’an and Sunnah only cripple Islam and that interpretation should be based on the general ethics of these sources which will allow Islam to be relevant to all humanity. The third is ‘Believing that truth is relative, open and pluralistic’. According to this, interpretations of the texts will change in time and space. They are open to error as well as truth. ‘Siding with the oppressed minority groups who are marginalized’ is the fourth principle. Such minorities and oppressed groups include those based on religion, race, ethnicity, gender, culture, politics and economics.

The fifth principle is ‘Belief in religious freedom’. JIL holds that believing or, more significantly, not believing in religion is a basic human right. Muslims should not persecute those of differing faiths or opinions. Finally JIL asserts its belief in ‘The separation of heavenly and worldly authorities, of religious and political authorities’. JIL is opposed to theocracy. Religion does not have the right to determine all forms of public policy. Religion is a private matter; religion and the state should be separate.

JIL’s six principles are a manifesto of a liberal-rational position in Islam. In key instances they are similar to the theology and ideas of the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution. JIL’s attitude to the Qur’an, Sunnah and Hadith, to textual exegesis and to freedom and reason are similar to those of the Mu’tazilite tradition. Their acknowledgement of the different schools of thought or ‘dimensions’ in Islam and attitude to other religions is a continuation of the ideas, reading and teaching of Harun Nasution on these matters. It is no coincidence that, as has been mentioned in this thesis (p. 1), around half of JIL’s founding members would have been exposed to Nasution’s courses and teaching at the Jakarta I.A.I.N., Ciputat. JIL’s support of minorities and oppressed groups in society and their position on the separation of religion and state are relatively new emphases in the above context, though Nasution was a committed supporter of non-sectarian government in Indonesia. While the Mu’tazilites were a relatively obscure movement almost forgotten by history and Harun Nasution was an academic who shunned
publicity, JIL has taken a high profile in the media and attempted to implement a practical liberal-rational approach to Islam in Indonesia, despite the relatively low number of active participants and supporters of the Network and in the face of significant, sometimes violent opposition (see section 3.5 below).

JIL has chosen the name ‘Liberal Islam’ because of their fundamental ideal of an Islam which emphasises individual freedom and liberation from oppressive social and political structures. Their main goal is to spread their principles throughout the community and they have chosen the organizational form of a network because it best embodies their liberal aspirations. The main activities of JIL’s program include the distribution of articles and interviews which represent their ideas to local and national media. JIL hosts a weekly show on public radio 68H Jakarta discussing religious and social affairs, which by 2005 was syndicated to forty public radio stations throughout Indonesia, including stations in Menado, Maluku, Yogyakarta, Solo, Bandung and Aceh (Nurdin 2005: 30). By 2009, 650 radio stations throughout Indonesia were subscribing to news broadcasts from Radio 68H (Taufik 2009: 46). JIL also publishes and produces books on themes and topics associated with liberal Islam. They have established a website and have produced public service advertisements for the mass media. Finally, in association with universities, student groups, non-government organizations and religious boarding schools (*pesantren*) JIL organizes regular discussion groups and seminars on Islam and religion in general, all from a liberal perspective. As has been mentioned, JIL also has a staffed office and meeting room in the Utan Kayu Community complex in east Central Jakarta.

What follows is a more detailed examination of JIL’s ideas, primarily through the writings of some its leading and most well-known figures.

3.3 Textual Examination of JIL’s Ideas

In addition to articles and interviews in the media, the first Co-ordinator of JIL, Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, has written two significant works: *Menjadi Muslim Liberal* (Becoming a Liberal Muslim) in 2005 and *Menyegarkan Kembali Pemikiran Islam* (Once More

*Wajah Liberal Islam Indonesia* is a collection of articles, interviews and discussions (‘on-line and off-line’). It was described by a critic as a “monumental work” and as “the first propaganda produced by liberal Islam in Indonesia” (Handrianto 2007: 217). With over forty contributors providing articles, interviews and discussions in *Wajah Liberal Islam di Indonesia*, it could be said that this work is the most comprehensive representation of progressive, liberal voices in Islam to be published in Indonesia to date (2009). The themes of freedom and reason in Islam are clearly reflected in it. In his introduction to this work, Assyaukanie sets out the position of liberal Islam. Fundamental to this is the view of the Qur’an. According to Assyaukanie, the Qur’an is not a book of laws, an encyclopaedia, or an answer for every problem confronting the modern world. Rather “The Qur’an is a holy book with a moral message” (Assyaukanie 2002: xx). This is its main function. Assyaukanie states uncompromisingly what is also a Mu’tazilite principle, that “The Qur’an was ‘created’ in time and space by the interaction of the Prophet with his Arab community” (2002: xix). The Qur’an was not a complete, all encompassing, finished work conveyed to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. The basic moral message of the Qur’an, the essence of Islam, is one of justice and equality (2002: xxvi). One version of Islam is not “the solution”, according to Assyaukanie. The faith is not a monolith; there are many schools of Islamic thought (2002: xxiii & xxiv) - precisely the position promoted by Harun Nasution.

Assyaukanie believes that many of the problems confronting the modern world cannot be solved by classical Islamic traditions alone, by relying solely on the Qur’an (2002: xxiv). In fact Ulil Abshar-Abdalla has described this reliance on the Qur’an as “bibliolatry”, echoing the Mu’tazilite concern that the ‘uncreated Qur’an’ could tend to be deified. He continues “the secret of the Qur’an is not inviting Moslems to return to the Qur’anic text itself, but to return to the ‘transcendental essence’ behind the text” (quoted in El-Dardiry 2005: 15). Assyaukanie concludes his introductory chapter by stating liberal Islam’s commitment to an agenda which includes separation of religion
and politics, the emancipation of women, religious pluralism, freedom of opinion, egalitarianism and social justice (Assyaukanie 2002: xxvi). These are the main issues which are discussed throughout the anthology.

JIL’s version of liberal Islam begins with the principle that the texts of Islam are open to interpretation or *ijtihad*, based on the premise that they are creations in time and space and should be subject to exegesis predicated on reason and freedom. From this principle, *Wajah Liberal Islam di Indonesia* sets out a liberal-rational position. The first section of the anthology consists of articles by various contributors on liberal Islamic discourse, Shari’a and democracy, the emancipation of women and religious pluralism and concepts of God, religion and the holy text. The remainder of the book is composed of interviews and discussions on these topics.

The main theme of the relatively brief section on liberal Islamic discourse is that the Qur’an should not be interpreted literally, but should be viewed as a moral message. One of the contributors, Ahmad Sahal, observed that the second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab (who ruled from 634 to 644), rejected the literal readings of the Qur’an relating to land ownership and the punishment of thieves and used reason and the situation at the time to make his judgement based on what he saw as the moral spirit of Islam. The thief did not have his hand cut off according to the Qur’anic injunction, because poverty had driven him to steal. Umar also instituted state ownership of land in a time of war, again rejecting the literal commands of the Qur’an on this matter. According to Sahal, this marks a beginning point of liberal Islam and the Caliph Umar represents a milestone in the use of reason to interpret the holy text (Sahal 2002: 4-6).

In the next section on Islamic law or Shari’a and democracy, Saiful Mujani (2002: 26) asserts that the application of Shari’a is undemocratic and, on this basis, unacceptable to liberal Islam. Shari’a needs an authoritarian, totalitarian government to apply it. Shari’a does not permit difference of opinion, pluralism or protection of minority rights, according to Mujani. In fact, he continues, groups which advocate the absolutist project of Shari’a are a menace and “Democracy can’t accommodate forces dedicated to destroying democracy itself” (Mujani 2002: 26). Taufik Adnan Amal adds that conflict within Islam makes the application of Shari’a highly problematic, quoting the
outcome of the debate in Pakistan over contraception where Islamic authorities could not provide a satisfactory outcome (Amal 2002a: 32). According to Muslim Abdurrahman, where the Shari’a is applied, the first victims are women. They suffer discriminatory restrictions in terms of mobility, employment, what they wear, polygamy and male-initiated divorce. The poor also suffer disproportionally from the strict application of religious laws, especially in respect to harsh punishments for petty crime. The third group to experience marginalization under Shari’a law are non-Muslims, whose freedom and ease of worship are subject to varying degrees of restriction (Abdurrahman 2002: 109).

Female emancipation and gender equality are dealt with in the next section. Nasaruddin Umar observes that initially Islam gave freedom to women relative to what they had previously experienced, but, as time went on, patriarchy, misogyny and local cultural practices reasserted themselves and women’s freedom was once more limited. In modern times, Islamic revivalism and fundamentalism are objectifying and subjugating women even more (Umar 2002: 44-45). Nong Darol Mahmada writes that the public domain should be open to all regardless of gender (2002: 47). She describes moves to restrict and discriminate against Muslim women as “hijabisasi”* – the veiling of females (Mahmada 2002: 48). She notes that lately hijabisasi is increasing in Indonesia and that this is a setback for the future development of Islam (Mahmada 2002: 49-50).

Another important issue for liberal Islam is religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue and tolerance. Budhi Munawar-Rahman (2002: 51 and 53) states that toleration is a moral principle of Islam and that all humans are equal before God regardless of their religion. Ulil Abshar-Abdalla notes the importance of interfaith dialogue, especially in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York. For him, dialogue should be the priority, not confrontation (Abshar-Abdalla 2002a: 54-56). Furthermore, Ulil has said that “All religions are the same. All of them are directed toward the truth. What is more, Islam is not the most true” (quoted in Handrianto 2007: 269). According to Djohan Effendi, people should also have the right not to be religious. If people are forced to adopt a particular religion it only leads to hypocrisy and dishonesty. To have or not to have a religion is a human right. Furthermore, the Qur’an stresses that in
matters of religion force is not permitted (Effendi 2002: 135). Finally, echoing Harun Nasution’s position, Zainun Kamal writes that not only Jews and Christians, but Buddhists and Hindus should be respected and tolerated by Islam as religions which legitimately offer salvation to their followers (Kamal 2002: 143-145).

Concepts of God, religion and the holy text are also discussed from a liberal perspective. Kautsar Azhari Noer states that the concept of God’s unity and unknowability is not the monopoly of Islam - that God cannot be limited to one religion (Noer 2002: 72). Ulil Abshar-Aballa believes that Islamic theology is continually evolving and that “every individual Muslim is a ‘small Muhammad’ who carries the prophetic history as did Muhammad” (Abshar-Abdalla 2002b: 77) It is not enough for Muslims to merely imitate Muhammad, they should develop his vision and give it contemporary relevance. Ulil thinks that God does not intervene in history unless it is on a rational basis and it is up to humans to continually develop and interpret God’s revelations according to reason (2002b: 75). Taufik Adnan Amal writes that the Qur’an underwent revision and evolved over centuries before its final codification in the 10th century when it was frozen in time by Islamic orthodoxy (Amal 2002b: 91). He argues that what is needed now is a new, critical, revision of the Qur’an (Amal 2002b: 83 & 87). It is interesting to note that this important part of the liberal Islam agenda is currently being carried out in Turkey, where the Qur’an and Shari’a are being reinterpreted for the modern age (Traynor 2008: 5). Taufik repeats the Mu’tazilite principle that the Qur’an cannot be seen as the direct speech of God, but as a divinely inspired book produced by Muhammad interacting with his Arab community and history in the 7th century (Amal 2002c: 193).

In 2005, the first Co-ordinator of JIL, Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, had a collection of his writings published, entitled Menjadi Muslim Liberal. Ulil was born in 1967 and experienced a traditional Islamic education in Muslim boarding schools (pesantren). In the 1990s he was active in the I.S.A.I and later was one of the founding members of JIL. In Menjadi Muslim Liberal, Ulil begins by setting out four steps to reinvigorating Islamic thought. These were first formulated by him in an article published in the Indonesian daily newspaper Kompas on the 18th of November 2002. As a consequence of what he had written, the Forum Ulama Umat Islam (The Islamic Community Religious Scholars
Forum) issued a statement sentencing Ulil to death for insulting and humiliating Islam (Handrianto 2007: 263).

Ulil’s four steps are based on the proposition that Islam is not a “dead monument” carved out in the 7th century, untouchable by the hand of history from then on. Rather it is a living faith subject to continual revision, renewal and regeneration (Abshar-Abdalla 2005: 3). On this basis, Islam and its texts need non-literal and contextual interpretation which fits the changing times. Muslims must continually endeavour to separate fundamental, universal values from local cultural influences and customs such as dress codes, discrimination against women and cruel punishments prescribed by Shari’a law. Muslims should not see themselves as separate from other humans. Universal humanism, religious pluralism and equality are fundamental Islamic values. Finally, a reinvigorated Islam should be apart from political power structures. The faith should be a personal matter and non-sectarian democratic processes should be the basis of political power (2005: 3-4).

Ulil continues by asserting that Muhammad was a human being who should be studied critically. Human reason is a blessing from God and should be continually exercised to invent create and discover (2005: 5) In fact Ulil notes later that fundamentalists have accused him of making a God of reason (2005: 25). As has been pointed out in this thesis, but was not mentioned by Ulil, this was a Mu’tazilite ‘heresy’ (see pp. 26-27 above). According to Ulil, one interpretation of the faith cannot be the only absolute, right one. Islam is a multi-dimensional, “multicoloured” faith. “There is one Islam but many interpretations of it” (2005: 43). Muslims must respect others rights and beliefs (2005: 7). He states that Shari’a law is not the solution to society’s problems; it is dogmatic and behind the times and Islam is going backwards because of this. Ulil believes that God is bigger than Islam and the Qur’an and that Islam should be in a never-ending process of development (2005: 9). Throughout the rest of this collection of his writings Ulil develops these themes, continually returning to the need for Islamic renewal based on freedom and reason. He sees content as more important than form, ethics and universal values as more important than the literal interpretation of the law or Shari’a; the Qur’an should not be seen as a criminal code (2005: 11).
Ulil quotes approvingly a statement by the American Muslim feminist Aminah Wadud that “It would be better if one or two verses were not in the Qur’an” (2005: 99). This is a more radical restatement of Fyzee’s comments about verses being no longer applicable (see p. 8 of this thesis). Ulil repeats that God is greater than the Qur’an (2005: 101). Again, he does not mention that this is the belief behind one of the main principles of the Mu’tazilites - the ‘createdness’ of the holy text. Finally, Ulil sees no hope for an Islamic renaissance from the Arab world; it is rather in South-East Asia that reformation and renewal are more likely. Ulil is hopeful that “the light at the end of tunnel” (sic) is to be found there, in Indonesia and Malaysia (2005: 180).

Luthfi Assyaukanie, now a lecturer at the Paramadina University in Jakarta which had been set up by Nurcholish Madjid, introduces the collection of his writings, *Islam Benar versus Islam Salah*, published in 2007, with a discussion of the universal truths of Islam. These are justice, equality, tolerance and freedom of choice (Assyaukanie 2007: xiv). This is the ‘true’ Islam as opposed to ‘false’ Islam, which is based on intolerance, authoritarianism, injustice and inequality. Furthermore, it is the exercise of reason which differentiates between what is true and false Islam (2007: xvii). According to Luthfi, JIL was established to support freedom of thought and renewal in Islam and has been diverted from this task at times by having to react to the violence and terrorism carried out by puritanical, hard-line Muslim groups such as Al-Qaeda on the world stage and Jemaah Islamiyah* in Indonesia (2007: xvi & xviii). JIL was not formed as a reaction to terrorist violence, but has had to respond to it (2007: xviii). Luthfi adds that Islam needs a radical renewal similar to that which occurred in Christianity during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Like Kurzman and Hourani, he dates the beginnings of liberal Islam from the start of the 19th century (2007: 61 & 78). The main obstruction to this renewal is authoritarianism in the interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith (2007: 5).

Luthfi sets out four agendas of liberal Islam to continue and develop this renewal of the faith – a faith which he believes is increasingly presenting a face of violence, intolerance and coercion to the modern world (2007: 71). These agendas are: the promotion of and support for secular liberal democracy and the separation of religion and the state, of religion and party politics; pluralism or the tolerance of other
religions; female emancipation; and freedom of thought. In particular the door of *ijtihad* in Islam must be opened wider (2007: 71-76). Luthfi divides his collection of articles into five sections: the renewal of religious thought, liberal Islam and freedom, radicalism and conservatism, Shari’a law and politics and Islam and the secular state. He is concerned that the Indonesian Muslim community is becoming increasingly conservative (2007: 182) and that radical fundamentalism there is growing. He quotes an unnamed survey that shows large, if not majority support for and sympathy with radical, fundamentalist Islam (2007: 176). He acknowledges that, in this context, liberal Islam has been unable to influence the masses (2007: 177).

Some of Luthfi’s observations on the four agendas follow. He believes that it is mainly fundamentalists who wish to apply the Shari’a (2007: 205). When it is applied it often conflicts with international law and human rights and it discriminates against women and non-Muslims (2007: 206-207). Luthfi rejects the idea of a return to the Caliphate in the modern world as absurd and utopian; it did not work perfectly in the past (2007: 213) and even the Prophet Muhammad himself was not free from sin and error (2007: 205). He has a similar criticism of the concept of the Muslim State as it tends toward absolute power just like communism or fascism (2007: 215). He is opposed to theocratic government because it corrupts religion, which should be a private matter (2007: 225-226). The separation of religion and the state will reduce social conflict and is a vital pre-condition for democracy (2007: 241).

Like Harun Nasution, Luthfi believes that Islam experienced a ‘golden era’ under the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, a glittering star among the cities of the world and an era when knowledge, reason, science and technology made rapid advancement (2007: 254). He adds that Islamic culture and civilization has been brilliant when it is inspired by philosophers, thinkers and freedom but declines when conservative religious leaders dominate and free-thinkers are persecuted (2007: 272). He notes that, in its origins, Islam gave more freedom to women in the public sphere and this is reflected in the fact that during the pilgrimage or *haj* to Mecca, males and females mix in worship and females are not veiled (2007: 31) and he supports the right of females like Aminah Wadud to lead the prayers of the faithful (2007: 32). For Luthfi, freedom and tolerance are more important than traditions and customs. Finally, he supports secular
education and the development of secular morality rather than relying on improving religious education to develop morality and ethics (2007: 278).

From the above it can be clearly seen how freedom and reason have informed the ideas and program of JIL. Its position on the primary text of Islam, the Qur’an, is identical to, if not more radical, than that adopted by the Mu‟tazilites and Harun Nasution. Once the Qu‟ran is seen as a creation in time and space which is not an inerrant and literal expression of God’s voice, then a liberal-rational interpretation of Islam becomes at least possible if not logical, given that many of its themes focus on equality, justice, reason, knowledge and tolerance. On issues such as gender equality, religious tolerance and pluralism, the separation of mosque and state, support for minorities, human rights, democracy and freedom of thought, JIL has given practical expression to liberal-rational theology expounded by the Mu‟tazilites and Harun Nasution. As shall be seen below, some members of JIL have acknowledged that Mu‟tazilite thinking sowed the seeds of liberalism in Islam. It is clear from the textual examination above, that Nasution’s aims to provide an alternative interpretation of Islam and to challenge to Asharite orthodoxy by promoting the liberal-rational theology of the Mu‟tazilites have been significantly realized in the aims and ideas of JIL. The texts examined above and JIL’s statement of principles barely mention revelation and are dominated by an ethical and rational rather than an inspirational or mystical Islamic response. Like the Mu‟tazilites, JIL aims to base its Islamic faith on the mind rather than the senses (cf. Kung: 2007: 287). Dogma, passive acceptance and exclusivism are rejected. JIL’s ideas and beliefs are a dynamic response to the challenges of modernity based on the principles of freedom and reason.

3.4 Origins of JIL’s Ideas

JIL’s ideas did not emerge from nowhere or as merely a reaction to literalist, puritanical and authoritarian versions of Islam. They clearly resemble a liberal-rational position in the faith which had a precedent in the 8th century, which was resurrected in the 19th century and which was explicitly and comprehensively restated in the modern
Indonesian context by Harun Nasution. That is, that God is reasonable, that humans have free-will and that the holy texts are creations in time and space. The above examination of JIL’s ideas demonstrates the commitment of liberal Islam to freedom and reason in the areas of theology, government and human rights.

In the first discussion group held at the Utan Kayu Complex in February 2001, which in fact led to the formation of JIL later that year, participants examined the origins of liberal Islam. A transcript of this discussion entitled ‘The Roots of Islamic Liberalism’ (‘Akar-Akar Liberalisme Islam’) is included in Wajah Liberal Islam di Indonesia. From this it is clear that JIL’s ideas were inspired by both scholars and Islamic thinkers on liberalism in the faith. According to Luthfi Assyaukanie, the term ‘liberal Islam’ was popularized by Charles Kurzman, but had also been previously discussed by Leonard Binder, Albert Hourani and A.A. Asaf Fyzee (2002: 157-158). He also notes the influence of the French invasion and occupation of Egypt in 1798 under Napoleon Bonaparte and its liberalizing effect on Islam (2002: 159). He continues by stating that this liberalizing process reached its peak in the person of Muhammad Abduh (2002: 159), who Nasution viewed as Mu’tazilite in all but name (see pp. 36-37, above). Luthfi concludes with his opinion that, after 200 years, the Islamic liberal movement in the Middle-East is in decline and is not producing thinkers of the calibre of Abduh and his contemporaries and followers (2002: 162).

In contrast to this, Hamid Basyaib said that the roots of liberal Islam could be found in the first decades of the faith and did not just emerge in the late 18th century. He mentions the Caliph Umar (d.644) and his liberal interpretation of Qur’anic verses (see above, p. 50). Hamid then states his opinion that the Mu’tazilites were very liberal and he quotes an unnamed, prominent Mu’tazilite as saying that “basically religion is unnecessary as long as humans exercise their faculty of reason truly and to the maximum” (2002: 163). Luthfi then agrees with Hamid and adds that the Mu’tazilites sowed the seeds of liberalism in Islam. “The Muktazilah were rationalists and liberals, although when they were powerful it led to problems (the inquisition or mihnah)” (2002: 164). He concludes “So, I think the seeds of liberal Islam can be derived from within Islam itself, that Islam is a liberal religion, a liberating religion” (2002: 164).
According to El-Dardiry, many liberal Muslims see Muhammadiyah, founded by Ahmad Dahlan in 1912, as the first organization to attempt to harmonize Islam and modernity in Indonesia (2005: 17). However, Nasution has dismissed Muhammadiyah as in any significant way representing liberal-rational Islam (see above p. 38). Indonesia’s first President, Soekarno, is also seen as supporting liberal-rational ideas in Islamic discourse such as the separation of religion and state (El-Dardiry 2005: 17). Maslahul Falah has commented on Soekarno’s admiration of the Mu’tazilites (2003: 84) who he saw as “the locomotive of the rational movement to enlighten the faithful” (2003: 51). According to Falah, Soekarno saw reason as the means of liberating Islam; if the Qur’an and Hadith are opposed to reason then an interpretation must be found which is acceptable to reason (2003: 81). Soekarno was also committed to the idea of a secular Indonesian State which would accept all religions and beliefs based on justice and fairness (2003: 51). Be this as it may, El-Dardiry saw the ideas of JIL as owing a great deal to four Muslim intellectuals: Nurcholish Majid (1939-2005), Ahmad Wahib (1942-1973), Djohan Effendi (b. 1940) and Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009). Above all, “JIL’s core agreed Nurcholis was the intellectual founding father of the present-day discourse on liberal Islam” (El-Dardiry 2005: 17). According to El-Dardiry, Majid’s belief that the Qur’an is a text and should not be thought of as a holy object, but treated as a message, provided “a theological argument to perform *ijtihad*, which is the very first point of JIL’s manifesto” (2005: 17).

The ideas and influence of the above-mentioned scholars and activists have been dealt with comprehensively by Gregory Barton (1995). However, as has been noted, neither Barton nor El-Dardiry acknowledged in any depth the influence of Harun Nasution in the creation of a liberal-rational Islamic discourse and movement in Indonesia. In a sense this is understandable, especially given that, in their writings, JIL members such as Ulil Abshar-Abdalla and Luthfi Assyaukani have not referred to Nasution in any detail, if at all. However, as has been shown, there is considerable congruence between the ideas of Nasution and JIL. Fauzan Saleh has demonstrated the importance of Mu’tazilite thought and Harun Nasution to current liberal-rational theological discourse in Indonesian Islam (2001: 197-240). The fact that around a half of the core founders of JIL would have been exposed to the ideas and liberal-rational
theology of Nasution has already been noted (see p. 1 above). Of the twenty-seven young, influential liberal Muslims identified by Budi Handrianto (2007: 173-284), thirteen were graduates of I.A.I.N. where the curriculum had been reformed by Nasution. In all, Handrianto profiles fifty prominent liberal Muslim figures, twelve of whom are or were academics at I.A.I.N. A prominent critic of liberal Islam, Adian Husaini (see 3.5 below), has said that “the figure and thought of Harun Nasution has been rarely discussed in public forums. Whereas in fact he has played a large part in the restructuring and renewal of religious studies, especially through his book *Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspeknya*, which is used as an important reference in Islamic studies courses at various I.A.I.N.” (Handrianto 2007: 37).

However, one of the latest studies of liberal Islam in Indonesia has commented extensively on the influence of Harun Nasution and Mu’tazilite thought on this movement. Halid describes JIL as basically continuing the liberal thought of their predecessors such as Harun Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid (2008: 131). In fact, Halid sees Nasution as a principal pioneer of liberal Islam in Indonesia, especially through his writings, teaching and leadership in the Jakarta State Islamic Institute or I.A.I.N. (2008: 118 and 199). Halid also associates the beginnings of liberal-rational theology in Islam with the Mu’tazilites and has noted the influence of their ideas on JIL (2008: 39). Like Nasution, he believes that a renewed, transformative Islam is needed in Indonesia where the Muslim community is “under-developed in nearly all aspects” (2008: 331). In his conclusion Halid also refers to the mutually inclusive pairing of liberalism and rationalism that is a conceptual basis of this thesis, though he does not relate this directly to the Mu’tazilites or Aristotle (2008: 334).

### 3.5 Critical Reaction to JIL

The fact that, in the 1960s, the Mu’tazilite liberal-rational views of Harun Nasution were seen as shocking and dangerous not only in Indonesia but at McGill University in Canada has been discussed in Chapter Two. Remarkably, Nasution was able to institutionalize these views at State Islamic Institutes throughout Indonesia from the
1970s on. Despite this, or because of it, in December 1975, the prominent Indonesian Muslim scholar, academic, first Minister for Religion of the Republic of Indonesia and one time associate professor at McGill University, H. M. Rasjidi, wrote a secret report for the Indonesian State Ministry of Religion pointing out the dangerous nature of Nasution’s views about Islam and requesting that the Ministry take action against his book *Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspeknya*, especially given that it was a compulsory text at all I.A.I.N. in Indonesia (Hadrianto 2007: 38). According to Rasjidi, who had personally recommended Nasution for his initial studies at McGill University in 1962 (Muzani 1994: 98), Nasution was “influenced by orientalist ways of thinking which harm Islam” (quoted in Muzani 1994: 107). This notion that Nasution’s ideas and books, especially *Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspeknya*, constitute a serious threat to Islam continues to be promoted in works such as Daud Rasyid’s *Sunnah di Bawah Ancaman – Dari Snouck Hurgronje hingga Harun Nasution* (The Way of the Prophet under Threat – From Snouck Hurgronje to Harun Nasution) (2006: 17-43 and 86). However, in 1975 and thereafter, no action was taken against Nasution or his text books. This is not surprising as the Minister for Religion at the time, Mukti Ali, had been a prominent supporter of Nasution in his leadership role at the Jakarta I.A.I.N. (Muzani 1994: 103). As recently as 2009, the prominent Muslim activist for women’s rights and lecturer at the Jakarta U.I.N., Professor Doctor Siti Musdah Mulia, who openly acknowledges being influenced by Harun Nasution, stated “I have often received threats of terror by telephone or S.M.S. after I have appeared on radio or television” (Dewanto, Kuswardono & Titiyoga 2009: 107). Given this background, criticisms of JIL were to be even more trenchant and, on occasions, accompanied by threats of violence and death.

Two representative works critical of liberal Islam and JIL are: *Islam Liberal: sejarah, konsepsi, penyimpangan, dan jawabannya* (Liberal Islam: history, conceptions, deviations and responses) by Adian Husaini and Nuim Hidayat and *Menangkal bahaya JIL dan FLA* (Preventing the menace of the Liberal Islamic Network and Interfaith Dialogue) by Agus Hasan Bashori and Hartono Ahmad Jaiz. Adian Husaini is a Chairman of the Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia* (The Indonesian Islamic Council for the Propagation of the Faith) and the General Secretary of K.I.S.D.I. and Agus Hasan
Bashori is a Muslim religious teacher and editor of the magazine ‘Islam Qiblati’ (The Orientation of Islam). The basic theme of both these works is that liberal Islam and JIL are enemies of Islam and agents of Western Imperialism and Zionism; liberal Islam’s aim is to deceive the faithful and undermine Islam from within and that liberal Muslims are financed and educated by Western infidels or kafir and orientalists to blacken the image of Islam and ultimately destroy it (Husaini and Hidayat 2002: 173 and Bashori and Jaiz 2003: 292). Similar themes, albeit in more restrained language and in a more academic style, are developed by Parjono Wiro Putro in his Membongkar Kesesatan Pemikiran Jaringan Islam Liberal (Exposing the Deviations in the Ideas of the Liberal Islam Network) which acknowledges the importance of the two representative works chosen for discussion here (2004: 7).

At this point it is necessary to briefly explain the concept of ‘orientalism’. Originally the term merely meant the views and knowledge of a Western expert in, or student of, Eastern languages and literature (Trumble & Stevenson 2002: 2021). However, in a work published in 1978, Edward Said redefined the term ‘Orientalism’ as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1985: 3). In this construction, the Orient is anywhere east of Europe (the West): the Near East or Middle East and the Far East (1985: 1-2). This is the meaning of the term ‘Orientalism’ as it has been used by the critics of JIL and liberal Islam. Earlier critics of Harun Nasution would have used the term to imply that he was merely too influenced by Western scholars of Islam, not that he was necessarily part of a project to demean or destroy it. Ulil Abshar-Abdalla has noted that contemporary fundamentalist and conservative critics of liberal thinkers in the Islamic world are increasingly using Said’s concept to accuse their opponents of being “orientalist lackeys” (2005: 125).

A critic sees JIL as “like a cat on heat, its caterwauling deafening and annoying many people” (Haidar Bagir, quoted in Husaini and Hidayat 2002: viii). According to Husaini and Hidayat it has four main aims which threaten Islam: it destroys the faith by promoting pluralism and inclusivism, it emasculates or rejects Islamic law or Shari’a, promotes secular democracy, and endeavours to smash militant Islam on behalf of the U.S.A. and Zionists. Furthermore, the liberals in JIL attack Islamic laws and beliefs concerning bank interest, divorce and polygamy, they cast doubt on the recorded
sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad - the Sunnah - and they reject past interpretations of the Qur’an and read it critically (Husaini and Hidayat 2002: 1-2). Husaini and Hidayat assert that the pioneers in developing liberal Islam in Indonesia were Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid (2002: 26). In fact they state that Nurcholish is a student and inheritor of the theology and ideas of the neo-Mu’tazilite, Harun Nasution (2002: 44). They note that Leonard Binder, described as a “Jewish political scientist” (2002: 22), may have been the inspiration for the formation of JIL as a result of his book *Islamic Liberalism*. They assert that JIL and the liberal Islam movement are not orthodox Muslims (2002: 2).

Bashori and Jaiz make extensive use of quotes from the Qur’an in Arabic and Indonesian to rebut, ward off and refute the menace of JIL (2003). They claim that in his article *‘Refreshing the Understanding of Islam’* published in late 2002 (see pp. 52-53 above for a summary of this article), Ulil Abshar-Abdalla insults Islam and they add that, according to the Qur’an, “the punishment for those who insult Islam is death” (2003: 4). They urge him to repent before he is killed and that “darahnya halal” (his blood is halal – meaning orthodox Muslims are permitted to kill him) (2003: 4). They claim that JIL gets its funds from America (2003: 150), that Ulil is influenced by Catholics and was educated by Jesuits (2003: 2, 23 and 101), that he supports the consumption of alcohol in some cases and that he is in favour of inter-faith marriages, all of which are against the Shari’a (2003: 1). Bashori and Jaiz observe that JIL even have female workers in their offices (2003: 293). They repeat Husaini and Hidayat’s criticisms of JIL, quoting Qur’anic verses to support their objections (2003: 54). According to them, Ulil has gone too far and is talking the dangerous rubbish of heathens (kafir), liberals, orientalists and secularists (2003: 100). They note that Ulil has been threatened with death and claim he is frightened (2003: 293). Bashori and Jaiz conclude that liberal Muslims are like dogs (2003: 295-296): they eat filth and are low and contemptible (2003: 298).

These critics of JIL and liberal Islam interpret the Qur’an literally (2003: 202) and quote from the text extensively to reject and condemn JIL’s agenda. Halid describes them as “fundamentalist-scripturalists” (2008: 308). Luthfi Assyaukanie has used the term “pavement Islam” in the same context (see above, p. 44). These opponents argue for a
monolithic, puritanical, exclusivist, patriarchal and authoritarian version of Islam. Bashori and Jaiz use violent and threatening language toward JIL and Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, and the following three examples show how these threats and criticisms have been manifested. The first has been mentioned (p. 52-53, above). On the 1st of December 2002, a group of Muslim leaders (*ulama*) and others representing an unspecified number of mosque communities from across Java, met at the Bandung Secretariat of an organization called the Forum Ulama Umat Islam (Islamic Congregations Leaders Forum) and issued a statement sentencing Ulil Abshar-Abdalla to death because he had insulted Islam in 2002 article article published in *Kompas* (see pp. 52-53 above). Bashori and Jaiz describe this statement as a *fatwa* or binding religious ruling (2003: 6-7). According to them, a representative from Nahdlatul Ulama, K.H. Luthfi Bashori, supported this *fatwa* (2003: 7). Not only that, on their return from Bandung, this group stopped off in Jakarta to visit K.H. Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, the then leader of the Majlis Mujahidin Indonesia (Indonesian Holy Warriors Council) or M.M.I. (2003: 6). Ba’asyir was also the leader of Jemaah Islamiyah or ‘The Islamic Congregations’ organization which had suspected links to al-Qaeda and some of whose members had been involved in terrorist bombings throughout Indonesia, including the Bali bombing of October 2002 (see Barton 2005: 7, 52-56 and 77).

Then, in mid to late 2002, JIL produced and financed a public service advertisement for television entitled ‘*Islam Warna-Warni*’ (Multicoloured Islam). The message conveyed by this advertisement was that within Islam there are many schools of thought and much cultural variety, in fact a re-statement of Harun Nasution’s position and the basis of his curriculum reforms at the I.A.I.N. over two decades earlier. The advertisement urged tolerance and acceptance of religious and cultural differences. Its main theme was “to invite the Muslim community to reject the idea that there is only one version of Islam” and accept that there are “many Islams” (Assyaukanie 2007: 96) or, as Ulil put it, “from this one (*Islam*), many interpretations have emerged” (Abshar-Abdalla 2005: 40). On the 4th of August 2002, after protests and threats of demonstrations by M.M.I., the television station involved withdrew this advertisement. The idea that there are many interpretations of Islam and that Islam is not a monolithic faith were seen as damaging to Islam and therefore offensive to the M.M.I. It is interesting to
note that twenty-seven years earlier a similar position had been taken by H.M. Rasjidi in his objections to Harun Nasution’s book *Islam ditinjau dari berbagai aspeknya* (see p. 60, above).

Finally, on the 28th of July 2005, the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Muslim Leaders Council) issued eleven religious rulings or *fatwa* at the end of their four-day annual National Conference. The M.U.I. was set up in 1975 by the Soeharto Government to represent Islamic leaders, scholars and intellectuals, to unite the Indonesian Muslim Community and form a shared vision and program. There are fifty-three members of the Council representing twenty-six provinces of Indonesia, ten from the main mass Muslim organizations, four from the police and armed forces and thirteen individual Muslim intellectuals and scholars (*M.U.I.* website 2009 – About M.U.I.). The seventh of the eleven *fatwa* stated that pluralism, secularism and liberalism are antithetical to Islam, that Muslims are prohibited from holding these ideas and that in matters of faith and practice Islam is an exclusive religion, although social intercourse with those of other faiths is permitted. Other *fatwa* requested that the Government ban the Ahmadiyah sect as heretical to Islam, that Muslims could not pray with those of other faiths, that interfaith marriage is not permitted by Islam and that women could not lead mixed gender prayers (2009: Fatwa).

As Luthfi Assyaukanie has pointed out, the effect of these M.U.I. *fatwa* was to “directly trigger violence and intolerance” from the Muslim community (2007: 167). As a result there were attacks on the JIL offices (2007: 167). For example, on the 4th of September 2005 a group calling itself the Forum Umat Islam Utan Kayu (The Islamic Community Forum of Utan Kayu) demonstrated outside the JIL office and demanded that it be closed, as well as carrying posters cursing JIL identities (JIL press release 2005). Given the history of violence and demonstrations carried out by ‘scripturalist-fundamentalist’ Muslim groups in Indonesia, (for examples, see Barton 2005: Ch. 3, Nurdin 2005: 21-22 and Rosadi 2008: 193-195 & 199-200), it is little wonder that JIL and prominent identities associated with it may have felt the fear noted by Bashori and Jaiz (2003 293). As shall be seen in the next chapter, apprehension and a sense of marginalization are not uncommon feelings among those in the liberal Islamic community.
Chapter Four – Freedom, Reason and Faith: Responses of Liberal Muslims

4.1 Introduction

“Liberal Islam is Islam which liberates, which is progressive, which values human rights, women’s rights, pluralism and diversity” (Sartina, interview 7, October 2008)

“For me, liberal Islam values reason in religion. Because we use reason in religion we can accept modern issues like gender, multi-culturalism and pluralism. I am from a pesantren background. There, we were not able to question our religion. As liberal Muslims of course we must value reason but formerly (in the pesantren), reason was ignored, rejected...it was seen as a virus which would undermine our faith community” (Mukhtar, interview 12, October 2008).

This thesis has examined how freedom and reason have been expressed in Islam through the Mu’tazilite movement, Harun Nasution and The Liberal Islam Network. An analysis of the writings of members of JIL such as Ulil Abshar-Abdalla and Luthfi Assyaukanie as well as other prominent contributors to the discourse on liberal Islam has been presented in Chapter Three. However, none of the texts about liberal Islam referred to in this thesis have discussed the ideas, perceptions, motivation and beliefs of liberal Muslims who do not have as high a profile as those already mentioned in this work. What follows is an attempt to demonstrate how freedom and reason in Islam are viewed by ‘rank and file’, predominantly young, liberal Muslims, what they are motivated by, how they see the future of their movement, the risks involved in their commitment to liberal Islam and their attitudes to two basic pillars of Islam - the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad. What is revealed by these interviews is important because it is especially young Muslims who represent the potential of, and prospects for, the liberal Islam movement in Indonesia.

Before 2001 in Indonesia there would have been few Muslims who would have described themselves specifically as liberal. With the formation of JIL, progressive,
modernist, liberal-minded Muslims increasingly accepted ‘liberal Islam’ as a description of their position and were willing to openly declare themselves as such. Between the 20th of October and the 7th of November 2008, I interviewed sixteen individuals in Jakarta who described themselves as liberal Muslims. Subjects volunteered to be interviewed on the basis of anonymity and were found with the assistance of the staff of JIL, Yayasan Paramadina (The Paramadina Foundation) and the Formaci (Forum Mahasiswa Ciputat – The Ciputat Student Forum) organization at the State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah at Ciputat in Jakarta. This is only a small cross section of people who consider themselves liberal Muslims, yet the interviews reveal some core issues for people who openly espouse that they are advocates of liberal Islam.

Before proceeding, it is necessary here to give a brief outline of the Paramadina Foundation and Formaci, both organizations of a liberal Islamic orientation. While only a quarter of those interviewed were members of JIL, this organization has provided the context for other Muslims to describe themselves as ‘liberal’ and so it was deemed appropriate to include self-styled liberal Muslims from the two above-mentioned organizations in the survey as well. As will be seen, their views are generally consistent with JIL’s six principles (see pp. 46-47 above). Of the four members of JIL interviewed, one had been a member of Formaci and another had attended the Paramadina University. Currently, one of the founding members of JIL, Luthfi Assyaukanie, is a lecturer at the Paramadina University (Handrianto 2007: 216). Also, the interviews with members of the Paramadina Foundation show their responses are consistent with those associated with JIL and Formaci. A significant number of Formaci’s members have gone on to become involved in JIL and were involved in its formation. Moreover Formaci’s existence is in part due to the influence and inspiration of Harun Nasution at U.I.N. Ciputat (see below, p. 67).

Yayasan Paramadina or the Paramadina Foundation, was established in 1986 by Nurcholish Madjid to enlighten and educate both the Islamic and non-Islamic communities in Indonesia. Its main aims were to combine universal Islamic values with local, Indonesian traditions and culture in order to enhance the national response to the challenges of modernity and to contribute to the quality and authority of the intellectual discourse, particularly in the religious sphere. The Foundation aimed to
promote a non-sectarian spirit, develop a creative and dynamic Islamic community, encourage interfaith dialogue and promote the study of the various schools of thought or *mazhab* within Islam (an approach pioneered by Harun Nasution in his curriculum reform at I.A.I.N.), to avoid exclusivism and intolerance (Paramadina Foundation 2009: website). Its agenda of renewal was broadly based on a liberal-rational perspective of Islam, similar to that later developed by JIL (Halid 2008: 308-311). In 1998 Nurcholish Madjid became a founder and the first Rector of the Paramadina University which aimed, among other things, to promote a modern, rational and free approach to Islam and institutionalize the values of the Paramadina Foundation in an academic context (see Universitas Paramadina 2008).

One year before the Paramadina Foundation was set up, Formaci was established at the Jakarta I.A.I.N. in 1985. Many of its members subsequently became prominent in JIL, for example Ihsan Ali Fauzi, Saiful Mujani, Hendro Prasetyo, Budhi Munawar Rahman and Nong Darol Mahmada (see Assyaukanie 2002, Handrianto 2007 and Nurhayati 2006). Formaci was established as a study and discussion club for students at what was then the I.A.I.N. and is now the U.I.N. (Universitas Islam Negeri - State Islamic University) at Ciputat in Jakarta. According to Nurhayati (2006: 36), members of the Forum see Islam as a humanitarian, transformative and rational religion, responsive to historical change. Formaci adopted a liberal interpretation of Islam (2006: 40) and claimed inspiration from, among other sources, the liberal-rational teachings of the teacher and one-time Rector of the Jakarta I.A.I.N., Harun Nasution (2006: 46). As Nurhayati stated, “In the field of Islamic studies, Formaci formed the *avant garde* of the Islamic renewal movement pioneered by Harun Nasution” (2006: 48).

The sixteen participants in the research were asked ten questions in a recorded interview and completed a written questionnaire about some personal details. Eight of the participants were university students aged between 21 and 26 and seven of this group were based at the State Islamic University, Syarif Hidayatullah. Six of these seven were also members of Formaci. Four of those interviewed were associated with JIL and five were members of the Paramadina Foundation. Eleven completed their secondary education at either *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) or *madrasah*
(Islamic secondary schools). Six of the participants’ families had breadwinners who were independent traders or entrepreneurs, two were farmers and the remainder came from professional backgrounds. Three of the participants were females. All were university students or graduates and thirteen had majored in various fields of Islamic studies at university level. Five were married. Interviewees ranged from those who were highly articulate and knowledgeable about liberal Islam to those who were relative newcomers to the movement; from paid staff of JIL and the Paramadina Foundation, to activists and passive supporters; and from an age range of 22 to 70, though all but three were in their twenties. One was from South Sulawesi, two from East Java, two from Jakarta, two from Central Java and nine from West Java.

The interviews consisted of questions about the meaning of liberal Islam to the participants, their motivation and involvement in the liberal Islam movement, their knowledge of the origins of this position in Islam, their personal faith, problems arising from their liberal orientation and evaluations of the achievements of, and prospects for, liberal Islam. The aim of the interviews was to obtain a general profile of the beliefs, views and opinions of a number of self-styled liberal Muslims. This research aimed to explore the extent to which freedom and reason informed the views of the respondents and the degree to which the principles and program of JIL have been absorbed by liberal Muslims. What follows is based on indirect and direct edited quotation from, and summaries of, these interviews, which were conducted in Indonesian (see Appendix 1: details of interviews and participants and Appendix 2: transcripts of direct, edited quotations). All the interviewees are identified by pseudonyms.

4.2 Freedom and Reason in Islam

When asked about the meaning they gave to the term ‘liberal Islam’, eleven of the sample interviewed directly mentioned freedom (kebebasan), three mentioned reason (akal) and three mentioned other values (human rights, tolerance and peace). However, the theme of freedom was mentioned by all participants in responses to
other questions. Furthermore, when the respondents mentioned the contextualization of the Qur’an they were referring to a process of rationalizing the text according to contemporary knowledge, conditions and historical developments.

Ibrahim, a twenty-six-year-old student of Hadith and Qu’ranic Exegesis at U.I.N. Jakarta and member of the Paramadina Foundation, described a liberal Muslim as “someone with a free pattern of thought”. He added that “the Islam which developed in Indonesia did not give this freedom” (Ibrahim, interview 1, October 2008). According to Nurhadi, twenty-two, a student of sociology and religion at U.I.N. and Formaci member, liberal Islam advocates “freedom to interpret the Qur’an and Hadith in context, according to when it was written” (Nurhadi, interview 2, October 2008). Abu, twenty-two, a U.I.N. student of Comparative Islamic Legal Schools and Formaci member and Iskandar, twenty-two, a U.I.N. student and Formaci member described liberal Islam as being free from dogma and doctrines and open to new ideas or as Tahir, a twenty-six-year-old Research Assistant at U.I.N. stated, liberal Islam espoused “freedom of thought, freedom to understand the texts, to follow one’s own religion and to allow others the same right” (Tahir, interview 6, October 2008). According to Kartika, a twenty-four-year-old student of Biotechnology at Al Azar University, Jakarta and member of the Paramadina Foundation, liberal Islam is not harsh; it is peaceful and promotes secularization. As Idris, twenty-four, a Formaci member and student of Philosophy at U.I.N. Jakarta said, liberal Islam “is free from all forms of violence...Islam which is free from orthodox and literal interpretations” (Idris, interview 9, November 2008). He added that it gave him the freedom to interpret the Qur’an and the Hadith rationally, not depending on tradition, but rather on the modern, Indonesian context in which he finds himself.

According to Amin, twenty-one, a Formaci member and Philosophy student at U.I.N. “Liberal Islam is based on the concept that reason is of a higher order than revelation. Liberal Islam is Islam which contextualizes its teachings...and adjusts them to local traditions and values” (Amin, interview 8, November 2008). Ismed, a twenty-one-year-old Economics student at U.I.N. and Formaci member, described liberal Islam as “thinking freely” (Ismed, interview 13, November 2008). Fatima, a retired Psychologist associated with the Paramadina Foundation, said that liberal Islam gave her the
freedom to interpret the Qur’an according to her knowledge, experience and opinions. Santoso, a twenty-eight-year-old JIL activist, described the liberal movement as a way of believing which is open, democratic, supportive of human rights, equality and the rights of the individual.

According to Naqib, a thirty-three-year-old JIL activist, liberal Islam is part of modern human culture and civilization, especially in the fields of human rights, gender equality and democracy. It is inclusive and not isolated and exclusive. To liberals, Islam is one religion among others; it is not the only religion. Its teachings should be universal and for the benefit of all humanity. While the faith has been willing to promote justice and equality, Muslims in general and particularly in Indonesia have had a problem with freedom. We “see a big problem confronting Islam as the problem or issue of freedom...‘liberal’ is a dirty word in Islam...the connotation of the word ‘liberal’ is very negative in the Muslim world, especially in Indonesia” (Naqib, interview 16, October 2008). He believes that other religions such as Christianity have already adapted to the notion of freedom and JIL is trying to achieve the same for Islam. JIL is the only organization in Indonesia to call itself ‘liberal’; “Since Independence no party in Indonesia has dared to call itself ‘liberal’. We have done this openly, to show our ethos; we struggle for freedom” (Naqib, interview 16, October 2008).

4.3 Motivation and Influences

What motivated those interviewed to see themselves as liberal Muslims? Almost all the participants had their liberal orientation confirmed or inspired by tertiary education and reading, though Mukhtar, a twenty-nine-year-old JIL activist, cited the influence of his older sister and Kartika of her mother, on their liberal positions. A majority of the respondents described their pre-university, pesantren based religious education as unquestioning, narrow, literalist and conservative. The crucial role of higher education suggests that the strategy employed by Harun Nasution has been effective at the elite level at which he implemented it.
Eleven of those interviewed described themselves as coming from conservative or conventional Muslim backgrounds and attending pesantren where unquestioning acceptance of orthodox Islam was expected. As Naqib said, “Generally I was conservative, like most Indonesians, especially as I was educated in a pesantren” (Naqib, interview 16, October 2008). As has been noted, Mukhtar was more specific in stating that the attitude at the pesantren was unquestioning, that he was not allowed to be critical and that the exercise of reason was seen as like a virus. The pesantren was experienced by them as a closed system where a literalist attitude toward the scriptures was generally dominant. According to Ibrahim, “I was educated in a closed system and was not permitted to question my faith until now (at university)” (Ibrahim, interview 1, October 2008). Tahir said that at the U.I.N. he was not forced but had the right or the freedom to make his own choices. Naqib asserted that “religious schools have been breeding grounds for the orthodox, the traditionalists, right up to now. We can hardly find an Islamic educational institution which is open enough. Fortunately in Indonesia there is the U.I.N., there is Harun Nasution” (Naqib, interview 16, October 2008). Sartina, twenty-nine, a JIL activist, and Ibrahim were attracted to the liberal position through coming across JIL’s website. Five of those interviewed who had grown up in a conservative, orthodox environment specifically mentioned their studies at the Jakarta U.I.N. and being associated with Formaci as motivating them toward a liberal perspective. Five respondents said that they had always had a liberal inclination and reading and education had confirmed this. The writings of Nurcholish Madjid were specifically mentioned by three respondents as being influential in forming their liberal orientation.

The debates and discussions encouraged at the U.I.N. and by JIL were contrasted with the dogmatism of much pesantren education. However, one respondent, Ismed, felt that the pesantren he attended in Garut, West Java had encouraged a more critical, questioning and freer thinking attitude to Islam. Tahir described how he felt impelled toward liberal Islam, attracted by freedom and choice rather than the compulsion and dogmatism which characterised his childhood experience of the faith. Sartina said that the influence of friends and then thinking for herself had exposed her to a liberal position. Santoso stated that when he came across liberal Islam he felt that it
represented what he had always believed anyway and that he had always tried to make his faith and beliefs fit in to a rational and liberal framework. The desire to find a version of Islam which was free from literalism, intolerance and exclusiveness and which was rather informed by reason and openness, was mentioned by Idris, who stated that liberal Islam was his faith for life. The influence of liberal causes such as gender equality, freedom of thought, commitment to democracy, tolerance of different faiths and beliefs and opposition to the violence and dogmatism of fundamentalists and fanatics were also mentioned by Nurhadi and Tahir. Fatima explained how her work in the area of mental health had led her to the belief that a liberal-rational outlook on religion was beneficial to the psychological well-being of her patients.

Hanafi, a twenty-six-year-old Paramadina Foundation activist, had attended a pesantren. Then when he went to the Jakarta U.I.N. to study philosophy he got involved in Formaci. He began to rethink his former beliefs using reason and logic and continually questioning his faith. He realized that if he kept interpreting the religious texts literally, he would become closed off. His faith would not develop. He saw that using freedom and reason to interpret the religious texts would create an Islam which would be more beneficial to the society. Finally, Naqib described how he had come across a treasury of Islamic thought while studying at university in Egypt. He mentioned being especially inspired by writers of the Mu’tazilite school.

4.4 The Significance of Liberal Islam

All those interviewed stressed the vital importance of the liberal Islamic discourse in present day Indonesia. According to Ibrahim and Abu, liberal Islam opens up the faith for criticism and progress. It encourages Muslims to think critically about their faith rather than blindly and unquestioningly accepting what they were taught by the dominant orthodoxy. Iskandar explained that, up to now, most Indonesian Muslims understood the Qur’an literally, as it is written. Liberal Islam frees them from this so they can make sense of the Qur’an in the modern context. Kartika saw liberal Islam as
important in opposing hard-line fundamentalism. Tahir and Sartina viewed Islam in Indonesia as stagnating and being taken over by fundamentalists and jihadists*. Liberal Islam, by opening the door of *ijtihad* or rational interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith, provided the possibility for renewal, progress and innovation to confront the challenges of modernity. Sartina concluded that with the increasing activity of radical, fundamentalist Muslim groups “Liberal Islam is vital in opposing them” (Sartina, interview 7, October 2008). Amin said that the liberal position “gives an understanding of Islam which is more local...more factual and contextual and meets the demands of changing times. Liberal Islam is important so Muslims don’t think of their religion as a dead monument...which only consists of rituals and observances” (Amin, interview 8, November 2008). According to Sartina, the liberal commitment to reason was vital to prevent Muslims falling behind in education and knowledge. She viewed the maximal use of reason as the foundation of Islam during its ‘golden era’ under the Abbasid Caliphate. She observed that terrorism had tarnished the image of Islam in Indonesia and that the liberal movement was a vital counter to this with its emphasis on pluralism and tolerance.

Santoso stated that Islam was being held back by its perceived negative attitude to gender equality and women’s rights, issues which are strongly promoted by liberals. Naqib was another to express the opinion that liberal Islam provides a counter-discourse to what he saw as increasingly prevalent and dangerous fundamentalism, extremism and conservatism, which he regarded as being imported to Indonesia from Saudi Arabia*. He described the former Taliban* regime in Afghanistan as symptomatic of this type of Islam, characterizing them as “the worst Muslim regime that has ever been on the face of the earth” (Naqib, interview 16, October 2008). He concluded that, despite liberal Islam being a numerically small movement, it has great influence, especially in balancing increasing religious extremism and conservatism. Without the presence of liberal Islam he felt that the moderate majority would be more vulnerable to the fundamentalists: “We (*the liberals*), protect moderation. In fact without liberal groups, moderation would be smashed” (Naqib, interview 16, October 2008).
4.5 Liberal Islam in History

When asked about the history of a liberal-rational outlook in Islam, a majority of the respondents saw freedom and reason as intrinsic to the faith. Only one referred to the 18th century confrontation with European Imperialism as being a spur to what he described as a revival of more liberal interpretations of the faith. None of those interviewed mentioned the ideas of Hourani, Binder or Kurzman as sources of their knowledge about the subject. Only Iskandar professed a lack of awareness about the history of a liberal-rational theology in Islam. Of the remaining interviewees, three mentioned the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution as important proponents of a liberal rational position in the faith. Ten of the respondents believed that liberal attitudes were reflected in the Qur’an and the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. They referred to the existence of Qur’anic verses urging the faithful to think for themselves, to have a responsive and flexible attitude to their environment and community, to pursue knowledge and to be tolerant of minorities and other religions. As Abu said, “As far as I know, liberal thinking and attitudes began with Muhammad... Essentially, from its beginnings...Islam was liberal” (Abu, interview 3, October 2008). Santoso observed that, in its origins, Islam was liberal as, being a minority religion, it defended pluralism, freedom and tolerance precisely because it would be a beneficiary of such attitudes on the part of the then non-Muslim ruling class. However when Islam became a majority religion and the state religion of imperial powers, the dominant elites enforced orthodoxy and rigidity on the faithful. Theology became less free and open and tended to justify the powerful rather than the weak and minority groups. Consequently Muslims of a liberal bent became marginalized.

Abu, Sartina, Idris and Mansur, a forty-one-year-old lecturer associated with the Paramadina Foundation, specifically mentioned the second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, as being one of the first pioneers of a liberal attitude in Islam, in the sense that he rejected a literal interpretation of the Qur’an in favour of an interpretation based on reason and context. They stated that Umar had understood the essence of the Qur’an in rejecting its literal injunctions in two significant instances (for details, see p. 50 above). They said that Umar had corrected the Prophet and the Qu’ran in these
two cases and that by doing so he established a liberal tradition of freedom to think independently and critically in opposition to rigidly accepting the texts literally. Tahir, Mukhtar and Naqib mentioned the Mu’tazilites as having a liberal theology stressing reason and freedom of thought. Ismed referred to a liberal truth which had existed in Islam from its origins but had been suppressed and hidden in Indonesia by fundamentalists until the 1970s, when the Islamic renewers began to restate these truths. Mukhtar believed that in each era of Islamic history there had been groups and individuals who had a liberal view of the faith. In the Indonesian context the liberalizing figures he mentioned were Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid. Tahir referred to Harun Nasution as establishing a liberal perspective in Islam in Indonesia which was continued by Nurcholish Madjid and others.

These responses support one of the central arguments developed in this thesis - that freedom and reason have been present in Islam from its origins, but have been suppressed or regarded as unorthodox as the Empires of the Faith and their adherents became more powerful and widespread. Powerful rulers generally did not find liberal ideas congenial to their interests and it was only when their dominance was challenged by 18th century European colonial invasion and occupation that such concepts were resurrected, as Santoso observed and as has been described in Chapter Two.

4.6 Problems Associated with a Liberal Position

All those interviewed, with one exception, expressed that they had experienced problems because of their avowed position as liberal Muslims. Five singled out visits to their home village as a source of difficulties and three mentioned issues relating to parental disapproval of their beliefs. Liberal Muslims were seen as being misled, confused, straying from the true faith or following deviant beliefs. While some of their parents may have warned them against involvement in liberal Islam, none of those interviewed reported outright rejection from their families.
Ibrahim described how former friends were angry at him and distanced themselves from him when they found out that he was a liberal and Abu described tension within his family about his beliefs, but concluded that perhaps he needed to be more subtle, gentle and calm in discussing his faith with them. Iskandar said, “I am often gossiped about and slandered in my village because their version of Islam is very fanatical. People who they understand as liberal Muslims are regarded as deviant, led astray and inconsistent” (Iskandar, interview 4 October 2008). Sartina observed that her friends reacted harshly when they found out about her views, scolding her and telling her she must repent and return to the true path of Islam. Mukhtar believed that his sister, a well-known liberal Muslim, may have failed to obtain a position at a local West Javanese school because of her beliefs. Mansur was terrified by the reaction of a respected reviewer of a book he had written, who had described him as “arrogant like Satan” (Mansur, interview 14, November 2008). Because of the hurt he experienced, he had since avoided meeting or confronting the reviewer, such was the virulence of his reaction. Fatima said that her friends had questioned her because, despite seeing her as a pious Muslim, they couldn’t understand why she didn’t wear a veil or jilbab*. According to Santoso “We are confronted by two forces, political forces and the forces of orthodox Islam. We are seen as deviant...we are regarded as apostates. I get very many threats of murder on my email and by S.M.S.” (Santoso, interview 10, October 2008).

Physical attacks on the offices of JIL and on those demonstrating for liberal causes such as the rights of religious minorities, were also mentioned by several respondents. However, none described being cowed or intimidated by this and stated that such threats and actions only served to strengthen their commitment to liberal Islam. Ismed said that as his liberal identity became stronger, threats didn’t worry him so much. Idris stated that he had met with intimidation from conservatives and militant fundamentalists “however, we will not...we will never back down...we must continue to advance...advance to spread peace” (Idris, interview 9, November 2008). Naqib saw the threats and attacks as “just a part of the challenges we face” (Naqib, interview 16, October 2008). According to Mukhtar, threats “in Jakarta are not so apparent because each day we can meet with people who think like us” (Mukhtar, interview 12, October...
In the capital, those interviewed were able to meet with others who had similar beliefs, join organizations such as JIL, Formaci and the Paramadina Foundation and establish friendships with fellow liberals. This made them feel more secure, despite the stigmatization and alienation they had experienced because of their beliefs. However, as all those interviewed originated from villages or towns outside the capital city, returning home for holidays and to visit parents and relatives was an occasion when they were reminded of the heterodox nature of their beliefs. Furthermore, the language and actions of the critics of liberal Islam which have been described above (see Section 3.5), provide an intimidating and sometimes frightening background to the feelings that liberal Muslims have about the way they are perceived in the wider community.

4.7 An Evaluation of Liberal Islam

Most of those interviewed saw the main successes of the liberal Islam movement as opening up a clearly stated and organized discourse within Islam about a liberal-rational perspective, providing a focus for opposition to a perceived increase in fundamentalist, extremist and puritanical elements in the faith and influencing a significant section of the educated elite. The main failure of liberal organizations was seen as an inability to influence the majority of Indonesians who live in a village environment. JIL, Formaci and the Paramadina Foundation were perceived as metro-centric groups, mainly based in Jakarta, with little traction outside the capital city. The main challenges to the movement were extending its influence beyond the cities and universities and confronting fundamentalist organizations. However, most respondents were optimistic about the future of liberal Islam, eleven of the sample specifically expressing such feelings.

According to Nurhadi, JIL is still a minority and its main challenge is confronting fundamentalists and Muslim hard line groups such as the F.P.I. (Front Pembela Islam – Islamic Defenders Front) (interview 2, October 2008). Ibrahim said that “the liberal Islam movement contributes something new to society and people can understand
this...Normally there is much fundamentalist Islam in Indonesia...It is liberal Islam which gives a new understanding” (Ibrahim, interview 1, October 2008). Abu stated that the liberal discourse had opened up the possibility for the Muslim community in Indonesia to have different ideas about the faith. However, he added that although the liberal movement had done well in the university environment, it was unsuccessful in putting its ideas into practice in the wider community. Nurhadi, Iskandar and Tahir commented on an increasing lack of interest in any religious matters among university students. Hedonism and selfishness were seen as becoming more dominant, even among students at the Jakarta State Islamic University. Iskandar described JIL as only reaching intellectuals and academics, however increasing participation in higher education would benefit the liberal cause.

Kartika commented that at the least liberal organizations could oppose or reduce the effect Islamic fundamentalism was having, especially on young people. According to Tahir, liberal Islam “has broken down the iceberg of a rigid and frozen faith. It has been successful in spreading notions about freedom in the community in several cases...fighting for the rights of the Ahmadiyah...and this has been much attacked from within the Muslim community...its failures...maybe the liberal Islam movement is not rooted enough in the society...maybe what liberal Islam is struggling for tends to be unpopular...one example is the campaign for gay rights...for homosexual rights...this is good in fact, but maybe it’s too new and too advanced for Indonesia” (Tahir, interview 6, October 2008). However, Sartina noted that if liberal Islamic organizations did not exist, the debate on issues such as minority religious rights and the implementation of Shari’a laws would be impoverished and in fact be dominated by the fundamentalist perspective. She added that if it had not been for the active support of liberal Islam, the Ahmadiyah sect would have been wiped out. Sartina concluded, “Formerly we were stigmatized but maybe now...several of our activists have appeared on television...people are becoming more appreciative...I think JIL is already maybe becoming more acceptable and more understood than before, when we started” (Sartina, interview 7, October 2008).

Mukhtar observed that the words ‘liberal Islam’ and ‘JIL’ still evoke opposition, even in progressive circles. For example, Non-Government Organizations with the same
agenda as JIL’s, say on gender equality, are welcome in pesantren, but when the pesantren hears the words liberal Islam and JIL they are not so welcoming “because we use the words ‘liberal Islam’...then...people are resistant” (Mukhtar, interview 12, October 2008). He concluded that liberal Islam needed to repackage its ideas, to quieten down and avoid “waving a big banner” (Mukhtar, interview 12, October 2008), in order to be more acceptable at the local level, especially in the mosques where, according to Mansur, conservatism dominates the discourse. He observed that in debates and discussions liberal ideas are convincing “but in terms of strategy and tactics we have failed...because now they (the conservatives) control certain areas...like Friday sermons...we don’t get a look in” (Mansur, interview 14, November 2008).

Finally, Naqib asserted that JIL had made free and open discussion about Islam more possible. He described JIL as one of the few groups to actively oppose militant extremism and conservatism. While acknowledging the pioneering work and ideas of Harun Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid and Adurrahman Wahid, he described JIL as bolder than them, “We are more daring than them. We are a movement; they were individual thinkers” (Naqib, interview 16, October 2008). JIL is an organized group specifically committed to actively promoting goals such as secularization, pluralism, inclusiveness, freedom of religious thought, the rights of minorities and democracy. He admitted that JIL needed to develop much stronger roots in social and educational institutions and organizations. He concluded “However, if our endeavours are systematic, maybe Indonesian society can become more Mu’tazilite” (Naqib, interview 16, October 2008).

4.8 Some Aspects of Personal Faith

Questions of personal faith centred on beliefs about the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad. The responses to these questions reflected the themes of freedom and reason which are the subject of this thesis. The faith of those interviewed was predominantly formed by rational choice rather than by revelation, by education and knowledge rather than by inspiration or blind acceptance. For example, Fatima said
that, in approaching the Qur’an, “I gather my arguments...my thinking...is it reasonable or not...does it fit in with my daily life experience”. She read the Qur’an with “freedom to interpret the verses according to my way of thinking, my knowledge and experience” (Fatima, interview 15, November 2008). None of those interviewed asserted the orthodox Sunni Muslim dogma that the Qur’an is uncreated. Ten specifically stated that they believed the Qur’an was created and six, while not disagreeing with the proposition, felt the issue was no longer significant in the modern context. All respondents acknowledged the importance of the Prophet Muhammad while stressing his humanity and that as a human being he was capable of error as well as expressing truth in his teachings and actions.

Those who believed that the debate about the creation or non-creation of the Qur’an was no longer relevant, for example Naqib and Sartina, were making a significant point. According to the arguments advanced by this thesis, this issue is crucial to liberal rational Islamic theology. Given that most respondents, including Naqib and Sartina, stressed that the message of the Qur’an needs to be continually contextualized, developed and re-interpreted, if not rejected in certain instances such as punishments, slavery and women’s rights, then it would seem somewhat equivocal, if not self-contradictory, to suggest that the debate about the status of the holy text is anachronistic. Either the Qur’an is the inerrant, eternal, uncreated speech of God or it is not. If the Qu’ran is believed to be uncreated and literally true then it is impossible to maintain and develop a liberal-rational Islamic faith. Given that this debate is still highly controversial, if not inflammatory, in Islam, perhaps some of those interviewed felt that, despite appearing to contradict themselves, discretion was the better part of valour and that a more subtle, less provocative approach to the issue was preferable. This matter will be further discussed in the concluding Chapter of this thesis.

Abu, who admitted that the question about the nature of the Qur’an was difficult, concluded that while the Qur’an “is from God, it is a creation. It is not God itself” (Abu, interview 3, October 2008), a clear restatement of the Mu’tazilite objection to the doctrine of the uncreated Qur’an. Other responses such as Nurhadi’s expressed the belief that the Qur’an was revealed to Muhammad, but that Muhammad interpreted this revelation according to his cultural, social, historical and political context; he was
not a neutral conduit for the text. This is in contrast to the orthodox view that Muhammad was simply “God’s mouthpiece” (Akhtar 2008: 119). Kartika added that, as Muhammad was illiterate, he needed his companions’ assistance in writing down the message and this increased the possibility of mistakes in the text. She added that the Qur’an could therefore not be seen as the absolute word of God. The fact that the Qur’an was transcribed and revised over a period of many years was seen by Tahir as further increasing the limitations of the text.

Sartina saw the debate about the status of the Qur’an as no longer significant and yet added that many parts of the text needed to be re-interpreted from a liberal perspective. Amin stated that the Qur’an was created as a response to the problems and conditions faced by Muhammad in Arabia in the seventh century and that new interpretations and responses are needed in different times and places. “The Qur’an is not a dead thing which must be accepted as it is but it is something which is living, which we can discuss and which...maybe sections of it, we don’t need any more” (Amin, interview 8, November 2008). In perhaps the most radical response to the debate, Idris simply asserted that “The Qur’an is created, by a human being...okay, people say it is from God...however, personally...this doesn’t make sense...yes...so the Qur’an is just created by Muhammad” (Idris, interview 9, November 2008). He concluded that Muslims don’t have to follow all Muhammad said and did, especially when his teachings and actions are out of date and context.

Naqib believed that the Qur’an was a revelation from God to Muhammad, who contextualized the message. He added that the Mu’tazilites believed that the Qur’an was created, to defend the concept of God’s unity; if the Qur’an was believed to be uncreated it would establish two deities. He said that the Mu’tazilites wanted to desacralize the Qur’an so it could be freely discussed and interpreted. However, for Naqib “Now this debate is obsolete” (Naqib, interview 16, October 2008). Mukhtar and Fatima observed that specific verses of the Qur’an contained such profound truths that they must have been inspired by God; they asked themselves how could have Muhammad possibly known some of the things revealed in the Qur’an. Ismed said that the spirit of the text was more important than the literal reading and that verses about the punishment for thieves, for example, were no longer relevant. Mansur expressed
his belief that God did not send his message to a passive recipient and that Muhammad was an active, creative and clever interpreter of the revelation; he adjusted the essential message to suit his culture, time and place, in his own language, Arabic.

Twelve of those interviewed saw Muhammad as an example to follow, a role model, who was a fallible human being with strengths and weaknesses. Four said he was a peerless leader and the greatest prophet, without mentioning any failings he may have had. Comments made by the majority included that Muslims need to be critical of Muhammad, to question his actions and teachings, even though he is still an example and role model. Nurhadi said that Muhammad “should not be regarded as sacred…he has his good and bad sides” (Nurhadi, interview 2, October 2008). Tahir considered that many Muslims had made a cult of Muhammad and cited what he regarded as the over-reaction of Muslims throughout the world to negative cartoons of the Prophet first published by a Danish newspaper in September 2005 as an example of this. For him, these Muslims were regarding Muhammad as like a God who could never be wrong. He personally regarded Muhammad as an extraordinarily intelligent and spiritual leader, further describing him as “a very rational person” (Tahir, interview 6, October 2008). Santoso believed that Muhammad was a human who made mistakes, that he couldn’t answer all questions, he had weaknesses and was limited, though he still deserves to be seen as a prophet. Examples of Muhammad’s failings given by Santoso were his attitudes to polygamy and slavery; “He has aspects which we shouldn’t follow” (Santoso, interview 10, October 2008). Or as Idris stated “We don’t have to follow all he (Muhammad) said because it may not be appropriate in the present context” (Idris, interview 9, November 2008).

According to Sartina, Muhammad was a revolutionary leader. He proposed racial, social and economic equality, he valued all people and he valued the role of women considering the historical and cultural context. However, she continued “Muslims today must continue to advance the Prophet’s efforts. We shouldn’t just stop where he did…now, tens of centuries after him, we need to continue to develop his original ideals such as justice, equality, progress” (Sartina, interview 7, October 2008). Mansur commented that it is precisely because Muhammad was a fallible human that makes it
easier for us as humans to follow his example. Mansur also observed that the Qur’an even censured Muhammad in some instances, but that, overall, he was an extraordinary figure who was able to unite the Arab tribes in a monotheistic faith and overcome superstition and paganism with ideas and teachings which were revolutionary for the time. Finally, Naqib said that “Muhammad can become a stagnating figure if he is seen as being the final achievement for humanity; he shouldn’t be the only inspiration for us now...the present social system, economic problems and culture are far more complicated...we need new Muhammads for the modern era...and maybe we don’t need other Muhammads...we need new figures of genius who don’t just rely on the word of God or religious inspiration and such like” (Naqib, interview 16, October 2008).

It is clear from the above research that freedom and reason are basic concepts which inform the beliefs of the liberal Muslims interviewed. That is, the freedom to interpret and express their faith according to reason and to continually contextualize, update, evaluate and in specific instances criticise the teachings and message of the created Qur’an as it was conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad, who was a human being not an infallible, sacred figure beyond reproach. The principles of the Mu’tazilites and the ideas and teachings of Harun Nasution clearly have significant congruence with the often radical and unorthodox beliefs and opinions of those interviewed. Indeed they could be seen as neo-Mu’tazilites. Like the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution, those interviewed were motivated by reason and choice rather than revelation and unquestioning faith. Moreover, the above research demonstrates that the program and principles of JIL are consistently similar, if not identical, to many of the responses given by those interviewed. The findings presented also confirm that self-styled liberal Muslims are generally aware of the history of their movement and are all too conscious of the negative perceptions of their position, similar to the negativity experienced by the Mu’tazilites and Nasution. The interviews also indicated that the strengths of liberal Islam are also its weaknesses, one of the main themes of the conclusion to this thesis.
Chapter Five – Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

If, as Naqib (interview 16, October 2008) and A.A.A.Fyzee (1963: 107) believe, a big problem confronting Islam both in Indonesia and abroad is the issue of the limiting, if not the denial, of freedom within the faith and if, as Leonard Binder (1988: 2 & 229) and Charles Kurzman (1998: 3 & 7) have noted, there is a widely held perception that Islam and freedom are mutually exclusive, then liberal Islam represents a significant and important response to these concerns. Moreover, as has been shown, a liberal-rational stream has existed within Islam from the first century of its existence, above all in the theology and ideas of the Mu'tazilites. By the end of the 13th century this liberal-rational theology had gone into “hibernation” in Islam (Martin et al 2003: 41). It then began to slowly re-emerge in the 19th century in the Middle East. In Indonesia it was re-stated in the late 1960s by Harun Nasution (Halid 2008: 199) and a similar theology has been openly proclaimed and put into practice by JIL since 2001. The latest academic research in Indonesia also views the Mu'tazilites as the starting point for any study of liberal Islam and sees Harun Nasution as a pioneer of the liberal movement there (Halid 2008).

However, liberal-rational theology is still regarded as unorthodox and confined to an elite. In fact, according to Martin, Woodward and Atmaja (2003: 139), from the thirteenth century when Islam first became a significant force in the archipelago, Indonesian Muslims have accepted orthodox Sunni theology almost without question. As has been shown in Chapters 3 and 4, even in 2008 liberal Muslims in Indonesia felt that they were regarded by society as misled and deviant, if not apostate. In addition, the Muslim scholar and Emeritus Professor in the Department of Sociology at Flinders University, South Australia, Riaz Hasan, has presented empirical evidence from seven Muslim countries including Indonesia, that shows “an intense belief among many Muslims in the self-sufficiency of Islamic texts and an attitude towards them that is literalist, anti-rational and anti-interpretive” (2008: 60). According to Hasan, this is the
most pressing challenge facing Muslim intellectuals today. The proliferation of scripturalist Islam and increasing Islamic militancy in Indonesia since 1998 have also been noted by both William Liddle, Professor of Political Science at Ohio State University (referred to in Bush 2009: 13) and Robin Bush, The Asia Foundation’s Country Representative in Indonesia (Bush 2009: 13). It could be argued that the liberal Islam movement in Indonesia is in the vanguard of responding to this challenge.

There is a perception that it is not in the Arab world, but rather in South-East Asia that the challenge of scripturalism is being met by an Islamic renaissance in which the role of liberal Islam is pivotal. According to Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, “I don’t have any hope for the Arab world. The social system there is so rotten that it’s very difficult to envisage any change or reformation in the short term. The greatest obstacle to the progress of Islam in the Middle-East via a rational approach is the power structure” (2005: 180). Ulil continues, “I hope for ‘the light at the end of tunnel’ (sic) in South-East Asia with its backbone in Malaysia and Indonesia” (2005: 180). This point of view is also supported by Shabbir Akhtar, the Muslim scholar and Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, U.S.A., who believes that the links between Islam and Arab culture, especially that religious culture which is literalist and puritanical, must be ruptured and this “is beginning to happen – especially in Indonesia” (2008: 164).

Reason and freedom are important in Islam because they allow the faith to develop and evolve in response to vastly differing historical, cultural and geographic contexts, they facilitate consistency and congruence between Islam and issues like democracy, human rights and gender equality and they encourage Islam to co-exist and co-operate with other faiths. They allow people to exercise choice in their lives rather than seeing their fate as predetermined and controlled by an all-powerful deity and they present the holy texts as the embodiment of an ethical message rather than as a legal code or inerrant, literal and eternally frozen set of commandments and injunctions. Finally, for those who have not experienced a personal revelation of God, reason can provide a foundation for their faith. As has been shown, in this context reason and freedom are mutually inclusive (Chapter 1, p. 2). The Mu’tazilites proposed a liberal rational theology for Islam in the 8th century, Harun Nasution restated this theology and
developed it in the Indonesian context in the last three decades of the 20th century and JIL has established and implemented a radical liberal-rational program for Islam in the capital city of the archipelago from the beginning of this new millennium. The relative paucity of the literature on the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution has been noted, as has the need for further study of both. Virginia Hooker (2004: 243) has observed that Mu’tazilite theology and ideas could be an inspired basis of creative Islamic approaches to contemporary issues.

From both within and outside Islam, there is a tendency to see the faith as a one-dimensional monolith. As discussed in Chapter 3, the fundamentalist M.M.I., the Government established M.U.I. which claims to represent Islamic orthodoxy in Indonesia, as well as the respected mainstream scholar, authority and first Minister for Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, Professor H. M. Rasjidi, have all expressed the conviction that a multi-dimensional view of the faith is a threat to Islam. In contrast to this, among others, Harun Nasution and JIL have demonstrated and promoted a multi-dimensional, “multi-coloured” view of Islam which is consistent with reason and freedom and which is crucial to the Islamic renaissance hoped for by Shabbir Akhtar and Tariq Ali, for example (Chapter 2).

5.2 The Institutionlization of Liberal-Rational Islam

In Indonesia, as has been demonstrated in this study, Harun Nasution has played a critical role in the establishment of a liberal-rational perspective of Islam in higher education at State Islamic Universities. According to Testriono, Nasution was one of the main pioneers in establishing a renewal of Islam based on reason and freedom. He introduced the rational theology of the Mu’tazilites to the Muslim academic community in the I.A.I.N. which became his laboratory in the struggle to renew Islam (2009a: 1). His teaching focused on the different schools of thought in Islam and the extent of their liberal-rational theology (see Chapter 2). According to Nasution, the theology which placed the greatest emphasis on reason and the least on revelation sees humans as powerful and independent and the theology which places the greatest
emphasis on revelation and the least on reason views humans as weak and dependent. It is the former theology which is Mu’tazilite and unorthodox and the latter which is Asharite and has dominated Islamic theology in Indonesia (Testriono 2009a: 102). Nasution’s aim was to provide an alternative and a challenge to Asharite orthodoxy by promoting the Mu’tazilite theology which he saw as the most liberal and rational mazhab in Islam (Testriono 2009a: 10).

According to Testriono, Nasution viewed education as the means to spread Mu’tazilite thought and his main target was the Muslim elite in Indonesia (2009a: 17). The ideas and theology of JIL and the continuing influence of Formaci in the State Islamic University of Jakarta demonstrate the effectiveness of Nasution’s strategy. However, the strength of this ‘top down’ elitist approach is also its weakness. Liberal-rational Islam has not so far been successful in gaining mass support in Indonesia. As has been noted, this was also a problem for the Mu’tazilites, whose theology also failed to appeal to the Muslim masses of the eighth and ninth centuries (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3). Leonard Binder observed this failure, noting that without mass support the prospects for Islamic liberalism would remain dim (1988: 359). Many of the liberal Muslims interviewed for this study saw this failure to gain popular support in the broader Islamic community, in the villages and local mosques, as one of the main challenges facing the liberal Islam movement in the future (for examples see Tahir, Mukhtar & Mansur, interviews: 2008). Halid (2008: 338) concluded that the liberal Islamic groups have not yet been able to evoke a positive and supportive response from mainstream Muslims in Indonesia. According to him, liberal Islamic ideas and organizations are as yet incapable of developing an effective strategy and approach which would guarantee their future. Despite this, as has been shown, liberal Islam has a strong organizational base thanks to JIL and institutionalized roots in State Islamic Universities as a result of the efforts and work of Harun Nasution.
5.3 Prospects for Liberal Islam in Indonesia

With a strong, if elitist and limited, base in higher Islamic education in Indonesia and the continued presence of JIL as an organization actively dedicated to the propagation of liberal-rational Islam, this movement has potential. Between fifty and one hundred people attend monthly discussion groups at JIL’s office in the Utan Kayu Community Centre and JIL has a permanent staff of seven (Testriono 2009b). Formaci maintains an organizational structure and boarding house based in Ciputat and organizes regular discussion groups, workshops and seminars attended by from ten to twenty students of the State Islamic University of Jakarta (Rafshadi 2009). However, as many of those interviewed for this thesis observed, a great challenge for liberal Islam in Indonesia is gaining popular, local and widespread support for its ideas. If it is to become more accepted, less stigmatized and a more influential movement within the faith, liberal Islam needs to break out of its base in the capital city and gain a foothold in mosques in the towns and villages of Indonesia. Interstingly, most of those interviewed for this study originate from villages which suggests there is a level of receptiveness to these ideas in more remote locations, but they have usually only encountered these ideas once they have moved to metropolitan campuses. The website, articles and interviews in national media and the radio program are three means by which JIL is beginning to reach a wider audience.

In an interesting development in September 2009, the founding co-ordinator of JIL, Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, returned to Indonesia from his studies in America and publicly stated his intention to stand as a candidate for the Executive Chairperson of N.U. at its 32nd National Conference in March 2010. According to Ulil, “Nahdlatul Ulama has already changed and now is the moment for a younger leadership” (Pradityo, Suriaji, Yophiandi and Budiman 2009: 109). N.U. is the largest mass-based Islamic organization in Indonesia with a membership of about 50 million (Bush 2009: 2). Ulil said that he is prepared to explain his opinions, which are seen as extremely liberal, to senior leaders of N.U. (Pradityo et. al. 2009: 110). One of his aims is to alter the negative image of liberal Islam which has spread within N.U. and has originated from external sources (2009: 109). The relationship between N.U. and JIL is complex and is not explored in
this thesis (for more on this see Bush 2009: 179-181), but whether he is successful or not, Ulil’s candidacy represents a new direction for the proponents of liberal Islam in Indonesia - the attempt to gain a mainstream base for JIL’s position. According to Ulil, the future of N.U. is not only the prerogative of traditional Muslims. The challenge for N.U. is to reach an accommodation with the increasing middle and educated classes and the ever-increasing youth membership of N.U., not only at the village level but also in the cities. Ulil believes that N.U. needs to respond more effectively to the challenges presented by what he describes as radical Islamic groups in the archipelago (Pradityo et al 2009: 109). Ulil’s candidacy will give him the opportunity to visit influential Muslim leaders and pesantren, “To explain and clarify the complexities of his opinions and thoughts” (Maksum 2009: 36). This will give the liberal Islam perspective a unique and significant opportunity for exposure and publicity quite apart from the success or failure of Ulil’s leadership ambitions.

To what degree should liberal Islam compromise its principles to guarantee its future in Indonesia? The Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Southeast Asian Politics at the Australian National University, Greg Fealy, has suggested that, by its provocative actions, liberal Islam in Indonesia has “helped to spark a conservative backlash and provided ammunition for their opponents”. Consequently, he suggests that liberal Islam needs “greater tactical acuity and sensitivity to community attitudes” if it is to regain the initiative (Fealy 2008: 2-3). A similar view was also expressed by several of the liberal Muslims interviewed for this thesis, who were concerned that in some instances the liberal Islam agenda was too radical to be acceptable to a majority of Muslims in Indonesia and that its strategies needed to be more culturally sensitive (see Chapter 4). The liberal provocations cited by Fealy included: stating that there is no law of God, only general principles (an extension of Harun Nasution’s ideas – see Chapter 2); developing interfaith jurisprudential codes and calling for equal gender rights in matters of marriage and divorce; and the banning of polygamy (see Nasution, Chapter 2). From this it would seem that liberal Islam is by definition provocative, as these controversial issues are basic principles of the liberal position (see Chapter 3). These issues are precisely what JIL is daring to struggle for; this struggle for emancipation is JIL’s ethos (Naqib interview 16, October 2008). In addition it could be argued that the
‘provocations’ cited by Fealy are simply a case of the exponents of liberal Islam exercising their democratic right to freedom of expression, a right it does not deny to its opponents. Two of those interviewed for this thesis, Naqib and Sartina, believe that, without JIL, the moderates, the silent majority of Muslims, would be in danger of being more susceptible to influence by conservative and fundamentalist versions of Islam.

What is clear is that there is tension in the liberal Islam movement between those who refuse to back down in stating their principles and those who see a more subtle and less uncompromising approach as more effective in promoting and realising their aims. More work needs to done on this. Further research could examine how liberal rational ideas have impacted on the changing traditionalist modernist divide in contemporary Indonesia as well as investigate the ideas of liberal rational Muslims not associated with JIL, the Paramadina Foundation or Formaci. In addition, the ideas, work and achievements of Harun Nasution are worthy of a far more detailed examination and analysis than has been possible here. In particular one could study the influence of his liberal rational thought, perspective and curriculum reforms on a generation of his students, many now in influential educational positions in U.I.N./I.A.I.N. not just in Jakarta, but throughout Indonesia.

The principles and beliefs of the Mu’tazilites, Harun Nasution and JIL may be unorthodox and unpopular, if not provocative on occasions, but maintaining ideas such as freedom and reason in an uncompromised form, as a part of the religious and social discourse in Indonesia, provides an important source for renewal and reform which can be utilized and presented more palatably by mass based organizations such as Nahdatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Influencing the discourse from ‘outside’ may be more effective in the long term than making the compromises necessary to gain mainstream acceptance. A majority of those interviewed for this study, despite feeling that one of the challenges facing their movement was gaining more widespread support, did not seem inclined to compromise their beliefs and principles, even in the face of intra-familial tensions, serious threats, stigmatization and marginalization.

Moreover, while the most vocal and open exponents of freedom and reason in Islam in Indonesia are numerically small, their organizational base, particularly in JIL, is
disproportionately strong in its administration and media profile. Liberal Islam also has a base in the Jakarta U.I.N., due in significant part to the curriculum changes instituted by Harun Nasution there and the continued existence of Formaci. However, freedom and reason in Islam are vulnerable under certain conditions and their survival is not inevitable. The Pakistani commentator and Chair of Physics at the Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, Pervez Hoodbhouy said recently “Twenty-five years ago when General Zia ul-Haq took over, he started the process of eliminating liberal Islam and bringing a very conservative Saudi style of Islam* into Pakistan...and he succeeded. So the Taliban have a real base now” (Hoodbhouy 2009). Despite their vulnerability, liberal Muslims in Indonesia feel they should not “back down” (Idris, interview 9, November 2008). As has been seen in the interviews, they believe that their position is an important bastion of freedom, reason and tolerance which by its presence and profile, be it provocative or controversial, provides an alternative view of the faith and a buffer between the ‘silent majority’ and conservatives and militant fundamentalists. If freedom is not exercised or is proscribed, it may wither and even succumb to its opponents, as is happening in Pakistan.

Finally, by reaching into the history and origins of Islam to confront the challenges of the modern world and by restating a position very similar if not identical to that held by the Mu’tazilites and Harun Nasution, JIL has a strong if limited foundation from which to shape the future development of Islam in Indonesia. The research into JIL and the views of a group of mostly young, liberal Muslims presented here has shown that freedom and reason can be consistent with Islam in the contemporary context. Furthermore, to summarize Naqib’s observations for example, the causes of the liberal movement - equality, justice, tolerance, inter-faith dialogue, gender equality, democracy, non-violence, human rights and respect for minorities - are as important to the future of Islam as they are to Indonesia and humanity in general (Chapter 4, pp. 70 and 79). A young, well-educated middle class in Indonesia may well find reason and freedom a more compelling basis for their faith than literalist interpretation, traditional unquestioning belief or revelation. Submission, surrender to and reconciliation with God, or Islam (Glasse 2002: 219) need not only be based on
revelation or unquestioning faith, but can also be founded on a rational act of free choice, as this study has attempted to demonstrate.


*Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Muslim Scholars Council) (2009). [www.mui.or.id](http://www.mui.or.id)


Yayasan Wakaf Paramadina. (The Paramadina Foundation) (2009) www.media.isnet.org/islam/Paramadina
Appendix 1

Interviews on C.D. rom. in mp3 format.

Interview 1: Ibrahim, 26, male, university student. Recorded 30\textsuperscript{th} October, 2008 at Pondok Indah, Jakarta.

Interview 2: Nurhadi, 22, male, university student. Recorded 31\textsuperscript{st} October, 2008 at Ciputat, Jakarta.

Interview 3: Abu, 22, male, university student. Recorded 31\textsuperscript{st} October, 2008 at Ciputat, Jakarta.

Interview 4: Iskandar, 22, male, university student. Recorded 31\textsuperscript{st} October, 2008 at Ciputat, Jakarta.

Interview 5: Kartika, 24, female, university student. Recorded 30\textsuperscript{th} October, 2008 at Pondok Indah, Jakarta.

Interview 6: Tahir, 26, male, Research Assistant. Recorded 31\textsuperscript{st} October, 2008 at Ciputat, Jakarta.

Interview 7: Sartina, 29, female, JIL Activist and Translator. Recorded 21\textsuperscript{st} October, 2008 at Utan Kayu, Jakarta.

Interview 8: Amin, 21, male, University Student. Recorded 4\textsuperscript{th} November, 2008 at Ciputat, Jakarta.

Interview 9: Idris, 24, male, University Student. Recorded 4\textsuperscript{th} November, 2008 at Ciputat, Jakarta.

Interview 10: Santoso, 28, male, JIL Activist. Recorded 20\textsuperscript{th} October, 2008 at Utan Kayu, Jakarta.
Interview 11: Hanafi, 26, male, Researcher. Recorded 28th October, 2008 at Pondok Indah, Jakarta.

Interview 12: Mukhtar, 29, male, JIL Activist. Recorded 25th October, 2008 at Utan Kayu, Jakarta.


Interview 14: Mansur, 41, male, University Lecturer. Recorded 7th November, Pondok Indah, Jakarta.

Interview 15: Fatima, 70, female, Mental Health Volunteer. Recorded 7th November, Pondok Indah, Jakarta.

Interview 16: Naqib, 33, male, University Lecturer. Recorded 20th October, 2008 at Utan Kayu.
Appendix 2


2. Page 65, Mukhtar, track 12. “Bagi saya Islam liberal adalah Islam yang menghargai akal dalam beragama...dan itu implikasinya bisa luas dan...apa...lebar. Oleh karena kita memakai akal dalam beragama, maka kita menerima isu-isu yang modern...ya...misalnya, gender, pluralisme, multikulturalisme, segala macam itu. Intinya adalah, dulukan kalau kita...kita...saya...latar belakang pesantren. Jadi di pesantren itu orang tidak boleh bertanya tentang...apa...agama yang dianut. Nah, kalau apa...kita sebagai Muslim yang liberal, tentu saja kita harus menghargai akal, akal diberi tempat dalam agama, yang dulu...apa...seperti disisihkan. Akal ini semacam...apa...virus yang akan menggerogoti komunitas agama kita.”


4. Page 69, Nurhadi, track 2. “...kebebasan itu...dan Al-Qur’an itu...lebih diterjemahkan...atau Hadis...lebih kepada kontekstual dalam artian...ya, disesuaikan dengan jaman..gitu”.

5. Page 69, Tahir, track 6. “...kebebasan apakah itu dalam pemahaman...memahami teks-teks keagamaan, apakah itu...bebas dalam menjalankan agama sendiri dan bebas dalam membiarkan orang lain itu beragama dan memiliki kepercayaan masing-masing...”

6. Page 69, Idris, track 9. “...yang bebas dari segala bentuk kekerasan...Islam yang bebas dari ini...penafsiran-penafsiran yang ortodoks, penafsiran-penafsiran yang literal...”
7. Page 69, Amin, track 8. “Islam liberal adalah Islam yang berdiri atas kosep bahwa akal menempati urutan lebih tinggi daripada wahyu...Islam liberal itu adalah Islam yang mengkontekstualisasikan ajaran Islam...dengan budaya dan nilai-nilai lokal.”

8. Page 69, Ismed, track 13. “...berpikir dengan bebas.”

9. Page 70, Naqib, track 16. “…melihat bahwa problem yang juga cukup besar di dunia Muslim umumnya dan di dalam agama Islamku khususnya itu, adalah _problem kebebasan_...’liberal’ _is a dirty word_ di dunia Islam. Kata ‘liberal’ di dunia Islam itu konotasinya sangat negatif dan di Indonesia khususnya juga.” “Sepanjang 60 tahun Republik ini berdiri tidak ada partai satupun yang berani menyebut diri sebagai partai liberal...jadi kita menggunakan itu untuk menunjukkan ethos kita bahwa yang kita perjuangkan adalah kebebasan.”


11. Page 71, Ibrahim, track 1. “Saya dulu dididik dengan _system_ pendidikan yang tertutup...tidak boleh mempertanyak (sampai) sekarang didalam sistem pendidikan yang liberal, yang bebas…”


14. Page 73, Amin, track 8. “…pemahaman Islam yang lebih...lebih...lebih lokal, pemahaman Islam yang lebih _faktual_...yang lebih kontekstual dengan _zaman_ yang berubah...Islam liberal penting adalah agar Umat Islam itu tidak hanya memahami agama sebagai _benda_ mati...yang hanya berisi ibadah, ritual…”

16. Page 73, Naqib, track 16. “...kami menjaga moderasi saja...Kalau tidak ada kelompok yang liberal sebetulnya hancur moderasinya.”

17. Page 74, Abu, track 3. “Setahu saya, pemikiran dan sikap liberal itu sudah dimulai dari jaman kenabian Muhammad...intinya bahwa Islam awal itu sudah...menjadi liberal.”

18. Page 76, Iskandar, track 4. “Saya sering sekali digunjing kalau di kampung ya...karena betul-betul agama yang mereka anut itu sangat fanatis sekali. Orang-orang yang mereka pahami orang-orang Islam liberal itu berarti itu adalah orang-orang yang ngawur, yang sesat...”


20. Page 76, Santoso, track 10. “...kita menghadapi dua kekuatan; kekuatan politik dan kekuatan orang-orang Islam orthodox. Kita dianggap sesat, kemudian...dianggap murtad. Di email saya itu banyak sekali ancaman-ancaman pembunuhan, di SMS soal pembunuhan...”

21. Page 76, Idris, track 9. “...namun kami ngak bakalan...ngak bakalan...pantang mundur, gitu...harus maju tetap, maju untuk menyebarakan kedamaian.”


23. Page 76, Mukhtar, track 12. “...kalau di sini...di Jakarta, itu mungkin tidak begitu kelihatan, karena kita juga ketemunya setiap hari dengan orang-orang yang sepikiran dengan kita.”

24. Page 77-78, Ibrahim, track 1. “...gerakan Islam liberal di Indonesia untuk sekarang itu justru memberikan ini...memberikan sesuatu yang baru kepada masyarakat dan masyarakat pun bisa mengerti...artinya biasanya di Indonesia ada banyak Islam yang fundamental...justru dengan adanya Islam liberal ini memberi pemahaman baru...”

25. Page 78, Tahir, track 6. “...mendobrak...memecahkan batu gunung es Islam yang...apa namanya...kaku, seperti itu...dia berhasil...apa namanya...menyebarkan beberapa paham yang bebas dalam beberapa hal...memperjuangkan hak
Ahmadiyah...dan itu banyak diserang oleh orang Islam sendiri. Yang gagal mungkin gerakan Islam liberal kurang memiliki akarnya dalam masyarakat. Memang yang diperjuangkan Islam liberal itu cenderung...ya, tidak popular, itu...salah satu contoh mungkin perjuangannya dalam memperjuangkan hak kaum gay...kaum homoseksual..itu...itu bagus sebenarnya tetapi mungkin terlalu baru, terlalu cepat untuk Indonesia...”

26. Page 78, Sartina, track 7. “Kalau dulu kita mendapatkan banyak stigma...tapi mungkin sekarang ini beberapa teman-teman aktivis JIL bisa tampil di TV, kemudian mereka mendapatkan apresiasi juga dari...saya kira JIL sudah mulai, mungkin dapat lebih diterima dan dipahami daripada dulu awal mula berdirinya.”

27. Page 79, Mukhtar, track 12. “...karena ia pakai nama Islam liberal itu...jadi, orang resisten...”

28. Page 79, Mukhtar, track 12. “...jangan pakai bendera yang terlalu mencolok.”


30. Page 79, Naqib, track 16. “Kita lebih...masih lebih berani menjadikan ini sebuah gerakan, sementara mereka menjadi sebuah pemikiran individu sebetulnya...itu.”


32. Page 80, Fatima, track 15. “Saya kumpulkan argument, saya kumpulkan secara pikiran itu...itu masuk akal atau tidak...yang klop dengan hidup sehari-hari...begitu.” “...kebebasan untuk menafsirkan ayat-ayat itu sesuai dengan cara saya berfikir dan saya punya pengetahuan dan punya pengalaman.”

33. Page 80, Abu, track 3. “Al-Qur’an adalah suatu yang keluar dari tubuh Tuhan...dan sesuatu yang keluar dari tubuh Tuhan adalah mahluk bukan Tuhan itu sendiri.”
34. Page 81, Amin, track 8. “Jadi al-Qur’an bukan benda mati yang harus diterima apa adanya, tapi menjadi sesuatu yang hidup, yang bisa kita diskusikan, yang bisa...mungkin sebagian kita tidak pakai lagi...”

35. Page 81, Idris, track 9. “Al-Qur’an itu adalah ciptaan manusia...sama dengan al-Qur’an adalah mahluk. Okelah, orang mengatakan...ya itu dari Allah, dari Tuhan...namun secara pribadi itu...itu nggak masuk akal...jadi, ya, al Qur’an hanya bikin-bikinan bisa-bisaan Muhammad saja...gitu.”

36. Page 81, Naqib, track 16. “Sekarang itu debat yang sudah sangat ketinggalan...”

37. Page 82, Nurhadi, track 2. “...tapi tidak dijadikan suatu hal yang sakral, begitu ya...ada sisi baiknya...tetapi juga...ada yang jelek ini...gitu.”

38. Page 82, Tahir, track 6. “...dia juga orang yang sangat rasional...gitu.”

39. Page 82, Santoso, track 10. “Jadi ada aspek-aspek tertentu yang juga tidak bisa diikuti...”

40. Page 82, Idris, track 9. “...tidak harus kita ikuti semuanya...karena memang tidak sesuai dengan konteks sekarang.”

41. Page 82, Sartina, track 7. “Untuk umat Islam zaman sekarang apa yang diupayakan oleh Nabi itu harus terus dilanjutkan. Jadi tidak berhenti kita dengan capaian-capaian yang dilakukan oleh Nabi Muhammad...kan...sekarang tentu belasan abad sesudahnya...perlu perkembangan yang lebih lanjut dari apa yang sebetulnya dicita-citakan oleh Nabi, yaitu kesetaraan, keadilan, kemajuan...”

42. Page 83, Naqib, track 16. “…Nabi Muhammad juga bisa menjadi figure yang stagnan kalau dibaca sebagai satu pencapaian puncak peradaban manusia...Dia bukan satu-satunya inspirasi bagi kita...pada saat ini sistem sosial, masalah ekonomi, kebudayaan masyarakat, jauh lebih complicated dan kita butuh lebih banyak Muhammad-Muhammad lain untuk zaman sekarang...gitu...dan mungkin kita tidak butuh Muhammad-Muhammad lain, kita butuh sosok-sosok jenius lainnya yang tidak hanya mengandalkan kalam Tuhan atau wahyu dan lain sebagainya...”
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