

# ASH'ARISM IN NUSANTARA: Reviewing Traditional Ulama's Role in Shaping Islamic Creed in Nusantara

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**Abstract:** Since the beginning of the introduction of Islam in North-East Asia, Ash'arism has been representing Sunni theology that shaped the mainstream of Islamic belief in the region. However, during the last few years, it has been confronted serious contention from various parties. This article will examine the role played by Ash'arism proponents in shaping Islamic belief and the challenges they faced to keep the tradition alive. It first briefly exposes how Ash'arism appeared and influenced theological discourse in various parts of Islamic world including Nusantara. Some prominent Nusantara ulamas and their contribution will be mentioned. Lastly, the study will draw attention to the modern challenges faced by the Ash'arites and offer some suggestions to keep Asharism relevant to the current need.

**Abstrak:** Sejak Islam pertama kali diperkenalkan di kawasan Asia Tenggara, aliran Ash'ari telah menjadi aliran dominan yang membentuk wajah Islam di wilayah tersebut. Namun begitu, pada hari ini aliran Ash'ari menghadapi tantangan serius dari berbagai pihak yang mengancam keberadaannya. Artikel ini akan mengkaji peran yang dimainkan oleh aliran Ash'ari dalam membentuk pegangan akidah Islam dan tantangan yang mereka hadapi untuk menjaga tradisi ini terus bertahan. Pertama, penulis akan memaparkan secara ringkas bagaimana aliran Ash'ari muncul dan mempengaruhi wacana teologis di berbagai belahan dunia Islam. Kedua, penulis akan membincangkan kemasukan mazhab Ash'ari ke negeri-negeri yang berada di Nusantara. Beberapa ulama Nusantara terkemuka dan kontribusinya akan disebutkan. Ketiga, kajian ini akan menarik perhatian kepada tantangan modern yang dihadapi oleh aliran Ash'ari serta saranan praktis yang ditawarkan untuk menjaga relevansi aliran ini dengan kebutuhan akidah umat Islam pada hari ini.

**Keywords:** Ash'arism, Nusantara, traditional ulama, Islamic theology

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the introduction of Islam in north-east Asia, Ash'arism has been referred the main Islamic theology in Nusantara. The first clerics who teach and defend Islam in the region are affiliated to this school. Today Ash'arism become a traditional creed that faces serious challenges from various parties including Salafism, Islamism, and Liberalism. In the the Salafi narrative, Ash'arism is none other than a misguided sect who prefers human intellect over the revelation. On most occasions, they tried to disconnect Ash'arism from orthodoxy. On the other hand, the liberalists and the supporters of western ideologies voiced out critical opinions in dealing with modern issues faced by Muslim communities like human right and free speech to take place the traditional positions. These challenges demanded serious attention from the proponents of the traditional theology to maintain their existence.

The following is a brief exposition on the role of Ash'arism in shaping Islamic belief in Nusantara and its current challenges.<sup>1</sup> This article will first expose the history of Ash'arism and its spread to various parts of Islamic world including Nusantara. Some prominent Nusantara ulamas and their significant contribution will be mentioned. Lastly, it will draw attention to the modern challenges faced by the Ashari exponents along with some suggestions to keep the school relevant in the current context.

## Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature. The data was collected using the literary method from primary and secondary sources. History books that contain information on the spread of the Ash'arism and its main figures are main references in this study. In addition, it also refers to sources that observe the development of the discussion on Islamic creed in current context. The collected data are then analyzed based on inductive and deductive methods.

## Results and Discussion

### Brief History of Ash'arism

Ash'arism is a renowned school of belief associated with Abû al-Hasan 'Ali bin Ismâ'îl al-Ash'arî, a great theologian and descendant of the famous sahabi named Abu Musa al-Ash'ari. He was born in Basra to a Sunni family in 874 SH/260 AH. His father died when he was still in his early childhood. His mother then remarried to Mu'tazilite scholar Abû 'Ali al-Jubbâ'î who then direct al-Ash'ari's theological orientation. It does

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a summary of my presentation on the same title in International Conference on Islamic and al-Washliyah Studies which was conducted in 28<sup>th</sup> December 2022.

not take long for al-Ash'arî to become one of the prominent Mu'tazili exponents. He even published several theological works in support of Mu'tazilism.

Many sources stated that al-Ash'ari retracted from Mu'tazilism when he was at the age of 40. He publicly declared his conversion to the *ashhâb al-Hadîth* camp in the Grand Mosque of Basra. Since that day he dedicated his whole scholarly life to defending traditionalism using the combination of reason (*al-'aql*) and revelation (*al-naql*). Until his last days, al-Ash'arî consistently employs *nazhar* (analytical reasoning) and defend the usage of *kalâm* despite strong opposition from the Hanbalites and ultra-traditionists.<sup>2</sup> He passed away and was buried in Baghdad in 324 AH/936 SH).

Most studies depicted al-Ash'arî as a pure theologian. It seems imperfect to describe al-Ash'arî's thoughts and personality. Overwhelming historical evidence shows that he is also fluent in other Islamic sciences including hadith. He studied hadith in Basra under Abû Khalîfah al-Jumâhî, Zakariya al-Sâjî, and among others. He exhibited good mastery in hadith by narrating hadiths with full chain in his books especially the voluminous Quranic commentary titled *al-Mukhtazan*.<sup>3</sup> He also penned several works in which he defended the reliability of Sunna in jurisprudence and theology.<sup>4</sup>

After al-Ash'arî's death, his intellectual legacy remained with his students and followers in various cities. Iraq and Khorasan become the stronghold of Ash'arism and its center of dissemination. The school attracts not only theologians but many other scholars from various disciplines to form Asharite communities in their respective cities. Ash'arism has also received solid support from the jurisprudence experts of four Sunni legal schools.<sup>5</sup> Since the 7th century AH/13 AD, Ash'arism appears the mainstream theology for Muslims in the Seljuq empire in the east, the Ayyubids in the middle, and the Muwahidun in the west.<sup>6</sup> In the centuries that follow, this school has become Ahl Sunnah wa al-Jamâ'ah *par excellence*. Every time the term is used in scholarly literature, it refers to the Ash'aris and the Maturidis.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh University, 1973); Y. Qadhi, "Salafi-Ash'arî Polemics of the 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> Islamic Centuries," *Muslim World*, no. 106, (2016): 433-447.

<sup>3</sup> A.H. Ibn 'Asâkir, *Tabyîn Kadhib al-Muftarî fîma Nasaba ilâ al-Imâm Abî al-Şasan al-Ash'arî* (Damsyik: Dâr al-Taqwâ, 2018); A.A. Ibn al-Subkî, *Thabaqât al-Shâfi'iyya al-Kubrâ* (Beirut: Dâr al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Ibn 'Asâkir, *Tabyîn Kadhib*

<sup>5</sup> Ibn al-Subkî, *Thabaqât al-Shâfi'iyya al-Kubrâ*.

<sup>6</sup> M. Imârah, *Tayyârât al-Fikr al-Islâmî* (Kaherah: Dâr al-Shurûq, 2007); Aḥmad bin 'Ali Maqrîzî, *al-Khumam wa al-Âthâr fi Mishr wa al-Qâhirah wa al-Nîl wa Mâ Yata'allaq bihâ min al-Akhhâr* (Beirut: Dâr al-bâdir, n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> A.A. Haytamî, *al-Fatâwâ al-Hadîthiyya* (Damascus: Dâr al-Taqwâ, 2004); A.M. Qârî, *Mirqat al-Mafatih Sharh Mishkât al-Mashâbih* (Beirut: Dâr al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2001).

## Ash'arism in Nusantara

Despite a lot of debate in dating the first introduction of Islam in Nusantara, perhaps it is not mistaken to establish that Islam has come to Nusantara as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century through merchants and sailors. The propagation of Islam during the later periods was mainly undertaken by Sufi saints and ulama.<sup>8</sup> The starting point of the new era of Islam in Nusantara was in the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. when the kingdom of Perlak adopted Islam as its official religion. It is followed by several coastal towns in North Sumatera such as Fansur, Lamuri, Haru, Samudra, and Melaka.<sup>9</sup> The culture and religious rituals practiced in the ancient Malay kingdoms are based on Ash'arism in belief, the Shâfi'i school in jurisprudence, and al-Ghazâlî's teachings in *tasawuf*.<sup>10</sup>

Along with the rise of Mecca and Medina to be the center of Islamic studies, many Nusantara students, also known as *Jâwiyîn*, have left for the two holy cities to pursue their education. It is difficult to determine when this phenomenon began. Historical evidence, however, shows that by the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the number of Jawi students in Hijaz indicate a significant increase.<sup>11</sup> They studied, among others, Ash'ari theology as one of Islamic curriculum at that time. Upon completing their study, most of these students returned to their respective countries and played important roles in shaping Islamic tradition in Nusantara.

They contributed to the establishment of Ash'arism through the publication of theological works based on the Ash'ari framework. The following table listed some of Nusantara scholars and their publications in theology.

Table 1: some of Nusantara ulamas and their theological works

No.	Scholars	Works
1	Nuruddin al-Raniri (d.1658)	<i>Durrat al-Farâ'id bi Sharḥ al-'Aqâ'id</i>
2	Abdul Rauf al-Sinkili (d. 1695)	<i>'Umdat al-Muhtâjîn ilâ Sulûk Maslak al-Mufridîn</i>
3	Muhammad Yusuf al-Maqassari (d. 1699)	<i>Saylaniyyah, Safînah al-Najâh</i>
4	Muhammad Zayn bin Jalaluddin al-'Ashi (d.)	<i>'Ilm al-Tawḥîd, Bidâyah al-Hidâyah</i>

<sup>8</sup> B. Basri, *Indonesian Ulama in the Haramayn and The Transmission of Reformist Islam in Indonesia* (Dissertation, University of Arkansas, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Z. Stapa, et. al., *Sejarah al-Ash'ari dan al-Asha'irah di Nusantara* (Kuala Lumpur: JAKIM, 20180).

<sup>11</sup> M.R. Othman, "Masjidil Haram dan Peranannya dalam Perkembangan Awal Pendidikan dan Intelektualisme Masyarakat Melayu." *Jurnal Usuludin* 21 (2001): 69-80.

5	'Abd al-Samad al-Falimbani (d. 1832)	<i>Zuhrat al-Murîd fi Bayân Kalimat al-Tawhîd</i>
6	Muhammad Nawawi al-Bantani (d. 1897)	<i>Dhariyat al-Yaqîn fi Umm al-Barâhîn,</i> <i>Sharḥ Tījân al-Darârî 'alâ Risâlat al-Shaykh Ibrâhîm al-Bâjûrî fi al-Tawhîd,</i> <i>Fath al-Majîd Sharḥ Dur al-Farîd fi 'Aqâ'id Ahl al-Tawhîd</i>
7	Dawud bin 'Abdullah al-Fattani (d. 1849)	<i>Al-Durr al-Thamîn fi 'Aqâ'id al-Mu'minîn</i>
8	Muhammad Nafis al-Banjari (d. after 1820)	<i>Al-Durr al-Nafîs fi Bayân Wahîdah al-Af'âl wal al-Asmâ' al-Shifât wa al-Dhât</i>
9	Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari (d. 1812)	<i>Tuhfat al-Râghibîn fi Bayân Haqîqat Imân al-Mu'minîn</i>
10	Ahmad Zayn al-Fattani (d. 1908)	<i>Farîdah al-Farâ'id fi 'Ilm al-'Aqâ'id</i>
11	Sayid 'Uthman bin Yahya al-Betawi (d. 1913)	<i>Sifat Dua Puluh</i>
12	Muhammad Hasyim Asy'ari (d. 1947)	<i>Risalah Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamâ'ah</i>

## Modern Challenges

In the present time, Ash'arism has become traditional creed that faces serious challenges that threaten its very existence. The first challenge came from the Salafis and neo-Hanbalis that emerged in the early 19th century. They sought to revive the *athari* creed based on strict adherence to the literal meaning of the religious texts. For them, human reason cannot be relied upon in religious matters. Therefore, they banned scholastic theology as well as so-called baseless practices and traditions. The Salafis clashed with the Ash'aris over many theological issues and deemed Ash'arism of heresy because of their position in interpreting religious texts on divine attributes. The second challenge comes from the liberalists who bring up issues related to the socio-politic regarding the Muslims in Nusantara and their fellow citizens like non-muslim rights, gender equality, LGBT, etc. Social media often becomes the main platform in which these issues are raised and fiercely discussed by all parties.

Failure of addressing these challenges will cost the traditional ulamas their significance and make Ash'arism looked irrelevant. Therefore, it is important for them to change their approach and method in discussing theological issues. The discussion of the Islamic creed must go beyond the old and traditional topics to debates on contemporary issues. More importantly, the traditional ulama should produce someone who capable of

combining Ash'ari traditional frameworks and modern findings to offer relevant solutions for the emerging issues.

In addition, it is important for Ash'ari scholars to involve actively in social media to directly guide the ummah and answer their inquiries. The online world has proved to be a fruitful and volatile place for religious ideas to be transmitted, especially to Muslim youth.<sup>12</sup> Internet plays a significant role in disseminating ideas and changing perspective. Therefore, while admitting the important of traditional madrasa to educate next generation, the traditional ulama must not overlook the significance of online platform to educate Islamic communities at large.

## Conclusion

In his book titled *Revival of Islamic Rationalism*, Masood Bano studies a new movement occurred in current Islamic societies, especially among the young and educated Muslims in the West.<sup>13</sup> They have been developing an intellectual network that helps to revive rationalist readings in Islam, the Ash'ari-Maturidi school of *kalam*. The proponents of this movement can familiarise young Muslim university students with the deeply philosophical and mystical dimensions of their faith. Bano then argues that, contrary to popular assumptions, it is not militant Islam but Islamic rationalism that is set to become the popular face of Islam in the current century.

Perhaps, it is not too optimistic if we expect the same for the fate of Ash'arism in Nusantara. The school has been part of the intellectual tradition in Nusantara since the first introduction of Islam in the region. However, given the current challenges, Nusantara Ash'ari scholars must initiate a series of reform agenda to keep the legacy alive.

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