

Dynamics of Classical Islamic Theology: Rationalism, Authority, and Sectarian Reception in Southeast Asian Muslim Societies

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of classical Islamic theology through a comparative analysis of five major theological schools Ash'arism, Murji'ism, Shi'ism, Mu'tazilism, and Kharijism—and their contemporary reception in Indonesia and Malaysia. Islamic theology ('ilm al-kalām) emerged from political conflicts and intellectual debates following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly concerning political authority, faith, divine justice, and the relationship between reason and revelation. This study employs a qualitative library-based approach using descriptive-analytical and comparative methods. Data from primary and secondary sources were analyzed through comparative content analysis. The findings show that each theological school reflects a distinct doctrinal orientation. Kharijism adopted an exclusive stance by excommunicating Muslims who committed major sins, while Murji'ism promoted a more inclusive approach by deferring judgment to God. Shi'ism emphasized imāmah as the basis of religious and political authority, whereas Mu'tazilism prioritized rational inquiry and human agency. In contrast, Ash'arism reconciled reason and revelation and later became the dominant theological framework in Sunni Islam. The study also demonstrates that the reception of these traditions in Southeast Asia is shaped by socio-political structures and state religious policies. Indonesia tends to be more pluralistic and accommodative, while Malaysia institutionalizes Sunni Ash'arism as its official theological orientation. This study argues that classical Islamic theological discourses remain relevant for promoting religious moderation, intellectual pluralism, and inter-sectarian dialogue in contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: Islamic Theology; 'Ilm al-Kalām; Ash'arism; Mu'tazilism; Shi'ism; Murji'ism; Kharijism; Southeast Asian Islam.

Public Interest Statement

This study explores the development of classical Islamic theological schools and their contemporary relevance in Southeast Asian Muslim societies, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. By comparing Ash'arism, Mu'tazilism, Shi'ism, Murji'ism, and Kharijism, the research highlights how theological ideas continue to shape discussions on religious moderation, pluralism, and authority. The study fills a gap in existing scholarship by combining doctrinal, historical, and socio-political perspectives within a comparative framework. Its findings are important for scholars, educators, and policymakers seeking to promote inter-sectarian dialogue, tolerance, and a deeper understanding of Islamic intellectual traditions in contemporary society.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*) constitutes one of the most significant intellectual traditions in Islamic studies, developing through complex historical, political, and philosophical debates within Muslim societies. Beyond discussing normative aspects of faith, Islamic theology examines fundamental questions concerning divine attributes, prophecy, free will, predestination, and the relationship between faith and human action. Historically, the emergence of theological discourse in Islam was closely connected to socio-political conflicts following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly disputes over political leadership and religious legitimacy.

These disputes gradually evolved into broader theological debates that produced diverse schools of thought, including Kharijism, Murji’ism, Shi’ism, Mu’tazilism, and Ash’arism (Latifa, 2025). The earliest theological fragmentation in Islam emerged from political conflicts during the caliphate of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the dispute with Mu’āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān. This conflict led to the rise of the Kharijites, a group characterized by its rigid theological position that declared Muslims committing major sins as unbelievers. Such a perspective reflected a literalist and exclusivist interpretation of religion. In contrast, Murji’ism emerged as a moderating response by postponing judgment regarding sinners and leaving ultimate accountability entirely to God. The theological opposition between Kharijism and Murji’ism marked the beginning of dialectical debates in Islamic theology concerning faith, disbelief, and moral responsibility.

Alongside these developments, Shi’ism emerged from debates surrounding the legitimate succession to the Prophet Muhammad. Shi’i thought maintained that leadership of the Muslim community rightfully belonged to the Prophet’s family through ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Over time, Shi’ism developed beyond a political movement into a comprehensive theological system emphasizing *imāmah*, divine justice, and spiritual authority (Mustofian, 2023). This demonstrates that Islamic theology evolved not merely as a doctrinal enterprise, but also as a response to broader socio-political realities.

The subsequent development of Islamic theology was marked by the rise of Mu’tazilism, a rationalist theological school that emphasized the role of reason in understanding religious teachings. Mu’tazilites developed theological principles centered on divine unity, justice, and human free will. They adopted an intermediate position regarding Muslims who committed major sins, arguing that such individuals occupied a status “between belief and unbelief” (Hanifah, 2016). Through its rationalist orientation, Mu’tazilism significantly contributed to the advancement of Islamic philosophy and intellectual inquiry, although it later faced criticism from traditionalist scholars.

As a response to the dominance of Mu’tazilite rationalism, Ash’arism emerged as a theological framework seeking to reconcile revelation and reason. Founded by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash’arī, this school rejected excessive rationalism while maintaining the use of logical argumentation in defending Islamic doctrine. Ash’arism eventually became the dominant theological orientation within Sunni Islam and remains influential in contemporary Muslim societies (Anwar, 2021). Its enduring influence lies in its ability to integrate textual authority and rational inquiry within a balanced theological framework.

Although numerous studies have examined individual theological schools within Islam, existing scholarship often focuses on doctrinal analysis in isolation rather than exploring the comparative dynamics among these schools and their contemporary reception in Southeast Asian Muslim societies. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to how socio-political structures and state religious policies shape the acceptance and institutionalization of theological traditions in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. This gap is particularly significant given the growing

relevance of theological discourse in contemporary debates on religious moderation, pluralism, and sectarian relations.

This study therefore aims to analyze the dynamics of classical Islamic theological schools Ash'arism, Murji'ism, Shi'ism, Mu'tazilism, and Kharijism through a comparative perspective while examining their patterns of reception in Indonesia and Malaysia. By situating theological developments within their historical and socio-political contexts, this study seeks to demonstrate that classical Islamic theology remains relevant for understanding contemporary Muslim intellectual life, especially in promoting moderation, critical engagement, and inter-sectarian dialogue in Southeast Asia.

Literature Review

The study of Islamic theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*) has attracted considerable scholarly attention from both Muslim and Western academics, particularly in relation to the emergence, evolution, and socio-political implications of classical theological schools. Existing scholarship demonstrates that Islamic theology cannot be understood solely as a doctrinal enterprise; rather, it developed through continuous interaction between political conflict, intellectual contestation, and institutional transformation within Muslim societies. This section reviews major scholarly contributions concerning the development of Ash‘arism, Murji‘ism, Shi‘ism, Mu‘tazilism, and Kharijism, while identifying the research gap addressed by the present study.

One of the foundational studies on Islamic theology is W. Montgomery Watt’s *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (1998), which provides a comprehensive historical framework for understanding the development of theological discourse in Islam. Watt argues that early theological debates emerged primarily from socio-political tensions following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly disputes concerning leadership and religious legitimacy. His work established an important foundation for understanding the interconnectedness between theology and political history in Islam. Similarly, J. Van Ess in *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Century of the Hijra* (2017) examines the formative period of Islamic theology through historical and philological approaches. Van Ess demonstrates that theological discourse evolved within broader intellectual and social contexts rather than in isolation, especially during the rise of Mu‘tazilite rationalism.

The rationalist orientation of Mu‘tazilism has been extensively examined by Richard M. Frank in *Early Islamic Theology: The Mu‘tazilites and al-Ash‘ari* (2007). Frank highlights the epistemological conflict between Mu‘tazilite rationalism and Ash‘arite theology, particularly concerning divine attributes, human free will, and the relationship between reason and revelation. This debate later shaped the intellectual foundations of Sunni orthodoxy. Expanding this discussion, Frank Griffel in *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology* (2009) explores how al-Ghazali integrated Ash‘arite theology with philosophy and Sufism, enabling Ash‘arism to evolve into a more comprehensive and adaptive theological framework. Griffel’s work explains why Ash‘arism became deeply institutionalized within Sunni educational traditions.

The institutional dimension of Islamic theology is further explored by George Makdisi in *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam* (1981). Makdisi argues that Islamic educational institutions, particularly madrasas, played a crucial role in transmitting and preserving dominant theological traditions such as Ash‘arism, while marginalizing other schools like Mu‘tazilism and Kharijism. This perspective is important for understanding how theological authority became socially and politically institutionalized in Muslim societies.

Studies on Shi‘ism have largely focused on questions of authority and legitimacy. Moojan Momen’s *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam* (1985) provides a detailed analysis of the doctrine of *imāmah*, emphasizing its theological and spiritual dimensions beyond political leadership. Likewise, Wilferd Madelung in *The Succession to Muhammad* (1997) critically examines the historical roots of Shi‘i identity through debates over succession after the Prophet Muhammad’s death. These studies collectively demonstrate that Shi‘ism developed as both a political and theological response to contested authority within early Islam.

The political dimensions of Islamic theology are also discussed by Patricia Crone in *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (2004), which analyzes how theological schools such as Kharijism and Shi'ism formulated theories of leadership and legitimacy. Crone's work illustrates the close relationship between theological doctrines and political practices in Islamic history. Meanwhile, Binyamin Abrahamov in *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (1996) explores the tension between traditionalist and rationalist approaches in Islamic theology, particularly highlighting Murji'ism's moderating position between theological extremism and rational speculation.

Classical studies such as A.J. Wensinck's *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (1932) remain influential for tracing the historical formation of Islamic creed (*'aqidah*). Wensinck explains how debates among Kharijites, Murji'ites, and Mu'tazilites contributed significantly to the development of theological concepts concerning faith, sin, and salvation. These debates became foundational in shaping subsequent Sunni theological orthodoxy.

In the Southeast Asian context, studies remain relatively limited. Yakub (2013) examines the development of Islam in Indonesia and demonstrates how Islamic theological traditions adapted within the socio-cultural context of the Malay-Indonesian world. Yakub (2019) further emphasizes the relationship between Islamic thought and social solidarity in Muslim societies. More recent studies by Mustofian (2023), Hanifah (2016), Latifa (2025), and Anwar (2021) discuss the relevance of Shi'ism, Mu'tazilism, and Ash'arism in contemporary Islamic discourse, particularly in Indonesia. However, these studies tend to focus on individual theological schools rather than comparatively analyzing their reception within different socio-political settings.

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, several gaps remain evident. First, previous studies predominantly examine theological schools independently, with limited comparative analysis of their interrelated dynamics. Second, insufficient attention has been given to how contemporary Muslim societies in Southeast Asia negotiate and institutionalize classical theological traditions through state policies, educational institutions, and religious authorities. Third, existing scholarship rarely integrates doctrinal, historical, and socio-political perspectives into a single analytical framework.

This study seeks to address these gaps by comparatively analyzing the theological foundations of Ash'arism, Murji'ism, Shi'ism, Mu'tazilism, and Kharijism while simultaneously examining their reception in Indonesia and Malaysia. Through this approach, the study contributes to broader discussions on Islamic intellectual history, religious authority, and theological pluralism in contemporary Southeast Asian Muslim societies.

Table 1. Summary of Previous Studies and Research Gap

Scholar	Main Focus	Key Findings	Limitation
W. Montgomery Watt (1998)	Historical development of Islamic theology	Theology emerged from socio-political conflicts after the Prophet's death	Limited discussion on Southeast Asian reception
J. Van Ess (2017)	Formative period of Islamic theology	Theology developed through intellectual and social interactions	Focuses mainly on early Islamic centuries
Richard M. Frank (2007)	Mu'tazilism and Ash'arism	Highlights conflict between rationalism and orthodoxy	Less attention to contemporary relevance

Scholar	Main Focus	Key Findings	Limitation
Frank (2009)	Griffel Al-Ghazali and Ash'arite theology	and Ash'arism philosophy and Sufism	integrated Concentrates mainly on Sunni tradition
George (1981)	Makdisi Islamic institutions	educational Madrasas dominant theology	institutionalized Limited comparative theological analysis
Moojan (1985)	Momen Shi'i doctrines <i>imāmah</i>	and Shi'ism combines spiritual authority	political and Focuses primarily on Shi'i theology
Wilferd Madelung (1997)	Succession after the Prophet	Legitimacy debates shaped Shi'i identity	Emphasis on historical succession
Patricia (2004)	Crone Islamic thought	political Theology closely linked with political authority	Less focus on doctrinal dynamics
Abrahamov (1996)	Traditionalism vs rationalism	Murji'ism theological moderation	represented Limited socio-political discussion
Yakub (2013; 2019)	Islam in Indonesia	Theology adapted to socio-cultural contexts	local Limited comparative Southeast Asian scope

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a descriptive-analytical design to examine the dynamics of classical Islamic theological thought. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study focuses on interpretative, historical, and conceptual dimensions of Islamic theology that cannot be adequately measured through quantitative methods. The descriptive-analytical method enables a systematic exploration of the theological characteristics, intellectual foundations, and socio-historical development of major Islamic theological schools, namely Ash'arism, Murji'ism, Shi'ism, Mu'tazilism, and Kharijism.

The research is based on a library research framework in which written sources constitute the primary data. Data were collected from a wide range of academic materials, including classical theological texts, scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and contemporary studies related to Islamic theology and intellectual history. The sources were classified into two categories: primary sources, consisting of classical theological works and writings of prominent Muslim theologians, and secondary sources, comprising contemporary academic analyses and interpretative studies on Islamic theological traditions.

Data collection was conducted through systematic documentation techniques involving identification, selection, classification, and critical reading of relevant literature. To ensure analytical rigor, the study adopted purposive source selection by prioritizing authoritative and widely cited academic works in the field of Islamic theology. This process enabled the identification of central theological concepts, doctrinal debates, and historical developments associated with each theological school.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis combined with a comparative approach. The analysis involved several stages: data reduction, thematic categorization, interpretation, and comparative synthesis. Through this method, the study identifies similarities and differences among theological schools in terms of their perspectives on faith, divine justice, political authority, human agency, and the relationship between reason and revelation. Furthermore, the comparative framework facilitates an examination of how these theological traditions have been received and institutionalized differently in Indonesia and Malaysia.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the study employs source triangulation by comparing information across multiple academic references and historical accounts. Cross-referencing classical and contemporary scholarship allows for a more balanced and objective interpretation of theological developments. Through this methodological framework, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and critically grounded understanding of the historical evolution and contemporary relevance of Islamic theological thought in Southeast Asian Muslim societies.

RESULT AND DISCUSS

The Dynamics of Classical Islamic Theology

The findings of this study demonstrate that the emergence of classical Islamic theological schools was deeply shaped by political conflict, intellectual contestation, and the search for religious legitimacy within early Muslim society. Although each theological tradition developed within a distinct historical context, all of them addressed similar fundamental questions concerning faith, divine justice, political authority, and the relationship between reason and revelation. The comparative analysis further reveals that these theological schools should not be viewed merely as isolated doctrinal entities, but rather as interconnected intellectual responses to evolving socio-political realities.

Ash'arism: The Theology of Moderation and Reconciliation

The analysis shows that Ash'arism emerged as a mediating theological framework between strict textualism and excessive rationalism. Founded by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī during the Abbasid period, Ash'arism developed in response to the dominance of Mu'tazilite rationalism and the resistance of traditionalist scholars. Unlike Mu'tazilism, which prioritized human reason as the primary epistemological tool, Ash'arism positioned revelation as the ultimate authority while still acknowledging the functional role of reason in defending religious doctrine.

This balance between revelation and rationality became the defining characteristic of Ash'arite theology. The doctrine of *kasb* (acquisition), for instance, reflects an attempt to reconcile divine omnipotence with human responsibility. Similarly, Ash'arite interpretations of divine attributes avoided anthropomorphism without rejecting scriptural references altogether. Such a balanced approach enabled Ash'arism to gain broad acceptance within Sunni Islam and later become institutionalized through madrasas and religious authorities.

The findings also indicate that the success of Ash'arism was closely connected to its intellectual adaptability. Thinkers such as al-Bāqillānī, al-Juwaynī, and al-Ghazālī expanded Ash'arite theology by integrating philosophical reasoning and spiritual dimensions into Sunni orthodoxy. This synthesis contributed significantly to the durability of Ash'arism as the dominant theological orientation in many Muslim societies, including Southeast Asia. In contemporary contexts, Ash'arism continues to be associated with religious moderation because of its capacity to accommodate both textual authority and rational inquiry.

Murji'ism and the Discourse of Religious Inclusivism

The findings reveal that Murji'ism emerged primarily as a reaction against the exclusivist tendencies of Kharijism. Whereas the Kharijites declared Muslims committing major sins to be unbelievers, Murji'ites postponed judgment and left ultimate accountability to God. This theological orientation reflected a more inclusive understanding of faith by emphasizing inner belief rather than outward actions alone.

Murji'ism therefore represented an early attempt to reduce sectarian conflict within the Muslim community. By separating divine judgment from human authority, Murji'ites challenged the practice of religious excommunication (*takfir*) that had intensified during political conflicts following the civil wars of early Islam. This approach contributed to social stability by promoting tolerance and discouraging rigid theological exclusivism.

However, the findings also show that Murji'ism was criticized for potentially weakening moral accountability. Critics argued that emphasizing faith over action could reduce ethical responsibility among believers. Despite these criticisms, Murji'ite thought significantly influenced later Sunni approaches to theological moderation and social cohesion. In modern pluralistic societies, the Murji'ite emphasis on avoiding premature judgment remains relevant for promoting inter-sectarian coexistence and reducing religious polarization.

Shi'ism: Theology, Authority, and Historical Consciousness

The study demonstrates that Shi'ism developed from debates concerning legitimate leadership after the death of the Prophet Muhammad and gradually evolved into a comprehensive theological system. Central to Shi'i theology is the doctrine of *imamah*, which combines political authority with spiritual guidance. Unlike Sunni theological traditions that separate political leadership from prophetic authority, Shi'ism conceptualizes the Imam as the legitimate successor responsible for preserving and interpreting divine guidance.

The findings further indicate that Shi'i theology integrates rational inquiry with spiritual authority. Shi'i scholars developed systematic theological arguments concerning divine justice, human agency, and moral responsibility while simultaneously emphasizing the sacred status of the Imams. This intellectual tradition contributed to the development of a sophisticated theological and philosophical heritage within Islam.

Historical experiences of marginalization also shaped Shi'i theological identity. Events such as the tragedy of Karbala became not only historical memories but also moral symbols of resistance against oppression and injustice. Consequently, Shi'i theology developed a strong ethical orientation centered on justice, sacrifice, and political resistance.

Nevertheless, the study finds that Shi'ism continues to face challenges related to sectarian tensions and debates over religious authority. In Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia, Shi'i communities encounter institutional restrictions, while Indonesia tends to provide relatively greater social space despite periodic tensions. These findings illustrate how state policies and religious institutions significantly influence the reception of theological traditions in Muslim societies.

Mu'tazilism and the Rationalization of Islamic Theology

The findings identify Mu'tazilism as the most explicitly rationalist school within classical Islamic theology. Emerging in Basra during the second century Hijri, Mu'tazilism emphasized the role of reason in understanding divine truth and moral responsibility. Its theological principles centered on divine unity (*tawhīd*), divine justice, and human free will.

One of the most significant contributions of Mu'tazilism was its argument that human beings possess rational capacity independent of revelation. This position enabled Mu'tazilite scholars to develop systematic theological reasoning and contributed substantially to the advancement of philosophy, logic, and intellectual inquiry in Islamic civilization. Their doctrine concerning the "intermediate position" (*al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn*) represented an attempt to mediate between Kharijite extremism and Murji'ite inclusivism.

However, the study also finds that the political institutionalization of Mu'tazilism during the Abbasid period contributed to its decline. The *mihnah* (inquisition) under Caliph al-Ma'mūn

associated Mu‘tazilite theology with state coercion, generating strong resistance among traditionalist scholars. As a result, Mu‘tazilism gradually lost political and institutional influence despite its enduring intellectual legacy.

In contemporary scholarship, Mu‘tazilism is increasingly re-evaluated for its emphasis on rationality, ethics, and critical inquiry. The findings suggest that Mu‘tazilite thought remains relevant for addressing modern intellectual challenges, particularly in discussions concerning science, human agency, and reinterpretation of religious texts.

Kharijism and the Theology of Extremism

The findings indicate that Kharijism represented one of the earliest and most rigid theological movements in Islamic history. Emerging from the rejection of arbitration during the conflict between ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān, Kharijism combined political rebellion with theological absolutism. The Kharijites insisted that faith must be demonstrated through action and argued that Muslims committing major sins should be considered unbelievers. This rigid understanding of faith contributed to the development of *takfīr*-based theology and intensified sectarian conflict within early Islam. The findings suggest that Kharijism’s literalist interpretation of scripture and uncompromising moral absolutism limited its capacity for theological flexibility. Although the movement advocated egalitarian leadership principles by rejecting tribal privilege, its exclusivist orientation frequently resulted in violence and fragmentation.

From a contemporary perspective, Kharijism is often referenced in discussions concerning religious extremism. The findings demonstrate that the historical experience of Kharijism provides an important lesson regarding the dangers of rigid textualism and exclusionary religious interpretations. Consequently, modern Muslim scholars frequently contrast Kharijite tendencies with more moderate theological traditions such as Ash‘arism and Murji’ism.

Comparative Reception of Islamic Theology in Indonesia and Malaysia

The comparative analysis reveals significant differences in how classical Islamic theological traditions are received and institutionalized in Indonesia and Malaysia. Indonesia demonstrates a relatively pluralistic and accommodative religious environment in which various theological perspectives coexist within civil society and educational institutions. Although Ash‘arism remains dominant through organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, alternative theological discourses continue to circulate in academic and intellectual contexts. By contrast, Malaysia institutionalizes Sunni Ash‘arism as the official theological orientation through state religious authorities. This institutionalization creates stricter boundaries regarding theological diversity, particularly concerning Shi‘ism and non-mainstream theological movements. The findings therefore suggest that the reception of Islamic theology is not determined solely by doctrinal considerations but also by state structures, religious institutions, and socio-political agendas.

Table 2. Comparative Characteristics and Reception of Islamic Theological Schools

Theological School	Main Orientation	Position on Faith and Sin	Approach to Reason	Contemporary Reception in Indonesia	Contemporary Reception in Malaysia
Ash‘arism	Moderation and Sunni orthodoxy	Major sinners remain Muslim	Balances reason and revelation	Dominant in pesantren and Islamic organizations	Official state theology
Murji‘ism	Inclusivism and tolerance	Judgment deferred to God	Limited rational engagement	Implicitly reflected in moderate discourse	Minimal institutional presence
Shi‘ism	Imamate and spiritual authority	Linked with loyalty to Imams	Integrates theology and rationality	Minority but socially present	Restricted by religious authorities
Mu‘tazilism	Rationalism and divine justice	Intermediate position	Strong emphasis on reason	Present in academic discourse	Limited institutional development
Kharijism	Literalism and exclusivism	Major sinners considered unbelievers	Textualist orientation	Rejected as extremism	Rejected as extremism

The comparative findings indicate that the reception of classical Islamic theological traditions in Indonesia and Malaysia is shaped by different historical trajectories, political systems, and models of religious authority. Although both countries are predominantly Muslim societies in Southeast Asia and share strong Sunni traditions, the institutionalization and social acceptance of theological diversity differ significantly. These differences influence how theological schools such as Ash‘arism, Shi‘ism, Mu‘tazilism, Murji‘ism, and Kharijism are interpreted, regulated, and integrated into public religious discourse.

In Indonesia, the reception of Islamic theology tends to be more pluralistic and socially negotiated. The absence of a single centralized religious authority allows diverse Islamic organizations, pesantren networks, universities, and intellectual communities to participate in shaping theological discourse. Ash‘arism remains the dominant theological orientation, particularly through the influence of Nahdlatul Ulama, which promotes a moderate Sunni tradition rooted in classical Islamic scholarship. At the same time, organizations such as Muhammadiyah contribute to a reformist theological environment that encourages rational engagement with Islamic teachings.

This relatively open religious landscape enables the circulation of alternative theological ideas, including discussions on Mu‘tazilite rationalism and Shi‘i intellectual traditions within academic institutions. Although Shi‘ism remains a minority tradition and occasionally faces social resistance, it is not uniformly prohibited at the national level. Similarly, Mu‘tazilite thought survives primarily as an intellectual discourse in universities and scholarly debates rather than as an organized theological movement. These conditions reflect Indonesia’s broader socio-political

framework, which emphasizes religious coexistence and accommodates multiple interpretations within Islam.

In contrast, Malaysia demonstrates a more centralized and institutionalized model of religious authority. Sunni Islam, particularly Ash'arite theology combined with the Shāfi'ī school of jurisprudence, is formally recognized as the official religious orientation of the state. Religious affairs are closely regulated by state Islamic councils and federal religious institutions, creating a more structured theological environment. As a result, theological diversity is more tightly controlled compared to Indonesia.

This institutional framework significantly affects the reception of non-mainstream theological traditions. Shi'ism, for example, faces legal and administrative restrictions in several Malaysian states due to concerns over religious unity and doctrinal orthodoxy. Mu'tazilite rationalism also receives limited institutional acceptance because of its association with theological liberalism and rational speculation. Consequently, theological discourse in Malaysia is more closely aligned with state-sponsored Sunni orthodoxy, leaving less public space for alternative interpretations.

Another important distinction concerns the role of religion in national identity formation. In Indonesia, Islamic identity coexists with a pluralistic national ideology that accommodates religious and cultural diversity. This context encourages a more dialogical approach toward theological differences. Conversely, in Malaysia, Islam is strongly connected to Malay political identity and state legitimacy. Therefore, theological uniformity is often perceived as essential for maintaining social and political stability.

Despite these differences, both countries share a common tendency to reject extremist theological interpretations associated with Kharijite exclusivism and *takfir*-oriented ideologies. Both Indonesia and Malaysia promote religious moderation as part of their contemporary Islamic discourse, although they pursue this objective through different institutional mechanisms. Indonesia relies more on civil society organizations and cultural accommodation, whereas Malaysia emphasizes state regulation and institutional authority.

These findings demonstrate that the reception of Islamic theology is not determined solely by doctrinal factors but is deeply influenced by political structures, educational institutions, and the relationship between religion and the state. The comparison between Indonesia and Malaysia therefore illustrates how classical Islamic theological traditions continue to evolve within contemporary Southeast Asian Muslim societies, adapting to different models of governance, authority, and social pluralism.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the development of classical Islamic theology was closely intertwined with the historical, political, and intellectual dynamics of Muslim societies. The comparative analysis of Ash'arism, Murji'ism, Shi'ism, Mu'tazilism, and Kharijism reveals that each theological school emerged as a distinct response to issues of political legitimacy, faith, divine justice, and the relationship between reason and revelation. Among these traditions, Ash'arism became the most widely accepted theological framework due to its ability to reconcile rational inquiry with scriptural authority, while Mu'tazilism emphasized rationalism, Shi'ism highlighted religious authority through *imāmah*, Murji'ism promoted theological inclusivism, and Kharijism reflected a rigid and exclusivist interpretation of faith. The study further finds that the reception of these theological traditions in Southeast Asia differs significantly between Indonesia and Malaysia. Indonesia tends to accommodate greater theological diversity through cultural and intellectual pluralism, whereas Malaysia institutionalizes Sunni Ash'arism through state religious structures and imposes stricter limitations on alternative theological orientations.

The findings imply that classical Islamic theology remains highly relevant for understanding contemporary debates on religious moderation, pluralism, sectarian relations, and Islamic authority in Muslim societies. By demonstrating how theological traditions continue to shape modern socio-religious discourse, this study contributes to broader discussions in Islamic Studies and Religious Studies regarding the interaction between doctrine, politics, and society in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, this research is limited by its reliance on library-based qualitative analysis and textual sources without incorporating fieldwork or empirical data from religious institutions and communities. Future studies may expand this research through ethnographic approaches, interviews, or comparative policy analysis to explore how theological doctrines are negotiated and practiced in everyday religious life across diverse Muslim societies.

Author Contributions

Mohd. Fahmy Bin Rapae: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft preparation, supervision. Rezky Pratama Marsudi: Data curation, validation, writing—review and editing, visualization. Muhammad Firdaus: Resources, literature review, investigation, editing. Muhammad Yakub: Supervision, project administration, review, and final approval of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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