

# Islam Encountering Enlightenment: Clash or Symbiosis?

A Comparative Analysis of the Dutch and Indonesian Discourse on  
Liberal Islam

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Enschede, October 2005

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A Written Report of an Internship at Jaringan Islam Liberal,  
Conducted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements of the Minor  
“As the World Turns; Sustainable Development in a North-South  
Perspective”

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## Preface

Last summer I have been given the privilege of being part of an exciting and inspiring group of Muslim intellectuals in Jakarta, Indonesia. Their struggle for the development and dissemination of a liberal form of Islam encouraged me to think deeper and more critical about the way I practice and view my own religion, while at the same time it showed me a societal engagement I very much miss in the Netherlands.

The three months I spent at Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL), the Liberal Islam Network, were, in principal, just part of my minor studies, “As the World Turns; Sustainable Development in a North South Perspective”. It resulted, however, in a far better understanding of my own religion, a greater appreciation of the well-established liberal values in the Netherlands and a total acceptance of pluralism as a given fact of life.

The latter, especially, meant, using Kuhnian terminology, a major paradigm shift in my own way of thinking for which I am incredibly grateful. As an Applied Physics student the risk of pretending to be omniscient and thereby to neglect the diversity in humanity and human thought is huge. Indonesia and the subject I studied convinced me, however, that one has to recognize there is not a certain superior system of thinking and that even when one has a total difference of opinion one has to respect the other for coming to another conclusion, while using his or her own intellect. This still, of course, does not imply I will agree with, for example, fundamentalist Muslims on how to be a Muslim or with libertarians on how to build a fair society, yet I have to try to understand them and, in the end, respect them for having another intellectual viewpoint.

Such kind of pluralism does not automatically result in culture or religious relativism, nor does it dismiss the terrible physical consequences some ideologies or thoughts can lead to and it should definitely not be an excuse for giving up the fight for equal rights, freedom or justice. Rather, I think such a pluralistic attitude is able to create an intellectual environment in which any missionary character disappears and more thorough discussions can take place. Hence, a far better climate for developing new thoughts, introspection and mutual understanding will then come into existence. Arrogance and the feeling of superiority, on the other hand, will only result in convincing oneself of one’s right, which will satisfy the debaters involved, but will damage humanity as a whole. This realisation process, which is not the subject of this report, has, undoubtedly, been my most important learning experience in Indonesia; therefore, I believe my period in Jakarta has become an indispensable part of my undergraduate academic career.

I imagine there could have been no better place to force the previous described paradigm shift than Komunitas Utan Kayu, the complex where JIL has been situated since its birth in 2001. Here, I found the intellectually stimulating environment my mind was asking for, after studying physics at a technical university for three years. Here, questions were more important than answers. Here, I felt truly free. Moreover, it was a great place for coming into contact with Indonesian arts, culture and, of course, cuisine.

Therefore, I would like to thank Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, who immediately responded very enthusiastically to my research proposal and invited me to come to Jakarta. Thank you so much. The first JIL members I met, Lanny Octavia and Novriantoni, were to become dear friends and were greatly encouraging me with my research, they are responsible for a large part of my personal development. My gratitude for both of you cannot be put into words. Burhanuddin and Saiful Mujani were always helpful in

providing me with new insights and in showing the essences of liberal Islam in Indonesia. Burhan and Saiful showed a tremendous interest in my research, probably they asked me as many questions as I asked them. I should also thank all other persons involved with JIL though, since all of them created a warm and open environment, despite the external pressure on JIL and the tensions arising from those threats. Ade, Anick, Guntur, Hamid, Moqsith, Nong and Umdah. my dear friends, it has been a blessing working, talking and having fun with you for three months. I wish you all the very best.

At last, I want to thank my Dutch supervisor Prof. Dr. Nico Schulte Nordholt for his help with my preparations, his incredible amount of anecdotes and analyses on Indonesia and his general study advices after my return to the Netherlands.

I hope this report succeeds a little bit in showing what I have seen and experienced in Indonesia and that it will be an informative read for those interested. I have tried my best to include what I believe was necessary. Listening and looking back to the performed work though, I think my focus and questions would have been slightly different. I assume that kind of realisations just form an essential part of studying and the process of becoming an academic. The more, the better.

R.E.D.

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*Elke moslim wordt, net als in de begintijd van de islam, opgevoed met de overtuiging dat alle kennis in de koran staat, dat kritische vragen over de koran niet zijn toegestaan en dat elke moslim (ook in 2004) zoveel mogelijk het leven van de grondlegger van de islam moet nabootsen. In de praktijk lukt het natuurlijk maar weinigen zich precies zo te gedragen als de profeet in de 7de eeuw.*

*Deze opvoeding heeft ertoe geleid dat de menselijke nieuwsgierigheid bij moslims ernstig wordt ingeperkt. Elke vooruitgang die een individuele moslim boekt, wordt door andere moslims afgewezen als vreemd en in strijd met het geloof. De godsdienst is statisch gebleven.*

*(Every Muslim is, just as in the first era of Islam, raised with the belief that every knowledge can be found in the Quran, that asking critical questions is not allowed and that every Muslim (also in 2004) must try to “copy” the life of the founder of Islam. In reality, of course, very few are able to behave oneself as the prophet did in the seventh century.*

*This upbringing has led to the fact human curiosity is fairly limited within a Muslim’s mind. Every progress an individual Muslim makes, is being denounced by others as strange and heretic with religion. The religion has remained static.)*

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, “Ik bevraag de islam, een religie zonder zelfreflectie”, in: *De Volkskrant*, 30-10-2004

*Liberal Islamists believe that Islam susceptible to critical thinking on itself is a chief principle that should be adhered to in order to keep Islam relevant from time to time... Liberal Islamists believe literal-textual understandings of the Quran and Sunna will only cripple Islam.*

From the leaflet: *Liberal Reader from Utan Kayu*, Jaringan Islam Liberal, Jakarta, 04-08-2005

# 1. Introduction

On Tuesday evening the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 2005 an open lecture at the campus of the University of Twente was attended by an extraordinary amount of people. Normally, such a lecture attracts the attention of a few; this time however, some attendants were even prepared to stand for two hours, the lecture hall was overloaded. Among the gray-haired men and women, the usual visitors of open lectures, there even were some students to be found. Apparently, the topic was able to bring together an interested, large and diverse audience; one could imagine most professors would be extremely jealous with such an attention. But then after all, the subject of that evening's lecture was, indisputably, one of the most debated in the Netherlands during the past years: the Islam.<sup>1</sup> That night's lecture showed the curiosity for Muslim religion, while at the same time the questions afterwards displayed a general ignorance about Islam.

Since the terrorist attacks in Washington and New York on September the 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, many Dutch intellectuals started to criticise Islam, its connected cultures and its presence in the Netherlands. Two months after the attacks Ayaan Hirsi Ali, at that time still a Muslim woman from Somali background, entered the public discourse by writing an article in the Dutch daily newspaper *Trouw*, in which she asked for a Voltaire in Islam.<sup>2</sup> According to her, Islam was in a desperate need for Enlightenment. Since then Hirsi Ali has become an icon in the debate on the, according to her, incompatibility of Islam and modernity. In 2004 she made a highly controversial film with late filmmaker Theo van Gogh, *Submission part I*, in which she challenged the position of women in Islam. By writing Quranic calligraphy on the naked bodies of abused Muslim women she linked violence on women directly to Quranic verses. The murder on Theo van Gogh on the second of November 2004 by a young Dutch Muslim from a Moroccan background, increased the already existing tension between non Muslims and Muslims in society. Although a serious physical clash did not appear, Islam itself was once again back in the battle field.

Besides the entrance of Ayaan Hirsi Ali in the public arena, the debate was also intensified by the rise of the politician Pim Fortuyn. He was heading for a remarkable parliamentary election victory, before he was killed on May the sixth, 2002. His popularity was for a large part due to his outspoken criticism on Islam and his fear of Islam influencing Dutch culture, which he described six years earlier in his book *Tegen de Islamisering van onze cultuur*. He became highly controversial when he stated that according to him Islam is a backward culture.<sup>3</sup>

Pim Fortuyn, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh all argued Islam, sometimes they nuanced it to fundamentalist or radical Islam, did not fit properly in the Dutch value system, in other words the religion of the Muslim minority was hindering them to integrate themselves in society. Furthermore, all of them were convinced they had the right to say whatever they wanted to say in public (here Pim Fortuyn words are very clarifying "Ik zeg wat ik denk en ik doe wat ik zeg"; "I say what I think and I do what I say") and were thus also extremely outspoken on religion related issues. Together they

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<sup>1</sup> The lecture was given by Prof. Dr. F. Leemhuis, an expert of the Arab language, he is well-known for his Dutch translation of the Quran.

<sup>2</sup> A. Hirsi Ali. "Laat ons niet in de steek; gun ons een Voltaire", in: *Trouw*, 24-11-2001.

<sup>3</sup> F. Poorthuis, H. Wansink. "De islam is een achterlijke cultuur", in: *de Volkskrant*, 09-02-2002

formed the forefront of a large group in society and in intellectual circles, who attacked Islam and who were stressing on the differences in ideology between the “Enlightened” West and “Medieval” Islamic world. Next to the contributions of the three already mentioned figures, the discourse in the Netherlands was primarily dominated by old, well-established, Dutch, male, conservative intellectuals, such as Paul Cliteur, Jaffe Vink and Leon de Winter.

On the twenty-first of February 2001, seven months before Al-Qaeda terrorists flew into the World Trade Center, when Ayaan Hirsi Ali was still a relatively unknown employee of the Wiardi Beckman Stichting (the Dutch labour party’s think-tank) and Pim Fortuyn was still writing columns, criticising the Dutch political establishment from the sideline, several young Muslim intellectuals gathered in the *kedai Tempo*, a small café, at Komunitas Utan Kayu in the eastern part of Jakarta, Indonesia. The complex was established by Goenawan Mohamad, a famous Indonesian poet and journalist, after Soeharto’s regime banned Tempo Magazine (1994); soon it became a centre where freethinkers, artists and journalists could flourish and develop activities that would be able to open Indonesian society, the complex was a stronghold against the Soeharto regime. Literature, music, paintings were shown in the library, the theatre and the gallery, while the Institute for the Studies on Free Flow of Information Indonesia (ISAI) was providing the infrastructure to create journalism with a non-governmental perspective on the developments in the Archipelago. The spirit of freedom of thought and freedom of expression were here to be found.

Ironically, it was one of the paradoxical consequences of introducing democracy in Indonesia in 1998 that worried the group of intellectuals who were discussing their concerns in the *kedai*. Since 1998, the influence of radical Islam was rising in Indonesia, since the governmental control and censorship on religion were fading away. Furthermore, Islam became politicised again, all traditional issues in Indonesia, such as the inclusion of the Jakarta Charter in the Pancasila were debated for a second time. To counterbalance the generally well organised radical Islamists it was, according to the Utan Kayu intellectuals, necessary to launch a platform in which liberal Muslims could make themselves heard. Hence, they decided to organise themselves in Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL), the Liberal Islam Network.<sup>4</sup>

Since then JIL activists have been occupied with developing and disseminating liberal Islamic ideas. Their appearance in and influence on the religious discourse increased day by day, partly because of their controversial ideas, partly because of others who were primarily focusing their critique on JIL or JIL members. The members of JIL are concerned about the growing conservative tendency, one of their goals is to liberate Islam from such conservative pressures. Their aim is to enlighten mainstream Islamic thought by freeing it from institutionalised, authoritative and political forms of religion. Not surprisingly, it was during JIL’s third anniversary, in March 2004, that Hirsi Ali’s film was being shown and discussed in Indonesia for the first time. It is a small world.

The JIL activists, the Dutch intellectuals, who criticise Islam from a Western perspective, as well as the radical, fundamentalist Muslims (sometimes called Islamists), are in

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<sup>4</sup> The founding fathers of JIL included: Goenawan Mohamad, Ahmad Sahal, Nong Darol Mahmada, Uliil Abshar Abdalla, Ihsan Ali Fauzi, Hamid Basyaib, Taufik Adnan Amal, Saiful Mujani and Luthfi Assyaukanie.

principal all concerned with the same question, i.e. whether it is possible to be a Muslim in a (post)modern, globalising age. What role should or could Islam play in the modernisation process of the Islamic world, in other words how should Muslims cope with modernity?<sup>5</sup>

To a great extent these three groups coincide with the categories the historian Iftikhar Malik made in his book *Islam and Modernity*.<sup>6</sup> The last group, the revivalists, believes Muslims will only be able to catch up with the Western world when Muslims return to a very puritan form of Islam, therefore they believe Islamising modernity constitutes the only escape from the struggle with modernity in the Islamic world. The second group, the Dutch intellectuals, are convinced “Islam is totally incompatible with modernity and thus against integration, pluralism, democracy and human rights.” (Malik 2004, p. 5), secularism is therefore the only solution. Liberal Muslims, however, strongly believe Islam itself is not the problem neither the solution; they seek a tolerant and humane interpretation of religion, which inspires and nourishes them in order to be religious without being dogmatic.

In this research paper the views and results of the last two groups will be more closely examined. An answer will be sought to the following question:

*How do the discourse on Islam and Enlightenment and the development of a liberal form of Islam take place in Indonesia compared to the debate, and its results, on Islam and the West in the Netherlands?*

Because of the formulation of this research question the concepts of Enlightenment and modernity play an important role in this thesis. These two words however, are quite abstract and perhaps even vague. In this paper Enlightenment refers to the historical philosophical movement in eighteenth century Europe which argued reason should prevail over any form of authority on thought. Modernity, an often used, but seldom clarified concept, will be understood in this paper as the process, which originated in Europe, from traditional societies to societies that are built upon science, technology, reason and individuality.

In this paper an analysis of the concepts of liberal Islam will be given first, subsequently its roots in Indonesia will be discussed (chapter 2). Second, an overview of liberal movements and persons in Indonesia will be shown (chapter 3). Third, the contemporary developments of liberal Islam in Indonesia will be compared to the critique on Islam in the Netherlands (chapter 4). Finally, the paper will end by a brief impression of the results and a conclusion (chapter 5 & 6).

The data for this research were obtained during a three months field study in the summer of 2005 at Jaringan Islam Liberal, Jakarta, Indonesia. To gain insight in the complex liberal Islamic organisational and societal structure more than twenty

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<sup>5</sup> Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, JIL's former coordinator, asked the same sort of questions during a speech at Paramadina University (08-02-2003) in the following way: “One matter that has been haunting the Moslem *ummah* (the worldwide Islamic community) is this: How can we live in accordance with the demands of religious text on the one hand, and on other hand adjust our selves to historical developments? How could we, on one hand, adapt incessantly to change, and on the other hand, keep being good Moslems? How do we become authentic and modern all at once? How do we transform while staying faithful to the fundamental bases determined by the religion? How do we keep the balance between “*ashalah*” and “*hadatsah*?””, extracted from [www.islamlib.com](http://www.islamlib.com), 13-10-2005

<sup>6</sup> Malik, I.H. 2004. *Islam and Modernity. Muslims in Europe and the United States*. Pluto Press. London.

unstructured interviews with activists, analysts and intellectuals were conducted. Additionally, data was taken from active involvement within the liberal Islamic discourse; workshops, seminars, talk shows and ceremonies have all been attended to actually experience what the discourse looks like. The countless amounts of personal conversations with JIL members contributed to a better understanding of the preceding. It should be noted the used approach was characterised by an interactive study of object and subject; quite often the difference between them actually just faded away, hence this study report should be read as a very personal endeavour to understand the liberal part of the Islamic religion and its troubles, rather than as a collection of facts, which resulted from a distant impersonal observation. The conservative discourse, the other end of the religious spectrum, will, in order to keep things concise, not be discussed in this report.

The Dutch, non-academic debate was primarily followed by studying four major Dutch quality newspapers (i.e. Trouw, NRC Handelsblad, de Volkskrant and Het Parool) after the eleventh of September 2001. In addition, a brief literature study provided relevant frameworks on how to observe the Dutch discourse. Especially the observing work of the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Aboe Zaid and Edward W. Said's classic *Orientalism* gave some more rigidity to this study.

## 2. The Concepts and Roots of Liberal Islam

In this chapter the historical background of the liberal Islamic movement in Indonesia will be discussed. Liberal Islam as such is of course not confined to the Archipelago, rather it is a global phenomenon with its basic concepts arising out of intellectual efforts made all over the world. The discourse in Indonesia is itself a perfect example of this globalisation of thought, famous Islamic and Western scholars are invited, via lectures and workshops, to contribute to the liberal discourse in Indonesia, such as the Swiss Egyptian Tariq Ramadan in 2003, the Egyptian Nasr Hamid Aboe Zaid in 2004 and the American Egyptian Khaled Abou El Fadl in 2005. In fact one of the NGO's participating in the discourse, which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3, explicitly refers to this international character by its very name, i.e. the International Centre for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP).

On the other hand almost all involved persons in the Indonesian discourse spend or spent some time abroad, either for undergraduate studies or for pursuing research degrees. Several persons currently involved in Jaringan Islam Liberal elucidate this: Novriantoni and Guntur Romli studied at the prestigious Al-Azhar in Egypt, Lanny Octavia was a student of Islam in Pakistan, Luthfi Assyaukanie is now studying in Australia, after having studied in Jordan and Malaysia, Burhanuddin will continue his study within a few months in Australia as well, Saiful Mujani got his PhD from Ohio State University in June 2003 and JIL's former spokesperson Ulil Abshar-Abdalla left in September 2005 for a graduate study at Boston University. The constant exchange of persons between Indonesia and the Arabic or Western world is an important catalyst in developing new ideas and frameworks. Generally, most liberals seem to seek a paradigm shift by indulging themselves in another culture or another scientific discipline.<sup>7</sup> Hence, since one cannot separate the Indonesian developments from its global counterparts, the roots of liberal Islam around the world will first be discussed in section 2.1; thereafter, in section 2.2 it will be placed in its specific Indonesian context and history.

### *2.1 Global Developments in Islamic Thought*

As noted in the introduction there are generally two responses within the Islamic world to modernity, i.e. a revivalist and a liberal one. However, before proceeding any further, it should be noted that a large part of the Muslim population does not belong to either of them, and is practicing a form of religion which is most often referred to as traditionalist Islam, in which local traditions are intertwined with Islamic religious rituals. In Indonesia this form of Islam is largely represented by the Nahdlatul Ulama, an organisation with more than 30 million followers. This group, founded in 1926, was, as such, not a response to modernity, but rather a protection of traditional Islamic practices from modernist

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<sup>7</sup> This globalization of thought is, however, not limited to the liberal discourse. Fundamentalist thinkers constantly travel to other countries as well. In fact, Sayd Qutb, one of the most influential fundamentalist ideologists, radicalised after his study in the US, his fundamentalist thoughts were largely a response to the decadence he saw and experienced during that time. Where liberal Muslims tend to be inspired and wondered by the West, fundamentalists are mostly frustrated and feeling unaccepted.

influences. However, in the contemporary liberal discourse the intellectuals from a traditionalist background play a key role, as will be discussed in subsection 2.2.2.

According to Charles Kurzman, whose influential book, *Liberal Islam. A sourcebook*, played a crucial role in the birth of the Liberal Islam Network in Indonesia (i.e. via his nomenclature), the liberal movement “emerged out of the revivalist movement of the eighteenth century” (Kurzman 1998, p.6), it was the Indian revivalist Shah Wali-Allah (1703-1762), who wanted to reopen the gates of *ijtihad*<sup>8</sup> and eventually lay the grounds for the more known modernists, such as Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), Jamal al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), who all stressed the importance of personal interpretation of religion. In their opinion religion could not be well understood or practised without a personal intellectual effort, they struggled against an authoritative form of religion.<sup>9</sup>

The modernist movement, of which the Indonesian Muhammadiyah, founded by Ahmad Dahlan in 1912, is an organisational remain, is in certain ways comparable to the Protestant, reformist movement in Christianity. Since both Protestants and Islamic modernists urge a personal encounter with religious texts (the Bible and the Quran respectively) and the abandonment of religious authorities and local traditions (the pope and the ulema). Logically, such a focus on personal intellectuality led to the establishment of schools and hospitals all over the Islamic world. Still Islamic modernists in Indonesia are very proud of this legacy, with Weber’s theory on Protestantism and capitalism<sup>10</sup> in their mind they proclaim Islamic modernisation will eventually lead to economic progress and prosperity. While Weber’s thesis is quite doubtful, it is, out of personal experience, hard to deny that Indonesians from a modernist background are more accustomed with some aspects of modernity, such as arriving on time and keeping an appointment, than Indonesian Muslims from a traditionalist background.

Out of this modernist movement grew the liberal tradition, which provided more room for interpretation of Islamic texts, the Quran and the Sunna. The use of *ijtihad* was extended and nurtured by the introduction of Western analytical tools, hermeneutics, in Islamic tradition. Because of its Western connotation, the term liberal is highly disputed; the term was first mentioned by the Indian scholar Asaf A. A. Fysee (1899-1981), he, however, immediately added one should not bother about nomenclature, which as shall be shown, eventually did happen, also in Indonesia (chapter 3.2). The way in which this interpretation is performed and the status of the holy text differs within the liberal movement itself. Hence, there is a wide variety of liberal thought, just as there is an enormous diversity in fundamentalist thought.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the acceptance of diversity, pluralism, is a characteristic of most liberals. The exact meaning of liberal Islam is thus

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<sup>8</sup> The term *ijtihad* seems to have become quite fashionable as the solution to escape from religious dogmatism lately, the American journalist and author Irshad Manji (2004) describes it as the way out of backwardness and subsequently launched “Operation *ijtihad*”. The exact meaning of the term, however, varies from group to group. Tariq Ramadan (2003), e.g., limits the use of *ijtihad* to Islamic scholars, who are well trained in Islamic literature. Nevertheless, in this paper the word describes an individual effort of interpretation of the Quran and to a lesser extent of the Hadith.

<sup>9</sup> C. Kurzman. 1998. *Liberal Islam. A Sourcebook*. Oxford University Press, Oxford

<sup>10</sup> Weber, M. 1965. *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Unwin University Books. London.

<sup>11</sup> This last fact is often neglected in discussions on Islam in the West, fundamentalism is there synonymous with its violent radical extremes. An interesting book in which some of the differences in the fundamentalist discourse in Indonesia are shown is: Barton, G. 2004. *Jemaah Islamiyah. Radical Islamism in Indonesia*. Ridge Books, Singapore.

not clear in a global context. The term will be specified for the Indonesian context in the next section.

Generally, however, liberal Islam is characterised by valuing reason either at the same level of or over revelation. The differences originate from the question what areas of religion reason should influence. Kurzman describes three distinct groups that differ on how to interpret Islamic law, or sharia: the liberal, the silent and the interpretive sharia group.<sup>12</sup> The first believes sharia itself leads to liberal values. It is this type of liberal Islam one frequently observes in the Dutch Muslim community and which leads to an endless words battle with orthodox Muslims, because both groups claim to have the authority on the interpretation of Islamic sharia. The silent sharia liberals state that Islamic law does not cover all areas of contemporary human life and that therefore Muslims themselves need to think of answers; they simply cannot rely on Islamic jurisprudence since Islamic law does not provide all the answers. The last group, the interpretive sharia liberals, questions the status of sharia itself and views it as a product of human fallibility. The intellectuals of this group are mostly trained in social sciences and are eager to apply Western scientific tools on the Quran, such as hermeneutics. Mohammed Arkoun and Nasr Hamid Aboe Zaid are two contemporary Islamic scholars that fall under this category. As shall be discussed in the next chapter these forms of liberal Islam are all represented in the Indonesian discourse in one way or another.

From more conservative Muslim sides liberals are always criticised because of a lack of theological foundation for their thoughts. However, liberals try to ground their thoughts directly on verses from the Quran, sayings of the prophet and very early Islamic scholars and tradition. The philosophers under the name of the mu'tazilla are a frequently mentioned group by which many liberals are inspired and look upon as an Islamic example of how reason and Islam are perfectly compatible. Other notable examples include the philosophers Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) and Ibn Sinna (980-1037). In fact, a part of the power of the Islamic liberals, all over the world, is that they are quite often educated in traditional Islamic schools and universities. They know their sources.

## ***2.2 Liberal Islam in an Indonesian Context***

In the previous subsection the global developments that led to the creation of liberal Islam have briefly been described. In the next two sections the contents of the Indonesian discourse on liberal Islam will be discussed. First, the basic ideas of the Jaringan Islam Liberal will be presented (section 2.2.1), since they serve as excellent example of what liberals in Indonesia actually adhere to. Subsequently, these ideas will be placed in its relevant historical Indonesian context by showing the relation of the older neo-modernist thoughts to the contemporary liberal ideology (section 2.2.2).

### **2.2.1 Ideas of Jaringan Islam Liberal**

As already described in the introduction there is nowadays only one organisation in Indonesia, which calls itself explicitly liberal in religious sense, i.e. Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL). JIL's activities started with the introduction of a mailing list

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<sup>12</sup> C. Kurzman, op. cit.

(islamliberal@yahoogroups.com), in which Muslim intellectuals could discuss their religious concerns. The mailing list exists up till today and currently has more than 600 members. JIL an sich, however, does not have any formal structure, besides the ten persons that are involved with running the organisation daily (the JIL core)<sup>13</sup>, so there does not exist any formal membership. Furthermore, not all persons included on the mailing list refer to themselves as liberals (again because of the problem of nomenclature), although their ideas could be similar to those of JIL's core.

There is, even within the core group, a variety of opinions to be found. The acceptance of these differences is, according to JIL core members, itself one of the meanings of the word liberal. The network focuses on an individual encounter with religion, the only authority lies within oneself instead of any religious institution. This demand for individuality, which does have its predecessors in early Islamic history (e.g. the doctrine of the Mu'tazilah in the ninth century A.C.), was challenged by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) on July the 28<sup>th</sup> 2005, when they issued a fatwa against pluralism, liberalism and secularism (these fatwas are discussed in some more detail in section 3.1). Far more than only being a rather unsubtle indirect attack on JIL's organisation, it was a claim on authority. JIL intellectuals, however, believe that every Muslim is responsible for his own thoughts and should not rely on any worldly institution, such as MUI, to practice his or her religion. One cannot monopolise human thought. This strong belief in freedom of thought, in freedom of religion and in the right to express these thoughts and forms of religion (freedom of expression) should also be seen as a continuation of the struggle against any form of authority in Komunitas Utan Kayu, JIL's alma mater, during the Soeharto era. Naturally, the background of many JIL founders in ISAI (among others: Ulil and Nong) strongly contributed to this characteristic aspect.

This is not to say that there exists a larger common ground on which all JIL activists seem to agree. These fundamentals of JIL are summarised in JIL's manifesto<sup>14</sup>, it consists of six points. First of all is to keep the gates of *ijtihad* wide open, liberal Muslims believe Islam will become irrelevant and "rotten" if rational interpretation of Islamic texts will not take place. This focus on *ijtihad* is, as stated in section 2.1, central in liberal Islamic thought. Contrary to most ideologies it is thus not the *result* of thinking which is regarded as valuable, but the thinking *itself*. It is thus not remarkable that JIL's core seems almost obsessed by books and do not restrict themselves by any private censorship. In fact, some classic books from Western philosophy are hard to find in Europe, but will easily be found on their bookshelves.<sup>15</sup> The majority of JIL's core uses *ijtihad* in a way that would fall under Kurzman's interpretive sharia category. According to JIL members it is impossible to understand the text without making an interpretation since there is an

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<sup>13</sup> At the moment of writing the following people make up the formal organization of JIL: Hamid Basyaib (1962) is the coordinator/spokesperson, who replaces Ulil Abshar-Abdalla (1967), Nong Darol Mahmada (1975) is the organisational woman behind the scenes. Anick Hamim Tohari (1974) organises the campus program. Novriantoni (1975), Guntur Romli (1978) and Moqsith Ghazali (1971) are discussion editors. Novri is also responsible for JIL's media syndication. Lanny Octavia (1979) is the translator for the English website. Ade is the secretary, Umdah El-Baroroh (1977) conducts interviews and writes reports, Burhan (1977) is responsible for funding proposals and financial administration. Furthermore, two "seniors" are still closely linked to the organisation: Luthfi Assyaukanie (1967) and Saiful Mujani (1962).

<sup>14</sup> See also: <http://islamlib.com/en/aboutus.php>, accessed on October 9, 2005

<sup>15</sup> I, personally, was always looking for Wittgenstein Tractatus and whereas I never found in a Dutch bookstore, I did find it in Jakarta.

epistemological distance in time and space. In other words the holy texts as such are not transparent, they only get meaning when a believer starts interpreting the text and tries to bridge this epistemological distance. In the words of Ulil Abshar-Abdalla: “the revelation cannot “speak” without the context”.<sup>16</sup> Liberal Muslims therefore do not believe in a monolithic form of Islam, Islam requires an adjective, like liberal or fundamentalist; *the* Islam simply does not exist.

Second, a direct result of this *ijtihad*, grasping the religious and ethical spirit of Islam is preferred above a literal reading of the primary Islamic sources, the Quran and the sunna. In one of Ulil’s most famous speeches, *Avoiding Bibliolatry*, from which was already quoted above, he formulates this opinion bluntly: “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”.<sup>17</sup> JIL activists emphasise in their talking they want to free contemporary Islam from its juridical character. The (in)famous halal-haram concept, which describes very precisely what is allowed (halal) and what is forbidden (haram), is according to JIL members, creating an institutionalised form of religion where religiosity is almost absent, the divine message is not properly understood when one just obeys text without a deeper thinking “behind” the text. For example, they would ask themselves what religiosity, what Islam, is there to be found in eating food with three fingers or entering the bathroom with your left foot (which is part of the prophet’s tradition). Thus, they perceive the Quran and sunna as a source of inspiration, not as a law book.

The denunciation of a literal understanding of the Islamic holy texts is also an attempt to free Islam, or better Muslims, from its seventh century Arabic influence, which is undoubtedly intertwined with its holy texts and practices. Some then denounce, e.g., the headscarf as not necessarily Islamic.<sup>18</sup> Liberal Indonesian Muslims, being at the periphery of the Islamic world, are very reluctant to accept, what they call, an arabisation of Islam. The fact that they are at the periphery, although that is a bit cynical since Indonesia is still the world’s largest Muslim country, and that the first language is not Arabic gives Indonesian Muslims the required tools to think more openly and frank about their religion. Perhaps, Indonesia’s position (the liberal part) is similar to the situation of Islamic Andalusia in the twelfth and thirteenth century, where at the borders of the Islamic world rationality and philosophy blossomed.

Again related to the opening of the gates of *ijtihad*, is JIL’s third interpretation of Islam, i.e. to accept (religious) truth as being relative, open and plural. Since liberal Muslims believe every Muslim interpret his religion in a certain manner, from radicals to liberals, they insist that these interpretations do not contain the real truth, but are a form of constructed, subjective truth relevant for the one who made this interpretation. Clearly, the acceptance of diversity here becomes an intrinsic part of JIL ideology. In other words, individuality leads to a wide spectrum of thoughts, of which none is truer than another. It is an effort to get rid of the political ideology and aspiration of many radical Muslim intellectuals. This third point in JIL’s manifesto is an indirect answer to the slogan “Islam is the solution”, since if Islam becomes a personal experience it can never be a one-size-fits-all way out of problems. Also it points out that it is not only Islam

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<sup>16</sup> Abshar-Abdalla, U. 2003. *Avoiding Bibliolatry. The Importance of Revitalizing the Understanding of Islam*. Speech at Paramadina University, 08-02-2003

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> See for example: Abshar-Abdalla, U. “Menyegarkan Kembali Pemahaman Islam”. *Kompas*, 18-11-2002. English translation available on JIL’s website, entitled “Freshening Up Our Understanding of Islam”.

from which truth could arise, in the words of Ulil: “The Muslims have to understand that Islam as interpreted by a certain group is not absolutely true, so there must be a readiness to accept truth from all sources, including those outside Islam. Let each group value the right of others to interpret Islam in their own way; what has to be combatted is every effort to absolutize a religious viewpoint.”<sup>19</sup>

Islam as such is subject to change and thus evolves in time and place, liberal Muslims regard it as impossible to create a contemporary understanding of Islam that resembles the religion as it was practiced during the prophet’s life and just after his death. While Islamists insist upon creating an environment in which Islam is put back in its original setting, liberals discard this as a utopia. This battle between absolutism and relativism is being fought at many university campuses in Indonesia. JIL’s most frequent (intellectual) opponent is the international organisation Hizb’ut Tahrir, which actually believes in the establishment of an Islamic caliphate from Morocco to Indonesia. So whereas an interview with one of Hizb’ut Tahrir chairmen, Ustadz Muhammad Rahmat Kurnia, led to the saying “Islam is one”, one of JIL’s public service announcements (see next chapter) was called colourful Islam, in order to show Islam’s plural nature.

JIL’s fourth and fifth point in explaining liberal Islam are the belief in freedom of religion and a protection of the oppressed minorities. Since religious truth is relative, none should declare his thoughts superior to those of another. Denouncing someone as heretical is a liberal’s worst nightmare. It was after the attack initiated by the Front Pembela Islam (the Islamic defenders front, FPI) on an Ahmadiyyah complex in Bogor on July the eighth, this last point became particularly clear. The liberal community of Utan Kayu was shocked and felt Islam as a whole was damaged. Immediately after the attacks several liberal (not all in name of course) NGO’s and intellectuals came together, condemned the attacks and asked the Indonesian government to guarantee the safety of the Ahmadiyyah community in Indonesia. This attack, according to Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, directly attacked the freedom of religion, a right that is, according to him and the constitution, granted for everyone.

The sixth and last point of JIL’s manifesto is “the separation of world and heavenly authorities, religious and political authorities”. This sentence is a continuation of the thoughts of Nurcholis Madjid, a famous Indonesian Muslim intellectual (his thoughts will be discussed in greater detail in the next section), who in the seventies became well-known for his phrase: “Islam: Yes! Islamic Parties: No!”. Liberals believe religion as an ideology should not interfere with the political arena. This sixth statement should again be seen in light of religious individuality and relativity, since it is not done for liberals to impose religious thought to another, which would be a direct consequence of politicising Islam. Religion should thus become part of the non-political, to some extent private, domain.

### **2.2.2 The Neo-Modernist Roots of JIL**

In the last two subsections the ideas of the most outspoken liberal Muslim organisation in Indonesia and its global background have been discussed. Being the largest Muslim country in the world, it is not surprising many parts of the discourse on modernity and Islam took place in the Archipelago, hence the contemporary Indonesian discourse on liberal Islam dates back to the work of earlier Indonesian ulema and intellectuals. The

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

birth of the Muhammadiyah in 1912 was probably the first institutionalised effort to harmonise Islam and modernity in Indonesia. For many liberal Muslims with a modernist background the liberal tradition thus already started with the founder of the modernist organisation, Ahmad Dahlan (ironically this same modernist tradition is now also able to breed more conservative intellectuals). Nahdlatul Ulama, founded in 1926 in reaction to Muhammadiyah, was originally a very inward looking, traditionalist, and rural organisation. However, especially under the leadership of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) in the eighties it has become a major source for liberal thinkers and ideology. Other Muslims, coming from a more secular tradition point out that Indonesia's first president, Soekarno, already practiced many of the liberal ideology, such as the separation of religion and politics (i.e. via the exclusion of the Jakarta Charter). Not unlikely, there exists a source of inspiration for every background. In this section, however, just four Muslim scholars will be briefly discussed, i.e. Nurcholis Madjid (1939-2005), Abdurrahman Wahid (born in 1940), Djohan Effendi (born in 1939) and Ahmad Wahib (1942-1973), who are, after an article of Greg Barton (who on his turn based his terminology on the Pakistan scholar Fazlur Rahman), mostly referred to as neo-modernists. A brief discussion of these scholars will be able to show JIL's ideas did not come out of a vacuum, but were for a great deal prepared by older intellectuals.

The influence of these neo-modernists should not be underestimated; they sometimes literally serve as intellectual Godfathers in the discourse. Parallel to the contemporary young liberal Muslim intellectuals, they were among the first Indonesian Muslims, who combined a profound Islamic knowledge with modern scientific tools. All of these four neo-modernists spent some time abroad. Young intellectuals have an enormous respect for these scholars and look up to them. After the issuing of MUI fatwas it was on Wahid's birthday (the fourth of August, see section 3.1) the liberals gathered, Djohan Effendi, who is still very active in the discourse, fostered, together with another senior intellectual, Dawam Rahardjo, the formation of an alliance against the MUI camp (chapter 3). The death of Nurcholis Madjid in Pondok Indah hospital on August the 29<sup>th</sup> 2005, was attended by thousands of people. JIL's core agreed Nurcholis was the intellectual founding father of the present-day discourse on liberal Islam.

The influence of Nurcholis', or Cak Nur, ideas can be seen quite directly when the thoughts he expressed in his most famous article called "The Necessity of Renewal on Islamic Thought and the Problem of Ummah Integration"<sup>20</sup>, published on January the third 1970, are compared to the just discussed JIL's manifesto. His renewal of thought was centred around three themes: secularisation, intellectual freedom and an open mind.<sup>21</sup> Secularisation means that the earthly should be strictly separated from the transcendental. Cak Nur then uses a strict interpretation of monotheism to justify this secularisation process. He regards the sacralisation of something other than God as a form of polytheism (mushrik). It is precisely this thought that enables liberal Muslims nowadays to study the most holy (notice that the word holy here is in fact a sacralisation, some JIL activists refuse to regard the Quran itself as something holy) Islamic text, i.e. the Quran, as a text or as a discourse. To be able to view the Quran as a text, Muslims should stop thinking of it as a holy object and treat it as message. Cak Nur's article thus provides a theological argument to perform ijtihad, which is the very first point in JIL's manifesto.

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<sup>20</sup> Barton, G. 1995. "Neo-Modernism: A Vital Synthesis of Traditionalist and Modernist Islamic Thought in Indonesia" in: *Studia Islamika*. Vol. 2, No. 3 pp. 1-51.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

The coming of Nasr Hamid Aboe Zaid in 2004 to Utan Kayu stressed the importance of desacralisation in the liberal discourse. In a workshop. Nasr Hamid Aboe Zaid conducted in Jakarta. he argued the Quran itself should be seen as a discourse, namely as a discourse between the transcendental, Muhammad and Muhammad's followers, rather than as a holy text in a nice lining. Here Nasr Zaid extended the tools Nurcholis had already presented to Indonesia in 1970. The general appreciation for Nasr Zaid in the liberal discourse shows this feeling of desacralisation has for a large part become common ground in the discourse.

Nurcholis' second and third points in his presentation, intellectual freedom and an open mind, are reflected in JIL's manifesto in the first, third, fourth and fifth point. Dogmatism in thinking will lead to a form of Islam which is stagnant and unable to answer to contemporary questions. Freedom of thought also opens the gates of using other methods than the traditional Islamic ones (such as the famous yellow books, the kitab kuning) to come to a liberal form of Islam. It is almost seen as a sin not to use the intellectual capabilities God has given humanity, in order to understand this world and separate the divine from the mundane (Cak Nur uses a saying of the prophet: "Think of the universe and do not think of God the creator")<sup>22</sup>.

Apart from his concrete thoughts, Nurcholis' academic career shows the affinity the neo-modernist/liberal discourse has with the Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman. Nurcholis took his PhD at the University of Chicago under supervision of Rahman and partly via him, partly via Shafii Maarif (also a Rahman PhD candidate), Muhammadiyah's former chairman, Rahman thoughts on Islam entered Indonesia.<sup>23</sup> JIL's present day coordinator, Hamid Bashyaib, was greatly influenced and inspired by his thoughts, especially by his genuine methodology for categorising the hadith.

Next to Cak Nur, former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) plays a very significant role in the forming of the present discourse. This will become even clearer when the current players in the discourse will be discussed in the next chapter. Gus Dur, coming from a very traditionalist background, his grandfather was one of the founders of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), is, especially for people coming from NU, an example on how to be a moderate, enlightened Muslim in a modern world. His thoughts on pluralism and democracy are still used by liberals nowadays, his birthday in 2005 was, in reaction to the MUI fatwa, a celebration of different religious traditions. His pluralistic attitude was expressed in the multi-religious prayer. According to Gus Dur himself though, the present day liberals are more a legacy of Cak Nur rather than of him. For a large part this is a consequence of style, the present day discourse tends to be very technical and intellectual, while Gus Dur's texts are, according to most liberals, more accessible. To some extent it also arises out of the way in which JIL's core values tradition. Gus Dur, a pesantren man (Islamic boarding school, mostly associated with NU), seeks the power in tradition while most JIL members prefer to use a more scientific analysis on the Quranic texts and hadith. Where JIL seems to belong to Kurzman's interpretative sharia category, Gus Dur seems to belong to the liberal sharia tradition.

The appreciation, one could easily say love, for the work of the neo-modernists in the liberal discourse is perfectly illustrated by the fact a prize for a young university

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> The influence of Fazlur Rahman on the Indonesian neo-modernist and liberal discourse has actually been worked out in a book: A'la, A. 2003. *Dari Neomodernisme ke Islam Liberal; Jejak Fazlur Rahman dalam Wacana Islam di Indonesia*. Paramadina Press: Jakarta.

student, who is able to reflect on his religious life, is named after Ahmad Wahib.<sup>24</sup> This award, created by the Freedom Institute, Jaringan Islam Liberal, and the student organisation FORMACI (see chapter 3), thus remembers and honours Ahmad Wahib, who is most known for his very honestly written diary. In his diary he writes about the problems he faces with his religion. It is this diary that inspired many young intellectuals, like Ulil, Nong, Luthfi and Novri. In his diary he shows his doubts and difficulties with his religion, sometimes he even questions whether he wants to be part of Islam at all. This struggle with one's own religion is common within the liberal Islam intellectuals and was also described by Ulil Abshar-Abdalla and Hamid Bashyaib. Wahib's diary is full with arguments for rationalising Islamic thought and, in agreement with the other neo-modernists, freedom of thought is seen as a prerequisite for a true understanding of religion.

The fourth and last neo-modernist that will be discussed, Djohan Effendi, is still very active within the liberal Islamic discourse. Nowadays, he runs the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace (ICRP). Djohan Effendi, who refers to himself as a freethinker and does not want to be put in a specific box (although he likes to think of himself as a humanist Muslim), was inspired by different Islamic schools of thought, he sees himself as an intellectual "traveller". In private conversations with Djohan, he stressed he wants to think for himself and then seeks inspiration from everywhere, he believes in a very personal relationship with God, for which only he himself is responsible (the resemblance with the quoted part of Ulil's article in *Kompas* is evident). Logically, he is inspired by a wide variety of groups, of which the Ahmadiyyah Lahore sect is just one. During his study time in Yogyakarta they provided him with a very rational approach to religion. Logically, Djohan was amongst the first seniors to denounce the attacks on the other Ahmadiyyah sect (the Qadiyah group)<sup>25</sup> and to actively participate in the forming of a pluralist alliance to oppose the MUI fatwas.

It was during the formation conference of this alliance, the community for a civil society, in Garut in West-Java on the 21<sup>st</sup> till the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, the role of the neo-modernists was emphasized. Both Dawam Rahardjo and Djohan were present and were for a great deal structuring the meeting. Especially Dawam talked long and was eager to present his opinion on the MUI fatwas to the younger public. *Garut* showed the incredibly important position the neo-modernists still have in the contemporary discourse on Islam and Indonesia.

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<sup>24</sup> This year the Ahmad Wahib award, a prize of approximately 3000 dollars, was awarded on June the 27<sup>th</sup> 2005 to a woman, Retna Hanani, who reviewed her PKS (an Islamic political party) involvement critically.

<sup>25</sup> The major difference between the Qadiyah and Lahore group stems from how they perceive the founder of the Ahmadiyyah, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1839-1908). Whereas the Qadiyah sect sees Ahmad as a true prophet, the Lahore group does only recognize him as a religious reformer.

### 3 The Contours of the Indonesian Liberal Islamic Discourse

An outline of the contents of liberal Islam and its long history, in Indonesia as well as the whole Islamic world, has been presented in the previous chapter. This chapter will focus its attention on the form of the discourse itself. Since the discourse is much broader than Jaringan Islam Liberal other players will be put forward and the differences amongst the different persons and organisations will be shown. The chapter will start with an overview of some of the major events that took place in the discourse in the summer of 2005 (section 3.1), then a discussion of those involved in the discourse will be provided (section 3.2).

#### *3.1 Events Influencing the Discourse*

During the three-month field study, two major events that were actually taking place outside the discourse became the main topics and concerns in the liberal discourse itself. Both events, i.e. the attacks on Ahmadiyah that took place in mid-July and the issuing of the MUI fatwas two weeks later on July the 28<sup>th</sup>, were very critically received by the liberal community, it upset all intellectuals involved.

A Bogor compound in use by the Indonesian Ahmadiyah Congregation was first threatened by the Islamic Defenders Front, FPI, on July eighth before it was physically attacked by ten thousand people on July the fifteenth, who referred to themselves as the Indonesian Muslim Solidarity Group. Although the attack resulted primarily in material damage, the fear in the pro-pluralism camp rose. The attacks in July were not the first to occur on the Ahmadiyah community in Indonesia, the scale and the severity, however, were not seen before. Even after the major attacks on July 15, fanatics returned to the complex on July 22 to make sure no Ahmadi returned. Immediately liberals came in action to denounce the attacks, a press conference was organised in the Muhammadiyah headquarters on Saturday the sixteenth, where several prominent liberals responded to the attack. The government was asked to guarantee the safety of all religious groups in Indonesia, in line with the Indonesian constitution and the pluralistic nature of the country. Vice-President Kalla responded differences should not be resolved with violence, he also stressed though Ahmadiyah is a deviant sect in Islam. The situation within JIL became even worse when rumours were spread the leader of FPI was planning to attack JIL's office; indeed, JIL would be next.

Meanwhile, FPI justified the use of violence with a fatwa from the Indonesian Ulema Council<sup>26</sup> (MUI), dating back from 1980, in which Ahmadiyah was declared heretical. MUI confirmed this fatwa was still valid, but that it should not lead to violence. The reconfirmation of the MUI fatwa took place during the second major event in the summer months on Thursday the 28<sup>th</sup> of July at the four day national MUI conference at the Sari Pan Pacific Hotel in Jakarta. The council issued eleven fatwas, of which the tenth explicitly asked the government to ban Ahmadiyah legally. Even more uproar than this tenth fatwa was caused by the seventh fatwa, in which it was stated that Islamic thoughts that are influenced by liberalism, secularism and pluralism are forbidden. In commenting

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<sup>26</sup> MUI was established in 1975, initiated by the Soeharto regime, in the liberal camp it is therefore for a large part still seen as a political instrument; the popularity amongst liberal intellectuals is thus fairly low.

on the fatwa MUI emphasized a contextual rather than a literal understanding of the Islamic holy texts was to be seen as deviant.

Coincidentally, most JIL intellectuals gathered that day in Utan Kayu's *kedai*. Ulil, Hamid and Djohan Effendi all happened to be there that day, they felt disappointed in Indonesia, especially the inclusion of pluralism in the edict came as a total surprise. It felt as if the heart of the Indonesian nation was hit by an Arabic sword from the seventh century. How could Islamic juridical scholars denounce the diversity of the Indonesian nation? Ulil, referring to Nurcholis famous phrase, summarised their feelings by saying: "Islam: Yes! MUI: No!". On the other end of the Islamic spectrum the fatwas were, of course, received as some form of victory. Now, FPI could base an attack on JIL on the just issued fatwa (although violence is not the official policy of MUI, FPI would now perceive their attacks as a legitimate act for a Muslim).

Soon after the issuing of the fatwas, FPI indeed turned their attention to the office of Jaringan Islam Liberal in Utan Kayu, the first real threat occurred on Friday the fifth of August. Just the day after all opponents of MUI had gathered to celebrate Gur Dur's sixty-fifth birthday. Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists prayed together in an interfaith prayer. The congregation was thus a direct resemblance of Indonesian diversity and plurality, this was freedom and respect for religion in its purest way. On Friday, the serenity of prayer made place for the spirit of resistance. In the *kedai* prominent Utan Kayu figures were giving speeches and stressing they would never let JIL down. According to JIL's activists FPI was planning to march on Utan Kayu that afternoon, protected by police forces and NU's militia nothing happened eventually. For a moment, most people seem to be relieved.

It was during a colourful parade, commemorating Indonesia's independence day (17-08-1945), where children were proudly pretending to be a mini Soekarno and mini Hatta and dance and music were creating a vibrant, joyful atmosphere, that a rather unobtrusive sign predicted the coming of a new threat to JIL. Amongst the harmless children, a miniature army tank was firing fake bullets right in front of Komunitas Utan Kayu. On the tank one could read on a white plate: "Singkirkan JIL!!... Komunitas Islam Utan Kayu Utara" (get JIL out of the Islamic community of North Utan Kayu). A month later this threat became more prominent when several people from a nearby mosque demanded JIL to leave Utan Kayu before the start of Ramadan (early October), FPI and its followers had succeeded in penetrating JIL's local environment.

It was at the same day of the parade, Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup> of August, several Islamic activists from different organisations left for the hot spring resort Garut, in West Java. In three days these mainly young intellectuals, guided by seniors Djohan Effendi and Dawam Rahardjo, decided to establish a new NGO that would protect civil society and its values. Some of the involved organisations will be discussed in the coming section.

### ***3.2 Organisational and Human Actors in the Discourse***

In chapter 2 the ideas of liberal Islam and its most outspoken exponent in Indonesia, JIL, has been discussed. It is now time to further examine the total discourse in Indonesia. This section will concentrate on the activities and thoughts of different organisations and persons. JIL's position in the discourse will then become clearer. Therefore, the section will start with activities that are conducted by JIL (section 3.2.1) and other organisations (3.2.2), before the differences in thought will be highlighted in the next section..

### 3.2.1 JIL's Activities and Activists

In order to disseminate and discuss the ideas described in section 2.2.1 JIL uses a variety of methods and media. At the moment JIL is involved in seven programs. Six of those programs are intended for a broad, public outreach, i.e. the syndication of Islamic writers, which gets form in JIL's publishing in the Jawa Pos every week; the weekly talk show on Radio 68H (this radio station is located in Komunitas Utan Kayu as well), during the talk show socio-religious issues are discussed, most often those that happen to be in the news; the publishing of books and booklets, those are sometimes translations from Arabic, sometimes compilations of articles and interviews JIL activists conducted; JIL's website is another major program, here a database of many JIL articles, interviews and book reviews can be found online, either in Indonesian or in English ([www.islamlib.com](http://www.islamlib.com)); during the last elections JIL also issued Public Service Announcements (PSA) in which a tolerant, pluralistic version of Islam was promoted on national television. One of those announcements, The Colourful Islam, has been censored by the television company, after some complaints from conservative groups. With these six activities JIL has tried to apply a shock therapy to the Indonesian Islamic discourse. Besides these organised activities, JIL activists frequently publish articles in Indonesian news papers. One of the most controversial articles was written by Ulil in *Kompas* in November 2002 ("Freshening Up Our Understanding of Islam"), in which Ulil stresses the importance of non-dogmatic, relative interpretations of Islam and urges the Muslim community to look together to seek an Islam "that is fresher, more enlightened, more able to be of benefit to mankind".<sup>27</sup>

Next to these activities that put JIL in the media spotlights, the organisation also organises discussions, both in Utan Kayu as well as at university campuses. The Utan Kayu discussions tend to be of a firmly high intellectual level, hence it attracts foremost Jakarta intellectuals. The discussions on the campuses are used to show many young Muslims that Islam has more than just one face. JIL activists observe many students tend to radicalise at campus, especially those in secular universities (UI, ITB, IPB etc.). At these campuses mostly students from a non-santri background get influenced by the simple, easy to understand religion as presented by organisations like Hizb'ut Tahrir and PKS (the justice party). Most of those students are studying exact sciences and extend their "mathematical" thinking to religion. Islam then becomes a rigid structure, in which Muslims are easily distinguished by non-Muslims by strict rules, which they see as the criteria to determine whether someone is a pious Muslim or not. It should be noted that these born again Muslims are also attracted towards radicalisation, because of the strong structure within these groups. It thus brings them security in their social life, i.e. via friendships bonds (in a way similar to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or fraternities in the West), as well as their psychological life, i.e. via religious rebirth. These young men and women, facing modernity in its most technologically advanced form during their engineering and science courses, are thus, ironically, secularising their own mind by limiting the use of analytical tools to their academic discipline, thereby protecting their religion from a thorough critical, academic analysis.

Compared to these observing remarks on the radicalisation process on campuses, the background of most liberals shows a sharp contrast. A majority of the persons involved in the liberal discourse were religiously educated at one of Indonesian's pesantren, religious boarding schools. The religious knowledge from the pesantren

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<sup>27</sup> Abshar-Abdalla, U. 2002. op. cit.

enables students to realise Islamic knowledge is complex and has historically led to very different interpretations. In most pesantren students learn to value a wide spectrum of traditions within Islam. After they graduated from pesantren, most liberals have continued their studies at an Islamic centre for higher education in an urban environment, where they deepened their knowledge on either Islamic philosophy or sharia. All persons currently involved in JIL, except for Hamid Bashyaib who studied law (albeit at UII, Yogya, an Islamic university), studied at a faculty of Islamic sciences.

Of course, an Islamic education does not automatically result in a moderate, open-minded and tolerant religion. Similar to the radicalisation process, the social environment, in which this education is being fulfilled, plays a key role in the liberalisation of minds. Especially, the State Islamic Universities (UIN) in Ciputat (a Jakarta outskirt) and Yogya provide the social infrastructure for developing liberal thoughts and ideologies, which was in fact envisioned by Gus Dur in the early nineteen eighties. It is thus not surprising around half of JIL's core in fact graduated from UIN in Ciputat (i.e. Saiful Mujani, Burhanuddin, Nong, Moqsith, Anick and in the future probably Umdah el-Baroroh), and that some fundamentalist hardliners think of the Ciputat campus as the source of all evil. In Ciputat the most outspoken liberal students organised themselves in FORum MAhasiswa CIputat, FORMACI. Nong, Saiful and Burhan were all engaged in FORMACI during their student time. It serves as housing and a discussion platform, where students stimulate each other to think frankly and openly about their religion. It is thus at these campuses a fruitful synthesis between a traditional Islamic background and an urban modern environment takes place. A fascination for modern products and thoughts leads to a critical examination of their religious thoughts with scientific methods, without resulting in a loss of their deep-rooted religiosity.

### **3.2.2 Other Liberal NGO's and Activists**

As mentioned before the liberal movement in Indonesia is not constrained to JIL, many others, most of the time sharing the same pesantren background, organised themselves in non-governmental organisations; for an outsider the numbers of NGO's are dazzling, this section will thus have to leave many of them out. Within the two largest Muslims organisations, NU and Muhammadiyah, several liberal organisations have been established. One of the most similar to JIL came into existence in the latter in October 2003, under the name of Jaringan Intellectual Muda Muhammadiyah or JIMM (the young intellectuals within Muhammadiyah). These young persons (of whom Fuad Fanani and Zuly Qodir are the most well-known) organised themselves within Muhammadiyah, because of their general disappointment in the theological progress within this originally modernist movement, they felt Muhammadiyah was becoming very static, becoming only occupied with maintaining its already existing material infrastructure. This NGO exists of several hundred university students spread over Java, who try to seek a progressive form of Islam within the Muhammadiyah framework; they claim to recapture the real spirit of Muhammadiyah's founder Ahmad Dahlan. JIMM has, despite its aim not to clash with the majority of Muhammadiyah members, a difficult relation with its mother organisation since its birth, because conservative forces regard it as a serious threat. The persons behind JIMM are aware of the fact they in a way have to conform themselves to Muhammadiyah's tradition. Their fight is to some extent a generation battle between young and old. JIMM's main goal is thus a reformation, rather than a revolution, within

Muhammadiyah itself, mainly via workshops with prominent progressive modernist seniors, discussions and books.

NU has led to several organisations that seek a plural explanation of Islam and that are trying to strengthen civil society, among others: The Wahid Institute, P3M and Lakpesdam. In general, most liberals tend to originate from a traditionalist background, indicating that the modernist intellectual heritage has ironically led to dogmatism rather than religious intellectuality (very similar with Calvinism in the Netherlands). The Wahid Institute was launched in September 2004, it “seeks to expand the vision and intellectual principles of H.E. Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur for the development of moderate Islamic thought to promote democratic reform, religious pluralism, multiculturalism and tolerance amongst Muslims both in Indonesia and around the world.”<sup>28</sup> Gus Dur’s daughter, Yenny Wahid, and several other young activists from NU felt the need to make sure Gus Dur’s thoughts would still flourish, even after he will be gone. The initiative tries to form an organisation that can have the same authority and credibility as Gus Dur has on liberal Islam. Some critics believe the institute was established merely as a political project of Yenny. Nevertheless or perhaps because of that, the organisation develops at a very high pace; within one year an excellent website, several workshops and a development project in Lombok has been set up. Yenny emphasized the institute tries to bridge the gap between intellectual think tanks and grass root levels, it is primarily concerned about the strengthening of civil society by empowering local populations via the pesantren system. Social and natural capital of the pesantren is utilised to develop small, poor, rural communities, the first project started with ginger farming in Lombok. The obvious connection with Gus Dur enables the institute to use his pesantren network to extend these efforts. However, the fact that the institute seeks a bridge between intellectuals and grass roots also limits it in challenging the Islamic discourse, since the persons involved within the institute cannot be too controversial, otherwise they would risk losing their social capital.

Another organisation, which is based on and in the Islamic boarding schools, is P3M (Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat, the Indonesian Society for Pesantren and Community Development), it dates back to May 18, 1983. Under the banner of emancipatory Islam, P3M tries to develop local communities and pesantren. It is also concerned however with the development of Islamic thought as is illustrated by the launching of the magazine “Progresif” this summer, in which progressive Muslim thoughts are discussed. The coordinator of this emancipatory Islam project, Zuhairi Misrawi, studied together with Novriantoni from JIL in Egypt, both organisations maintain close links. When needed P3M provides NU social security for JIL’s organisation.

Other persons and organisations from NU use different name tags to promote a tolerant form of Islam. Lakpesdam uses indigenous Islam, while Ahmad Baso, a NU thinker and writer, prefers to use post-colonial Islam. In the next sections their reasons for not using the word liberal will be shown.

Two institutions that require some more attention are LKiS and ICIP. Situated in Yogyakarta, LKiS is one of the older progressive NGO’s, it was founded in the early 1990’s out of student discussion circles. They are promoting a tolerant and transformative Islam. Again they use different terminology than JIL to stimulate an inclusive religion. Transformative Islam should be read as Islam that is used to foster social justice in society;

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<sup>28</sup> [www.wahidinstitute.org](http://www.wahidinstitute.org), accessed on 15-10-2005

hence intellectual Islam is transferred to real life. Similar to the activists of JIL, LKiS activists try to release Islam from any dogmatic thinking, in fact many books that inspired JIL activists were translated by LKiS. Next to the translation of books, the organisation publishes a weekly bulletin, encourages interfaith dialogues and organises seminars and discussions. Furthermore, they try to organise people at grass root level in Central and East Java in order to increase their social capital. LKiS also wants to re-strengthen the bond between pesantren and the local community.

ICIP, on the other hand, is merely an intellectual organisation, led by Shafii Anwar, which tries to create a network of progressive Muslim thinkers, both in Indonesia as well as in the world. Therefore they translate the work of Indonesian scholars into English and Arabic, while at the same time they invite other Muslim and non-Muslim scholars to Indonesia (in the summer of 2005, for example, Asma Barlas and Ebraheem Moosa, who conducted several lectures and workshops in Jakarta and Yogya). One could say ICIP serves as a motor at the background of the discourse, not having and wanting the same media exposure as JIL, and thus provides the discourse with some of the fresh insights that were mentioned in the introduction of chapter 2. ICIP further trains journalists to create a more peaceful journalist discourse.

### ***3.3 Critique and Differences within the Discourse***

The previous section described several organisations that are currently working in the field of liberal Islam. Since there are so many NGO's operating in nearly the same field, there is sometimes a difficulty in defining one's own niche. Critique on each other is therefore used to distinguish oneself from the other, in this section some of those critiques will be presented. Sometimes it even felt as if these critiques were distracting the discourse from its major concerns as described in chapter 2, the critique then resulted in quarrelling on definitions and nomenclature.

One of the major disagreements in the discourse originates from the different perspectives on the involvement in socio-economical policies and activities. By almost all organisations and intellectuals, not directly involved with JIL, JIL is perceived as a pro capitalist, elitist organisation. JIL is accused of extending liberal theological ideology to the economical and political field. Being a liberal is then seen as being an American with just a thin Muslim covering.<sup>29</sup> An advertisement in *Kompas* on February 26, 2005<sup>30</sup> and the links with JIL and the Freedom Institute increased the amount of suspicion on JIL. The advertisement, a full colour page, was bought by this Freedom Institute to convince the Indonesian public that the proposed ending of the fuel subsidies by the government was a good idea. The article, which argued the subsidies are foremost benefiting the rich and are thus actually regressive, was perceived as an advocacy for neo-liberal policies; since most Indonesians are convinced the subsidies are in fact benefiting the poor. Thirty-six persons, of whom many prominent Utan Kayu figures (Goenawan Mohamed, Ayu Utami) signed the petition, of whom five are directly linked to JIL: Hamid Basyaib, Luthfi

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<sup>29</sup> In fact JIL has been accused many times for being an exponent of an American-Zionist conspiracy, see, e.g.: Van Bruinessen, M. "Post-Suharto Muslim engagements with civil society and democracy", paper presented at the Third International Conference and Workshop "Indonesia in Transition", organised by the KNAW and Labsosio, Universitas Indonesia, August 24-28, 2003. Universitas Indonesia, Depok.

<sup>30</sup> Freedom Institute, "Mengapa Kami Mendukung Pengurangan Subsidi BBM?", in: *Kompas*, 26-02-2005

Assyuakanie, Nong Darol Mahmada, Saiful Mujani and Ulil Abshar-Abdalla. Although all five signed the article on their own behalf, not in the name of JIL, others immediately linked the advertisement with liberal Islam. At the same time, these JIL intellectuals (except Luthfi) are involved in daily activities within the Freedom Institute as well. This institute, which refers to itself as the “center for democracy, nationalism, and market-economy studies”, was co-founded by the controversial, corrupt Indonesian businessman and current minister of economical affairs Aburizal Bakrie. Again, the involvement of JIL members with this institute seems to challenge JIL’s position as solely a religious organisation.

Ulil however, who was one of the founders of the Freedom Institute, sees the institute primarily as an intellectual heaven, he is particularly proud of the well-equipped library. The library, decorated with posters portraying famous Western persons (John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Einstein), located at the institute’s office at Jalan Irian in Menteng, indeed hosts an exceptional collection of religious, philosophical and socio-economical books and journals. During a conversation in Utan Kayu, Ulil revealed he believed the advertisement was misunderstood by the more left intellectuals. He sincerely thinks the subsidies are contributing to injustice in Indonesia and should thus be abandoned. He also expressed it is not JIL’s task to fight poverty directly in Indonesia, there should be a division of tasks among the NGO’s. A relative small NGO, which JIL is (especially in terms of human capital), cannot do everything, reformation of religious thought is tough enough. It would be hypocrite and unfair to address the problem of poverty without doing anything concretely to eradicate it, those would just constitute hollow phrases (Ulil said he used to say such things in his student time, he felt embarrassed to mention it). Furthermore, it is incorrect to stigmatise JIL as a neo-liberal organisation, since within the organisation itself the advertisement led to heated discussions (Anick, a member of JIL’s core., sees himself as a socialist rather than a neo-liberalist). Still, most NGO’s, LKiS, The Wahid Institute, P3M and senior intellectuals, Gus Dur, Dawam Rahardjo believe a progressive form of Islam should also concern itself with the problems of the unprivileged in society. In fact Gus Dur and Dawam are influenced by Christian liberation theology that came into existence in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin-America and the Philippines during the nineteen sixties and seventies.

Related to the capitalist connotation of JIL, is the use of the word liberal in the discourse. The founders of JIL decided to use the word, inspired by Kurzman, because of its clear suggestion of liberation and the fact the word is able to attract the attention (it sounds “sexy” so to say). The opponents of the use of the word can be categorised in two groups: those who prefer the use of a different term to describe an Islam based on reason and those who prefer not to use an adjective at all. The latter could mostly be found in senior intellectual circles. Gus Dur, for example, believes such an adjective only limits oneself in thinking freely, because once you are tagged it becomes difficult to think out of your box. Moreover, it becomes easier to become stigmatised. Gus Dur’s disagreement with the labelling of thought is related to the fact the neo-modernists tended to express themselves as individuals rather than as organisations. Amin Abdullah, the rector of UIN Yogya, even questioned whether it was necessary to organise liberal thinkers in NGO’s at all.

Afraid for being labelled as a liberal, most other intellectuals choose to label themselves with another term. Terms as progressive, humanist, indigenous, post-colonial, transformative, post-traditionalist, emancipatory and Indonesian Islam are all used to prevent being linked to the West (ironically, almost all organisations that use different

terminology depend, just like JIL, on American money coming from The Asia Foundation, USAID or the Ford Foundation). Indonesian liberal intellectuals are, besides using the word liberal, hesitant to copy terminology from the West blindly, because the perception of being part of the West could destroy the message. Therefore, Western concepts are often translated into the Arabic language, which surely has more Islamic authority, before they are used in an Indonesian concept. Paradoxically, arabisation of liberal thought is thus needed, in order to free contemporary Islamic thought in Indonesia from arabising. The use of Western terminology, in fact, differs from person to person involved in the discourse. According to Moqsith, a JIL editor, this can be perfectly seen in JIL itself: He himself primarily uses Islamic terminology, Ulil and Novriantoni use both Western and Islamic terms, having a strong background in pesantren life, while Hamid Basyaib (having a law background) mainly uses Western vocabulary.

On a more theological level there appear some differences in the discourse as well. The majority of JIL's core seems convinced Islamic tradition itself should be questioned, thus belonging to Kurzman interpretive sharia category. A clear exception is Moqsith, an expert in Islamic classical literature (he is famous within JIL for knowing many parts of Islamic literature by heart), who tries to seek Islamic liberation within the rich NU heritage; very similar to the NU intellectuals, such as Ahmad Baso, who refer to themselves as post-traditionalists (not surprisingly Moqsith is also working in The Wahid Institute). Moqsith believes liberal Islam should not break with its Islamic past, but rather should use tradition, in order to question contemporary forms of Islam. The other JIL intellectuals, however, are, although mostly coming from a traditionalist background, more critical on the status of Quran and Hadith itself. Additionally, they tend to be less apologetic, they are not afraid to acknowledge some parts of Islam do not belong in a modern world; reformation then comes from questioning tradition, instead of using tradition. Post-traditionalists on the other hand are, to use a very populist term, "shopping" within Islamic tradition, in order to pick out those traditions that suits their humanist values best, hence they believe in the liberation aspect of tradition itself. In fact they can be said to be abrogative, conserve what is good in religion, but leave out what is unwanted. Post-traditionalist Islam is thus closer to the liberal and silent sharia category.

## 4. The Dutch Discourse

The discussion of the Indonesian liberal Islamic discourse, in the previous two chapters, showed the basic concepts of liberal Islam, its diversity, the major players and their backgrounds and some of the problems with which the discourse has to deal. In this chapter, the attention will be shifted to the Netherlands and the debates that took place there since the eleventh of September 2001 (chapter 4.1). The perception of Islam of those who criticised Islam from an “Enlightened” perspective will then be compared to the Indonesian liberal discourse directly (chapter 4.2).

### *4.1 The Contents of the Discourse*

The Dutch discourse, just as the Indonesian, comprises an enormous amount of newspaper articles, intellectuals and organisations. A very detailed description of those contributions goes beyond the scope of this text. This study will therefore restrict itself to a discussion of the views of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, in section 4.1.1, since she evidently plays a crucial role in the discourse, and to a very basic outline of others involved in the discourse, in section 4.1.2.

#### **4.1.1 The Role of Ayaan Hirsi Ali**

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, born in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1967, came to the Netherlands in 1992 after she refused to participate in an arranged marriage with her cousin living in Canada. In the Netherlands she studied political science at Leiden University, where she came in contact with the right-conservative intellectuals Paul Cliteur, a professor at Leiden, and Herman Philipse, a professor of philosophy at Utrecht University. As already described in the introductory chapter, it was Ayaan Hirsi Ali who was one of the first to stress Islam needed Enlightenment. Although she had had some predecessors, such as the Dutch Iranian columnist Afshin Ellian and the Dutch novelist Leon de Winter, she was able to attract an enormous amount of media exposure. Since she was at the time of her first newspaper publication still a Muslim, her contributions were welcomed as a long awaited Muslim critique on the Islam. The fact she was a woman, black and Islamic seem to have given her a special status, her background gave her an extra, “authentic” credibility; by the conservative, predominantly white, male intellectuals she was welcomed as “one of us”, in fact after a death threat in the autumn of 2002 some renowned conservative intellectuals and opinion makers constituted “The Friends of Ayaan” group (among others: Paul Cliteur, Herman Philipse, Afshin Ellian, Leon de Winter, Jaffe Vink). To understand why she was so appealing for these men, it is quite interesting to reread her first written critique on Islam as it appeared in *Trouw* under the title “Laat ons niet in de steek; gun ons een Voltaire” (Do not leave us; let us have a Voltaire) on the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2001.

In this article, she clearly refuses to remain apologetic, which she argues is the mainstream Muslim answer on the problems of Islam today. On the contrary, she suggests Islam itself is the problem: “islam is gegijzeld door zichzelf” (Islam is hijacked by itself). This sentence, which appears in the end of the article, is preceded by an extensive description of her views of the Islamic and Western world, thereby she merely focuses on the incompatible differences between the Islamic world and the Western rule of law state,

“Het zal duidelijk zijn dat de hedendaagse islam niet verenigbaar is met de eisen van de Westerse rechtsstaat” (It will be obvious cotemporary Islam is not compatible with the demands of the Western rule of law state). In her description of the Islamic world, she exploits her Muslim background to act as an authority on the Islamic world. Thus, she uses sentences as: “Uit eigen ervaring kan ik bevestigen dat de islamitische wereld sterk hiërarchisch is ingedeeld” (From own experience I can confirm the Islamic world is based on a strong hierachal structure), “Deze karakterisering is voor mij als moslim zeer herkenbaar” (these characterasations are for me, as a Muslim, very recognisable (referring to the superstitious character of the Islamic tradition as described by Leon de Winter)), “Hoe ver deze doctrine kan doorwerken, heb ik zelf ondervonden: Toen ik voor het eerst een jood zag, was ik verbaasd dat het een gewoon mens van vlees en bloed bleek te zijn.” (The far-going consequences of this doctrine, I experienced myself. When I saw a Jew for the first time, I was surprised it turned out to be an ordinary human of flesh and blood (referring to Islamic prejudices versus Jews)). On the other hand, she argues the Western world is primarily based on self independence and individuality; the general absence of prejudices and moreover that its culture is governed by reason.

Her generalising picture of the Islamic world is remarkably similar with the views of those of previous Western orientalis. A study of Edward Said’s magnum opus<sup>31</sup> reveals very little have changed in the Western perception of the Orient in two centuries. In her first writing Hirsu Ali clearly divides the world in a civilised “us” (the West) and a barbaric Islamic world (the East), making a caricature of both the West and the Islamic world. In the words of Said himself: “On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things.” (Said 1978, p. 49).

However, the major difference is that this time the orientalist view on the Islamic world is expressed by a Muslim, not by a Western intellectual; this then of course serves as a strong confirmation of already existing views and prejudices of the Muslim world within Western intellectual circles and is without doubts one of the reasons she was so gladly received by her “Friends”. After her first publication in *Trouw*, Hirsu Ali soon broke with the Dutch labour party, which was, at that time, constantly accused of a soft and culture relativistic attitude towards immigrants in general and Islam in particular. Instead she became an active member of the right wing liberal party, VVD, in which she was given more space to criticize Islam. In 2003 she became a member of the Dutch Parliament, of which she is still a member at the moment; her involvement in politics should also be seen in the context of the rise of Pim Fortuyn, who was the first politician to condemn the Dutch immigrant policy and the soft standpoint towards (radical) Islam. So by the time Hirsu Ali entered politics it was already accepted and perhaps fashionable to openly attack Islam.

Naturally, the Dutch Islamic community responded to her appearance by denouncing her as a bounty: black from outside, but white from the inside. In a way Hirsu Ali’s public manifestation elucidate her position in the discourse, although she mainly aims to reach suppressed Muslim women, she primarily gets support from Dutch, conservative figures. A news item on Dutch television, i.e. in Nova, in 2004, in which Hirsu Ali visited some abused Muslim women (the one she is supposed to represent),

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<sup>31</sup> Said, E.W. 1978. *Orientalism*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

showed the women felt Ayaan was not contributing to their battle<sup>32</sup>, thus affirming Hirsi Ali has distanced herself from the grass roots level.<sup>33</sup> Hence, Ayaan seems to “preach in her own church”.

In the light of Orientalism, the title of Ayaan’s first article becomes even more telling, and emphasizes her article should be read in the tradition of orientalist scholarship. The first part of the title, “Do not leave us”, suggests the Islamic world is helpless without the interference of Western intellectuality. Here it is the Muslim, who for his or her own sake, needs the support of the Western man to enlighten himself. The Muslim thus is depended for his future on the Western world. The second part, “Let us have a Voltaire”, summarises her views on the Islamic world, i.e. that of a backward, monolithic entity. She neglects, willingly or unwillingly, the differences within the Islamic world itself, in the words of the fundamentalists: “Islam is one”. Ironically, the liberal tradition is hence neglected and marginalised by a majority of Muslim world, as well as by many Western scholars, who are now calling for Enlightenment.

After the publishing of several articles, discussions on national television and her entrance in politics Ayaan Hirsi Ali continued with her critique on Islam via various ways. In 2004, this led to the making of *Submission*, part I, directed by late filmmaker Theo van Gogh. During the eleven minutes film four physically abused Muslim women are portrayed as helpless, fatalistic creatures, while submitting only to Allah. In the film, Quranic verses are written on their bodies, in order to convince the audience their abuse could be linked directly to Quranic texts. Indeed, relating Islamic “backwardness” to the principal Islamic sources, the Quran and the hadith, forms a leitmotiv in Hirsi Ali’s work. *Submission* underlines the orientalist approach Hirsi Ali uses in her “enlightening” message to Muslims. Sonja van Wichelen and Marc de Leeuw, who wrote a thorough critique on *Submission*, observed: “The depiction of *Submission* within an oriental-Arabic Islamic scenery in which Islam is presented as essentially “backward” and “despotic” contributes to a revival of orientalist clichés and myths present in Europe since the 19th century.” (Van Wichelen & De Leeuw 2005, p. 4).<sup>34</sup> Indeed one could argue the veiled, but naked body of the narrator, living in “Islamistan”, thus presenting an exotic, erotic, yet unpersonal image of the oriental woman, fits perfectly in the continental tradition of the portrayal of oriental harems and odalisques.<sup>35</sup> In fact, where painters like the Frenchman Ingres, displayed harem women as sexual, physical slaves of the sultan, Hirsi Ali, relating primary religious sources to their particular dependent, powerless situation, goes a step further and portrays Islamic women as slaves of God.

#### 4.1.2 The Different Attitudes in the Discourse

The contributions of Ayaan Hirsi Ali were supported by parallel, similar critiques given by other Dutch intellectuals. On the twenty second of December 2001 one of Ayaan’s friends’ Paul Cliteur, a professor of law and philosophy in Leiden and Delft, writes: “...(dat) het project van de liberale islam bepaald failliet mag heten.... Het lijkt erop dat

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<sup>32</sup> *Heftige reacties op korte film van Hirsi Ali*. 2004. Nova, Hilversum, NPS/ VARA/ NOS, 13 October.

<sup>33</sup> Van Wichelen, S., De Leeuw, M. 2005. “*Please, Go Wake Up!*” *Submission, Hirsi Ali, and the “War on Terror” in the Netherlands*. To be published, obtained via private communication.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Fatima Mernissi described this Orientalist tradition in painted art in greater detail. Mernissi, F. 2001. *De Europese Harem*. Uitgeverij de Geus: Breda

wat genoemd wordt 'de liberale islam' een utopie is die nog honderden jaren op zich kan laten wachten. De voorstellingen over een liberale islam zijn op geen enkele manier representatief voor de reël bestaande islam.” (...(that) The project of liberal Islam could be called bankrupt....It seems that what is called liberal Islam is a utopia that will not be realised in hundreds of years. The concepts of liberal Islam are in no way representative for the in reality existing Islam).<sup>36</sup> In his article Paul Cliteur monopolises humanist thought, according to him it is only the western secularist tradition that is able to enlighten a man's mind. He easily dismisses the liberal Islamic tradition out of pragmatic viewpoint: it does not appeal to a majority of Muslims, hence it is not a solution. Remarkably he does not seem to doubt whether his suggested ecumenical human tradition will face the same problem or not. Cliteur's article is just one example of the general absence of faith in any religion in the Netherlands, reading many articles “between the lines” reveals the Dutch traumatic history with Calvinist, dogmatic religion is now posed on almost all other religions, at least the monotheistic ones. Thus, it is not only Islam that is represented as monolithic, it is the phenomenon of religion as a whole. Religion *an sich* is not understood, religion *an sich* is perceived as backward. Not surprisingly one of the “Friends of Ayaan”, Herman Philipse, wrote the Atheistic Manifesto and Ayaan Hirsi Ali herself once stated: “Het klinkt misschien arrogant, maar ik denk dat de meeste mensen die zichzelf gelovig noemen in wezen atheïst zijn...Wetenschappers geloven niet” (Perhaps it sounds arrogant, but I think most people who refer to themselves as believers are in fact atheist...Scientists do not believe).<sup>37</sup>

The discourse on Islam and Enlightenment was not confined to the written media. In particular, the coming of Pim Fortuyn exposed the general fear in Dutch society for Islam and extended the discourse to the political arena. After Pim Fortuyn's assassination in 2002 the political critique on Islam was taken over by Parliament member Geert Wilders, Ayaan Hirsi Ali (i.e. via her election in the “Tweede Kamer”, the Dutch Parliament, in 2003) and to some extent Rita Verdonk, the minister for integration and minority affairs. The interference with the critique on Islam and politics goes as far as the EU-Turkey question (Geert Wilders states Turkey can, foremost because of its Islamic character, never become part of the EU, this issue was in fact one of the reasons he left the liberal right party VVD), the problem with imported imams, the suggested abandoning of Islamic schools and the denunciation of burkha's in public, which is a continuation of the French discussion on the *laïcité*, the separation of Church and State. The “handshake” affair in November 2004, in which imam Ahmad Salam refused to shake the hand of Rita Verdonk, since shaking the hands of women was according to him incompatible with Islamic teachings, Verdonk on her turn responded by saying: “Then we have still have a lot to talk about”, caused an enormous amount of commotion in the Dutch media; the affair, just after the murder on Theo van Gogh, added to the already existing negative view on the Dutch Islamic community.

At the same time this community, for the most part consisting of first, second and third generation Turkish and Moroccan immigrants, seems unable to react constructively to the Dutch critique. Hindered by their non-intellectual, rural background, the Dutch Muslim community falls back in a defensive position, in which they state Islam is for peace and that fundamentalists “misunderstand” Islam. Precisely the apologetic attitude Ayaan Hirsi Ali wanted to get rid of in her first newspaper article. The Dutch Muslims are

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<sup>36</sup> Cliteur, P. “Alleen oecumenisch humanisme brengt licht”, in: *NRC Handelsblad*, 22-12-2001

<sup>37</sup> Visser, A. “Tien geboden: Ayaan Hirsi Ali”, in: *Trouw*, 25-01-2003

remarkably absent in the discourse on Islam and Enlightenment, there is a total lack of critical reviews on oneself and their practised religion. On the one hand this arises out of the fact that Dutch Muslims are foremost migrant communities, which always tend to be inward and use religion as a secure relic of the homeland; thus immigrants tend to be more conservative than their brothers in Morocco or Turkey; on the other hand the lack of deep-rooted knowledge of the Islamic tradition disables the Dutch Muslims to respond adequately to Dutch, intellectual attacks. It should be noted the Islamic community in the Netherlands is, of course, not monolithic and the group of native Dutch Muslims is increasing. Abdulwahid van Bommel, e.g., sometimes does provide a more intellectual answer to Dutch “Enlightened” criticism on Islam. They are, however, still a minority.

In the Dutch newspapers, contributions of prominent Muslim figures, i.e. the novelist Kader Abdolah and Hacı Karacaer the director of Mili Gurus, a Turkish organisation, were among the few that encouraged Muslims to think more critically and to develop an Enlightened Islam: “Moslims moeten de Koran in het licht van hun nieuwe land (Nederland) herlezen en begrijpen zoals dat veertien eeuwen geleden eerder regel dan uitzondering was” (Muslims should reread and understand the Quran in the perspective of their new country, the Netherlands, as was common practice fourteen hundred years ago)<sup>38</sup> and “De belangrijkste les die de immigratie me geleerd heeft, is: Uit je mening! En luister naar de mening van een ander! Daarom hekel ik de moslimorganisaties die meteen een slachtofferrol gaan spelen.” (The most important lesson immigration taught me is: Give your opinion! And listen to somebody else’s opinion. Therefore I loathe Muslim organisations that immediately fall back in a victim position).<sup>39</sup>

However, even these internal criticasters fail to offer a thorough Islamic alternative for western secularised Enlightenment. In fact, the Dutch discourse as a whole stagnated at a superficial problem analysis, and the call for change, it does *not* discuss any serious theological solutions, nor does it provide a historical treatment of liberal Islamic values. Hence, the discourse merely restricts itself to the present situation; a religious reformation is suggested, begged for, demanded, however no reformation takes place. Mohamed Arkoun, the famous Islamic scholar from the Sorbonne in Paris, summarised this view when he stated: ‘Er is geen enkele intellectuele ontwikkeling te bekennen in islamitisch Nederland.’ (There is no intellectual development to be found in the Dutch Islamic community).<sup>40</sup>

#### ***4.2 The Dutch versus the Indonesians***

Since the contents and the shape of both the Indonesian and the Dutch discourse have been discussed, it is now time to compare the two discourses, to see where the differences lie and to study their relative effectiveness. It should be noted the critique of the Dutch conservative intellectuals is to some extent similar to the critique of the JIL activists. Both denounce any absolute, literal forms of Islam, in fact both groups’ long term goals are to enlighten Islamic thought (see JIL’s motto on their website: enlightening, liberating). This, however, only forms a very superficial similarity. Whereas their concerns might be

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<sup>38</sup> Karacaer, H. “Moslims past meer zelfreflectie”, in: *Trouw*, 15-06-2002

<sup>39</sup> Abdolah, K. “De cultuur van de vader”, in: *de Volkskrant*, 18-02-2002

<sup>40</sup> A. Olgun. “In islamitisch Nederland ontbreekt elke intellectuele ontwikkeling”, interview in: *NRC Handelsblad*, 27-10-2001

comparable, their approach, the used methodology, and their position in the discourse are entirely different. However, the most important difference stems from the attitude towards religion in general. As discussed in section 4.1.2 the Dutch critics are in favour of an a-religious or even anti-religious outcome, whereas the Indonesian discourse adheres to religion itself as a powerful tool for change.

The difference in approach can be observed quite easily when the title of Ulil's famous article in *Kompas* in 2002 is compared to Hirsu Ali's first article in *Trouw* in 2001. Ulil uses the phrase: "Freshening Up Our Understanding of Islam", while Hirsu Ali says "Do not leave us; Let us have a Voltaire"). Ulil, sharing his basic concerns with Hirsu Ali, explicitly stands in the Islamic discourse and writes for an Islamic public, Hirsu Ali on the other hand is asking non-Muslims not to leave liberal Muslims, she is thus discussing outside the Islamic framework. A further analysis of both articles supports this view, Ulil uses Islamic methodology, Islamic terms, combined with Western scientific insights, to address the problems in the Islamic world; Hirsu Ali does none of that, moreover she stereotypes the Islamic world, displaying it as a static, almost timeless entity, quite different from Ulil who opens with: "In my view Islam is first and foremost a living "organism", a religion that evolves in accordance with the pulse of humankind's development. Islam is not a static monument that was carved in the 7th century CE and thereafter regarded as a beautiful "statue" that may not be touched by the hand of history."<sup>41</sup> Their respective views on contemporary Islam are different. It is a difference between positivism and negativism, plurality and homogeneity, heuristic power and heuristic weakness. This difference arises out of the fact initiatives like JIL and intellectuals like Ulil, but also Gus Dur and Cak Nur, are denied and marginalised by the Orientalist tradition, of which Ayaan is essentially a part. Thus whereas Ayaan calls for a western enlightener, a la Voltaire, Ulil seeks his enlightenment in Islamic scholars and Islamic texts (in the *Kompas* article he quotes the prophet and a verse from the Quran). Ulil's attack on dogmatism and monolithic observations could, with a little imagination, be applied to the whole Dutch discourse. It is very cynical to observe that those who fight for an enlightened Islam in the Islamic world, are not recognised and overlooked in the West for their struggle. In this light, Paul Cliteur's statement on liberal Islam quoted earlier seems to be one of utter ignorance and, above all, misplaced arrogance. Surely, liberal Islam has a long way to go, all JIL activists will immediately admit, but it is very doubtful a "universalist" one-size-fits-all humanism will succeed at any faster pace. In reality, the critique of the Dutch intellectuals does not reach the Dutch Islamic community, who meanwhile continue their conservative religiosity, whereas JIL's efforts, although they are badly received by the mainstream, at least initiates a thinking process within the Islamic community in Indonesia.

Here, the used methodology and JIL's position in the discourse are also a vital component of JIL's relative success. JIL and the Indonesian discourse as a whole are imbedded within the Islamic tradition, which increases their credibility. The only credibility that seems to exist in the Netherlands, however, is either that of simply *being* a Muslim or that of being a scholar in the orientalist tradition. Islamic intellectuality is, sadly, to a large extent absent in the Dutch discourse. The Dutch discourse is, in essence, an unequal discourse, the "Enlightenment fundamentalists" are not debating, but almost "shouting" their critique to the intellectual "inferior" Muslim community. Muslims must be converted to modernity and humanism, their backwardness must be upgraded.

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<sup>41</sup> Abshar-Abdalla, U. 2002. op. cit.

Respect, there is no respect. Not surprisingly, Ayaan is now preparing her next Submission film and is writing a book, both entitled: “The Shortcut to Enlightenment”, emphasizing the Dutch discourse is a missionary discourse. This is a total different attitude than the one observed in Indonesia, where although one disagrees with each other, one accepts the other for having a different viewpoint. JIL’s manifesto adheres to relativistic truth; the “Friends of Ayaan” seem to believe in a total absolute truth.

The Dutch critique is thus foremost a negative sideline critique, which does not extend to an Islamic theological discourse. The contents of the discourse are relatively straightforward and do not provide the Dutch Muslim community with an Islamic alternative for Dutch modernity. It is characterised by assimilation rather than integration.

## 5. Conclusion & Discussion

In this paper the liberal Islamic discourse in Indonesia has been described, analysed, and compared to the Dutch “Enlightened” critique on Islam. It was shown contemporary liberal Islam in Indonesia as such is not a new phenomenon, but rather is deeply rooted within the Islamic tradition, from which the present-day discourse in fact originated. In particular, liberal Islam in Indonesia rose out of the neo-modernist movement, of which Gus Dur and Cak Nur are the most well-known exponents. Intellectually, the liberals are thus nurtured by the neo-modernists, while at the same time the young liberal Muslims in Indonesia continued their struggle against dogmatism and authority initiated in the last years of the Soeharto era.

Liberal Islam in Indonesia is fore and foremost seeking an open, relative and contextual understanding of Islam, in which rationality is preferred above dogmatism. Reason and revelation thus go hand in hand; the former is used to understand the latter, the former strengthens the religiosity of the latter and the former questions, while the latter inspires. Authoritative, politicised forms of religion and absolutism are denounced as contradictory to the very nature of mankind and as unable to solve the current problems Islam is facing with modernity.

The persons involved in the discourse mostly originated from a pesantren, traditionalist background and have therefore been educated from their early years with Islamic classical texts and tradition. Their pluralist view on Islam was for a great deal fostered by their traditional upbringing combined with a modernist encounter during their university careers. This social context, combined with a deep concern and fear for radicalisation in society, leads to a genuine attempt to modernise Islam, thereby opposing the fundamentalist ideology which mainly tries to islamise modernity. The discourse, although still a very elitist, intellectual one, is trying to reach mainstream Islamic religion by various media activities and development projects; thereby the available social capital of the two largest Muslim organisations, NU and Muhammadiyah, is more and more transformed, by the liberal NGO’s, into constructive efforts for realising an open and plural society.

In the summer of 2005, the discourse was shocked by the issuing of anti-pluralism, secularism and liberalism fatwas by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and violent attacks on the Ahmadiyah sect in Bogor. Those events show there is still a long way to go for the discourse to gain more mainstream support. Later on, this gap with the grassroots level was revealed directly by a local community protest against the main promoter of liberal Islam in Indonesia, Jaringan Islam Liberal, in Utan Kayu. It showed their policy of shocking mainstream ideas are misunderstood and misused by a significant part of Indonesian society. Here, undoubtedly, lies one of the biggest challenges for the liberal discourse in the future, i.e. to translate its high intellectual level to the language of the average Muslim in Indonesia.

In the Netherlands, exactly the opposite should occur; the general ignorance on Islam and the Islamic world, intertwined with and originating out of the oriental tradition, which is still very much alive in the discourse, result in a discourse where a real theological discussion is absent. The critique on Islam, as expressed by the Dutch right wing conservative intellectuals is directed towards a form of Islam which those who practice a liberal form of Islam do not identify with. By stigmatising religion as a whole,

focusing on the incompatible differences between the West and the Rest, reformation within the Islamic religion becomes daunting. Far more, the emergence of liberal Islam in the Netherlands is handicapped by a lack of Muslim intellectuals with a thorough, holistic understanding of religion and a conservative attitude of the mainstream Muslim community. Hence, Progressive Muslims are “sandwiched” between the missionary “Enlightenment fundamentalists” and the conservative forces within their own communities.

Here, the Indonesian liberal discourse has a tremendous advantage, since they are, in a certain way, the “Enlightenment fundamentalists” of their own society, they are only attacked from the grassroots level, their conservative communities, but not from a group who claim to be intellectually superior. Furthermore, Indonesia’s global position, i.e. at the periphery of the Islamic world and blessed by an enormous natural plurality and diversity in humanity of the Archipelago, provides the tools necessary for developing a pluralist, inclusive and liberal Islam.

Although the end goals, the dreams, of the Western humanist tradition and liberal Islam are similar, it is vital to further explore the possibilities of the Islamic tradition without copying Western philosophy directly and without, at the same time, staying dogmatic in Islamic sense. Rationalising religion could, however, lead to a devaluation of religion as a whole. Here the classic Islamic debate between the philosophers Al Ghazali (1058-1111) and Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) dooms up again and becomes highly relevant, what is the value of religion when reason can provide all answers? Al Ghazali contrary to Ibn Rushd, stressed the power of religion should be sought in mysticism rather than rationality, a sufi instead of a religious philosopher. The Islamic mystical tradition could, perhaps, provide an alternative, more thorough Islamic answer to Western secularism than a totally rationalised religion.

The comparability of dreams should not prevent liberal Muslims, in the West nor in Indonesia, to criticize Western ideologies and thoughts, nobody wins when Western thoughts are idealised in favour of Islamic thoughts. Liberal Muslims should thus be very careful not to copy or follow Western trends blindly, since a very negative connotation with Western thoughts has destructive effects on grassroots level in Muslim societies. Liberal Muslims in Indonesia now realise their delicate position in the discourse, hopefully they will restrict their public appearance solely to the religious domain in the future and the strengthening of the socio-economical position of the grassroots level in society. A further interference with liberal socio-economical affairs could destruct their credibility.

At the moment, the Indonesian discourse consists of many largely independent intellectuals and NGO’s. A stronger cooperation between these already existing NGO’s should be sought, in order for liberal Muslims to have a stronger influence on society and a clearer division of tasks among them can come into existence. The community for a civil society could mean a first step for reaching this goal.

To conclude, the discourse in Indonesia is a shining, contemporary example of how Enlightenment and Islam could meet, it shows Islam can definitely be compatible with Modernity, without losing religiosity as such. Those involved in the discourse are indeed the living evidence of a fruitful symbiosis between Islam and Enlightenment, thereby denying the orientalist, monolithic perceptions on Islam and their connoted doom scenarios.