

Rahman, Fazlur

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Summary

Fazlur Rahman was a preeminent 20th-century Muslim scholar who combined modernism with tradition. He saw his role as that of shaping the study of Islam in the modern Western academy with the empathy of a believer and a critical scholarly acumen. Grounded in philosophy, theology, history, and moral thought, he advocated for a reinterpretation of the early sources of Islamic learning—emphasizing, for example, the more organic Sunnah instead of the atomistic prophetic reports in the form of ḥadīth. Critical of some aspects of the transmitted discursive tradition, he nevertheless viewed tradition as indispensable to the renewal of Islamic thought. He placed the Qurʾān and his specific hermeneutic of the historicized thematics of the revelation at the center of his renewal and reform project. While he took history seriously, in the end a scripture-centered hermeneutic became his preferred discursive framework.

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Biography: Early Years and Formation

Fazlur Rahman was born on September 21, 1919, to the Malik (colloquially Malak) family in the Hazāra district in British India, now part of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. His first name is written in Arabic as Faḍl al-Raḥmān and in Urdu as Faḍlur Reḥmān, but in the West the second part of his first name has been used as his last name instead of the family name Malik. Six months prior to his birth, on April 13, 1919, British forces sadistically massacred between 379 and 1,500 unarmed protesting Indians in the city of Amritsar, in what became known as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The event spurred demands for Indian home rule and finally led to independence from Britain, which resulted in the partition of the subcontinent into two states, India and Pakistan. During the turmoil of partition Fazlur Rahman was in Britain, studying at Oxford University. He had left British India for Oxford, but fate determined that his birthplace and family home would become part of Pakistan.

In a career that spanned several continents, Rahman's ideas, scholarship, and public life shaped the ideas and visions of many around the world. He wore his commitment as a faithful Muslim with pride even as he prized critical thought. On his death in Chicago on July 26, 1988, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the doyen of Western Islamicists with his own strong ties to the India-Pakistan subcontinent, described him as “a person of integrity; a religious man with a brilliant mind using

it as part of his religion. He was a moral person; a serious Muslim motivated by deep concern for his culture and his people.”¹ At the time of his death, Rahman was survived by his wife Bilqis and by a daughter and four sons.

Rahman’s father Mawlānā Shihāb al-Dīn (d. 1970) was a graduate of the famous Deoband seminary, located in post-partition India.² Renowned for its orthodoxy, 21st-century Deoband constitutes a global franchise with an impressive reach. Shihāb al-Dīn was close to the leading scholar and anti-colonial activist Mawlānā Maḥmūd Ḥasan (d. 1920), better known as “Shaykh al-Hind,” who was a leading light at the Deoband seminary. Another classmate of Shihāb al-Dīn was the impressive cosmopolitan and notable activist-scholar of the Deoband school, ‘Ubaydullāh Sindhī (d. 1944). The two were close friends, but no two friends could have been so different in their intellectual temperaments. Shihāb al-Dīn, Rahman’s father, was, according to his son, stern and exacting in his religious views. Sindhī, on the other hand, abjured zealous and stifling religious viewpoints while remaining, of course, within a traditionalist framework. The intellectual jousts between the two men often ended in impassioned and dramatic rhetorical fireworks. At one memorable meeting Sindhī was so piqued by his friend’s rigid traditional views that he prophesied in frustration, “Listen, Shihāb al-Dīn, I am going to have you executed by this son of yours,” pointing to the young Fazlur Rahman, who was present in their company.³ Sindhī clearly approved of Rahman’s intellectual temperament and had more than an inkling that his friend’s son would avoid following the strict traditional ways of his father. Rahman later mused to the scholar Muḥammad Sarwar that Sindhī was indeed right in predicting the critical intellectual path in the study of Islam that he adopted. “This prediction [by Sindhī] was so accurate. There was no question of physical execution, nor did Mawlānā [Sindhī] intend it,” Rahman said to Sarwar. “Now whatever I believe, say, or write, if this is not symbolic parricide, then what else would it be?”⁴ Abandoning some of his father’s orthodox teachings to embrace his own brand of Islamic modernism was Rahman’s way of aligning himself with Sindhī’s more capacious and provocative intellectual temperament.

At an early age Rahman studied, under the supervision of his father, the traditional Muslim scholastic texts that were featured in the subcontinent’s traditional Nizāmī curriculum. This included Islamic law (*fiqh*), dialectical theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*), prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), Qur’ān exegesis (*tafsīr*), logic (*manṭiq*), and philosophy (*falsafa*). Later he attended the University of the Punjab in Lahore, where he graduated with an undergraduate degree in Arabic, followed by an MA in Arabic, which he earned with distinction. Between 1943 and 1946 he was a research student at the same university. Aged twenty-seven, he moved to Oxford University, where he worked with Professor Simon van den Bergh on a doctoral dissertation that he completed in the three years between 1946 and 1949. Rahman cultivated a warm relationship with the leading orientalist scholar Sir Hamilton Gibb and frequently acknowledged his debt to this important scholar of Islam.

In Pakistan and England Rahman acquired Greek, Latin, French, and German. He also deepened his knowledge of psychology and philosophy. His dissertation was a translation, critical edition, and commentary on the psychology section of the *Kitāb al-Najāt* by the famous 11th-century Muslim philosopher Abū ‘Alī Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), also known as Avicenna. After graduating, Rahman was appointed as a lecturer in Persian and Islamic philosophy at Durham University in

the United Kingdom, remaining there from 1950 to 1958. He left England to teach at the Institute of Islamic Studies at Canada's McGill University in Montreal between 1958 and 1961, as an associate professor.

In 1961 the military ruler of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan, as part of his agenda to revive the national spirit, invited Rahman to head a national initiative to bring the country's law into line with a liberal and rational vision of Islam. At the newly formed Central Institute of Islamic Research (1960; later renamed the Islamic Research Institute in 1962), Rahman first became a visiting professor (1961–1962) and later director of the institute over a six-year period from 1962 to 1968.

The policy side of Rahman's job meant that his views were often open to public scrutiny; his recommendations became entangled with power and politics, and, as his views entered the public sphere, he inevitably locked horns with the orthodox Muslim religious scholars and clergy ('*ulamā*') who gave him and the government no quarter. Thus, Rahman's intellectual labor in the service of social reform was drawn into the messy political fray of Pakistan in the 1960s. Political parties and religiously-inspired social groups opposed to Ayub Khan targeted Rahman's scholarly views in their bid to damage his patron.

Some of the legal and religious issues Rahman attempted to address involved the status of bank interest as usury (*ribā*), state regulation of the compulsory religious tax (*zakāt*), the use of mechanical slaughter of animals, and family law and family planning directives and legislation. But what drew the greatest ire were his views on the authority of prophetic reports (*ḥadīth*) and the prophetic practice (*Sunnah*) drawn from those sources as well as his reflections on the nature of revelation. After a turbulent period that adversely affected his health and his leadership role at the Institute and on the Advisory Council for Islamic Ideology, Rahman resigned.

At age forty-eight Rahman arrived in the United States, where he spent the next two decades of his life. After a short spell as visiting professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1968, he was appointed professor of Islamic thought at the University of Chicago in the fall of 1969. In 1986 he was named Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor at Chicago, a title he held until his death in 1988 at the age of sixty-eight.

Rahman's intellectual legacy is captured in his prolific writings that range over topics including philosophy, Islamic theology, contemporary questions in Islamic thought involving human rights, women's rights, education, religion and politics, law and ethics, medicine, history, and the study of the Qur'ān and hermeneutics. He grappled with a complex research agenda that encompassed both scholarship and policy work. In his scholarship, he dedicated the last years of his life to the task of making the Qur'ān the centerpiece of a renewed Muslim interpretative and knowledge framework.

He saw himself as combining the modern and pre-modern traditions of Islam. In the modernist tradition, he admired Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) of Egypt and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) of India, and he was inspired by the spirit of the ideas proposed by the poet-philosopher of pre-partition India, Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938). He deemed it worthwhile to advance the modernist tradition into the 20th century, but he also made his own amendments to it. The philosopher Ibn

Sīnā, the jurist-theologian and polymath Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), and the jurist-theologian Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymīya (d. 1328) all inspired him. Among the thinkers of the subcontinent, Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624) and Shāh Waliyullāh (d. 1762) were two he held in great esteem.

His impact on the Western academy, especially in North America, can be measured by the range of students he trained and inspired. In Turkey, Indonesia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and, after his death, in parts of the Arabic-speaking world, his views and interpretations became the subject of scholarly debates and inspired some scholars to pursue the social reconstruction and reform of Islamic thought. In his native Pakistan, only a select scholarly elite is still familiar with his thought, and aversion to Islamic reform along modernist lines remains.

Ḥadīth and the Living Sunnah

The most important methodological contribution that Rahman pursued was not primarily about arriving at the meaning of the Sunnah, the exemplary and normative conduct of the Prophet. What he achieved was to shed light on the early conceptual history of the Sunnah: he proposed an intervention in its received account so as to sustain an earlier conception instead of defaulting to the ḥadīth-centered idea of the Sunnah in Sunnī Islam. For Rahman, the Sunnah as a pattern of exemplary conduct was embedded in the organic and lived reality of the Companions of the Prophet and the subsequent Successor generation. As such, the concept was also deployed by Rahman to signify a lived tradition connected to prophetic authority. In other words, the Sunnah as the actions of one person—namely, the Prophet—had gradually morphed into the sense of an authoritative tradition. But, in Rahman’s view, this tradition crucially incorporated the sensibilities, ideas, and practices of multiple generations of Muslims in terms of how they understood and applied the transmitted prophetic norm.⁵

Rahman tried to mediate the criticism and skepticism directed by Western scholars against the documentation of the Sunnah in the form of ḥadīth compilations. But the Western criticism of ḥadīth was for him less objectionable if one accepted the Sunnah as part of an organic tradition, as he proposed. While Rahman tries to rebut some of the Western criticism directed at the ḥadīth, he does not fully elaborate the mechanisms by which a transmitted tradition functions in communities of knowledge. In support of his argument for the living Sunnah, he provides individual examples as evidence for his case, and these do indeed puncture the dominant accounts and raise questions.

Historiography requires an acute awareness of the situation of the historian. In a modern secular age, Western critics of the ḥadīth tradition and those Muslims who are generally cautious of the verbal authenticity of ḥadīth would benefit from an exercise in self-reflexivity. Here the insight of the French Catholic historian Michel de Certeau is pertinent: “A society which is no longer religious imposes *its* rationality, *its* own categories, *its* problems, *its* type of organization upon religious formulations.”⁶ Even in the various ages of Islam as a religious tradition, multiple epistemological concerns were directed at the ḥadīth materials by the many parties engaged with this tradition. At one end of this spectrum were the earliest scholars who, with their sectarian

affiliations, engaged with the ḥadīth corpus to serve their purposes in constructing an orthodoxy. At another end are contemporary orthodox actors and critics who wish to defend the tradition from the ravages of the modern age. These, and every era in between, have all, in one way or another, imposed their rationalities, categories, problems, and organizational techniques on historical materials such as the ḥadīth. To claim otherwise is untenable. The various law schools and theological schools of Islamic history bear testimony to these epistemic imprints. Modern historians possess a more acute and self-reflective awareness of these epistemological shifts and their effects. Rahman does recognize that, with respect to Islamic thought, it would require “a herculean task to examine this massive material from the perspective of historical criticism,” also noting that many Muslims feared that, should such criticism find its way to the ḥadīth, such an inquiry could result in the collapse of “the entire fabric of traditional law and institutions in Islam.”⁷ For example, Rahman is skeptical of how the reports documenting the Sunnah can be laden with such a welter of detail and substantive content. If one concurs in his skepticism, then one cannot avoid the conclusion that the content of the Sunnah as known to us may in part be the product of the Ḥadīth-Fiqh literature and not necessarily the verbatim utterances of the Prophet Muḥammad.⁸

Selectively examining some legal texts up to the 2nd century of Islam (the 5th century in the Gregorian calendar), Rahman argued that the content of the Sunnah was very much organically informed by the intellectual effort and labors (*ijtihād*) of the Companions and Successors as well as the work of later generations, all of which cumulatively informed the consensus (*ijmāʿ*) positions. But this link between *ijtihād* and *ijmāʿ* was, in his view, a dynamic relationship that conferred an organic character upon the consensus without rigidly formalizing it. In short, he argued that what we call the Sunnah generated its content over time as part of a historical process on the way to reaching consensus.

Mainstream Sunnī Muslim orthodoxy has, of course, rejected the view that the Sunnah/*ijmāʿ* was the product of a historical imaginary. Sunnah, orthodoxy believes, is a set of discrete actions, statements, and endorsements by the Prophet that not only was complete at its inception but was also chronologically situated in a specific period of time. Traditional Sunnī sources do agree that the Companions are embodiments and role models of the Sunnah, and in Shīʿī thought the hereditary imāms embody the prophetic charisma. Critical historians such as Rahman, however, argue that what we identify as the Sunnah is in large part the product of various historical imaginaries and historiographies over time. What often goes unacknowledged is that the process of canonization, involving conscious documentation and ḥadīth historiography undertaken by a variety of actors, indelibly shaped what was recognized as the Sunnah. The tools used to make, shape, and craft ideas and knowledge do, in the end, influence the substance of knowledge. The tools of preservation, whether as oral tradition or in the form of writing, do leave their traces on the content. Oral cultures and their protocols shape and craft knowledge in very different ways from cultures of writing. How print and digital cultures have left indelible imprints on the construction of knowledge could serve as an analogy for the effects of oral and early writing cultures.

One figure who shaped the construction of knowledge in early Islam, in Rahman's view, is the champion of Sunnī orthodoxy—namely, Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820). It was Shāfi'ī who formalized the hierarchy of knowledge sources, their interpretative modes, and their totalized consensus. In Rahman's view, however, Shāfi'ī turned out to be a “representative of a trend” that was long in the making and which sought equilibrium and uniformity in ideas and practices. It was for this reason, Rahman explained, that Shāfi'ī “demanded agreement which left no room for disagreement.”⁹ And it was Shāfi'ī who limited *ijtihād* only to the application of analogy. It should be noted that here Rahman adopted an instrumentalist theory of Islamic epistemology due to the lack of a detailed history of the early period.

In Rahman's view, the early Muslim consensus was always forward-looking and culminated in a process of deliberation. After Shāfi'ī, however, the idea of consensus became a backward-looking concept and an authoritative tool in decision-making. Rahman captured Shāfi'ī's intentional role in the establishment of the authority of the sources of Islam with some nuance since the historical evidence clearly supported his claim. “Al-Shāfi'ī's genius provided a mechanism that gave stability to our medieval socio-religious fabric,” Rahman wrote, “but at the cost, in the long run, of creativity and originality.”¹⁰ What Rahman desires is for contemporary Muslims to engage with the Sunnah as a living tradition, as was the case in early Islam, rather than as a static formulation.

Rahman claims that the living Sunnah was almost identical to consensus, and the Iraqi school, meaning the Ḥanafis, excelled at formulating it as such. A similar approach was at work in the Mālīkī school. Rahman acknowledged that the ḥadīth materials can be traced back to the Prophet as the Sunnah. In doing so he recapitulated the idea that it was customary among the Arabs to seek guidance from their leaders and chiefs. He rebuked Western skepticism of the historicity of the Sunnah as “tantamount to a grave irrationality, a sin against history.” At the same time, Rahman's stern retort to Muslim denialists and skeptics of the Sunnah/ḥadīth, such as the “folk of the Qur'ān” (*ahl-i Qur'ān*) in Pakistan and elsewhere, was to assert that the Sunnah is a fact of history:

This fact juts out like a restive rock in the religious history of Islam, reducing any religious or historical attempt to deny it [the Sunnah] to a ridiculous frivolity: the *Sunnah* of the Community is based upon, and has its source in, the *Sunnah* of the Prophet.¹¹

Rahman attributes the denial of the ḥadīth and the prophetic Sunnah to a certain brand of progressivism. He deems these progressives' method questionable and lacking in scholarship. “‘Progress’ we all want,” Rahman the philosopher-theologian explains, “not *despite* Islam, nor *besides* Islam but *because* of Islam for we all believe that Islam, as it was launched as a movement on earth in the seventh century Arabia, represented pure progress—moral and material.”¹²

It was the *living* Sunnah, which turned out to be an expanding resource in the first two centuries of Islam given its connections with *ijtihād* as a concept and practice, that Shāfi'ī replaced with the ḥadīth, a development which Rahman saw as being indicative of the “nature of the change and the power of the new trend that had set in the legal thought of Islam.”¹³ What comes into

existence, Rahman explains, is a “Ḥadīth movement,” also described as “Ḥadīth formation,” thanks to Shāfi‘ī’s labors in law and the consolidation of legal ḥadīth. Part of this trend involved moral maxims, aphorisms, and edifying statements that the classical traditionists admitted were attributed to the Prophet, but which, according to Rahman, could not be historically verified. This lack of verification resulted in what Rahman called the “principle of non-historicity,” meaning the predisposition to uncritically accept the authority of the ḥadīth literature.

Concessions that legal and dogmatic ḥadīth of such provenance could “strictly speaking” belong to the Prophet lead Rahman to ask whether such license could in practice have remained confined only to law and ḥadīth. What, he asked, prevented someone from attributing to the Prophet a maxim containing a moral truth? The license to allow anything good to be attributed to the Prophet reinforced Rahman’s claim that:

[The] contents of the Ḥadīth corpus is, in fact, nothing but the Sunnah-Ijtihād of the first generations of Muslims, an *ijtihād* which in the course of time and after tremendous struggles and conflicts against heresies and extreme sectarian opinion received the sanction of *Ijmā‘*, i.e. the adherence of the majority of the Community.¹⁴

It is this “Sunnah-Ijtihād” which later enjoyed the sanction of a binding consensus.¹⁵

If the assertion of the non-historicity of ḥadīth persisted, however, Rahman feared it could elicit a religious objection, namely, that the ḥadīth could be dubbed “a gigantic conspiracy.”¹⁶ Reports confirm that, on the one hand, anything “good” could be attributed to the Prophet, while, on the other hand, there were warnings that deliberately lying about the Prophet would destine one for hellfire. There did develop over time a contentious claim that reports arousing pious feeling should not be rejected.¹⁷ This aporia regarding veracity leads Rahman to say that “it must, therefore, be concluded that Ḥadīth represents the interpreted spirit of the Prophetic teaching—it represents the ‘living Sunnah.’”¹⁸

Expressing the same idea differently, Rahman argued that what constituted the living Sunnah of early Islam was now “reflected in the mirror of the Ḥadīth with the necessary addition of chains of narrators.”¹⁹ Preempting any accusation that he gave insufficient attention to the chain of narrators (*isnād*), Rahman declared that he valued the vast and genuine biographical literature generated by ḥadīth studies, for it represented a unique Islamic achievement and, as an instrument of verification, the *isnād* served to eliminate forged ḥadīth. But Rahman’s approach was nuanced since he was careful not to give the mere act of the transmission of reports a decisive role as a basis for affirming reports. Why? In his view, the chain of transmission, in and of itself, lacked evidence, in terms of the canons of history, of what had actually and verifiably happened. A’s word is taken at face value based on a claim of A’s alleged moral credibility, but this chain of transmission on its own could not verify the historical accuracy of the substance of A’s report.

For Rahman this becomes especially problematic when predictions about future political troubles are attributed to the Prophet through excellent chains of narrators in noted Sunnī ḥadīth collections.²⁰ Consistent with the line of thinking proposed by the classical traditionists, Rahman does not reject all reports containing predictions but only those reports “which are fairly

specific.”²¹ Since the chains leading to the ḥadīth are a late 1st-century development, Rahman is unable to accept the historical authority of the chains if, as he puts it, “we are historically honest.”²² Yet the orthodox tradition boasts that the very idea of chains of narrators is a unique providential gift vouchsafed to the community of Muḥammad. The chains, orthodoxy claims, safeguarded the authenticity and authority of knowledge from the Prophet. Rahman, however, proposed a modification of the orthodox position on ḥadīth. More worthwhile for him was a historical study of hadith by “reducing it to the ‘living Sunnah’ and by clearly distinguishing from the situational background the real value embodied in it.”²³ Once the role of the ḥadīth in the formation of the living Sunnah was accepted, then many things could be explained historically. For example, one could now demonstrate convincingly how ideas of determinism trumped the importance of free will in Islamic theology due to specific historical circumstances at certain moments in Muslim history.

For Rahman, a case in point is the early pietist al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728). The latter invoked the Sunnah of the Prophet as authority without claiming that there was a verbatim statement attributed to the Prophet as evidence for his adoption of the doctrine of free will. If there were verbal traditions, Rahman argued, then these “must therefore be interpreted in their correct historical perspective and their true *functional* significance in *historical context* clearly brought out.”²⁴ “Ḥadīth, *verbally speaking*,” Rahman wrote, “does not go back to the Prophet [although] its spirit certainly does, and Ḥadīth is largely the situational interpretation and formulation of this Prophetic Model or spirit.”²⁵ When Rahman regarded ḥadīth as an instance of “situational interpretation,” he was relying on a larger set of assumptions he made about the nature of the Messenger’s mission, values, outlook, and political vision, and about the Prophet’s relationship with the Divinity as part of a multilayered hermeneutic informing the Sunnah. This larger framework is not always very explicit in his writings, but the assumptions are evident.²⁶ Rahman himself urged the adoption of historical criticism to resolve “contradictory traditions, all allegedly emanating from the Prophet.”²⁷ For the question arises of how the concept and practice of the Sunnah after the production and codification of the ḥadīth is different or could be different compared to a prior period when the ḥadīth was embedded in a larger oral tradition. This question remains unanswered. Historical facts, whether related to salvation or to worldly endeavors, often are conceived differently across different modes of communication, geographical spaces, and temporalities. Successive meanings of the key terms and concepts, and their historical relations, become our means of understanding. A more accurate interpretation thus requires a more careful inquiry. Isolating and construing concepts according to historical periodization is one way of identifying the diachronic and synchronic axes of those key vocabularies. This approach also reveals the conceptual histories embedded in historical materials. Rahman understood that, after the codification of the ḥadīth and the law schools, a different set of historical facts was created, and he deemed these developments to be antithetical to the earlier spirit when the Sunnah was organic and part of a lived community.

Keeping in focus the overall story of the Muḥammadan prophecy and the norms generated at the time provides one with what Rahman calls a situational background and its commensurate interpretation. In this situational background the living Sunnah flowered, and from this one should retrieve the overall moral value to which any fragment of a ḥadīth report is related. Legal

ḥadīth posed a “problem” for Rahman given his concept of *ijtihād-ijmā‘* and he recognized that a “delicate question” existed but nevertheless required attention.²⁸ Legal ḥadīth, in his view, could not be taken at face value and treated as a “ready-made law to be directly applied”; rather, he called for these ḥadīth to be “re-treated.”²⁹ By re-treatment, he meant that the ḥadīth must be placed in the greater scheme of prophetic values. This step must be preceded by a robust situational scrutiny in order to grasp the extent to which the values in question were sedimented and saturated in particular historical contexts.

Studying the living Sunnah led Rahman to conclude that Islamic thought, during its early development, was fecund and creative. But once the living Sunnah was replaced by the ḥadīth this creativity turned out to be “short-lived because the *content* of this structure was invested with a halo of sacredness and unchangeability since it came to be looked upon as uniquely deducible from the Qur’an and the Prophetic *Sunnah*.”³⁰ In other words, after the canonization of the ḥadīth the very content of Islamic thought was severed from its organic and historical embeddedness and was thereafter treated as a sanitized and hallowed body of thought endowed with the status as the “unique incarnation of the will of God.”³¹ This aspect of Rahman’s historical analysis has the best claim to being called his unique contribution to a historical analysis of Islamic thought.

Yet Rahman did acknowledge that Islamic jurisprudence played a constructive role in Muslim thought. He wrote:

Actually, the attempt to integrate jurisprudence into the larger field of Islamic thought is in itself not to be derided but, on the contrary, to be commended and encouraged. Only in this manner can a synthetic whole be built of the total human endeavour. Indeed, if the Muslims had not brought their general world-view to bear on Islamic jurisprudence, this would have led to basic incoherence.³²

Rahman was certainly critical, however, of the theological dogmas that were integrated into and imposed upon legal theory. The result, in his view, was formalism and blatant contradictions in the juristic doctrine. The most consequential development was the loss of dynamism in thinking and the detrimental role theological dogmas played in the realm of political thought. For, in Rahman’s view, a version of sacred and unchangeable thought tried to preserve the external solidarity of the Muslim community “at the expense of the inner density of the faith.”³³ Political docility and obedience were the consequences, he argued, especially when predestinarian theological doctrines seriously undermined human agency in a bid to secure conformism. It is the ḥadīth literature in both the Sunnī and Shī‘a traditions that, he believed, “introduced new elements . . . modifying, sometimes quite seriously, the teachings of the Qur’an and bringing new and often contradictory factors to bear upon problems of human concern.”³⁴ A desire to preserve human agency in Islamic thought was the motivation that drove Rahman into the arms of Ibn Taymīya as an inspirational figure. Ibn Taymīya presumes humans to be free and responsible, as against the Ash‘arite Sunnī doctrine which, in Rahman’s reading, considered a human being to be an automaton.³⁵

Historical contingencies and exigencies had, in Rahman's view, turned into theological and moral dogmas. An example of this process can be seen in how the Umayyads favored theological determinism and denied human freedom and will while advocating political pacifism and the acceptance of the status quo. While hindsight enables such a reading of history, this view might be countered by the objection that the Umayyads may well have deployed more discreet and subtle mechanisms of political theology to consolidate their expansive but short-lived empire. Only further studies can show how the Umayyads exercised their power, since hegemony is never absolute and often the best laid plans are obstructed.

Rahman's efforts to question the knowledge content of Islamic political thought are indeed noteworthy. Rahman was always quite concerned with the role of politics as a component of his vision for human improvement, or what he would deem progress. For, in his view, the betterment of this world and the humans in it were both at the center of God's interest. For this reason, the relationships between humans—in other words, society—“requires the trans-human reference to God.”³⁶ Hence the need for an effective use of power and governance, in short, politics.

Prophecy and Revelation

What also preoccupied Rahman in the 1960s and consistently animated both his theological and historical inquiries was the concept of prophecy as embodied in the person of the Prophet. Combined with the revelation itself, the Prophet and prophecy were indispensable components of Islam. Few studies have recognized how significant the Prophet was to Rahman's thought and how the idea of the Prophet sustained and undergirded his understanding of the revelation, of the role and meaning of the prophetic tradition, and of Islam as a faith tradition in history. A prophet, in Rahman's view, is a figure entrusted, as per the rhetoric of the Qur'ān, with a “heavy responsibility” and who is “excessively conscious of this responsibility.”³⁷ “A prophet,” Rahman wrote,

is a person who is centrally and vitally interested in swinging history and moulding it on the Divine pattern. As such, neither the Prophetic Revelation nor the Prophetic behavior can neglect the actual historical situation obtaining immediately and indulge in purely abstract generalities; God speaks and the Prophet acts *in*, although certainly not merely *for*, a given historical context. . . . And yet the Message must—despite its being clothed in the flesh and blood of a particular historical situation—outflow through and beyond that given context of history.³⁸

Rahman argues further that the “very greatness of the Prophet lies in the fact that, having a unique insight into the forces of history, he pressed them into the service of a Divinely inspired moral pattern.”³⁹

The Prophet Muḥammad, in Rahman's reading, was gifted with “historic judgment.”⁴⁰ In other words, he was a visionary and a transcendent figure. Rahman's construction of the Prophet Muḥammad is of a man concerned with big-picture global concerns who dedicated little of his prophetic energy to the minutiae of life. If the quotidian details of the Prophet's life were

documented, then it was as part of the cultural fabric of Arabian life. In most instances, in Rahman's view, the Muslim community of the Prophet resolved its challenges by drawing on common-sense solutions derived from their customs and conventions. Where the Prophet was invited to decide upon certain issues, he did so informally and on an ad hoc basis. This generated normative prophetic examples and quasi-precedents—but, Rahman argued, not in a strict legal sense.

Drawing on insights developed by a range of past Muslim theologians and philosophers, Rahman was keen to understand revelation as organically and integrally related to the persona of the Prophet Muḥammad, with special attention to his psychological and biographical history as well as his spiritual experiences. The Muslim philosophers, for their part, formulated a concept of a Prophet-lawgiver like Plato's philosopher-king. Muslim theologians, in turn, viewed prophecy as a demonstration of God's power. Hence, theologians saw prophecy as a "divine favor and gift" accompanied by certain prophetic capacities. Ghazālī, Rahman wrote, accepts some aspects of the philosophical idea that a "prophet's soul is endowed with certain intellectual, imaginative, and telekinetic capacities which cannot be acquired either by learning or mystical purification."⁴¹ Prophets teach the moral law, what is good and what is wrong, hence some acts must be performed while others are to be avoided. Prophets are the promulgators of religious laws. They determine the rights and duties among individuals in society.

Rahman drew on Ibn Sīnā and Fārābī to explain that a prophet has "a religio-social mission and should legislate."⁴² A prophet is not merely a "thinker" or a "mystic," Rahman explained, but "an actor moulding actual history," and this idea is very close "to expressing the esprit of the historic Muslim community."⁴³ For this reason, prophets establish cities with laws and instill in societies the idea of contracts so that people can live by means of cooperation and transactions. And without law and justice, these arrangements cannot be sustained. The function of the law is to regulate self-interest. This is why a prophet possesses a combined religious and philosophical truth and is therefore able to express himself in terms and doctrines that are acceptable to the common intelligence as well as holding appeal for the elites. For the law to be continuously effective after the prophet's death, one must ensure that "the prophet's real intentions and background meaning is not forgotten and . . . the law is not reduced to a moribund formalism."⁴⁴ Specific religious institutions are requisite in order to perpetuate the law and to serve as reminders of its real purpose. Only a figure with the extraordinary imaginative faculty of a prophet can optimally accomplish the task of producing a law and its associated institutions.⁴⁵

Rahman attempted to show how revelation was related to the mind and soul of the Prophet and to his environment, and how the substance and content of his teachings were in some domains organically related to his culture and immediate surroundings. This move was consistent with Rahman's ambition to historicize Islam as a religious tradition, but his conception of revelation was largely misunderstood by his vocal opponents and it elicited fierce opposition from orthodox figures, political revivalist quarters, and political opponents of the government of Ayub Khan in Pakistan.

Questions about the nature of revelation in Islam are not new. In the 2nd and 3rd Islamic centuries (corresponding to the 9th and 10th Gregorian centuries), Rahman argued, an emerging Islamic orthodoxy “emphasized the *externality* of the Prophet’s Revelation in order to safeguard its ‘otherness,’ objectivity and verbal character.”⁴⁶ While Rahman agreed that the Qur’ān itself maintained its otherness and objectivity, he also believed it repeatedly rejected the idea of the externality of the revelation to the Prophet himself. In Rahman’s view, the scripture itself expressed how close the revelation was to the heart of the Prophet. Since orthodoxy, in his analysis, lacked the tools to combine the otherness and verbal character of the Qur’ān, on the one hand, “and its intimate connection with the work and religious personality of the Prophet,” on the other hand, the orthodox doctrine was unable to articulate “both that the Qur’ān is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muḥammad.” He went on to write that “the Qur’ān obviously holds both, for it insists that it has come to the ‘heart’ of the Prophet, [so] how can it be external to him?”⁴⁷ Despite Rahman’s valiant efforts to explain his argument, there were few receptive audiences in Pakistan in the late 1960s for the finer points of Islamic theology. Defenders of the doctrinaire position made Rahman’s ideas the linchpin of their anti-government campaign. Ironically, the political leader, Ayub Khan, who had invited him to spearhead the effort to bring the country’s laws in line with modern Islamic interpretations, himself despaired, gave in to pressure, and abandoned his appointee.⁴⁸ Rahman took the hint, resigned his position, and sought academic refuge in the United States.

Ten years after arriving in the United States, Rahman published an article explaining how the Word of God was conveyed to the Prophet. It was part of Islamic doctrine that the Qur’ān was the Word of God and without this “pivotal belief,” he wrote, “no person can even be a nominal Muslim.”⁴⁹ But he maintained that Muslims, as is well known, disagreed about the nature of the Word of God—from the Mu‘tazila, who held the doctrine that the Qur’ān was created, to Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, who vigorously declared the Qur’ān was uncreated. Different from both was the theologian Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī, who held that the Qur’ān as read, heard, and seen is not the eternal Word of God. In the view of the Ash‘arites, the Word of God is “a simple, eternal, indivisible mental act of God (Kalām-i Nafsī).”⁵⁰ While the written word in ink and on paper as uttered by mortal tongues is revered as the Qur’ān, it cannot be deemed an eternal entity in this form. The eternal Qur’ān is ineffable, expressed in the psychic “inner speech” as a mimesis of the articulated verbal and written speech. This position was reinforced by multiple figures, Rahman said, including Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564–1624) and Shāh Waliyullah (d. 1762). Sirhindī said: “By God, the Word of God, is in truth, one single (mental act); externally, the effects appear as diverse (like the Torah, the Evangel and the Qur’ān).”⁵¹ While Rahman does not mention the influential Muḥī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) to support his case, both the Indian scholars mentioned were in thrall to Ibn ‘Arabī’s talents and insights. Ibn ‘Arabī went to great lengths to explain how revelation reaches the Prophet and he also invoked the role of the Prophet’s heart as the locus of reception, along the lines that Rahman tried to explain.⁵²

Rahman drew extensively on the arguments of Waliyullāh, who elaborates in great detail in an analogy between the nature of the Sharī‘a—the revealed devotional, social, and moral practices—on the one hand and the very nature of revelation itself on the other. Just as the revealed Sharī‘a is formulated according to the customs of a people, revelation similarly takes the form of the mold

of the Prophet's mind; or, put another way, it is affectively related to the ecology of the Prophet's mind. "The verbal revelation," Rahman wrote, citing Waliyullāh, "occurs in the mould of words, idioms and style which are already existent in the mind of the Prophet."⁵³ Waliyullāh's claim is based on a philosophical-mystical explanation in which the Prophet's imagination is identical to the will to do good for humanity. When the Prophet's imagination "comes down" (*tadallī*), the mind/imagination is transformed into a mental representation or mimesis of the Divine Omnipotence (*jabarūt*).⁵⁴ Rahman does not elaborate this mystical aspect in his explanation, as Waliyullāh did. Nor does he anywhere acknowledge his debt to the 19th-century thinker Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), who explicitly adopted some of Waliyullāh's understanding and explanation of the Prophet Muḥammad's revelation, but with one major caveat.⁵⁵ Waliyullāh explained the revelation of the Qur'ān as "words, idioms and styles of narration" that were already stored in the mind of the recipient of revelation in the mental, linguistic, and cultural forms the Prophet Muḥammad inhabited. But he made no mention of verbal revelation. Surprised by the absence of any mention of the verbal revelation in the explanation of the 18th-century scholar, Khān made it a point to state that he believed that the verbal revelation was also from the divine source.⁵⁶

Rahman struggled with this topic in the following words:

If the words, style and the idioms were already possessed by the Prophet, how is it that they become [the] eternal, divine and uncreated Word? How is it that the Word of God has come to the Prophet not merely in inspirational form but the very words of the Qur'ān are revealed divinely?⁵⁷

How do sound words come to the Prophet, as the orthodox tradition believes, and how do these words acquire the character of eternal uncreated words that pass through the mind and body of a mortal prophet?

Drawing on Iqbāl's insights, Rahman noted that affect and feelings too generated a cognitive element that lent itself to the form of an idea. Put differently, feelings and ideas are the nontemporal dimensions of a unit of inner experience. Rahman was persuaded by Iqbāl's psychological explanation that inarticulate feelings find their expression in ideas. We know that ideas also emerge simultaneously with feelings. When both—ideas and feelings—are expressed in a temporal or contingent realm, then one can count both the inner experience and the word as being revealed. Yet another question haunted Rahman: how does this feeling-idea-word complex that lies outside the control of the Prophet differ from other creative acts of the mind pursued by poets, artists, and mystics?⁵⁸ How does the Qur'ān distinguish itself from other forms of original cognition where something new is discovered? A psychological account, for Rahman, was insufficient, since it only placed the Qur'ān in the company of other creative poetic and artistic forms of inspiration. He sought something compelling that set the Qur'ān apart from other creative accounts.

For him, that uniqueness was the substance of the teachings of the Qur'ān, which established its divine character and uniqueness. He shared this insight in his book *Islam*, but this explanation was never entertained by his critics, who were obsessed by his unusual characterization of the revelation. In their view, he stood accused of not confessing to the Qur'ān being the Word of God. For Rahman, the force of the Qur'ān was moral. This moral core emphasizes both monotheism and social justice at the center of Islam's moral law. "The law is immutable: it is God's 'Command', Man cannot make or unmake the Moral Law: he must submit himself to it."⁵⁹ The moral law and its spiritual values must be known and ought to inculcate a moral and religious perception that leaves the individual transformed. Rahman does not elaborate how the moral law is known. He would most likely not identify it with the traditional *fiqh* practices and teaching, which he would see as culturally and historically specific. Yet he would most likely identify some of the moral principles that were extrapolated from the *fiqh* practices as being the moral law. However, Rahman did not expand upon or illustrate the deduction of the moral law from revelation in a theoretically satisfactory manner. One expression of the moral law was the commandment to pursue moral and social justice. The Qur'ān, Rahman believed, taught, through the example of the Prophet Muḥammad, that humans must be ready to recreate history in the pursuit of the moral law.⁶⁰ The Sunnah of the Prophet itself becomes a model of how the moral law is implemented. However, Rahman explained, there were moments when the Prophet transcended himself: these were the moments when his

moral cognitive perception becomes so acute and so keen that his consciousness becomes identical with the moral law itself. . . . But the moral and religious values are God's Command, and although they are not identical with God entirely, they are part of Him. The Qur'ān is, therefore, purely divine.⁶¹

Despite his detractors, Rahman did enthusiastically join the orthodox enterprise "of moving from text to *ḥukm*, from immanent language to transcendent values."⁶²

Rahman was channeling here, in a slightly modified manner, the idea of Walīyullāh, who identified the Prophet's mind and imagination with Divine Omnipotence. Rahman's cosmological imagery was inhabited by the moral law in relation to the Prophet's consciousness. Consciousness is important to him for the "organic relationship between feelings, ideas and words" since it creates in the Prophet a relationship so complete "that feeling-idea-word is a total complex with a life of its own."⁶³ While it may not be obvious, for Rahman the Prophet Muḥammad is central to the event of the Qur'ān. When the Prophet's intuitive moral perception rose to the highest point and became identical with the moral law itself, at those very moments his own conduct was subject to criticism in the Qur'ān and open to correction. The intimacy of the Prophet and the revelation cannot be separated at the inception nor can they be sundered in history. The Prophet is in a mimetic relationship with the Divine Omnipotence or the moral law, but he is never identical to the moral law nor is he an incarnation of it. "The Qur'ān," Rahman wrote,

is thus pure Divine Word, but, of course, it is equally intimately related to the inmost personality of the Prophet Muḥammad whose relationship cannot be mechanically conceived like that of a record. The Divine Word flowed through the Prophet's heart.⁶⁴

Becoming unified with the moral law does not mean the Prophet can identify with God or even with a part or an attribute of the Divine. Islam erected a barrier against such identification of the creation with God, and "association" (*shirk*) is marked as one of the gravest sins against God. "The reason," according to Rahman, "is that no man may say, 'I am the Moral Law.'" He added that "man's duty is carefully to formulate this Law and to submit to it with all his physical, mental and spiritual faculties."⁶⁵ The burden of the discovery of the moral law is on humans themselves, in the shadow of the Qur'ān and the moral precepts of the Messenger.

Historiography of Islamic Civilization and Intellectual Thought

As others have noted, Rahman's modernist perspective on occasion colored his historiographical account, and he was, ironically, identified as being among the "modern Muslim apologists," an unfair label at best.⁶⁶ Since politics was not very far from his intellectual concerns, he linked political units of action to communities, as well as their institutions, as elements of historical time. The dilemma of Muslim modernists and reformers lay in their deep anxieties about the challenges of their present and their urgent desire to find solutions. That mindset can sometimes result in Muslim historical concepts and practices becoming tainted by the anxieties of the present, resulting in the loss of nuance and, at times, accuracy.

One is startled to read how Rahman portrays the Prophet as blending "religious authority and democracy" with "a finesse that defies description."⁶⁷ A more historically-minded reader is left questioning the association of prophetic authority with the modern concept of democracy in the absence of a careful definition of what Rahman means by democracy. A generous reading would be that he views democracy as a synecdoche for politics or the egalitarian spirit of Islam: otherwise it is anachronistic to describe the Prophet's society in this manner. The finesse and wisdom of the Prophet in accomplishing his mission is, in the eyes of a believer, indisputable, but for a historian it requires evidence. Yet Rahman frames as a form of democracy the consultation (*shūra*) that the Prophet undertook to arrive at some social decisions. *Shūra* is an assembly of elite rulers, far from the popular or electoral democracy of modern times. In pre-Islamic Arabia, consultation allowed the elites to share their opinion with their leader, who then took the final decision in significant matters. Yet Rahman, like many writers on political Islam, draws a straight line between modern democracy and the Prophet's Medina.

The dynamic early growth of Islamic civilization, to Rahman's mind, was due to the normative content of Islamic teachings being imagined as part of an ongoing "living *sunnah*," which, in his estimation, unfortunately ceased to be an "on-going process."⁶⁸ Without that early dynamic outlook, the harvest of knowledge from the revealed and prophetic sources was, in later generations, "regarded as the unique incarnation of the Will of God." A nuanced reading of Rahman might argue that knowledge derived from the revealed sources represented the will of

God at a particular moment in history; that knowledge then, through the vehicle of tradition, passes on to every successive generation the burden of discovering the moral law appropriate to each time.

Rahman regretted that political imperatives in early Islam, especially the need to quell internal sectarian differences between rival forces, had resulted in the “lived” nature of the Muslim source teachings being stifled or becoming subject to political contestation. In other words, the element of contingency as a feature of that historical time was muffled. But the weakness of Rahman’s own argument is that he isolates the source teachings, excepting possibly the ḥadīth materials, as exempt from the contingencies of history. Interpretative contingency is unavoidable, and it became manifest during the Prophet’s time and afterward. If specific incarnations of theology and politics became the drivers of Muslim history, then surely that is its contingency, even if the results are not to the liking of Rahman. Rahman does not provide us with a thick historical excursus and compelling reasons as to why and how the organic and dynamic living Sunnah was displaced by dogmatic approaches. A historian, however, must give an account of what happened and admit that this account is a manifestation of the contingency of history. One plausible explanation might suggest that, when Muslims were successful in establishing functioning communities and societies with stable political orders and institutions, then the discursive fluidity available to them was displaced by practices and institutional norms that worked for discrete communities. If Islam took history seriously, it would not necessarily follow that all history subsequent to the establishment of Islamic societies is a perfect history. Even if historians proclaim that Islamic societies became an incarnation of the divine will, it does not necessarily mean these are perfect societies; the human quest for truth is not infallible.

Similarly, when commenting on the possibility of realigning religious imperatives with philosophic views in the 10th century, Rahman speculated that a more integrated tradition of philosophy and theology would have served Muslims better. One suspects that this is again part of his diagnosis of Islamic history in light of contemporary problems. For their part, the Muslim philosophers held the view that there were parallel discourses—one of religion aimed at the multitude, and another the discourse of philosophy serving the elites; they were separate and served two distinct audiences.

Few doubt that the Muslim philosophers thought their discourse was compelling, even superior. However, they did not claim that their views ought to displace the convictions of religion. The philosophers were content with a discourse in line with the metaphysical currents of the time, yet they also thought that the laypersons to whom theologians catered required easily accessible dogmas. Ghazālī obviously disagreed with this view: his writings increased the intellectual torque of the theological arguments and he vehemently disapproved of the dual truths held by philosophers. Leading theologians prior to Ghazālī may have disagreed with the Muslim philosophers but a blanket charge of heresy was rare. Philosophers, for their part, deemed their metaphysical views to be compelling and in line with the prevailing cosmology, playing a role like the one physics plays today as an explanation of the material existence of the world.

Rahman’s approach to a recurring issue in the historiography of Islam is suggestive of how he imagined the place, role, and proper interpretation of history. Rahman writes that “if the philosophers had been a little more bold and Islam-minded it might not have been altogether

impossible to hold philosophically that the body is resurrectible in some sense and that without it the soul means nothing.”⁶⁹ The insight that the opposition between corporeal resurrection and spiritual resurrection ought not to have been such polarizing idea in Islamic theology is, in hindsight, a good sentiment, but events in the post-Ghazālī era did not play out according to Rahman’s wishes, and the historical question to be posed is this: did the Muslim philosophers, on the one hand, and the theologians, on the other, see their methods as complementary in the 9th and 10th centuries in the way that Rahman expected them to be if they were to collaborate? Was a combined or integrated method for both theology and philosophy even thinkable at the time? More intriguing is Rahman’s wish that the Muslim philosophers had been more “Islam-minded” in this instance, though in another instances he viewed their “intellectual effort as Islamic—indeed, as deeply religious.”⁷⁰ Rahman wished that the philosophers had given preference to their Islamic scriptural perspectives over their Hellenic influences, and his own perspective is a normative wish-list after the fact, and clearly not history. And as Skinner correctly pointed out, it is bad history when writers from the past are “simply praised or blamed according to how far they may seem to have aspired to the condition of being ourselves.”⁷¹

Knowledge and Epistemology

During the 19th and 20th centuries, Muslim religious thought encountered what some scholars have identified—sometimes seriously and at other times ironically—as a “crisis in knowledge” in Muslim societies. What this expression conveys are the challenges encountered in the disciplines related to the interpretation of Islam as a faith tradition: Islamic law, ethics, and theology, among others. Few Muslims have any serious qualms about modern medicine, science, and engineering, save when there is a conflict between a pre-modern, theologically-informed value claim and a modern practice. In those instances, the cultural divide and the knowledge divide between Islamic thought and secular orientations are invoked. More recently, the opposition is formulated in terms of a colonial genealogy, on the one hand, and indigenous forms of cognition and learning, on the other.

Rahman did apply himself to the diagnosis of why, in religious domains, the Muslim knowledge project turned out to be wanting. In his review of madrasa education for Muslim theologians in and outside South Asia, he identified both the strengths and weaknesses of such educational systems. The core difference between the pre-modern tradition and modernity lies in the concept of knowledge to which religious experts are exposed.⁷² Rahman pointed out that traditional Muslim knowledge systems, which are represented by a diverse range of Muslim seminaries, conceptualize knowledge “as something to be acquired.” By contrast, the modern Western attitude holds that “knowledge is essentially to be searched and discovered by the mind to which it assigns an active rôle in knowledge.”⁷³ Rahman is clearly thinking of modern Muslim theologians’ preference for pre-modern epistemology of combining the rational (*‘aql*) harvest of knowledge with the transmitted or traditional (*naql*) knowledge practices which Muslim orthodoxy carried into modernity.⁷⁴ He often portrays the traditional knowledge system as being prone to dogmatic commitments. Another way of putting this is to say that, for the orthodox groups, knowledge is inherently tradition-constitutive, in other words, constituted by

tradition.⁷⁵ In other words, rationality is, in a sense, constituted by the reason of tradition. But if reason is subordinate to discourses of authority, then discursive authority stands outside the interrogation of reason. Even if one concedes that rationality is tradition-constitutive, the role of rational discourse has always been a contentious one in both pre-modern and modern debates. What constitutes tradition and how to evaluate its elements is a high-stakes, hotly contested and unresolved debate in modern Islam, and Rahman was an ardent voice in that conversation.⁷⁶ In his analysis, Muslim orthodoxy, on the whole, came out forcefully “against reason, which it wanted to keep in strict subordination to dogma.”⁷⁷ Dogma is Rahman’s keyword to mark elements of a tradition that no longer resonate with the lived experiences of Muslims or are at odds with the demands of rationality at a specific time. While, to Rahman’s mind, the emphasis on transmitted knowledge or tradition-based authority “had an incalculably damaging influence in this direction”—in other words, it assaulted the authority of reason—he did concede that “enlightened and intelligent men were not altogether lacking who insisted on a real understanding of the tradition.”⁷⁸

Addressing the question of knowledge more directly, Rahman was aware that 20th-century Muslim religious thinkers harbored all kinds of ambivalence about modern knowledge, including their anxiety that knowledge related to the values and morals on which the contemporary world was based lacked an Islamic pedigree. One response offered by Rahman was that there was nothing wrong with knowledge per se, but its moral status depended on the ends to which knowledge was deployed.⁷⁹ He argued that the modern world had “misused” knowledge in a moral sense. Instead of harnessing energy from nuclear power, humanity produced instead a destructive atomic bomb. Humans do possess the capacity of the intellect and do deploy their reason (*‘aql*) in pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge in turn confers responsibility on humans. The exegesis of the Qur’ān 33:72, where humans do indeed possess knowledge but fail in executing their responsibility—an interpretation which is further reinforced by Q 80:23—resonated strongly with Rahman. “It is because of this discrepancy between the power of knowledge which man has, and his failure to live up to the moral responsibility arising from that knowledge,” Rahman wrote, “that this problem needs to be addressed.”⁸⁰ Only if Muslim intellectuals identify certain moral priorities can the misuse and abuse of knowledge be stemmed. It is for this reason that Rahman strenuously campaigned for ethics and morals to be prioritized in modern Islamic thought as guardrails to avoid what he called the misuse of knowledge within the practice of the Islamic tradition itself.

Historically, Rahman portrayed the dogmatic theology of the pre-modern period as dedicated to “lengthy and sometimes incisive discussions on the nature of knowledge and even special treatises on the subject.” But, in his view, “these endless discussions on the nature of knowledge failed, in practice,” for they miscarried in the one area where they were needed most—namely, in the theological domain.⁸¹ Theology, in Rahman’s view, was not effectively served by the changing knowledge debates. While he conceded that *kalām*-theology expanded as a result of the needs of the community for new dogmatic formulations, Rahman himself only drew attention to the historical development of the discipline and did not provide an extensive description of the problem. *Kalām*-theology or dialectical theology, in his view, failed to foster an inner and organic relationship between its multiple parts in the light of serious and ongoing epistemological

debates, and this resulted in the stagnation of the field of *kalām* itself. “This,” he wrote, “is what we mean by saying that the *kalām*-system, instead of stimulating thought, came to be a *substitute* for philosophy and retarded thought in general.”⁸² Scholars such as Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 1390) had observed that, by his time, philosophy and *kalām* had become indistinguishable, and some may have viewed this move as a constructive step, but for Rahman this evolution of the discipline meant that philosophy surrendered to the impulses of *kalām*.⁸³ In other words, he preferred a vibrant continuity of the philosophical pursuit in dialogue with theology. Again, we see Rahman’s preference to make ideas the foremost object of his historical endeavors.

Despite Rahman’s own personal disenchantment with philosophy in relation to understanding the divine, he held that philosophy met

a perennial intellectual need and has to be allowed to flourish both for its own sake and for the sake of other disciplines, since it inculcates a much-needed analytical-critical spirit and generates new ideas that become important intellectual tools for other sciences, not least for religion and theology.⁸⁴

Actual tensions between theology and philosophy are not reasons to ban philosophy in the name of a “self-righteous theology, or vice versa.”⁸⁵ The critical-analytical activity philosophy provided was, to his mind, vital and needed to be exercised with freedom; the abandonment of critical tools was tantamount to committing “intellectual suicide.”⁸⁶ Because of the affront philosophy caused in some orthodox quarters, philosophy had become, in his words, a *disciplina non grata*. Rahman’s claim might be challenged by more recent studies that suggest that philosophy did indeed thrive in Muslim societies.⁸⁷ However, there is some validity to the charge that modern Islamic thought is, with some exceptions, severely deprived of philosophical insight of any kind.

Rahman’s critics frequently framed him as a modernist, but in doing so they missed two aspects of his thought. Firstly, Rahman’s own writings contain a certain ambivalence in his relation to modernity and some of its practices. Secondly, while he often proudly wore the badge of being a “Muslim modernist” both in Pakistan and in the United States, he did so with certain qualifications. In a large part of the Muslim world, the appellation “modernist” often connotes negatively that which is betwixt and between modernity and tradition (among other destabilizing characteristics). And, in the aftermath of independence in various Muslim countries, the turn toward different varieties of nationalism—including Muslim nationalism in Pakistan—brought the idea of modernism generally, and Islamic modernism in particular, under renewed scrutiny. Rahman wanted to make clear that “Islamic modernism is not equivalent to secularism.” He railed against social scientists, especially political scientists, “who through ignorance [and] wishful thinking linked Islamic modernism to secularism.”⁸⁸ Here is his clearest articulation of his position:

A Muslim modernist is every bit Islamic. Indeed, it was the Muslim modernist who consciously reformulated the idea that Islam is applicable to the whole gamut of life and is not confined to certain religious rites, family law and certain penal provisions of the Qur'an as the 'Ulama' had come in practice to accept, and by so doing had become quasi-secular. What is true is that Muslim modernism represents Islamic liberalism: it has accepted certain key liberal social values from the modern West and has interpreted the Qur'an to confirm those values and not just to "legitimize" them as a social scientist is so fond of putting the matter.⁸⁹

Critical to Rahman was the "process of re-understanding the Qur'an and the legacy of the Prophet" which involved not only the intellect of Muslims but also their faith. And he was careful to point out that the "Muslim modernist certainly does not accept the entirety of Western social values."⁹⁰ The Muslim modernist welcomed the emancipation of women, Rahman acknowledged, but he also complained about the "havoc" caused by the new sexual ethics in the West. He wanted to preserve the idea of a family and he deemed unacceptable the way in which the family was diminished.

Rahman's Legacy

Rahman's legacy and reception have been mixed. In many parts of the world, Rahman's legacy has received a positive reception and he is regarded as a reformist.⁹¹ His scholarship has inspired a range of individual thinkers and scholarly cohorts attracted by his modernist project. Most of these contexts, in countries like Bosnia, Indonesia and Turkey are characterized by a challenge that resembles the one he encountered in Pakistan—namely, the divide among reform-minded modernists, modernizers and neo-traditionalists of different stripes opposed to a range of traditionalist forces laying claim to an orthodox tradition and truth claims related to religion. The particular challenge of Rahman's policy work in Pakistan was best captured in the words of the Pakistani president, Ayub Khan, who invited him to assist him with legal reforms. Pakistan, Khan wrote, was riven "by a number of schisms; the most fundamental is the one which separates the educated classes from the traditional groups."⁹² Others, too, identified this rift in binary terms as a "fundamental conflict."⁹³ All aspired to restore communication between these two classes, and Khan claimed that "a proper interpretation of Islamic principles and their application to the present-day problems" would be the panacea.⁹⁴ His fear was that the gulf between the traditional religious groups and the modern educated classes would widen and eventually alienate the latter from Islam. In hindsight, the issues were much more complicated. The modernist solution of a correct interpretation of Islam clashed with the traditionalist solution of an *authentically* correct interpretation of Islam, and this clash over the meaning and practice of normative Islam has yet to be resolved. In Pakistan, the very idea of a "proper interpretation" of Islam has itself become a highly contested phenomenon.

In the last three decades, the English-language historiography of religious thought in Pakistan leans distinctly in the direction of the traditionalist 'ulamā'. In this context, some evaluate Rahman's legacy in a more balanced manner as that of a "modernist," while more critical

evaluations label his views as being “controversial and disrespectful . . . of some unanimously agreed upon dogmas among Muslims.”⁹⁵ Rahman’s complex and knowledgeable understanding of issues such as how bank interest differs from the usury prohibited by the Qur’ān, or how the pharmacologically and gastronomically generated substance identified as alcohol differs from the Islamically prohibited substance called “wine,” went unappreciated in both the academic and policy venues in Pakistan in his time.⁹⁶

Since Rahman’s time, Islamic thought has become much more complex, featuring a variety of intellectual orientations. Rahman saw value in some of the inquiries made by orientalist scholars but often disagreed with the implications of their work. Orientalist scholarship has since undergone a change, and those who adhere to it give greater attention to Muslim accounts of historiography, dropping their once hyper-skeptical view that all Muslim sources are unreliable and tainted by confessionalism.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, scholarship in national languages has grown but still receives insufficient attention in the Western academy unless it speaks to sensational controversy. The growing presence in the Western academy of a diverse group of scholars from Muslim backgrounds makes possible new critiques of older scholarship and raises new questions on a range of topics ranging from gender and sexuality to history, politics, and a host of other issues.

Rahman played a commendable role in the understanding of Islamic thought, broadly conceived, in certain Muslim societies and in the Western academy. In 1983 he was honored by his peers and awarded the Giorgio Levi Della Vida medal for his contributions to Islamic Studies. His legacy and scholarly contributions have received acknowledgment from a range of quarters. Only further critical and evaluative studies will be able to advance our full understanding of his scholarly legacy.

Rahman’s Double-Movement Theory

Islam remains an important book in Rahman’s oeuvre, and his book, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*, and *Islam and Modernity* form the core of Rahman’s later vision of an Islamic discourse. In this context, his theory of interpretation as “a double movement” is most relevant.⁹⁸ This approach gained a number of followers, especially those in pursuit of an ethical theory anchored in the Qur’ān, but it also elicited an equal number of critics and dissatisfied readers.⁹⁹ Rahman’s first “movement” involves understanding the macro-situation of the context of the revelation as a step to “understanding the meaning of the Qur’ān as a whole.”¹⁰⁰ In this step, the comprehensive tenor of the Qur’ān ought to be the framework through which each law and ethical teaching is viewed in order to bring into prominence the “definite attitude toward life” and the worldview that the revelation instills in its readers and communities.¹⁰¹ Most important, for Rahman, was to view the Qur’ān itself as a coherent unity. The first step of the double movement is thus to elicit and systematize the general principles of the Qur’ān itself. The second step is to take this general view and move to “the specific view that is to be formulated and realized now.”¹⁰² The modern situation required careful scrutiny in order to apply afresh the Qur’ānic principles and values extrapolated in the first movement. If both movements were effectively executed, Rahman believed, then “the Qur’ān’s imperatives will become alive and effective once again.”¹⁰³ To realize

the second move in the present, Rahman explained, could even involve “changing the rules of the past in conformity with the altered situation of the present,” provided this change does not violate the general principles and values of the Qur’ān. S. Parvez Manzoor deemed Rahman’s Qur’ān hermeneutics “hopelessly inadequate.”¹⁰⁴ Manzoor’s critique is valid since Rahman is vague in terms of his brief theoretical method, which lacks any interpretative canons and explanations of how these could be applied to an ethics based on the Qur’ān. Nevertheless, Manzoor, in a later reflection, applauded Rahman’s affirmation of the moral will that is incarnated in meaningful transcendence.¹⁰⁵ Needless to say, the quest for transcendence is especially challenging in the modern age of immanence. Still, Manzoor pointed to a paradox at the heart of Rahman’s scholarship: he found very little role for the historical interpretation of the tradition in terms of what Hans-Georg Gadamer identified as “effective history”—namely, those preconceptions, prejudices, and biases held by readers and interpreters that make understanding possible. Rahman strenuously refused to give any credence to effective history and deemed it too subjective. Rather, he stood with Emilio Betti, for whom hermeneutics was about objectivity and methodical adherence to the canons of interpretation.¹⁰⁶

In standing firm in his commitment to the historicity of the Qur’ānic text, Rahman frequently questioned the adherence of past interpreters to the Qur’ān’s teachings when they did not meet his criteria for reading the revealed text. For Rahman, the normativity of the Qur’ān’s moral law had to be apparent at all times, and thus it may seem that he had little time for previous interpretations of the revealed text. He also assumed that Qur’ānic normativity would be uniform and singular throughout history, whereas the study of the intellectual tradition shows a multiplicity of normative narratives as experienced by readers and communities. “In saving the text,” Manzoor charged, Rahman “had to damn the history of its reading.”¹⁰⁷ Manzoor’s criticism may be excessive, but it is partially a product of Rahman’s own tension-ridden rhetoric. On the other hand, Rahman is explicit that the intellectual tradition “cannot be ignored.”¹⁰⁸ He is dismissive of the kinds of reforms pioneered by figures such as Kemal Atatürk, who tried to “shed the historical being of the community and to seek a future without it.” Rahman wanted comprehensive reform that left a trace on “the being of the community,” and that effective change occurs “when the cumulative process has reached a stage of outburst that literally reforms orthodoxy.”¹⁰⁹ Contrary to Manzoor’s charge of neglecting history altogether, he insisted that a critical study of “historical Islam” is a prerequisite for an understanding of the Qur’ān. History, for Rahman, was crucial for showing “the career of Islam at the hands of Muslims.” But Rahman insists that, in “religious terms,” the intellectual history will be “finally judged by the criterion of the Qur’ān itself,” as per his two-stage hermeneutical theory.¹¹⁰ Put differently, in the understanding of Islam, tradition and history have a vote but not a veto. If any source does have a veto, then for Rahman it would be the Qur’ān as “revealed to the conscience of a believer only after it has been properly understood” by placing its legal and social assertions in a historical setting. History and tradition as judged by the normativity of the Qur’ān are what define Fazlur Rahman’s Islamic modernism.

Discussion of the Literature

If one examined only Fazlur Rahman's well-circulated later writings, one would be startled to learn that in the early part of his career he was deeply interested in Islamic philosophy and theology. In between two early works on philosophy, *Avicenna's Psychology* (1952),¹¹¹ followed by *Avicenna's De Anima* (1959),¹¹² he also published *Prophecy in Islam* (1958, reprint 1979).¹¹³ Shortly after arriving in the United States, he published *The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā* (1975).¹¹⁴ His stays in the United Kingdom and Canada were extremely productive periods in his life during which his main preoccupations were philosophy and theology. Questions about theology and ethics were not very far from Rahman's intellectual agenda. It is not surprising that at every stage of his career he also contemplated how to make a difference in the realm of Islamic thought.

His philosophical and theological meditations also laid the groundwork for that genre of writing which Rahman himself identified as "Islamic thought," and he energetically contributed to this body of work. How does one differentiate Islamic thought from philosophy? "Philosophy" explores and contributes to the knowledge and understanding of the cognitive identities of things. By contrast, "thought" explores the differences between the identities of things. Furthermore, thought looks at the specific elements that undergird the identities of entities and how these constitute our knowledge of things.¹¹⁵ Islamic thought, in Rahman's view, included the study of the normative Islamic tradition but was leavened by the insights of dispassionate historical research nourished by philosophical and critical thought. Here the amalgam of intellectual disciplines, including history, philosophy, theology, the study of the normative practices (*Sunnah*) of the prophet, exegesis of the Qur'ān, prophetic reports, and moral philosophy, formed an integrated whole. In the archives of Islamic law, legal theory, pre-modern and modern philosophy, and ethical traditions, Rahman found plenty of illustrations and experiences to support his arguments.

His writings on Islamic thought include, first and foremost, *Islam*, a book that framed Rahman's intellectual manifesto for his ambitious plan to reconstruct Islamic thought. The book is a historical account in only some respects. For it is, as he himself conceded, an attempt to give an overview of "the general development of Islam" over fourteen centuries.¹¹⁶ Two goals—interpretive and phenomenological—were foremost in the author's mind and shone through his descriptive accounts of the story of the Muslim tradition in *Islam*. The interpretive aim was to provide an elucidation of ideas on a range of topics throughout Muslim history. The phenomenological angle was intended to give the reader an "Islamic sense" of that history in order to facilitate an appreciation of the "inner intensity of life which constitutes that faith."¹¹⁷ Since the book was addressed to multiple audiences, he hoped his Muslim readers would look at their religious history and tradition "more objectively." He especially wanted Muslims to know how Islam as a religious tradition and a civilizational construct had fared at the hands of its own adherents. Readers outside of the Muslim faith tradition, he hoped, would learn "what Islam does to a Muslim from the inside."¹¹⁸

The phenomenological aspect of Rahman's writing often suffered. He felt compelled to demonstrate the historical development of Muslim thought at the expense of paying attention to the documented experiences of modern Muslims. To be fair, Rahman himself often wrote on concrete issues of Muslim ethics, politics, and law by drawing on his experience of developments in Pakistan, Turkey, and Indonesia. These observations served as a working ethnography and as grist for his analytical mill, helping him to examine multiple Muslim contexts.

When Rahman does provide a historical narrative in *Islam*, it is a history very much written for his agenda of Islamic reform, which is the golden thread sustaining his narrative.¹¹⁹ First published in 1966 in the United Kingdom, *Islam* is the product of Rahman's thought as it stood not long after he published his trilogy of philosophical and theological works. The second edition of *Islam* was published a decade after he settled in the United States in 1979. It appears that in the 1960s Rahman was also simultaneously writing a book important to his reformist program, namely, *Islamic Methodology in History* (1965). The latter represented his detailed historical understanding of religious thought during the formative period of Islam. He raised questions as to whether the composition of the prophetic reports (*ḥadīth*, pl. *aḥādīth*) could truly mirror the lived practices (*Sunnah*) of the Prophet and whether some of these reports alleging normative claims did not also include post-prophetic developments. The book also included his account of how the politics of knowledge at the very formation of Islam served as the basis for the shape and form not only of the foundations of Islamic law and theology, but also of the formation of Muslim political theology and Islamic mysticism. In 1968, the very year that he left Pakistan, Rahman published *Selected Letters of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi*. Sirhindī (d. 1642) was hailed at the dawn of the 2nd Islamic millennium as a traditional centennial "renewer" (*mujaddid*). Sirhindī left for posterity a large trove of epistolary communications. Rahman was impressed by Sirhindī's intellectual and mystical spirit and edited some of his Persian letters. In some sense he also felt a certain kinship with Sirhindī's religious and spiritual ideas, specifically his political activism.

With multiple studies in philosophy, theology, and history under his belt, and having produced a steady stream of articles on an array of topics ranging from modern Islamic thought to ethics, Rahman published, seven years after he had relocated to the United States, *The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā* (1975), his last book devoted exclusively to philosophy. What followed was his turn to the ethics and theology of the Qur'ān in *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (1980); his examination of tradition through the prism of Islamic education in *Islam and Modernity* (1982); medical history and ethics in *Health and Medicine in the Islamic Tradition* (1987); and the posthumously published *Revival and Reform* (2000), which was designed to address debates on Islamic fundamentalism. Rahman also continued to pen numerous articles on a variety of topics in philosophy, contemporary Islamic thought, history, ethics, Islamic law, education, and politics.

While philosophy and philosophical theology animated Rahman's early writings, they also were the seed of his quest to explore an appropriate interpretation of the Muslim tradition. He realized that the God of the philosophers "remained a bloodless principle—a mere intellectual construct, lacking both power and compassion."¹²⁰ He therefore resorted to the Qur'ān. He was, however, deeply dissatisfied that the traditional Muslim approach did not treat the Qur'ān as a source on its own but rather relied—unusually, in his view—on commentaries and glosses. Thus, he felt the need to approach the Muslim scripture in conjunction with the life of the Prophet Muḥammad in

order to, as he put it, “gain fresh insight into its meaning and purpose, making it possible for me to reevaluate my tradition.”¹²¹ Along the way, he addressed the challenges modernity posed to religious thought and tradition. Revitalizing Islamic thought was central to the imperative of intellectual and social reform, and the impulse of renewal pulsed through his scholarship. While Rahman emphasized the importance of historical concerns and the Qur’ān, the normativity of his reading of the revelation often turned his historical questions into normative questions. Equipped with his distinctive historical–hermeneutical framework, Rahman explored a range of ethical questions that confronted a number of Muslim communities. These involved the nature of an Islamically inspired political order, along with specific issues of governance, women’s rights, Muslim family law, and medical ethics.

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