

Fazlur Rahman's Islamic Modernism

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis discusses the Islamic modernism of Fazlur Rahman, a distinguished theologian who conceptualized a new understanding of Islam in order to reconcile it with modern developments. Generally, religion is seen as representative of tradition and, hence, an impediment to social change. In contrast, the main thesis of Islamic modernism is that Islam has the capacity to generate change and renewal through its own dynamics, something which presupposes the re-interpretation of the *Qur'an* through the use of reason. This thesis analyzes the Islamic revival and reform processes in the light of Fazlur Rahman's studies. By scrutinizing the ideas of Fazlur Rahman, this thesis attempts to explain, on a theoretical level, the contributions as well as the shortcomings of Islamic modernism to Islamic thought.

KEYWORDS: Islamic Modernism, Fazlur Rahman, *Qur'an*, Revivalist Movements.

## ÖZET

Bu tez, Fazlur Rahman'ın İslami çağdaşlaşma fikrini tartışmaya açmaktadır. Döneminin seçkin teologlarından olan Fazlur Rahman, İslam'ı, modern gelişmelerle uzlaştırmak amacıyla, yeni bir ele alışla kavramsallaştırmaya çalışmıştır. Konu, dinin değişimi engellediği mi yoksa değişime katkıda bulunduğu mu sorusudur. Dinin geleneği temsil etmek suretiyle toplumsal değişimin önünü tıkadığı genel kanısının aksine İslami çağdaşçılık fikrinin ana tezi, İslam'ın değişim ve yeniliği kendi iç dinamikleriyle meydana getirecek kapasiteye sahip olduğu ve bunun başarılabilmesi için de Kuran'ın akıl yoluyla yeniden yorumlanması gerektiğidir. Bu çalışmada İslami uyanış ve reform hareketleri Fazlur Rahman'ın çalışmalarının ışığında incelenecektir. Fazlur Rahman'ın görüşleri ve getirmiş olduğu yenilikler tartışılmak suretiyle İslami çağdaşlaşmanın İslam düşüncesine katkılarının yanı sıra eksiklikleri de dile getirilmeye çalışılacaktır.

**ANAHTAR SÖZCÜKLER:** İslami Çağdaşlaşma, Fazlur Rahman, Kuran, İhya Hareketleri

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	iii
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	iv
<b>ÖZET</b> .....	v
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	vi
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>CHAPTER I: FAZLUR RAHMAN</b> .....	4
1.1) Fazlur Rahman’s Intellectual Background .....	4
1.2) General Outlook of Fazlur Rahman’s Thought .....	8
1.2.1.Revelation.....	9
1.2.2. Riba.....	12
1.3) Conclusion .....	15
<b>CHAPTER II: ISLAMIC MODERNISM</b> .....	17
2.1) Pre-modernist Revivalist Movements .....	19
2.2) Classical Islamic Modernism.....	26
2.3) Conclusion .....	30
<b>CHAPTER III: CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC MODERNISM</b> .....	32
3.1) Contemporary Islamic Modernism.....	32
3.1.1 The <i>Qur’an</i> and Islamic Modernism.....	34
3.2) Conclusion.....	42
<b>CONCLUDING REMARKS</b> .....	44
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	47

## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary challenge for Muslims is how to recover Islam from the debris of history and make it a living force, not only among Muslims, but also in the world at large. The basic questions have to do with elements in the history of Muslim countries that need to be emphasized and recombined with modern ones for effective self-restatement of Islam in the present challenge, and what needs to be modified and rejected. All pre-modernist reform movements, and most modernist attempts, have been no more than attempts to resolve these questions. In a more specific sense, the task is to distinguish between the religious communities as bearers of religious culture, and the normative truth or transcendent aspects of Islam.<sup>1</sup>

It is the upheavals of modernity that raised the issue of the relationship between religion and social change. The question here is whether religion contributes to or impedes change. As Toprak points out, this discussion does not necessarily assume that all religions oppose change.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, there have been many religious movements which sought to change the world or, as I shall discuss later, in some cases, religious movements attempted to determine the direction of change. In this debate, there are those who have presented religion as a catalyst of change and even of modernization. Religion, in this view, is represented as generating change and renewal through its own dynamics. Conversely, there are those who consider religion as obstructing change or modernization, and who therefore find the roots of the apparent backwardness of religious communities in religious teaching. Religion, in this sense, is regarded as an impediment, acting against the forces of change, especially by revolutionary movements that see it as defending the status quo.

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<sup>1</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, (New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 235-237

<sup>2</sup> Binnaz Toprak, *Islam and Political Development in Turkey*, (Leiden; Brill, 1984), p. 7

This study particularly takes the issue of the relationship between Islam and modernity as these relate to the idea of contemporary Islamic modernism developed by Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988). Fazlur Rahman believes that change, which brings within itself certain social and religio-moral implications, is inevitable.<sup>3</sup> The social situation does not remain the same, but continues to change. In fact, a state of true stability and solidarity does not consist of merely the static internal cohesion of various factors and elements of a society, but of an adjustment of the total social organism to movement and change; an adequate change in all parts and sectors of the organism is necessary.<sup>4</sup> According to Rahman, Islam has the initial capacity to exercise control upon the phenomenon of change provided that it is supported by its main sources, the *Qur'an*, and the *Sunnah* (the sayings and doings of the Prophet), and that Islamic heritage take shape and develop in the light of these resources. The ideas of Fazlur Rahman, which became known as contemporary Islamic modernism, utilize historical criticism in order to offer a way to interpret not only Islamic history, or the formation process of the *Hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet), but the *Qur'an* as well.

Fazlur Rahman, as a Pakistani scholar, was educated in a traditional Islamic style until his move to the West for his academic career. When he proved himself as a distinguished academic, he was invited back to Pakistan to manage the Central Institute of Islamic Research. This experience was a cornerstone in Rahman's line of thought since he found the opportunity to test the validity of his ideas. He then started to give lectures at Chicago University. Here, he embarked upon finding solutions to the problems that the contemporary Islamic world faced. It is obvious

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<sup>3</sup> Alparslan Açıkgenç, "The Thinker of Islamic Revival and Reform", *Journal of Islamic Research*, Vol. 4, No. 4, (Oct., 1990), p. 240

<sup>4</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Islamic Modernism: Its Scope, Method and Alternatives", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 1, (1970), p. 321

that, generally speaking, his suggested solutions are based on the actual problems of Pakistan at that time. However, these solutions may also offer new perspectives to the other Muslim countries' problems on the road to modernization.

The basic organization of this thesis gives priority to a topical rather than a chronological analysis. Chapter I will examine Fazlur Rahman, who proposes a new approach based on interpreting the *Qur'an* through historical criticism in order to solve the traditional problems of Islamic thought. What Rahman offers towards reconciling Islam with modernity is to make Islam a living force in the modernization process. To illustrate this, his life story will be briefly given since it has some parallels with his chain of ideas, which, as will be seen, can be divided into three parts. In the following chapter, revival movements and reforms in Islam will be examined, mainly in the light of Fazlur Rahman's studies. Chapter III will analyze contemporary Islamic modernism, which is represented by Rahman, and its interpretation of the *Qur'an*.

## CHAPTER I: FAZLUR RAHMAN

Fazlur Rahman's life story is interesting in the sense that it has similarities with his major concern, namely, Islam encountering modernity. His life and career have been described at length elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, I wish only to provide a brief description of the most influential periods in his life, those which had significant impact on his intellectual development, especially in his re-evaluation of the *Qur'an* with regard to modernization.

### 1.1. The Intellectual Development of Fazlur Rahman

Rahman, who belonged to a "deeply religious" family, started his early education in traditional Islamic thought under the guidance of his father, Mevlana Shahab Al Din.<sup>6</sup> He memorized the entire *Qur'an* in his early years. In 1940, he received his B.A., and later, in 1942, he received his M.A in Arabic from Punjab University, Lahore. Rahman continued his Ph.D. studies at Oxford University in 1946, and obtained his doctorate in Islamic Philosophy in 1949. His dissertation was on Ibn Sina's treatise on psychology. After completing his Ph.D., he taught, from 1950 to 1958, as a lecturer in Persian studies and Islamic philosophy at the University of Durham. It was at this stage that the conflict between traditional and modern views began to interest him.<sup>7</sup> As he puts it,

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<sup>5</sup> The most extensive record of information on Fazlur Rahman's life and works is Christopher Thomas Radbourne Hewer's "Fazlur Rahman: A Reinterpretation of Islam in the Twentieth Century". Ph.D. Thesis, (The University of Birmingham, 1988). See Fazlur Rahman's autobiographical note "Personal Statement", *The Courage of Conviction: Prominent Contemporaries Discuss Their Beliefs and How They Put Them into Action* ed Philip L. Berman, (Ballantine Books, New York, 1985), pp. 153-159. See also personal anecdotes by some of his former students Wan Mohd Nor Waun Daud "Personal Anecdotes on a Great Scholar, Teacher and Friend", *Islamic Research*, Vol. 4, No: 4, (1990), pp. 253-261, Alparslan Açıkgenç, "The Thinker of Islamic Revival and Reform", pp. 232-252, Tamara Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman", *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1995, Vol. 3, p. 408

<sup>6</sup> His father was a religious scholar who had graduated from Deoband. Rahman "Personal Statement"

<sup>7</sup> Açıkgenç, "The Thinker of Islamic Revival", p. 235

After I went to England, where I studied for my doctorate at Oxford and then taught at the University of Durham a conflict between my modern and traditional educations was activated. From the later forties to mid fifties I experienced an acute skepticism brought about by the study of philosophy. It shattered my traditional beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

However, Fazlur Rahman, as Açıkgenç has pointed out, did not fall into the trap of nihilism as a result of his skepticism; instead, he reached a synthesis that “all religious traditions need constant revitalization and reform” through a methodology which summons the Muslims back to the main sources of Islam, the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah*.<sup>9</sup>

During his academic career at the University of Durham, he published *Prophecy in Islam*, and it must have been around the time of the completion of this book that he arrived at the opinion that a theory or a doctrine cannot be considered truly Islamic unless it is derived from the *Qur’an*. He also published eight other articles mostly on the contemporary challenge of ideas and social issues in Islam. Later, while teaching as an associate professor at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University from 1958 to 1961, he completed the critical edition of Ibn Sina’s book of psychology from the *Shifa*.

In 1958, he received an invitation from the government of Pakistan to join the newly established Central Institute of Islamic Research, and, in 1961, he accepted an offer to become the director of that institute. The goal of this institution, and, through the institution, Rahman’s own goal, was to interpret Islam in such a rational and scientific way that it may cover a modern society’s needs.<sup>10</sup> He founded and edited

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<sup>8</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “An Autobiographical Note”, *Journal of Islamic Research*, Vol. 4, No. 4, (Oct., 1990), p. 227

<sup>9</sup> Açıkgenç, “The Thinker of Islamic Revival” pp. 234-235

<sup>10</sup> Adil Çiftçi, *Fazlur Rahman ile İslam’ı Yeniden Düşünmek*, (Kitabiyat, Ankara, 1999), p. 46

for several years the journal *Islamic Studies* and was deeply engaged in the Islamic affairs of the country. The controversies over his reformist views, particularly on the revelation, led to his resignation from his post. At this time he aimed to develop a methodology and this first appeared in a series of articles which were later collected into a book entitled *Islamic Methodology in History*. However, most of his methodological concern in this period concentrates on concrete solutions rather than on theoretical formulation.<sup>11</sup> In fact, he encapsulates the role of the Institute when he notes that the Institute

argued that in order to apply Islam today it is in the first place essential to understand the background of the Qur'an in order to determine the kind of purposes in moral spiritual and socio-economic fields which the Qur'an wanted to fulfill that the implementation of the Qur'an cannot be carried out literally in the context of today because this may result in thwarting the very purpose of the Qur'an. [ . . . ] This approach is so revolutionary and so radically different from the approaches generally adopted so far in that it seeks to bring under strictly historical study not only Fiqh and Sunnah of the Prophet but the Qur'an as well. [ . . . ] But this would seem to be the only honest method of appraising the historic performance of the Muslims and of genuinely implementing the purposes of the Qur'an and the Prophet.<sup>12</sup>

In that period, many of his ideas were considered to be threatening by the Islamic conservatives, particularly by Abu'l A'la Mawdudi<sup>13</sup> of Jama'at-i-Islami.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Açıkgenç, "The Thinker of Islamic Revival", p. 240

<sup>12</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "The Impact of Modernity on Islam", *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (1966), p. 127

<sup>13</sup> Despite Mawdudi's aggressive propaganda against Rahman, which led to Rahman's resignation from his post at the Islamic Reserch Institute in Pakistan, Rahman, upon the passing away of Mawdudi in September, 1979, points out that Mawdudi's departure is a loss to Islam, despite Rahman's severe and "perfectly justified" criticism on him. See *Islam and Modernity*, Prefatory note.

Accordingly, Rahman was forced to leave Pakistan, and, in the spring of 1969, he was appointed as a visiting professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. In the fall of 1969, he was appointed as a professor of Islamic Thought at the University of Chicago, where he remained until his death on July 26, 1988.

His career in Chicago is very significant in the sense that it shows the development of a clear theoretical formulation of his method. The gradual development of his methodology came to full fruition with the publication of his *Major Themes of Qur'an and Islam and Modernity*.<sup>15</sup> For his contribution to the study of Islam, Fazlur Rahman was honored by being appointed as the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago, and he was the first Muslim to receive the Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal for the study of Islamic Civilization from the Gustave E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, as Açıkgenç points out, Rahman's intellectual life can be divided into three phases, which run parallel to his evaluation of Islamic thought's development against external changes. The first phase includes the last years of his education and the first years of his teaching, during which time he was in doubt. It also includes Fazlur Rahman's early life, education, and philosophical-theological work on prophecy and revelation. The second phase started from 1958, when he began to teach at McGill University until a decade later. In this period, Rahman concentrated on the methodology required for closing the gap between Islamic traditionalism and modernity. He focused on the main themes of his work in Pakistan, particularly on

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<sup>14</sup> Jama'at-i-Islami was founded by Mawdudi during the mid-1940's initially to prevent the creation of Pakistan, but, when this aim failed, they shifted their concentration to the establishment of an Islamic state. See Toprak, *Islam and Political Development*, p. 18

<sup>15</sup> Açıkgenç, "The Thinker of Islamic Revival", p. 240

<sup>16</sup> See Richard G. Hovannisian, "Presentation on Award to Ninth Recipient Fazlur Rahman" *Ethics in Islam: Ninth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Conference 1983 in Honor of Fazlur Rahman*, ed., Richard G. Hovannisian (Undena Publication Malibu CA, 1985), pp. 1-2, Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman", p. 408, W. A. Bijlefeld "In Memoriam: Dr. Fazlur Rahman", *The Muslim World*, Vol. 59, No. 1, (1989), pp 80-81

the issues of Islamic intellectual methodology, the Islamic state, personal and legal issues, and the socio-economic system. The third phase started when he first became a professor at Chicago University and lasted until his death in 1988. In this last phase, Rahman tried to find solutions to the problems that the contemporary Islamic world faced. Particular attention was given to *Qur'anic* methodology, ethics, women in Islam, and interfaith relations. It is in this period that he attempted to constitute a methodology needed for Islamic sciences to find suitable answers to contemporary problems.<sup>17</sup>

## **1.2) The General Outlook of Fazlur Rahman's Thought**

As a Muslim thinker, Fazlur Rahman was well aware of the contradiction between traditional Islamic thought and modernity. He was especially concerned about those negative processes that the Muslim world encountered as a result of the upheavals of modernity. Modernity brings freedom; however, it also brings chaos and anxiety, since the process of modernity dismembers the meaning of traditional values. These values, at least, had been guiding people in a certain direction. Yet, modernity not only broke the former values, but it also failed to put in place any new sets of values to replace the old. In this context, Fazlur Rahman asks himself whether faith can render the same mission instead, even at a time when it would appear that the sacred is no longer of concern. According to Fazlur Rahman, recovery is indeed possible if what is worthy in tradition is maintained, and certain structures are constituted so as to meet the necessities of the modern situation. What is more, Rahman is certain that this system should also be coherent with the *Qur'an*.

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<sup>17</sup> Alparslan Açıkgenç, "Fazlur Rahman", *T.D.V İslam Ansiklopedisi*, Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, İstanbul, Vol. 12, (1995), p. 281

Despite a long history of searching, Muslims have failed to recover and reconstruct Islam. In order to recover the Islamic past and to reconstruct an Islamic future, Muslims must address the basic question of method. This presupposes a new type of thinking on the main resources of Islam, and, since the *Qur'an* is the primary source of Islamic thought, Rahman endeavored to interpret it first. As I shall argue later, Fazlur Rahman was criticized by traditional Muslims with respect to his radical interpretations of some Islamic issues<sup>18</sup> (criticism which led, as noted above, to his resignation from his post in Pakistan). Revelation and *riba* are the outstanding issues that evoked a major debate on Rahman among traditional Muslim *ulema*.

### 1.2.1. Revelation

The *Qur'an* asserts itself as the Words of God (*Kalam Allah*) revealed to the Prophet, who is also convinced that he is the only recipient of this Divine Message. Every Muslim must also believe that the *Qur'an* is the Word of God, and, without this pivotal belief, no person can be a nominal Muslim. In many of his writings, Fazlur Rahman explicitly affirms the authenticity of the *Qur'an* and has repeatedly repudiated most of the Orientalist's claims.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, he felt no compulsion in asserting both that "the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad."<sup>20</sup> Confident in his intellectual capability, he disparages the orthodox conceptual framework, even all of medieval Muslim thought, as lacking the necessary intellectual tools and capability to combine "in its formulation of the dogma of the otherness and verbal character of the Revelation on the one hand, and

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18 For details, see Fazlur Rahman's "Some Islamic Issues in the Ayyub Khan Era", *Essays on Islamic Civilization*, ed. Donald P. Little, (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1976), pp. 284-302

<sup>19</sup> In this case, see, for instance, his Introduction to *Major Themes of the Qur'an*

<sup>20</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, p. 31

on the other, its intimate connection with the work and religious personality of the Prophet”.<sup>21</sup> Later, recounting the hatred of masses, he reiterated his position in the following words: “the Qur’an is entirely the Word of God insofar as it is infallible and absolutely free from falsehood, but insofar as it comes to the Prophet’s heart and then at his tongue, it was entirely his word”.<sup>22</sup>

As has been pointed out, the *Qur’an* declares itself to be the word of God (*kalam Allah*), and the Prophet himself was also in absolute assurance that he was the recipient of the message from God, who, through certain channels, dictated the *Qur’an* with an absolute authority.<sup>23</sup> “The verballity of the Qur’an does not only indicate that it is verbally revealed and not merely in its meaning and ideas.”<sup>24</sup> Although the Qur’anic term *wahy*, according to Rahman, is an “idea-word inspiration,” in this case, he pointed out that, even in ordinary consciousness, ideas and feelings are not floating about and cannot be mechanically clothed in words. As a matter of fact, there is an organic relationship between feelings, ideas and words. Taking inspiration as a lower degree of *wahy*, Rahman argues that, in inspiration, this relationship is “so complete that feeling-idea-word is a total complex with a life of its own.”<sup>25</sup>

While accepting the objectivity and verbal character of revelation, Fazlur Rahman rejects the idea of the externality of the revelation to the Prophet. The *Qur’an* itself, he argues, maintains “the otherness, the objectivity and the verbal character of the Revelation, but had equally certainly rejected its externality vis-à-vis the Prophet”. In order to safeguard the otherness, objectivity and verbal character of

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<sup>21</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, p. 31

<sup>22</sup> Fazlur Rahman has expressed his disappointment that his rational account of the revelatory character of the *Qur’an* was manipulated to give the impression that the *Qur’an* is the joint work of Allah and Muhammad – a position, which no Muslim can hold. “Some Islamic Issues in the Ayyub Khan Era”, *Journal of Islamic Research*, Vol. 4, No. 4, (Oct., 1990), pp. 299-300

<sup>23</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, p. 30

<sup>24</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, pp. 30-31

<sup>25</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, p. 33

the Prophet's revelation, and partly due to the influence of Christian doctrines, the Orthodoxy, he claims, made the revelation "entirely through the ear and external to the Prophet and regarded the angel or the spirit that come to the heart an entirely external agent."<sup>26</sup>

Fazlur Rahman argues that the *Qur'an* itself insists that it has come to the heart of the Prophet, and thus it cannot be external to him. In this respect, Rahman cites a few verses to support his argument. The *Qur'an*, for instance, declares, "The Trusted Spirit has brought it down upon your heart that you may be a warner"<sup>27</sup>, and again, "Say: He who an enemy of Gabriel (let him be), for it is he who has brought it down upon your heart."<sup>28</sup> It seems that Fazlur Rahman insists that the *Qur'an* was not revealed word for word, but by the process of inspiration, which then gets confused with the Prophet's own subjectivity and cognitive imagination. It is significant to note that, although the source and the origin of the Revealed Words are beyond the ordinary reach of human agency, the words themselves are Arabic, understood by the Prophet, though the meanings of some of the key words and concepts that project the world-view of Islam are entirely new.

It is also obvious that, although Fazlur Rahman realized that the psychological account could not exhaust the meaning of Divine revelation, he, at this stage, seems to affirm the similarity between the Prophetic Revelation and the sudden visions of great poets and artists, or the apostolic inspiration of biblical authors, or the illuminative intuition of sages and saints.<sup>29</sup>

Fazlur Rahman's views on the nature of revelation are quite radical and controversial. His is a radical departure from the *Sunni* orthodox explanation of

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<sup>26</sup> *Islam*, p. 31

<sup>27</sup> Fazlur Rahman's translation of Surah al-Shu'ara 26:194. See Rahman, *Islam*, p. 31

<sup>28</sup> Fazlur Rahman's translation of Surah al-Baqarah 2:97. See *Islam*, p. 31

<sup>29</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Divine Revelation and the Prophet", *Hamdard Islamicus*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (1978), pp. 68-69

revelation, and it has been the subject of a most explosive dispute, which at one point forced him to leave Pakistan in 1968. Watt applauds such a radical view as “the character of the new worldview or identity,” something which is urgently needed and could be duly realized by the Muslim in compliance with Western historical criticism. Fazlur Rahman, he holds, is prepared to apply it in his interpretation of the *Qur’an* and his review of the history of Islamic thought.<sup>30</sup>

In short, Rahman’s concept of revelation is an example of an attempt to combine “religious idiom with naturalistic idiom,” where the valid role of traditions was made superfluous. The *Qur’an* was dictated into the heart of the Prophet and his character. In fact, the *mi’raj* also loses its traditional *Qur’anic* pegs, all these verses being reinterpreted as references to the process of inspiration.<sup>31</sup>

### 1.2.2. Riba

Another controversial issue that led Fazlur Rahman to be the subject of debates is *Riba*, which is a socio-economic problem facing the Muslim world today. The problem lies in the confusion between this term and the function of interest rates in the modern banking system. In Islamic thought, the prohibition of usury is essential for public welfare, but to draw the conclusion that “all forms of interest should be banned” would be “a cardinal error”.<sup>32</sup> Fazlur Rahman pointed out that “the initial interest itself was not usurious. [. . .] what made it *riba* was the increase in capital that raised the principal amount several-fold by continued re-doubling”.<sup>33</sup> Thus,

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<sup>30</sup> W. M. Watt, *Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity*, (Routledge, London and New York, 1988), p. 69

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Rippin, review of *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, by Fazlur Rahman, *Journal of School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 44, (1981), p. 362

<sup>32</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, p. 41

<sup>33</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, p. 6

the *riba* of pre-Islamic days, which was categorically declared haram by the Qur'an, so that those who indulged in it were threatened with war from God and His Prophet, was of an atrocious kind and went on multiplying in a manner that the poor debtor, in spite of his regular payments, could not pay off the usurious interest let alone the capital.<sup>34</sup>

There must have been a great deal of variation in each individual case of loan depending on circumstances (for example, the nature of the investment, the amount of risk, and so on). However, "all these individual cases were part of the one *riba* system in whose nature it was to be exorbitantly usurious." Therefore, it had to be eradicated by banning the whole system, and hence no exception could be made in individual cases. When the entire system was banned, the milder cases within that system were also naturally abolished since the system itself was considered tyrannical. Thus, it can not be argued that "since the Qur'an abolished even the milder cases, it must be concluded that the bank-interest of today also stands condemned" because today's bank-interest is a separate kind of system.<sup>35</sup>

By having examined the verses regarding the issue of *riba* in their chronological order, Rahman concluded that the *riba* of the pre-Islamic days

was a system whereby the principal sum was doubled and redoubled (ad'afan muda'afah) through a usurious process; because of this process of doubling and redoubling the principal, the Qur'an refused to admit that *riba* was a kind of fair of business transaction; and while permitting the commercial profit, the Qur'an encouraged the spirit of co-operation as opposed to that of profiteering.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, p. 7

<sup>35</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, pp. 7-8

<sup>36</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Riba and Interest", *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (1964), p. 5

Fazlur Rahman devoted a long section to analyzing the *hadith* materials on *riba*. There are many contradictory and conflicting reports with regard to the chronological order of the *Qur'anic* revelations on *riba*, as well as on the nature of *riba* itself. Besides these contradictions, most of the *hadith* materials concerning *riba* are full of complexities which are almost impossible to resolve. In effect, there are conflicting opinions of the *fuqaha* (people who specialize in Islamic law) on this subject, and each one of the schools has its own supporting *hadith*.<sup>37</sup> The contradictions and inconsistencies in the *riba-hadith*, and the evolutionary trend in this literature lead to “an ever-increasing rigidity which vitiates its authenticity and authority”:<sup>38</sup>

In short, no attempt to define *riba* in the light of *hadith* has been successful. [. . .] It is true that the evolutionary process through which these *hadith* have passed and of which we have given a brief account above has shown them not to be authentic. But it would be a grave folly to ignore their moral import since they are sincere and performed attempts at interpreting and elaborating the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and the *Qur'anic* injunctions. The fact is that the spirit in respect of economic life and economic system that it wanted to promote. Therefore, we feel convinced that in order to understand what the *Qur'an* meant by *riba*.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion, the term *riba* refers exclusively to the practice of doubling and tripling the sum to the debtor for the failure to pay the debt in the agreed period of time. Therefore, the practice of *riba* must be distinguished from the interest charges found in banking methods of the twentieth century. Furthermore, Rahman concludes

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<sup>37</sup> Rahman, “*Riba* and Interest”, pp. 8-37

<sup>38</sup> Rahman, “*Riba* and Interest”, p. 40

<sup>39</sup> Rahman, “*Riba* and Interest”, p. 30

that interest rates are necessary to establish a viable economic system and the charging of interest does not violate the injunction of the *Qur'an*, which condemns only the practice of *riba*.

### 1.3. Conclusion

As can be inferred from this brief evaluation, it is obvious that the ideas of Fazlur Rahman towards Islamic issues are radical. The following remarks, made by Rahman's friend, Dr. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud from his memoir of Rahman, best summarize the reason for such radical expression:

Professor Fazlur Rahman is known for his tough style of writing, which is often mistakenly interpreted as arrogant particularly when he evaluates the performance of Muslims in history. Once I asked him why his method is generally rather sweeping and aggressive when analyzing the problems of the Muslim and proposing their solutions. He smiled and said, "Muhammad Nur, the Muslims have been sleeping for a hundred years...If you want to wake them up, it must be by a series of shock treatment, and not with a sweet, soft voice!"<sup>40</sup>

Despite all these tough and controversial expressions, Rahman used to remark that while he would not mind considering political compromises, he certainly could not think of compromising his intellectual position. According to what Wan Daud points out, a few leaders from an established Muslim Organization in the United States, who knew him and studied some of his works, wanted to translate his *Major Themes in Qur'an* (1980) and *Islam and Modernity* (1982) into Arabic and distribute them in the Arabic speaking communities in the US and the Muslim world, provided

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<sup>40</sup> Wan Mohd Nor Waun Daud, "Personal Anecdotes on a great Scholar Teacher and Friend", *Journal of Islamic Research*, Vol. 4, No. 4, (Oct.,1990), p. 254

that he should change one or two positions that they considered controversial, particularly on *riba* and revelation. “Notwithstanding the possible loss of popularity, he politely declined”.<sup>41</sup>

In sum, Fazlur Rahman, whose approach was broadly in line with a historicism, expressed his ideas towards Islamic issues were radical in its manner of expression that made him the subject of sharp criticisms. His approach to the concepts of revelation and *riba* is quite different than the traditional Islamic belief which I think were reformulated to apply the essential principles of Islam to meet new circumstances.

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<sup>41</sup> “Personal Anecdotes”, p. 254

## CHAPTER II: ISLAMIC MODERNISM

The idea of Islamic modernism is still ambiguous, although it has been argued for more than one century in different languages and in various countries. It is regarded as suspicious and dangerous, particularly in traditionalist Islamic countries since it is a reminder of concepts such as modernity and reform that have always been considered as threatening the very tenets of Islam. In this part of the study, I will try to define what Islamic Modernity is by initially attempting to determine what it is not.

First of all, Islamic modernism is not a theory or an idea that any certain Islamic thinker puts forward to solve the problems of the Islamic world. When stagnation occurs, revival movements come onto the agenda. However, the religious identity of people who initiate such ideas does not mean that these ideas are necessarily of Islamic modernism. Furthermore, Islamic modernism should not be understood as rejecting some parts of the religion and adjusting the rest according to the necessities of the time. In addition, it does not mean to take certain parts of the *Qur'an* which are thought to fit with contemporary developments and ignoring the rest.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Islamic modernism is not an eclectic idea trying to form a hybridized entity from certain parts of Islam coupled with some western ideas. Finally, it is not an ordinary reaction or a response to developments that took place in the West, developments which paved the way for the Western world to seize the upper hand in determining the course and nature of international relations.<sup>43</sup>

According to Mehmet Aydın, nobody has contributed as much as Rahman sincerely did in responding to the question of what Islamic modernism is. Rahman

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<sup>42</sup> Mehmet Aydın, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", *Journal of Islamic Research*, Vol. 4, No. 4, (Oct., 1990), pp. 273-274

<sup>43</sup> Aydın, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", p. 273

constituted the theoretical framework of such a question and applied it to the actual conditions by means of his official duties as well as his academic studies. These works brought about a strong tie between the name of Fazlur Rahman and contemporary Islamic modernism.<sup>44</sup>

The concept of Islamic Modernism can be concisely defined as the effort at reconciliation between Islam and modernity. The main thesis of the concept of Islamic modernism, put simply, is that Islam is capable of exercising control upon the changes stemming from the problems arising from and through the socio-historical development process, provided that it is supported by its main resources the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* and the heritage that came into being in the light of such resources as a whole, and further that, together with these resources, to be understood and interpreted through a scientific and rational perspective.<sup>45</sup>

Fazlur Rahman's major goal in putting forward this idea is to prove that Islam is a dynamic religion that it is indeed able to retain its vitality through the centuries. In so doing, Rahman particularly emphasizes the role of reason in interpreting the Divine rule, which would make it possible for Islam to fit to any modern development. Rahman's endeavor is to look at all Islamic history in a critical manner. Hence, he emphasized that the key point is that "we must not consult the tradition as rescuer, but to interpret it with the reason."<sup>46</sup>

## 2.1. Pre-Modernist Revivalist Movements

Before analyzing contemporary Islamic modernism, it will be helpful to take a look at Islamic heritage and the phases of Islamic revivalism. Approximately three

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<sup>44</sup> "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", p. 273

<sup>45</sup> Aydın, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", p. 274

<sup>46</sup> Rahman, "Islamic Modernism", p. 319

centuries ago, the Islamic world felt that something was going wrong in its inner structure, and this evoked some stirrings of revivalism. In effect, the history of such revival movements can be traced back to the efforts of Ghazali. The very thing that was desired to be revived was, of course, Islam in its original form, and this was due to the fact that certain beliefs and applications had been imposed on Islam over the course of time, beliefs and applications which did not actually comply with its inner structure. Hence, Muslim thinkers immediately felt the necessity to eradicate these alien components in order to purify Islam.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, according to Rahman, certain aspects of the tradition also led to difficulties for the progress of Islam. In this regard, he emphasized Islamic sciences, such as *kalam*, ethics, philosophy, *tafsir*, *hadith*, and law. Generally, he wanted to see all Islamic prophetic experiences as a whole. Despite the multitude of different historical situations, he argued that the “inner unity and unmistakable sense of direction are displayed in the prophet’s activity and the Qur’anic guidance”<sup>48</sup>. The Prophet’s activity and the *Qur’an* are represented as the wholeness and unity of Islam. Holding this consciousness, Rahman leads to a path of correct interpretation.

Hence, in his view, we must first of all see the teaching of the prophet with reference to its historical context and the personality of the Prophet. The elements of this belief consist mainly of “one creator-sustainer God, socioeconomic justice, and last judgment.” If we pay careful attention, we can see that the central concern of the *Qur’an* is the conduct of Man.<sup>49</sup> which shows the realistic dimension of Islam. The conduct of Man in the real world can be practiced through moral values. No moral reality is possible without the regulative ideas of God and the last judgment. This is

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<sup>47</sup> Aydın, “Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism”, p. 274

<sup>48</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 13

<sup>49</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 14

theorized by Kantian terms whereby “no ideal knowledge is possible without regulative ideas of reason.” Naturally, in Islam, this requires religious practices. Believing in God and the last judgment represent only the faith component of this wholeness. Rahman criticizes the negativity of medieval Islam since it “put God in exclusive object of experience, and made the experience the end in itself”.<sup>50</sup> The exactness of faith and practices were broken by putting the experience at the center of pietism.

It should be noted that dominant medieval Islam was insisting on saving formal practices, although Sufi experience was growing in the opposite direction. Rahman denotes the different points of Sufism with Christian theology in which the former had a positive influence on personality building, whereas the latter insisted on “empty formalism.” He finds Christian theology as beneficial for sharpening the mind. When the mind was applied to the natural sciences, it provided striking results. On the other hand, consciousness of one God in Islam is creatively and organically related to the founding of an ethical sociopolitical order in the world, since, from the point of view of the *Qur’an*, “those who forget God eventually forget themselves.”<sup>51</sup> This sentiment is expressed in a different way by the Prophet: ‘He who knows himself, knows God.’ This, it seems, represents the inner worldly dimension of Islam, and this is also what Rahman tries to reveal.

Rahman does not mean to say that Muhammad spoke from a perspective that can never be seen in these worldly relations. On the contrary, social aspects of Muhammad’s reform had inner-worldly ground. Furthermore, nearly all the *Qur’anic* revelations had a background or historical context; therefore, instances of revelation do not focus on stressing the sacred characteristics which is seen to be about faith. It

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<sup>50</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 14-15

<sup>51</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 15

is in this historical context that early scholars of Islam and leaders of the community exercised a good deal of freedom and ingenuity in interpreting the *Qur'an*, including the principles of *ijtihad* or *qiyas*. Consequently, for them, it was not difficult to see the real points of verses (*ayat*) or the “basic import of a given injunction.”<sup>52</sup>

According to Rahman, the close relations of the first generation of Muslims with the prophet gave them a much more correct interpretation of Islamic rules than later generations. Even though the *Qur'an* rarely refers to actual events and situations, and almost never mentions names, it would be inaccurate to characterize it as an ambiguous document. Rather, it is possible to correctly determine the rationale behind its statements and injunctions.

According to Rahman, the basic tone of the *Qur'an* is quite clear from its very early passages. These are mainly the “stress on socioeconomic justice and essential human egalitarianism.”<sup>53</sup> This is derived from the fact that the *Qur'an* primarily stresses Faith. Faith constructs a general framework for all Islamic thought.

Nevertheless, in reaching correct derivations, there is disagreement. The main problem lies in interpreting particular situations in the *Sunnah* in order to make derivations from the *Qur'an*. Modernist Muslims have often contended that the *Qur'an* gives us the principles, while the *Sunnah*, or our reason, embodies these fundamentals in concrete solutions. This understanding is still pervasive. For instance, Mawdudi and Shariati, who have had a major impact on Islamic revivalism, insist on the explanatory characteristic of the *Sunnah*. On the other hand, Fazlur Rahman sees this as a *cliché*, and as wrong. The *Qur'an*, actually, does not necessarily provide us with general principles. For the most part, it gives solutions to specific historical issues, but it provides the rationale behind these solutions and

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<sup>52</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 18

<sup>53</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 19

rulings so that we can deduce general principles from them. He cites famous *Maliki* jurist Shatibi who says that, “eternal validity belongs only to the general principles (*usul kulliya*) and not to the particulars of the Qur’an.”<sup>54</sup>

As is clearly seen, Rahman’s essential endeavor is to look at all of Islamic history in a critical manner. The *cliché* cited above, for example, has been pervasive throughout Islamic history, although some *ulama*, such as Shatibi, have articulated different interpretations. Rahman emphasized that the key point is that “we must not consult the tradition as rescuer, but interpret it with reason.”<sup>55</sup>

The first generation of Muslims had had close relationships with the prophet or his companions. However, the most crucial stage in the development of the religious sciences was the period of the next two generations: the successors, and the successors to the successors. It was during this period that an “appeal to individual verses of the Qur’an and texts of *hadith* began to be made in order to resolve issues legally”. The emergence of the concept of *qiyas* is a case in point. It yields more than one opinion – a systematic working out of the values and principles of the *Qur’an* that would minimize differences.<sup>56</sup>

However, this deduction and reasoning processes could not be sustained. There is, at this point, another disagreement about the real cause of the stagnation in Muslim countries. Modern Muslim thinkers, in explaining the reason for such stagnation, have laid the blame on the destruction of the Caliphate in mid 13<sup>th</sup> century. Rahman puts forward an objection to this assertion. According to him, there was stagnation before this destruction, and this was the effect of Ash’arism. The Ash’ari theology (*kalam*), which took shape between 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, claimed for itself the position of defender of the bases of Islamic law. Moreover, Sufism was

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<sup>54</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 20-21

<sup>55</sup> Rahman, “Islamic Modernism”, p. 332

<sup>56</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 25-26

yet a second strict interpretation affecting the Islamic orthodoxy. At that time, there occurred a close relation between Ash'arism and certain extreme forms of Sufism which affirmed that there was one, and only one, existence in reality, namely God. They also evaluated all else as "illusion, shadow, or appearance"<sup>57</sup>.

An opposing response did not come until later. This was also the first revivalist movement led by Ibn Taymiyya in the fourteenth century, trying to return to the *Qur'an*. In particular, and taking the Sufi rituals into account, Taymiyya wanted to purify the bases of Islamic thought by removing from it elements of Sufism. However, Rahman interpreted this first revivalism as naive.<sup>58</sup> According to Rahman, this revivalism prior to modernism was seriously lacking in terms of progress. Taymiyya and other revivalists not only opposed intellectualism and reason, Taymiyya also attacked Sufism, philosophy, and Ash'ari *kalam*.<sup>59</sup>

Just as Taymiyya tried to institute a revival movement, another was initiated in India by Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi. While the former criticized Sufism (although he did not reject it as an institution), the latter attempted to improve Sufism from an inner perspective.<sup>60</sup>

On the other hand, the first revivalists played a significant role in solving the problems of the Muslim world by trying to unify the theological and social aspects of Islam. To accomplish this, they would have to combine a practical program with thought, which takes its strength from the *Qur'an*. Unfortunately, the revivalists did not have such a vision. However, as I shall later argue, the modernist Muslims were not actually opposed to all intellectualism; on the contrary, they would often use reason and mind in order to justify their version of Islamic thought.

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<sup>57</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 26-27

<sup>58</sup> Aydın, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", pp. 274-275

<sup>59</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), p. 637

<sup>60</sup> Aydın, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", pp. 274-275

The bare bones of Sunni theology was formulated by Ash'ari, and then further elaborated into systems by Fakhr al-din al-Razi (1209), who incorporated certain philosophical themes like essence and existence, causation, the nature of God's attributes, and prophethood, while at the same time refuted the theses of Muslim philosophers like Ibn Sina. However, there was also another path of Sunni theology, *Maturidi*, which remained less important than Ash'ari. Similarly, the historically less important, although more reasonable, theses of Sunni *kalam* system founded by al-Maturidi elaborated by Nasafi and al-Taftazani (14<sup>th</sup> century). On the other hand, Shi'ite theology followed a different path from the Sunni school. It took the central *Mu'tazilite* doctrine of the freedom of the human will and reason, and it was developed by Nasir-al Din al-Tusi (13<sup>th</sup> century) and al-Hilli not by rejecting philosophy, as in the Sunni case, but by largely accepting it<sup>61</sup>.

Fazlur Rahman not only analyzes these differences among theological schools, he also catalogues phases of educational institutions in terms of legal theological systems. In his analysis, the first distinction was come to be made between religious sciences and rational (secular) sciences in medieval Islam. This view was expressed recurrently that "knowledge is vast while life is short", one must fix priorities, and this will naturally be in favor of the religious sciences which does not reject the rational sciences.<sup>62</sup> Another reason can be added in that, after conquest movements had pervaded vast areas, and there occurred a division between those who lived in richness and those who wanted to live in accordance with pure Islam, Muslims turned back into themselves without concern for the external world. Rahman resorts to historical evidence in explaining the emergence of such a differentiation between "religious" versus "rational" sciences and the gradual decline

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<sup>61</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 32-33

<sup>62</sup> *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 33-34

of science and philosophy. It was the aggressive attitudes of Ghazali towards science and philosophy expounded by the Muslim philosophers like al-Farabi and particularly Ibn Sina, led to the decline of science and philosophy. At the end, religious scholars could get jobs as *qadis* or *muftis*, but a philosopher or a scientist was limited to court employment. Rahman cites these other factors because, generally, all criticisms about stagnation have been laid at the door of al-Ghazali. In his other book, '*The Philosophy of Molla Sadra*',<sup>63</sup> Rahman refutes this common belief, a belief that is especially pervasive among Orientalists.

Discussing these theological differences on the question of religious versus rational sciences, Rahman, points to different types of *madrasas* in the Muslim world. In the case of the Ottomans, *madrasas* were founded by Fatih Mehmet not only for theology and law but also for natural sciences and medicine. In Iran, although there was government aid for *madrasas*, the *madrasas* were autonomous private organizations. It was only in Iran that a high level of creative philosophical tradition persisted, although within the limits of the authority of Islam.

By way of a general conclusion, it can be argued that the main feature of later medieval centuries of Islam was the replacement of the original texts of theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, and such, as materials for higher instruction with commentaries or higher commentaries. For Rahman, this led to the following negative consequences:

- 1) The unfortunate habit of learning appeared without any deeper understanding.
- 2) Commentaries, compounded refutations and counter

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<sup>63</sup> Fazlur Rahman, '*The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra*', (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), p.VII

refutations were proliferated. 3) Encyclopedic scholars emerged that had little new to say on anything.<sup>64</sup>

The impact of such factors is still being discussed, but their negative content has been admitted by all Muslim thinkers. To sum up, the first revivalist movements had certain weaknesses in that the idea of “turning back to pure Islam” was simplistic. However, if the common goal of any Islamic revival movement was that return is intended to bring all the applications of *asr-al saadeh* to our time, then, from a sociological point of view, it is obviously impossible since, for a modernist Muslim, an era can only be a source of inspiration or a ground that provides power to go further.

Furthermore, the premodernist revivalist movements were seriously lacking in terms of suggesting new ideas, particularly in the case of the Taymiyya. They were principally opposed to every kind of intellectualism and rationalism. As such, they were not only confined to a very limited line of thought, but they also initiated an unproductive educational system since they considered philosophy as dangerous for Islam.<sup>65</sup>

## **2.2. Classical Islamic Modernism**

We saw in the previous section that a nascent revivalist movement appeared in the Muslim world in premodernist times, a movement particularly represented by the Taymiyya, in order to overcome the stagnation of Islamic thinking. Moreover, the failure of the *Shari'a* (Islamic law) and its institutions to meet the changing needs of Islamic society was another factor that affected the course of education in Islam.

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<sup>64</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 38

<sup>65</sup> Aydın, “Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism”, p. 275

However, there was a very different kind of threat that the Muslim world had to face. This was the threat from the world of Christendom. The premodernist revivalist movements had their roots solely in the Islamic world. Classical modernism, on the other hand, had to take into account the Christian West. All classical Muslim modernists agreed that the challenge the Muslim world faced was from Western civilization.<sup>66</sup> The convergence of Islam and the West had two faces, one of which was ideological and the other was social (political, military, economic and so on). Developments that took place in one area were affecting the other.<sup>67</sup> Hence, the Muslim world felt the need for an immediate revival, a revival that would necessarily be by means of Islam. Classical modernism can be understood as the outcome of this situation. All Muslim modernists share the common intellectual point of view: the strong consciousness for the need for change. In this sense, what differentiates modernists from conservatives and premodernist revivalists was the former's concern to determine the direction of this change, whereas the latter only emphasized the need for change and had little concern for the direction in which this change should move.<sup>68</sup>

There are substantial differences in the character of modern developments in different Muslim regions. Rahman differentiated them on the bases of (a) sustaining sovereignty against the colonial powers, (b) the state of the *ulama* and of education, and (c) the attitude of the specific colonial powers. Despite motives of various degrees of directness and intensity, the colonized countries were basically conditioned by the nature of the medieval intellectual temper of Islam. For example, the *madrassa* education was, for centuries, amazingly uniformed.

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<sup>66</sup> Charles J. Adams, "Fazlur Rahman and Classical Modernism", *İslam ve Modernizm: Fazlur Rahman Tecrübesi*, İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür İşleri Daire Başkanlığı Yayınları, (1997), pp. 80-81

<sup>67</sup> Aydın, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", p. 275

<sup>68</sup> Adams, "Fazlur Rahman and Classical Modernism", p. 81

However, there were two mainstream branches of classical modernism, one of which was in the Middle East and the other in India. Especially in Egypt, Syria, and Turkey, the influence of the Middle East wing, led by Jamal al Din Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, was strong. According to Rahman, Afghani was neither a great intellectual nor a great scholar, although his social and political thought set the ground for a revival, whereas Abduh was a major thinker who had been educated in the classical Islamic style and, in this sense, was quite different from the Indian wing's great representative, Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Although, these two were totally different in terms of their approach, it is worth noting that they reached largely the same conclusions.<sup>69</sup>

The efforts of modernist Muslim thinkers must be taken separately from the reformist movements of premodernist times. Rahman carries reformism to the first ages of Islam. He evaluates even Ghazzali together with Ibn Taymiyya, the Senusi movement, Shah Valy Allah, and Sirhindi in the reformist framework. For Rahman, there is no impact of modernity on these leaders and movements.<sup>70</sup> They were all trying to save the idea of *Tawhid* (unity of God) against deformations. However, they were also all aware of the problems. Rahman claims that if we do not understand this reality, we cannot appraise the Islamic reflex against modernist assaults.<sup>71</sup>

Rahman interprets the emergence of the first reformers as evidence that reformation and revivalism does exist in the dynamic character of Islam. Islam was born in history, and it changes with history. Hence one cannot argue that Islam does not depend on time and place. Moreover, these first revivalist movements have a desire to change the existing situation, even though they did not have the dynamic

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<sup>69</sup> Aydın, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", p. 275

<sup>70</sup> Adil Çiftçi, "Bir Sosyolog Olarak Fazlur Rahman", *İslam ve Modernizm: Fazlur Rahman Tecrübesi*, İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür İşleri Daire Başkanlığı Yayınları, (1997), p. 56.

<sup>71</sup> Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, p. 632

character needed to succeed in this. *Ehl-i Sunnah*, while trying to react against *Mu'tazilite* and *Khariciyya*, overemphasized the role of *Hadith*. This was the first sign of stagnation. In spite of seeing the *Sunnah* as a continuing process, it evaluated the *Sunnah* as static and unchangeable.<sup>72</sup> Then *ijma*, while it must be seen as progressive in construction, started to be understood as a unity of ideas of the past, as we have seen in the Islamic Middle Age.

There are two basic approaches towards modern developments in the Muslim world. One argues that modern knowledge should be limited to the practical, technological sphere. The other believes that we must take not only its technology, but also its intellectualism. The first view is conducive to a dualistic attitude and will eventually result in a secularist state of mind. This is a duality of loyalty to religion and to worldly affairs. However, the earlier argument for useful technology is replaced by a demand to cultivate science as such; technology is certainly useful, but what is of primary importance is the "cultivation of the spirit of scientific inquiry as demanded by the Qur'an".<sup>73</sup> Rahman gives Ziya Gökalp and Atatürk as an example of this trend. They not only insisted on taking the technology of the West in order to take the country to a civilized level, but also the spirit of the West.<sup>74</sup>

With respect to the Muslim world's encounter with modernity, Rahman discusses educational systems. He points out that while in Ottoman Turkey the question was how to introduce secular education, in Egypt, it was how to make the school system more attuned to religious culture. Given the dual identity of Ottoman educational system, that became partly religious and partly secular following mid-19<sup>th</sup> century reforms, the new Turkish republic emphasized the secular tone of education than elsewhere. This was evident in the readiness and enthusiasm of the

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<sup>72</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 26

<sup>73</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 51

<sup>74</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 50-54

Turkish governing elite to become modernized. Iran was much more influenced by the *ulama* than in Turkey, although this was largely due to the *ulama*'s relative strength. Pakistan, faced with modernism, gradually gravitated to a conservative position.<sup>75</sup>

According to Rahman, all revivalist movements had major personalities to sustain their arguments: Sayyed Ahmed Khan and Sayyed Amir Ali in India, Namik Kemal in Turkey, and Jamal al-Din Afghani and Muhammad Abduh in Egypt, who argued that Islam does not oppose modern secular sciences. These classical revivalists of the nineteenth century conceived change as a comprehensive enterprise which embraces law, society, politics and ethics.<sup>76</sup>

### **2.3. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have analyzed the revivalist movements in Islamic history, mainly in the light of Fazlur Rahman's studies. The first revivalist movement can be traced back to the efforts of Ibni Taymiyya, whose criticism of any intellectualism and philosophy confined Islamic education to a very limited form and content that, in the final analysis, damaged the progress of Islamic thought in terms of its ability to compete with Western thought. Classical modernism, on the other hand, had to consider both the threat of the western world and the internal problems of Islam.

In short, as emphasized before, modernist revivalists must be differentiated from the classical reformists. The first reformists had their roots and branches in the Muslim world, and their objections were raised against certain beliefs and rituals embedded in Islam. However, modernist reformers had to reckon with the Christian

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<sup>75</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 70-79

<sup>76</sup> Rahman, "Islamic Modernism", p. 317

West. This first modernism lasted until 1945. It was Hamilton Gibb<sup>77</sup> who first criticized the early modernists. Gibb pointed out that, the first modernists could not understand that social change is gradual and needs public support. Secondly, they failed to subject Islamic tradition to historical criticism and, hence, disregarded the history of Islam. Last, but not last least, classical modernists could not appreciate the Western world as a whole. The absence of methodology led them not only to see their past as *asr-al saadeh*, but to misunderstand the history of the West. Rahman was aware of this reality, as a result of which he attempted to construct a new understanding and methodology.

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<sup>77</sup> Hamilton Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1947), p.111

## CHAPTER III: CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC MODERNISM

It is difficult to delineate a contemporary Islamic modernism that has identifiable representatives or exact boundaries. Although the representatives of the modernist idea have largely pointed to the same problems and offered similar solutions as those who have gone before, these efforts were independent of each. However, in terms of both classical Islam and Western philosophical and theological discourse, Rahman was probably the most learned of the major Muslim thinkers in the second-half of the twentieth century. He contributed significantly to contemporary Islamic modernism and is regarded as the pioneer of this project. It is directly to his ideas that we now turn.

### 3.1. Contemporary Islamic Modernism

According to Rahman, the ethical and social order of the *Qur'an* has never been entirely fulfilled in any phase of history. Hence, it cannot be expected that Islamic societies can overcome their problems by simply keeping their traditions.<sup>78</sup> What should be done in order to really perceive the *Qur'an* and *Qur'anic* Islam is to understand what they truly are, and this necessitates a new sort of approach.

For Rahman, education is the most crucial tool in constituting such a new approach. He strongly advocates the need for modern educational institutions which also requires new educators who can teach in line with the necessities of ideological revivalism. As stressed before, Rahman believes that the responsibility of the modernist is neither to embrace the past, nor to take certain ideas from the past to arrive at a mechanical eclecticism. On the contrary, the modernist should not attempt

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<sup>78</sup> Aydın, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", p. 277

to mould a modern ideology with Islam. What needs be done is to prepare the postulates that will lead to a modern ideology. Only if this is successfully achieved can a drastic change take place in the line of reasoning of Muslims. This, finally, strongly necessitates the prerequisites of inquiry, critical thinking, elaboration, and taking of risks.<sup>79</sup>

Rahman points to the failure of educational policy in the Muslim world. He argued that Muslim countries in the postcolonial period have either neglected education or as in the case of Turkey, have resorted to a “slavish imitation” of the Western model.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, with respect to Islamic education, especially in Turkey, Rahman analyzes the scholars and the courses of *Ilahiyat* (theology) faculties and Imam-Hatip schools. He applauds the pervasive education in the Arabic language in Turkey. He again makes a comparison between Turkey and other Muslim countries. Whereas in Turkey the new phenomenon of religious education is the result of the upsurge of public opinion, in Egypt the entire “reorganization, consolidation, and vast expansion of the massive al-Azhar are the handiwork of the government itself.” On the other hand, Islamic education in Iran is free and is basically supported by merchants and people at large, and by the organization of *awqaf*.<sup>81</sup> In Indonesia the influence of Egypt’s Al Azhar introduces the traditional aspect of Islam to education because al-Azhar has a more traditional curriculum than the *Ilahiyat* faculties in Turkey.<sup>82</sup>

Postcolonial revivalists were much influenced by the historical conditions of their countries. In Pakistan, Jama’at-i-Islami had a strong impact on Islamic education as they had been influential in the separation of Pakistan from India; they

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<sup>79</sup> Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, pp. 643-651

<sup>80</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 87-90

<sup>81</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 97-104

<sup>82</sup> *Islam and Modernity*, p. 104

led Islamic revivalism, especially among the youth. In Iran, the *ulama* and Islamic intellectuals were very active throughout the Shah's reign. Egypt was one of the most influential countries for Islamic movements elsewhere. It was the ideas of Sayyid Qutb especially that influenced the theoretical dimension of Islamic movements. All these movements had the belief that a resurrection of the Islamic world against the Western world is possible.<sup>83</sup> Rahman evaluates these movements in a positive way to the extent that they crippled the strength of tradition, and made a contribution to the understanding of Islam by the Muslim youth.

Mehmet Aydın, a prominent professor of theology in Turkey argues that Fazlur Rahman could not appreciate the dashing characteristic of these movements<sup>84</sup>. He refers to the Clifford Geertz' observation that "what they want to express as turning back to the fundamentals of Islam was aiming at going further."<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, new revivalism has richer programs than the first revivalism (reformism). This is because it is a modern movement. The most significant feature of this movement is that it initiated a broad struggle towards two fronts at the same time: unless a great struggle is started against tradition and against western powers, pure Islamic thought cannot be constructed.

### **3.2. The *Qur'an* and Islamic Modernism**

The issue of the *Qur'an* and a new approach to its interpretation is of great importance for Rahman since, like many other revivalists, Rahman also takes the *Qur'an* as the most significant resource that allows Muslims to practice their religion properly. The *Qur'an* always had a background or historical context. Moreover, it is

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<sup>83</sup> *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 104-128

<sup>84</sup> "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", p. 276.

<sup>85</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, (New Haven, Yale University Press., 1968), p. 69.

not a treatise or a book; rather, it is a document that grew within the flesh and blood of actual history. The passages of the *Qur'an* were revealed to the Prophet during the course of the twenty-three year period of his mission, and these passages were pronouncements upon concrete issues faced by the Prophet and his community. The *Qur'an* therefore is as coherent as life itself.

Rahman argues that the original meaning of the *Qur'an*, which lies in the historical context to which the *Qur'an* responded, can, in fact, be reached objectively. In this approach, the study of the background material (in this case the occasions of the *Qur'anic* revelation and the socio-historical context of revelation, that is to say, the socio-historical context of seventh-century Arabia which includes the activity of Prophet) is absolutely crucial for an adequate understanding of the *Qur'an*, both as a whole and in terms of its individual pronouncements. This socio-historical background is fundamentally important because it gives cohesion to the *Qur'an* and displays the dynamics of Islam as a living force.<sup>86</sup>

In fact, Rahman argues that the biographers of the Prophet, the *Hadith* collectors, the historians, and the *Qur'an* commentators, all of whom have preserved the general socio-historical background of the *Qur'an*, the Prophet's activity and, in particular, the background of particular passages of the *Qur'an*, have affirmed their strong belief that this background is necessary for an understanding of the *Qur'an*. However, no systematic attempt has ever been made to understand the *Qur'an* in the chronological order in which it was revealed, by setting the specific cases or occasions of revelation in some order against the general background, which is no more than the activity of the Prophet, and its social environment. If this method is

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<sup>86</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Islam: Legacy and Contemporary Challenge", *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4, (1980), pp. 241-242

pursued, most arbitrary and fanciful interpretations will at once be ruled out since a definite enough anchoring point will be available.<sup>87</sup>

The belief in the historicity of the *Qur'an* leads to the fundamental consequence that, since the prescriptions of the *Qur'an* are very much linked to seventh-century Arabia, some of these prescriptions can no longer be applied in the present context. The changing of the context, therefore, invites new interpretations. This reinterpretation has to be performed not only with regard to the texts of the *Qur'an*, but also to other elements in the tradition of Islam since these too are conditioned by the socio-historical context.

Rahman differentiates between the original meaning and the historical meaning of the text and its significance or general principle. Thus, he asserts that the process of interpretation involves two stages; the first stage is to return to the original meaning, and the second is to arrive at the significance of the meaning in the present context.

The *Qur'an* does not give many general principles, but it provides, either explicitly or implicitly, the rationale behind the solutions, and it gives rulings upon specific and concrete historical issues from which general principles can be deduced. Although one can find some general statements or principles in the *Qur'an*, the socio-historical situation must be given due consideration. Therefore, in order to obtain the real truth about the *Qur'anic* teachings, one must generalize on the basis of the *Qur'anic* treatment of actual cases:

In building any genuine and viable Islamic set of laws and institutions, there has to be a twofold movement: First one must move from the concrete case treatments of the *Qur'an* – taking the necessary and

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<sup>87</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 142

relevant social conditions of that time into account – to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. Second, from this general level there must be a movement back to specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant social conditions now obtaining.<sup>88</sup>

Rahman sees this approach as fundamentally important because it is precisely where the dynamics of Islam are displayed as a living force. On the one hand, the significance of the meaning varies from one reader to the other, and, on the other hand, it also varies from one socio-historical context to the next, hence producing an endless diversity of interpretation. Rahman's methodology, therefore, in the final analysis, opens the *Qur'an* up for relative and subjective interpretation.

For understanding its general and contextual level, Rahman cites 'objectivity' theory; the process of understanding is a reversal of the creative process. This, he asserts, operates to varying degrees in the case of the *Qur'an*. When taking into consideration the contextual level of the revelation, the objective situation is a *sine qua non* for understanding the meaning of the *Qur'an*, since it is literally "God's response through Muhammad's mind." Rahman continues by saying that this notion of 'God's response through Muhammad's mind' has been underplayed by the Islamic orthodoxy.<sup>89</sup>

Objectivity theory is one of Rahman's methods of interpretation best represented by E. Betty. If we want to understand and interpret one expression, we have to go to the owner of the expression, and his world of mind. Once this is done, the expression can be understood not as an abstracted one, but as belonging to the certain world of mind and condition. However, the case is not as straightforward as

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<sup>88</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 20

<sup>89</sup> *Islam and Modernity*, p. 8

might be expected because there is another theory that tries to refute this understanding. This theory is the phenomenological approach, and it is represented by thinkers such as Gadamer. Rahman takes such views seriously,<sup>90</sup> and thus it is important to look at them.

Rahman approves of the postmodernist recognition of the impact of historical context on intellectual interpretation. In this case, he agrees with Gadamer on the importance of historical circumstances in understanding the meaning of a text, for all experience of understanding, according to Gadamer, presupposes a preconditioning of the experiencing subject. However, he rejects Gadamer's conclusion that "there is no question of any 'objective' understanding of anything at all", and argues that given sufficient study and adequate methodology, one can determine accurately the circumstances that surround the revelation of the *Qur'anic* verses and their interpretation in various times and places by various historical figures.

According to this theory, all the experiences of understanding necessitate the reality of prejudices of interpreters. For Gadamer, what defines *me* is effectively history. Even if we are aware of this prejudice, the situation does not change. "If Gadamer is right", says Rahman, "turning back to the Qur'an and coming to the present would become meaningless." Yet, according to Rahman, adequate evaluation is possible through, first of all, specifying the certain event. After that, this event is assessed with respect to the *Qur'an*. Naturally enough, we have to know what facts pertain prior to being able to make any kind of assessment. These facts, I think, can be seen to be compulsory information for the process of assessment. This act, Rahman confesses, is inevitably burdened with value, and this must not be seen as pre-determination.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Aydın, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", pp. 280-281

<sup>91</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 9

Rahman asserts that this method is suitable to illuminate only the cognitive dimension of the *Qur'an*. He makes a division between emotional and cognitive verses. What he articulates about understanding of the *Qur'an* is related to the cognitive side. When this cognitive side prevails, there is also another contribution that can be added. This cognitive side is open to the intervention of non-Muslim people in a positive manner.<sup>92</sup> This contribution is of course not for the normative aspect of Islam, but for its cognitive side.

As stressed before, the novelty in Rahman's ideas can be found mainly in his approach to the *Qur'an* and the sayings of the Prophet, the '*sunnah*'. Rahman believes that the norms and values of revelation have an enduring relevance to religious communities without becoming anachronistic. His approach to the revelation of the *Qur'an* is very important in understanding his methodology as well. For Rahman, revelation presents divine orders to people, and people are responsible for carrying them out, which necessitates that they first be understood. In this regard, the prophet's role is very critical, since the main point is the relationship between the divine message and the understanding of the prophet. Adil Çiftçi, a prominent academic of theology in Turkey, points out that in analyzing the traditional ideas on revelation, Rahman believes that the traditional revelation approach offers a mechanical and external view of the relationship between the prophet and the archangel; the archangel comes and delivers the message of God to him in much the same way that a postman would. In fact, this situation contradicts the *Qur'an*, because in the *Qur'an* it says that an angel inspires the prophet's heart with the message of God.<sup>93</sup> For Rahman, this means that we have to accept the presence of a third party, and this is unacceptable. He calls Gabriel an angel, but bears in mind that

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<sup>92</sup> Aydın, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Modernism", p.281.

<sup>93</sup> Çiftçi, *İslam'ı Yeniden Düşünmek*, pp. 65-72

Gabriel does not have an existence outside the Prophet. Hence, according to Rahman, in revelation, although the inspiration belonged to God, the wording of the *Qur'an* belonged to the Prophet himself.<sup>94</sup>

The *Qur'an* is a powerful catalyst for the building up of a comprehensive worldview.<sup>95</sup> In fact, an overall worldview of Islam has first to be systematically built up on the basis of the *Qur'an* if various specific fields of intellectual endeavor are to be coherent and consistent.<sup>96</sup> However, there has been no effort made at systematization in order to produce a unitary outlook for the *Qur'an*. For this reason, Rahman sees the urgent need for a proper rediscovery of Islam, which demands an understanding of the message of the *Qur'an* as a unity. In so doing, the formulation of a proper *Qur'anic* theology is necessary, particularly in order to define the God-Man relationship.<sup>97</sup>

On the one hand, Rahman explicitly affirms that the *Qur'an* is the word of God (*kalam Allah*) revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, who is the recipient of the final verbal revelation of God, and, on the other hand, he also states that the *Qur'an* is entirely the words of God and, in an ordinary sense also entirely the word of Muhammad. Therefore, his ambiguous notion of revelation deserves the most careful attention and analysis. Any attempt to study his theory of revelation has to be made with reference to the context in which the controversy arose, and a better understanding concerning his position on the nature of the *Qur'an* must take into account his explicit statements and his various implicit writings on the subject.

There is no disagreement among Muslims throughout the centuries that the *Qur'an* is the words of God, and it is agreed upon that the *Qur'an* is guidance for

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<sup>94</sup> For the details on Fazlur Rahman's interpretation of revelation see "Revelation" part of **Chapter I**

<sup>95</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, p. 256

<sup>96</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 133

<sup>97</sup> Rahman, "Islam and Legacy", p. 241

mankind, and that it is entirely oriented towards practice. The *Qur'an* is not a speculative theological treatise, although it does contain some theology, a certain amount of cosmology and psychology. In the absence of the unitary vision of the *Qur'an*, Rahman believes that it is necessary to reconstruct “a new theology”, which arises from the *Qur'an* through a systematic methodology and goes beyond the traditional construct. The first step toward such a reconstruction of theology is a historical critique of theological development, which aims at revealing the extent of the dislocation between the worldview of the *Qur'an* and various schools of theological speculation in Islam.<sup>98</sup>

However, the *Qur'an* in itself is not complicated in terms of theological discussion of the nature of God. The *Qur'an* is not “a treatise about God and His Nature,” but it calls itself “a reminder,” or “the Reminder”, by drawing Man’s attention to certain obvious facts and turning these facts into “reminders” of God.<sup>99</sup> All activities that are directed toward God, from the point view of the *Qur'an*, will be for the betterment of Man, not of God. Hence, the fact that the *Qur'an* frequently urges human beings to contemplate everything in the universe, as well as within themselves, as signs of God, means that the central importance is not Man but God. Rahman stresses that “the God of the Qur’an is strictly a functional, pragmatic concept” such that “God is needed not for what He is or may be but for what he does.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 151-153

<sup>99</sup> Rahman, *Major Themes*, p. 12

<sup>100</sup> Rahman, *Major Themes*, p. 1

### 3.3. Conclusion

In this chapter I have analyzed Fazlur Rahman's thought and his understanding of contemporary Islamic modernism. Over the course of time, Islam has shown an initial capacity to meet challenges creatively. For approximately fourteen centuries, Rahman holds, Islam has unfolded itself in history, partly controlling and molding this long historical process, especially in the early centuries, and partly compromised by this process, either at a political level, in the post-classical period, or at a spiritual level, in the later Middle Ages. During the course of history, Islam has acquired that richness and depth of experience through which it has developed as a historical phenomenon.<sup>101</sup> However, these rich traditions are various types of interpretations, which are confined to time and place.

Although there will always be certain differences in interpretation, these different interpretations are not all a product of normative Islam.<sup>102</sup> What many Muslims may have regarded as being of great importance to Islam in one period may differ from what may have been emphasized in an earlier or later period,<sup>103</sup> for people understand their religious sources primarily according to the felt needs of their own contemporary situations, even when they make a genuine and serious effort to go back to the sources and transcend the intervening tradition. For example, as Rahman states,

The greater part of the pre-modernist revivalism, namely, the Arabian and the African movement understood the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet primarily in terms of a pure monotheism that

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<sup>101</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: Review Essay", *Approaches to Islam in Religious Study*, ed. Richard C. Martin, (The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1985), pp. 151-162

<sup>102</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, p. 235

<sup>103</sup> Rahman, "Approaches to Islam", p. 191

had been adulterated by various accretions and superstitions for this was the primary conditioning of their situation.<sup>104</sup>

Rahman, then, is certain that Islam in history has changed, and that it will continue to change at an even more rapid pace.<sup>105</sup> The only things that can not be given up or modified are the *Qur'anic* objectives and principals, which must exercise control upon the present social change.<sup>106</sup> And Institutional education seems to be the key to the future of the Muslim world to that end. Since, desirable social change will only come about through appropriate education.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Islam: Challenges and Opportunities", *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge*, ed. A.T. Welch and P. Cachia, (Edinburg University Press, Edinburg, 1979), p. 326

<sup>105</sup> Rahman, "Approaches to Islam", p. 202

<sup>106</sup> Rahman, "Challenges and Opportunities" p. 236

<sup>107</sup> Andrew Rippin, review of *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, by Fazlur Rahman, *Journal of School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (1984) , p. 354

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this thesis, I have tried to explore the ideas of Fazlur Rahman with respect to Islamic modernism. It has been underlined that the idea of Islamic modernism, the concern of meeting changing needs, is not new, and, at various times and in various Islamic geographical locations, religious people, as well as politicians and scholars, have attempted reforms and took part in revivalist movements in order to overcome the problems resulting from the role of religion in social life. What makes Fazlur Rahman of particular importance is both his intellectual effort to sum up these movements and his conclusions as to their accomplishments as well as their shortcomings.

Rahman's main concerns are the relative stagnation of Muslim societies when compared to the rise of Western civilization, and the ways of coping with such a problem by means of a re-thinking of the *Qur'an* and *Qur'anic* Islam. Rahman did not write a systematic interpretation of the *Qur'an* to exemplify his methodology. Instead, he contributed a book entitled *Major Themes of Qur'an* in which he synthesized the most important ideas from the *Qur'an* in a logical sequence, stressing its chronological order as developed in the corpus of the *Qur'an* itself. However, it should not be forgotten that his over-emphasis on chronological understanding of the *Qur'an* can be seen as dismissive of the idea that the existing arrangement of the *Qur'an* is significant. In fact, in order to fit his ideas to the main body of the text, Fazlur Rahman, to some extent, tailors and imposes his subjective interpretation on certain verses.

This point aside, however, the development process of Muslim societies in line with *Qur'anic* interpretations through the agency of reason is of great importance. Islamic modernism's major concern is to make Islam a living force in

the face of modernity, while not excluding its Islamic heritage. In that sense, its first aim is to reconstruct Islam. However, most of the Muslim countries which have opted for secularism have partly excluded their Islamic tradition, and destructive policies towards religious symbols have evoked an adverse reaction in the public. Such public reaction led to the reinforcement of traditional Islam and prevented any concerted thinking about religious issues through a reasoned approach. Islamic modernism, on the other hand, asserts that Islam is a dynamic religion that can accommodate change, provided that *Qur'anic* rules are interpreted through reason. To that end, Fazlur Rahman emphasizes the crucial role of well qualified, educated people, and hence, the role of education in the revitalization of Muslim societies since, for Rahman, desirable social change will only come about through appropriate education.

This thesis has confined itself largely to an analytical presentation of the main points of Fazlur Rahman's Islamic modernism and the intellectual assumptions underlying them. The academic interests of this scholar, and the significance of his contribution to various aspects of the study of Islam, have to be acknowledged and further discussed and assessed from several perspectives. For this reason, Fazlur Rahman remains an important Islamic thinker and scholar, one whose foresight and ingenuity --in the face of the difficulties confronting the Islamic world-- in terms of reconciling its heritage with the necessities of the modern world rightly deserves the acclaim it has so far received, both in Turkey and elsewhere.

The Islamic world has experienced extensive social changes over its long history. Yet despite these changes, a consensus is difficult to achieve about the reasons of relative backwardness of Muslim societies. Although, Islamic modernism might be seen as something of a purely intellectual movement, with its proponents

open to the criticism that their suggested reforms lead only to the Westernization of Islam, the value of Islamic modernists should not be underestimated. Not only does it emphasize educational reforms incorporating a modern curriculum together with legal and social change, but, at the same time, it maintains the notion of Islamic unity, gives renewed credibility to Islam's intellectual and scientific heritage, and produces modern interpretations of Islam and its source texts which incorporate modern concepts and institutions. This situation is no more evident than it is in Turkey, a country that has embraced secularist reforms, where theologians like Yaşar Nuri Öztürk and Zekeriya Beyaz are trying to find practical and modernist solutions to religious problems within the modern context.

Islamic modernism can be seen to introduce and promote a way of thinking which is oriented towards change through a rejection of the blind following of tradition and an acceptance of the need for reinterpretation and reform. It is in this that Islamic modernism as represented by Fazlur Rahman, his thoughts and ideas, not to mention his methodology, may offer a way for Islam to maintain itself as a credible force within the ever-changing modern world of the twenty-first century, and it is hoped that, in some way, this thesis will contribute to a greater understanding and acceptance of this role.

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