FAZLUR RAHMAN’S ISLAM AND MODERNITY REVISITED

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INTRODUCTION

It has been just over ten years since Fazlur Rahman published his groundbreaking book *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Here Rahman deals with the basic issue of Islamic epistemology by outlining the characteristics of the traditional Islamic method for acquiring knowledge, and determining whether something is “Islamic” or “un-Islamic”. He theorizes that the traditional method is fraught with shortcomings which are keeping the ‘Muslim mind’ from entering the modern age. He argues that if Muslims continue to adhere to the traditional Islamic methodology, they will not be able to reconcile the teachings of their religion with the demands of the twenty-first century. Consequently, there is an “immediate imperative” to develop a coherent Islamic worldview—a worldview which could only be developed by constructing a new Islamic methodology.

In the view of many a Muslim critic, Rahman’s arguments are “radical” by any measure, and contain major errors. However, considering the abysmal and chaotic state of the modern Muslim scholarship, his arguments warrant serious consideration. In the following article, I will discuss a number of issues related to Rahman’s Islamic methodology, and highlight its major features. During the course of this discussion, I will contrast the essential features of this proposed methodology with that of the traditional Islamic methodology. I will try to show that Fazlur Rahman’s endeavour to construct a new Islamic methodology falls not only within the parameters of the Islamic epistemological tradition, but also within the parameters of modern Western methodological principles. In other words, Rahman’s method is both “Islamic” and “scientific”. In the final section I will investigate whether or not the methodology proposed by Fazlur Rahman will have any impact on the Muslim mind.
FAZLUR RAHMAN’S FORMULATION OF AN ISLAMIC METHODOLOGY

It is the opinion of many scholars that the ‘Muslim mind’ and the Muslim world have been in an acute state of crisis for at least two centuries. This state of crisis has been deepened by the social, political, economic, and military ascendancy of the West vis-à-vis the Muslim world. This ascendancy has only increased with the passage of time. This state of affairs has caused many Muslims to wonder why their societies are so backward and those of the West so advanced. The question becomes even more haunting in light of the historical grandeur of Islamic societies in the not so distant past. Pondering the cause of their decline and the conditions necessary for revival, many Muslims have offered their views and solutions. Fazlur Rahman and his proposed Islamic methodology fall into this category.

The reasons offered by Fazlur Rahman for the decline of Islamic societies and the conditions necessary for their revival can best be understood when contrasted with the views of others. The Islamic revivalists are one such group. The revivalists can be characterized as those who argue that the essential challenge facing the Muslim world is the process of secularization—which they define to be the “removal of religious value from all aspects of society except that defined as specifically religious”. The main goal of the Islamic revivalists has been to arrest the process of secularization and de-Islamization in Muslim societies. The revivalists argue that the re-invigoration of Islamic societies can only take place when modern politics, economics, education, and social relations are reinfused with Islamic principles. The underlying assumption of the revivalists is that the same “Islam” which empowered the early Islamic community is also capable of empowering modern Islamic societies. The very same Islamic institutions, legal codes, and social mores adopted by the early Islamic community are sufficient for today’s Islamic societies, with only minor variations. The failure to adopt the above has been responsible for the backwardness of Muslim societies. Hence issues such as banning alcohol, and casinos, requiring women to cover themselves, and implementing the Shar’ah are of critical importance to the revivalists. Adopting these measures will bring the Islamic community more in line with the teachings of Islam, consequently stemming the downwards spiral movement and laying the groundwork for future grandeur.

In contrast to the prognosis and remedy for the malaise afflicting Islamic societies offered by the revivalists, Fazlur Rahman argues that the cause of this malaise is rooted in the intellectual legacy of Islam. To him the revival of modern Islamic societies requires far more than merely adopting various Islamic institutions and behaviours and abandoning various Western institutions and behaviours. He criticizes the position of the revivalists in the following words:
To insist on a literal implementation of the rules of the Qur’ān, shutting one’s eyes to the social change that has occurred and that is palpably occurring before our eyes, is tantamount to deliberately defeating its moral-social purposes and objectives.  

The very roots of Islamic methodology have to be re-examined in light of the present condition and historical experience. In essence the method used by Muslims to determine what is “Islamic” and what is “un-Islamic” itself has to be scrutinized. According to Rahman the malaise afflicting modern Muslim societies is rooted in a faulty Islamic methodology, not in the process of secularization. He argues:

If the Muslims’ loud and persistent talk about the viability of Islam as a system of doctrine and practice in the world of today is genuine . . . then it seems clear that they must once again start at the intellectual level. They must candidly and without inhibitions discuss what Islam wants them to do today.

Rahman contends that the decline of the Muslim world did not begin with Western penetration in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries, but with the intellectual ossification which took root in the aftermath of the collapse of the Abbasids in the thirteenth century. This fact is obvious considering the quantity and quality of original scholarship produced by the Muslims after the collapse of the Abbasids. The ability of the Europeans to penetrate the Muslim world was the most dramatic evidence of the internal decline of Muslim society, not its cause. Here Rahman is echoing Malek Bennabi’s thesis that the Muslims became colonized because they had become “colonizable”.

The political fragmentation of the Ummah in the aftermath of the Abbasid collapse led to the decline of the “religious imagining” and the rise of the “dynastic imagining” in the Muslim world. The “religious imagining” being defined as imagining oneself to be part of strata “in the cosmological hierarchy of which the apex was divine”. The rise of the Ottomans in Turkey, the Safavids in Persia, and the Mughals in India strengthened the “dynastic imagining” amongst the Muslims at the expense of the “religious imagining”. The two primary factors identified by Benedict Anderson which weaken the “religious imagining”, (1) the territorialization and relativization of faith and (2) the demotion of the sacred language, were unmistakably present in the Muslim world by the sixteenth century. Confrontation with the pagan Mongols from the East and the Christian Crusaders from the West forced the concepts of territorialization and relativization upon the Muslims. With the rise of Turkish and Persian as the mother tongue of a large percentage of Muslims, Arabic ceased to be the lingua franca of all Muslims. The decline of the “religious imagining” and the rise of “dynastic imagining” created a situation where the
"preservation of the empire became the primary concern of Muslim institutions rather than the principles on which it was founded".\textsuperscript{13}

According to Rahman the \textit{`ulamā'} class played a critical role in the process of relegating the Islamic principles to this secondary status in favour of political expediency. They failed to articulate a comprehensive Islamic worldview which in turn made the Islamic principles vulnerable to the vagaries of power politics.\textsuperscript{14} The co-option of Islamic principles and institutions by the imperial state created an intellectual climate in which rationalism and \textit{ijtihād} were superseded by the principles of social necessity and public interest in the formulation of Islamic law. Rahman notes:

While taking advantage of and appealing to the principles of 'social necessity' and 'public interest' that the Muslim jurists themselves had enunciated for the convenience of administration ... Muslim rulers at the same time freely resorted to promulgating state-made law that was neither Islamic nor yet secular.\textsuperscript{15}

This state of affairs inevitably led to intellectual ossification and the replacement of scholarship based on original thought by one based on commentaries and supercommentaries. As early as the eleventh century certain \textit{`ulamā'} were already arguing for the closing of the gates of \textit{ijtihād}, and basing the Islamic method solely on \textit{taqlīd} (blind imitation).\textsuperscript{16} By the beginning of the fourteenth century the Islamic methodology had become firmly based on the principles of precedence and consensus, while rationalism and \textit{ijtihād} were totally disregarded. In turn Islamic education became a glib process of memorizing the "requirements of obedience and imitation".\textsuperscript{17} At this point, the break between Islamic society and the \textit{êlan} of the Qur'ān became complete, and the society heretofore developed along the lines of culture and tradition, completely cut-off from the Qur'ānic principles.\textsuperscript{18} Since the cause of Muslim decadence lies in the adherence to an Islamic methodology which has put a vast chasm between Islamic society and the Qur'ānic principles, Fazlur Rahman argues, the path to revival lies in developing an Islamic methodology which will close this gap.

Rahman proposes a new methodology that strives to draw a clear distinction between "historical Islam and normative Islam".\textsuperscript{19} This distinction has to be drawn both in regards to Islamic principles and Islamic institutions. He states that the multitude of Qur'ānic revelations took place "in, although not merely for, a given historical context".\textsuperscript{20} Muslims must recognize the essential feature in the revelation which is meant not only for the specific context in which it was revealed but is intended by the Creator to "outflow through and beyond that given context of history".\textsuperscript{21} This can be accomplished by undertaking a comprehensive study of the Qur'ān to firmly establish the general principles and required objectives elucidated therein. The object of this comprehensive study would be to establish the \textit{êlan} of the Qur'ān. Thereafter,
the *aspāb al-nuzūl* (the historical circumstances surrounding a specific revelation) should be used to examine specific pronouncements, to ensure that the pronouncement is in keeping with the *èlan* of the Qur‘ān. This will allow for the resurrection of the original thrust of the Islamic message, free from the accumulated debris of tradition, precedent, and culture of the past millennium.

In addition to this Muslims have to become aware of the historical transformation of important Islamic institutions. Only when they are able to determine the impact of various socio-political trends upon their legal, intellectual, and political institutions will they be able to distinguish the “historically accidental from the essentially Islamic”.[22] This comprehensive study of the Qur‘ān and various Islamic institutions would go a long way in clearing up the endemic confusion amongst the Muslims between the general/universal Islamic principles and their specific/historical application in the past. Stopping at this point would be useless, a detailed study of the problem afflicting the Islamic societies should be undertaken. Then the general principles garnered from the study of the Qur‘ān would be applied to the particular problems faced by modern Islamic societies in order to come up with a satisfactory solution. Rahman summarizes his methodology in the following words.

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‘ān—taking the necessary and 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 conditions now obtaining.[23]

Following Rahman’s Islamic methodology, many of the assumptions held by Muslims about a multitude of Islamic teachings would be challenged. For example, virtually all Muslims define the position of women in Islam within the context of a family. A woman’s worth is measured by her role as a mother, wife, or daughter. In all of these roles it is assumed that the male is responsible for her financial maintenance, and that she cannot be economically independent. Fazlur Rahman argues that the Qur‘ānic verse “men are the managers of the affairs of women” (4:36) is a description of the way things were in Makkah at the time of revelation, not the way things should always be. In light of the fact that some of the Prophet’s wives, most notably Khadijah and ‘Ā’ishah, ran quite profitable business enterprises, and there was no rebuke on part of the Prophet or the Qur‘ān, the traditional Muslim attitude towards a woman’s financial independence deviates from the Qur‘ānic spirit.[24]
He also argues that even though all of the four Sunni schools of law have given outright permission to a man to marry four wives, this position is also not faithful to the spirit of the Qur'an. The Qur'an states that a man is allowed to marry up to four women if he is able to do justice to all of them. But in another verse (4:128) it is made very clear that a man is incapable of doing justice to more than one woman. Fazlur Rahman argues that taking these two verses together, along with the ones stressing the equality of all human beings (4:40, 33:35, etc.) one is forced to conclude that the Qur'an prefers monogamy to polygamy. Moving away from the influence of culture and tradition, and examining the relevant verses on their own merit, one has to agree with Rahman regarding judging a woman on her individual merit, her right to financial autonomy, and the preference of monogamy over polygamy.

Of far greater importance than the implications of Fazlur Rahman's Islamic methodology on such issues as the status of women in Islam, the possible permissibility of interest, the acceptance of geographically-defined Islamic political entities, is its implication on the essence of Islam. For him Islam's mission is to establish a just socio-economic order among mankind. He argues that for the first eleven years of the Prophet's mission, Islam had only one pillar, tawhid, the belief in the Oneness of Allah. Other than being required to believe in only one God, the early Muslims were not required to observe any other religious duties. He points out that if the Makkah revelations are studied carefully one sees the believers being repeatedly exhorted to care for the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the destitute. Furthermore, the rich who hoard wealth, do not encourage the feeding of the poor, usurp the rights of the orphan, and are malevolent towards the widows, are condemned in the harshest language. Fazlur Rahman states,

The early SuraJJs of the Qur'an make it abundantly clear that the acute problems in that society were polytheism, exploitation of the poor, malpractice in trade, and general irresponsibility towards society (which there is good reason to believe the Qur'an perceived as interconnected). Taking together with the emphasis on socio-economic justice, the absence of any religious obligation other than believing in the One God, for the first eleven years of the Prophet's mission, leads one to the inescapable conclusion that these are the two elements which determine the essence of Islam. He draws a direct link between tawhid and socio-economic justice when he says:

For Muhammad's monotheism was, from the very beginning, linked up with a humanism and a sense of social and economic justice whose intensity is no less than the intensity of the monotheistic idea.
Even though the Muslims are well aware of the status of *tawhīd* in Islam, the concept of socio-economic justice has become very diluted and abstract. For a great number of Muslims, especially the political élite, there is no connection between Islam and a just socio-economic order. Fazlur Rahman argues that such a just order can only be established through political/economic mechanisms, and any society not striving to establish such an order cannot be properly defined as Islamic. He says:

... the Qurʾān had from the time of its revelation a practical and political application; it was not a mere devotional or personal pietistic text.²⁸

Following his Islamic methodology, ultimately striving to distinguish between normative Islam and historical Islam, Fazlur Rahman reached this conclusion regarding the essence of Islamic teachings, e.g. belief in the One God and ceaseless social activism.

**CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW ISLAMIC METHODOLOGY**

In formulating his Islamic methodology Rahman utilizes various principles from the rich tradition of Islamic epistemology and scholarship. His contribution to Islamic thought lies in the fact that he applied certain principles used by the traditionalists in novel ways, to address various issues facing modern Muslim thinkers. *Ijtihād* being the foremost among these principles. He is explicit in stating that he is “not in the process of creating, but merely making explicit an Islamic methodology”²⁹ He sees this effort to be an “intellectual *jihād*, technically called *ijtihād*”.³⁰ He argues that by trying to articulate a methodology, which would make Islamic principles relevant to modern society, one would fulfil the Islamic obligation to expend one’s utmost effort to serve the Creator. In fact he defines *ijtihād* to be:

... the effort to understand the meaning of a relevant text or precedent in the past, containing a rule, and to alter that rule by extending or restricting or otherwise modifying it in such a manner that a new situation can be subsumed under it by extension.³¹

According to Rahman *ijtihād* fulfils the role of contrasting the eternal Qurʾānic principles with “freshly derived inspiration from revelations”.³² Then the knowledge and wisdom gained from this process are to be used to tackle issues and problem facing contemporary society.

In spite of the fact that for nearly a millennium ‘official orthodoxy’ preached that *ijtihād* was no longer necessary, there is no Qurʾānic injunction or Prophetic tradition which justifies such a view. A strong argument could indeed be made that closing the gates of *ijtihād*, by anyone at any point in time,
is against the letter and spirit of Islamic teachings. An authentic hadith narrated by Bukhārī and Muslim sheds light on this subject. The Prophet appointed Mu‘adh ibn Jabal to be an arbiter amongst the people of Yemen, after the Yemenis had requested such a person. Upon being questioned by the Prophet regarding the source of his legal opinions, Mu‘adh ibn Jabal told the Prophet that the Qur‘ān would be his primary source. If an explicit answer couldn’t be found therein, he would refer to the Sunnah of the Prophet, and that failing, he would use his own ijtihād. The Prophet approved this hierarchy of sources by stating ‘‘What the messenger of the Messenger of Allah has spoken has pleased the Messenger of Allah’’. It is obvious that as one moves away in time and space from the Prophetic community of Madinah, one is faced with novel situations and problems which the early Muslims did not face. The Prophetic tradition as well as the Qur‘ānic injunctions allow, nay demand, the practice of ijtihād in addressing these new situations and problems. Rahman proposes a methodology which aspires to provide contemporary Muslims with intellectual tools and concepts which could be used to deal with issues and problems facing Muslims in the twentieth century. Consequently in formulating his Islamic methodology, Fazlur Rahman continues the established, accepted, and respected tradition of practising ijtihād.

In the vast body of the Qur‘ānic exegesis, the universally most respected and admired is the Tafsīr al-Qur‘ān by Ibn Kathīr. All commentaries on the Qur‘ān, including the one by Ibn Kathīr, comment on a given verse and contain some other pertinent information. What sets Tafsīr al-Qur‘ān apart from the others is that it contains not only the above-mentioned information on a specific verse, but also the circumstances surrounding the revelation of the verse. Ibn Kathīr researched the voluminous body of hadith literature in order to determine the historical circumstances in which a certain verse was revealed. In his Tafsīr al-Qur‘ān he narrated the particular hadith which is related to the circumstances surrounding the revelation of specific verses, or groups of verses.

Determining the asbāb al-nuzūl was not the forte of Ibn Kathīr only, nor was he the only classical Muslim scholar to engage in such an enterprise. Indeed, the practice had been part of the Islamic scholarly tradition long before Ibn Kathīr arrived on the scene. Other scholars worked hard to determine the historical circumstances during which certain verses were revealed, it is just that no one did such a through and comprehensive job as Ibn Kathīr. In the Islamic legal tradition, determining the asbāb al-nuzūl of the Qur‘ānic verses related to legal matters was a long-established practice. In addition to determining the historical circumstances during which a Qur‘ānic verse was revealed, a similar tradition exists in classic Islamic scholarship related to determining the historical circumstances surrounding the pronouncements of the Prophet. Fazlur Rahman recognizes the fact that classical Muslim scholars accorded the asbāb al-nuzūl special attention. He faults them for limiting their reliance on the asbāb al-nuzūl when formulating legal opinions. He states that a principle regarding the role of
*āṣāb āl-nuzūl* in the formulation of law was constructed which stated that “although an injunction may have been occasioned by a certain situation, it is nevertheless universal in its general application”. This principle, in effect, lent greater import to the literal wording of a verse in the formulation of legal opinion rather than the value underlying the verse. It is only by giving the underlying value greater import than the literal wording that one can capture the true spirit of the Qur’ān. In spite of this shortcoming the import accorded to the *āṣāb āl-nuzūl* by both the classical scholars and Fazlur Rahman is quite great.

**MODERNITY’S CHALLENGE TO TRADITION**

The crisis of the modern Muslim mind is not unique. There is confusion and turmoil in the Western mind also. A strong argument could be made that the crisis of the Western mind is no less severe than that of the Muslim mind. Whereas the modern Muslim mind is trying to grapple with problems of the twenty-first century using tools and concepts developed a millennium age, the modern Western mind is unable to accept the possibility that there are certain eternal and transcendent truths which man must accept, even if they are many millennia old. The malaise of the Western mind has troubled many thinkers and many of them have written extensively of the subject. According to Abu-Rabi’, Houston Smith’s *Beyond the Postmodern Mind* addresses this very topic.35

Professor Smith is deeply troubled by the modernist philosophical “assertion that truth is made and not found”. For a theologian who believes that “truth” cannot be created by the human intellect but must be discovered in the Divine revelations, the modernist assertion is unsettling, to say the least. This state of affairs is the culmination of a process which began during the Enlightenment period. By the beginning of the twentieth century it was a widely-held belief in the West that human salvation lies in conquering nature and not in obeying the teachings of the Divine revelations. The modern assertion that there is no such thing as an eternal truth is merely a culmination of this process which has totally divorced modern man from Divine teachings. According to Abu-Rabi’, Professor Smith argues that the “sense of epistemological and social fragmentation in the West” can only be reversed by establishing the principles of “stability, foundation, intention, and purpose”. The methodology he proposes for bringing this about is worthy of investigation.

According to Abu-Rabi’, Professor Smith theorizes that religion must by seen as a “synthetic construct” which combines metaphysics and social fact. He is saying that on one level, the metaphysical plane, religion is universal and transcendent, and on another level, the social plane, religion is “subject to diversity and particularism”. Professor Smith argues that all social sciences and other epistemological tools be used in distinguishing the transcendent from the particular. He assert that “the Transcendent is the only certain foundation on which man can build his future”. By establishing the Transcendent, man
will be able to give meaning to his existence, and also establish a definitive place for himself in the swirling cosmos—something which he is incapable of doing by relying on secularist thought alone. Once he has laid this solid foundation it will be much easier for him to tackle the myriad of problems he is facing.

Returning to Fazlur Rahman’s Islamic methodology, one can clearly see that the whole purpose of his enterprise is to give the Muslims the intellectual tools which will help them to discern the Transcendent principles of the Qur’an from the particular interpretations of it by the previous generations. Even though he remains faithful to the conceptual methods of classical Muslim scholars, he forges new intellectual pathways in endeavouring to distinguish between the eternal and the particular. Comparing Rahman’s endeavour with Smith’s hope, it is abundantly clear that both are aiming at similar goals for their respective traditions. Here we have evidence that Fazlur Rahman’s endeavour falls within contemporary trends in religio-philosophical thought. This contention is reinforced in light of the fact that Houston Smith is selected from a vast number of Western thinkers who are struggling with the state of modern epistemology, the future of the modern mind, and possible solutions for its malaise.

In *Islam and Modernity*, Fazlur Rahman himself discusses the “affinity of his Islamic methodology with what the West now calls historicism”.

Historicism is a term that describes a conceptual approach for analysing the history of ideas and thought. Historicists assert that a true understanding of ideas and theories cannot be gained unless the historical circumstances surrounding the articulation of these ideas and theories are taken into account. In this construct the historical analysis becomes crucial to understanding philosophical thought, religious principles, and social trends. The validity of the historicist approach has been widely accepted in Western scholarly circles.

A new approach in epistemological methodology—deconstructionism—has gained considerable currency over the past two decades in the West. This approach holds that all “truth” and knowledge are purely subjective. Consequently there is no such thing as the “Transcendent” which Houston is searching for, or the “normative Islam” which Rahman is attempting to discover. In spite of the fact that the deconstructionist approach is having increasing impact on the Western intellect, many serious questions regarding its validity remain. Historicism remains an important and widely accepted approach to understanding the history of ideas, thought, and social trends.

Rahman’s attempt to formulate a coherent Islamic methodology is part of a trend in modern thought to deal with a number of issues facing modern/postmodern society. The search for the “transcendent”, “authentic”, “normative” etc. is being carried out on many levels, in many intellectual circles, not just Islamic ones. This search is evident amongst not only the
traditional societies but also among the industrialized and modern societies. In the West this search is the result of a nagging sense of unease among certain intellectuals that in spite of its apparent triumph and strength, there is something seriously amiss in contemporary Western civilization. René Guenon is one such intellectual. He defines a “normal” civilization as,

... one that is based on principles, in the true sense of the word, one where everything is arranged in hierarchy to conform to these principles, so that everything in it is seen as the application and extension of a doctrine whose essence is purely intellectual and metaphysical.42

It is clear that one cannot characterize contemporary Western civilization as being “normal”, as defined by Guenon. When one looks at contemporary Western civilization in light of this definition one sees that the “doctrine” it is based on is neither “purely intellectual” nor “purely metaphysical”. Lyotard has accurately characterized the nature and function of “knowledge” being produced by the Western intellectual/intellect, in these words:

Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production.43

Pure intellectualism has been crushed under the weight of “operational knowledge”. The fate of the intellectual/intellect which does not exclusively produce “operational knowledge”, in the contemporary West, is marginalization at best, and suffocation at worst. Where Lyotard has described the degeneration of intellectualism to operationalism in the West, Marcuse has documented the death of metaphysics. The disciples and heirs of Saint-Simon’s positivism have seen to it that “the metaphysical dimension, formerly a genuine field of rational thought”44 is dealt a fatal blow. The triumph of logical positivism has meant that metaphysics is consigned to the realm of “obscurationist and regressive modes of thought”,45 along with all idealisms and transcendentalisms. The death of metaphysics and the birth of an intellect totally absorbed in the pursuit of “operational knowledge”, have been complementary and mutually re-enforcing trends. The abnormalities of a civilization lacking both purely intellectual and metaphysical roots, will be manifested in a myriad of psycho-spiritual problems. The sacrificing of pure intellectualism and metaphysics at the altar of operationalism and consumerism has meant the loss of a spiritual centre, increasing alienation from the self and others, and the triumph of low culture over high culture. These and other serious problems have forced many intellectuals in the West to embark on a process of self-examination in order to halt the mad rush towards nihilism—the defining characteristic of a postmodern society.46 This self-examination is aimed at discovering the defining principles, as enunciated by Guenon, of Western society. Fazlur Rahman’s Islamic
methodology is the result of a similar self-examination which is occurring amongst Muslim intelligentsia.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Earlier in the twentieth century Antonio Gramsci, as quoted by Bassam Tibbi, described an "intellectual" in the following terms.

The characteristic feature of the new intellectual may no longer be eloquence as the exterior and immediate driving force of the emotions and passions. Instead he must immerse himself actively in practical life, not as a mere orator but as a designer, organizer, "permanent persuader". 47

The process which causes the transformation of a "professional intellectual" and leads to the emergency of a "new" or "organic" intellectual is described by Karl Mannheim. The transformation begins when the professional intellectuals become aware of "their own social position [in society] and the mission implicit in it". 48 After becoming aware of their social role and position in society, their political and intellectual role

... is decided on the basis of a conscious orientation in society and in accordance with the demands of the intellectual life. 49

The process of self-realization, their position in society, and their constant interaction with the masses causes the "professional" intellectuals to become "designer[s], organizer[s], permanent persuaders", in other words "organic intellectuals". Herein lies the biggest obstacle to the spread and acceptance of Fazlur Rahman's ideas and methodology. He was a "professional intellectual" who was by no stretch of the imagination a "designer, organizer, 'permanent persuader'". He went through the phase of self-realization, as described by Mannheim, but when he evaluated his position in society he was aware that he could not function in such an environment. The intellectual milieu in Pakistan during the 50's and 60's was openly hostile to his ideas, and in order for him to grow intellectually he had to leave the country. His scholarship flourished in an un-Islamic, but accommodating environment. The fact that Rahman remained a "professional intellectual" all his life, strongly weighs against the possibility of the spread and acceptance of his ideas. The reason for this lies in the characteristics of the contemporary Islamic resurgence.

The modern Islamic intellectual resurgence, of which Rahman is an heir and participant, was initiated, nurtured, and spread by individuals who can be accurately defined as "organic intellectuals". The father of the modern Islamic movement, Jamal al-Din Afghani, can aptly be called an organic intellectual. Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, Syed Qutb, Abul-A'la Mawdudi, Ali
Shari'ati, to name a few prominent Muslim thinkers, were not intellectuals in the traditional sense of the word. In addition to thinking and theorizing about the problems in their society, these individuals were also "designer[s], organizer[s], 'permanent persuader[s]"—to use Gramsci's words—who actively tackled the problems they were thinking and theorizing about. Today it is individuals like Hasan Turabi, Abbasi Madani, and Rashid Ghanoushi who are continuing the intellectual-activist tradition in the Islamic world. This group of intellectual-activists have been the source of the newest and freshest ideas in the Muslim world over the past century. Their ideas and works have had greater impact in the Muslim world than that of any "professional intellectual". One has to search hard to find an Islamically-oriented professional intellectual who has had any considerable impact on the modern Muslim mind.

Another reason mitigating against the spread of Rahman's ideas in the Muslim world is the fact that he has left behind no committed cadre that will work to promote his ideas, no organization that will propagandize on their behalf, and no institutions which will attempt to put his proposals into practice. At the present time Fazlur Rahman's ideas are free floating in the "marketplace" of ideas with no group or institution to give them a concrete form. In spite of these shortcomings it does not mean Fazlur Rahman's work will not have any impact in the Muslim world at all. On the contrary there is ample reason to believe that his Islamic methodology will receive considerable play amongst the Muslims.

Looking at the countries in which the Islamic movement is strongest and the characteristics of the activists, and attempting to find a common denominator, one comes across a striking fact. Prior to the Revolution in Iran, the greatest number of foreign students in the United States were from Iran. When almost all of them were expelled in the aftermath of the embassy takeover, this distinction went to the Malaysians. The number of the Sudanese students in the United States is also quite large. If one wants to determine the strength of Islamist trend in a specific Muslim country, it seems that all one has to do is look at the number of students from that country studying in Western universities—the greater the number of students in such universities, the stronger the Islamist trend. It is safe to say that today tens of thousands of Muslims are enrolled in universities in each of the industrialized countries. And it is from among this pool that some of the most committed and sophisticated Muslim activists are emerging. It seems that almost all of the leading intellectual-activists received higher education in the West. These individuals are acutely aware of the fact that the traditional method of approaching Islamic epistemology is severely lacking and incapable of helping an Islamic society enter the twenty-first century. Herein lies the chief reason which most favours the spread of Rahman's works. A realization that the old will not work naturally initiates a search for the new. When searching for a new way of approaching Islamic epistemology, one will be hard-pressed to ignore Rahman's contributions. The
intellectual ossification in the Muslim world combined with an enthusiastic and open environment in the West suggests that the West may become a major source of original Muslim thinking. Fazlur Rahman’s works are evidence of the fact that this is already happening.

CONCLUSION

Fazlur Rahman’s work *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* is a major work which contains a coherent and cogent outline for the construction of a new Islamic methodology. The underlying reason for the necessity of a new methodology, according to the author, is that normative Islam must be separated from historical Islam. The proposed methodology remains true to the fundamental principles of Islamic epistemology, as well as to the scientific principles of the modern social sciences. The author does not so much construct a new methodology, as he puts into a coherent conceptual framework many of the established principles of Islamic scholarship, in order to give the Islamic tradition relevance in modern society. Considering the various trends in and around the Muslim world, Fazlur Rahman’s work is destined to have a positive impact on the intellectual debates in the Muslim circles. This book is a very serious piece of work which deserves the close attention of all Islamic scholars.

1Rahman’s *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* is a synthesis of his major ideas. The major themes discussed in this book are found in their formative stages in his *Major Themes in the Qur’an* (1979), *Islam* (1967), numerous articles published in leading academic journals, and also other books.

2The first edition of *Islam and Modernity* was published in 1982 by the University of Chicago Press.

3Hamilton Gibb in *Modern Trends in Islam* has identified an entity called the “Muslim mind”. According to Gibb this entity is incapable of adopting “rationalist modes of thought and... the utilitarian ethic” due to its “atomism and discreetness”. For Gibb these characteristics of the “Muslim mind” are eternal and immutable. It is my opinion that if such an entity exists, something which is very difficult to prove, the characteristics it possesses at any given stage in history are most likely to be the product of its historical and cultural milieu and not some transcendent principles.


5Ibid.


12Ibid. p. 17-18.
18Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman’s Islamic Methodology", p. 217.
20Ibid.
22Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman’s Islamic Methodology", p. 229.
23Ibid. p. 218.
24Ibid. p. 220.
25Ibid.
27Ibid.
28Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman’s Islamic Methodology", p. 222.
29Ibid.
30Rahman, Islam and Modernity, p. 5.
33Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman’s Islamic Methodology", p. 222.
36Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman’s Islamic Methodology", p. 222.
38Rahman, Islam and Modernity, p. 17.
40Ibid.
41Ibid. 230.
42Ibid. 236.
43Ibid. 239.
49Ibid.
53Ibid.