

Islamic Ethics in Engagement with Education, Economics, and Politics: An Overview of the Attempts of Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988)

MUHAMMAD SYAFIQ BORHANNUDDIN*

Abstract

This article examines the ethical thought of Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988), focusing specifically on how his views on ethics in Islam are applied to the practical domains of education, economics, and politics. Although he is widely recognized for his role in Islamic modernist thought, his efforts to integrate ethical principles into these applied fields remain underexplored systematically and holistically. This study aims to fill that gap by unearthing, classifying, and analysing his writings, policy interventions, and theoretical contributions across these key sectors of Muslim public life. Methodologically, this article undertakes a critical textual analysis of Fazlur Rahman’s primary works, as well as his lesser-known articles, policy recommendations, and public addresses. These texts are analysed thematically to identify the normative ethical assumptions that undergird his intellectual agenda. The study also situates his ideas within the broader landscape of modern Islamic thought, including his dialectical engagement with both secular ideologies and traditionalist religious interpretations. The key argument advanced is that Fazlur Rahman’s project represents a deliberate and coherent attempt to operationalize Islamic ethics in concrete sociopolitical and institutional contexts. In education, he emphasizes the integration of religious and secular knowledge as a means of cultivating ethical character and social consciousness. In economics, he critiques both capitalist and socialist frameworks, advocating instead for a ṣadaqah-based system of cooperative justice grounded in the principles of tawḥīd and zakāh. In politics, he proposes a Qur’ānically inspired democratic ethos rooted in shūrā (consultation), moral leadership, and public accountability. Ultimately, the article aims to demonstrate that Fazlur Rahman’s ethical vision is not limited to theoretical moral reasoning but is deeply concerned with constructing a just and morally meaningful social order. His integrative approach offers a model for contemporary Muslim societies to rethink the role of ethics in addressing modern challenges.

Keywords

Islamic ethics, Fazlur Rahman, applied ethics, Qur’ānic moral framework.

Introduction

In contemporary Islamic scholarship, the engagement of Islamic ethics with the practical domains of modern life—particularly education, economics, and politics—remains both urgent and underexplored. While

* Fellow, Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

there has been a significant body of work addressing these domains independently, little has been done to systematically examine how Islamic ethical frameworks are applied across these diverse spheres in a coherent and integrated manner. This lacuna is particularly striking in relation to the intellectual legacy of Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), a distinguished Muslim thinker whose writings reflect a sustained attempt to revive Islamic ethical thought and apply it meaningfully to contemporary realities.¹

This article addresses precisely that gap. It offers a comprehensive study of Fazlur Rahman's efforts to articulate and operationalize Islamic ethics in the domains of education, economics, and politics—fields which he did not treat in isolation but as interconnected dimensions of a broader moral vision of the Qur'ān and Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him).² These efforts reflect Fazlur Rahman's broader intellectual project, that is, the reinvigoration of Islamic ethical thought not merely as abstract theory, but as an actionable moral framework capable of shaping public life in a manner faithful to Islamic vision while responsive to modern challenges.

By investigating Fazlur Rahman's writings, public engagements, and policy recommendations, this article aims mainly to 1) uncover the intellectual and sociopolitical motivations behind Fazlur Rahman's ethical engagement with these practical domains; 2) situate his applied ethics within the broader landscape of modern Islamic thought, particularly in its response to secular ideologies and Muslim traditionalist circles; and 3) analyse the central moral questions he addressed, such as the formation of moral character through education, economic justice as an extension of *tawḥīd* (divine unity), and participatory governance through *shūrā* (mutual consultation).

Fazlur Rahman's work in this area is particularly significant given the unique position he occupied, that is, a scholar deeply rooted in classical Islamic sciences, yet unafraid to engage modern intellectual trends; a thinker who worked in both Western academic institutions and Muslim-majority national bureaucracies. His thought continues to offer critical insights into how Islamic ethics can serve as a unifying force for

¹ Other leading figures of this period whose ideas deserve to be discussed in a constructive engagement with various practical domains include Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (b. 1931) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933).

² For an extensive study on Fazlur Rahman's expositions on Islamic ethical theory proper, see the author's dissertation, "Fazlur Rahman on Ethics in Islam" (PhD diss., Raja Zarith Sofiah Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science, and Civilisation (RZS-CASIS), University of Technology, Malaysia, 2022).

contemporary Muslim societies fragmented by intellectual, institutional, and ideological divides.

This article, therefore, is not merely an exercise in the interpretation of Fazlur Rahman's writings. Rather, it is an attempt to distil from his corpus a vision of ethical praxis that prioritizes human welfare, justice, and social responsibility. Through this investigation, I aim to contribute to the growing discourse on the relevance of Islamic ethical thought to the pressing dilemmas of modernity and to assert Fazlur Rahman's rightful place in that evolving conversation.

Recent scholarship related to Islamic ethics and Fazlur Rahman can be classified into two tracks. First are studies that conceptualize ethics largely at the level of terms and frameworks—e.g., Qur'ānic semantics or the re-articulation of *akhlāq/adab* as a science of religion (of Islam, as expressed in its Arabic technical term *al-dīn*)—without following those frameworks into practice across institutions and sectors. Landmark exemplars include Toshihiko Izutsu's (d. 1993) *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān*³ and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's (b. 1931) *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*⁴ and *On Justice and the Nature of Man*.⁵ These clarify categories but rarely demonstrate sustained application in education, economic life, or governance.

A second track concerns Fazlur Rahman specifically. Here, the dominant focus has been on his hermeneutics and reformist project, with only partial or piecemeal treatment of his ethics—and even less of his applied ethics. Surveys of theses and articles show that most studies either 1) discuss Fazlur Rahman's Qur'ānic method and then infer ethical implications, or 2) isolate single domains (e.g., *shūrā* or *ribā*) rather than situating them within a worked-out ethical system. Consequently, previous scholarship notes both a dearth of sustained analysis of modern Muslim figures on ethics and a tendency to treat Fazlur Rahman's discussions on education, economics, and politics in isolation and not in relation to his discussions on ethics as a whole.⁶

³ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966).

⁴ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition on the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995).

⁵ Al-Attas, *On Justice and the Nature of Man* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2015).

⁶ See Charles J. Adams, "Fazl al-Rahman as a Philosopher," in "In Memory of Fazlur Rahman," ed. A. Acikgenc, special Issue, *Journal of Islamic Research (Islami Arastirmalar)* 4, no. 4 (1990): 264-72; Megan Brankley Abbas, "Between Western Academia and Pakistan: Fazlur Rahman and the Fight for Fusionism," *Modern Intellectual History* 12, no. 2 (2015): 321-50; and Nurcholish Madjid, "Fazlur Rahman dan Rekonstruksi Etika al-Qur'an," *Ulumul Qur'an* 3, no. 4 (1992): 5-14.

Where authors do engage Fazlur Rahman's ethics, they often emphasize selected themes (e.g., egalitarianism) or his methodological claims, leaving under-examined his core virtue-vice grammar (*īmān*, *taqwā*, 'adl vs. *shirk*, *kufr*, *ẓulm*), his stated primacy of the *sharī'ah*, and the coherence of his move from Qur'ānic principles to sectoral prescriptions. There is also limited critical scrutiny of Fazlur Rahman's own assumptions (e.g., his charge that earlier literatures "modified" Qur'ānic emphases or privileged non-Qur'ānic sources) and of the potential secular dualisms that persist in his English-language formulations.⁷

At the level of primary sources, we do have a dispersed corpus through which Fazlur Rahman articulates ethical principles and applies them in education (curricular reform, moral formation), economics (justice beyond capitalist/socialist binaries), and politics (*shūrā*, accountability).⁸ Yet the literature has not systematically assembled this corpus to reconstruct a single ethic-to-praxis arc across these domains. Prior reviews explicitly call for classifying his ethical discussions, testing the fit of his concepts within the Islamic semantic field, and tracing their institutional application—a matter this article undertakes.

In short, despite many valuable contributions, the field still lacks 1) a synthetic, critical reconstruction of Fazlur Rahman's ethical system and 2) a holistic account of how he operationalizes that system across education, economics, and politics as mutually reinforcing sites of moral order. The present article addresses this by unearthing, classifying, and analysing Fazlur Rahman's writings and policy interventions to show an integrated ethic-to-praxis pathway, rather than three disconnected areas.

Islamic Ethics in Engagement with Education

It is evident in many of Fazlur Rahman's writings that he devotes extensive treatment to how he understands "education" in relation to his broader discussion on ethics in Islam. From these writings, three main themes can be derived in terms of how he applies and advances his Islamic ethical framework or systematically deploys his ethical framework in defining 1) the purpose of education; 2) the kind of content that is needed to inculcate the proper conscience and ethical dynamism the Qur'ān promotes for the believers; and 3) the kind of

⁷ For example, see Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980) and Fazlur Rahman, "Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'ān," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 11, no. 2 (1983): 170-85.

⁸ Fazlur Rahman, "The Qur'ānic Solution of Pakistan's Educational Problems," *Islamic Studies* 6, no. 4 (1967): 315-26, Fazlur Rahman, "Ribā and Interest," *Islamic Studies* 3, no. 1 (1964): 1-43, and Fazlur Rahman, "The Principle of Shura and the Role of the Ummah in Islam," *American Journal of Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1984): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v1i1.2817>.

reconstruction of the religious sciences that is needed for ethics to be reintegrated into the curriculum.

It must be remembered that Fazlur Rahman's discussions on education were not merely based on library research, but arose out of the experiences of someone who has been directly involved in the education planning and policy of Pakistan since 1964.⁹ It is against such a backdrop that in the first work, where Fazlur Rahman deliberates on the question of education—his *Islam* published in 1966—it can be found that he makes the case that Muslims have not properly formulated an integrated educational programme wherein the complex developments taking place in Muslim societies are addressed.¹⁰ For him, the only solution to the predicament facing contemporary Muslims must lie in basic reform of their modern educational systems so as to impart genuine Islamic values.¹¹

He declared in the same book that genuine moral enlightenment and an inculcation of a true inwardness of faith must form a fundamental part of Islamic education as per the initial drive of the masters of *taṣawwuf*, supporting his argument with reference to Muḥammad al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) teachings:

That genuine moral enlightenment and an inculcation of a true inwardness of faith must form a fundamental part of Islamic education, which was the initial motive force of Ṣūfism, none may deny, for, as al-Ghazālī taught us, an excessive stress on the "external disciplines" of religion merely creates religious fossils.¹²

In 1967, during his directorship of the Central Institute of Islamic Research in Pakistan, Fazlur Rahman highlighted the intimate link between education and ethics in his article titled "The Qur'ānic Solution of Pakistan's Educational Problems." He stated that the Qur'ān called for humankind to pursue knowledge for salutary ends both for the individual and the society. Thus, it is "the first responsibility of educators to attune the minds of their pupils on sound moral lines"¹³ and involve the perception of right and wrong:

The Qur'ān directs the severest possible criticism against such pursuit of material knowledge which would work for the detriment of moral values. It says, "Say: shall we tell you of those whose works have come to naught? It is those people whose efforts have become lost in the (naked) pursuit of

⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago, IL, Chicago University Press, 1982), 112-13.

¹⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1979), 221.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹² *Ibid.*, 244.

¹³ Fazlur Rahman, "Qur'ānic Solution," 315.

materialistic life (*al-ḥayātī' d-dunyā*) and they think they have achieved great things" (XVIII: 104-105). The Qur'ān taunts this type of people saying: "This is the be-all and end-all of their knowledge" (LIII: 30). The one-sided pursuit of worldly gain makes people's thinking so negative that, according to the Qur'ān, it becomes even difficult for them to imagine that their knowledge could be used in a better and more constructive way. "Whenever these people are asked not to sow corruption on earth, they retort 'we are only putting things right'" (II:11). It follows that the first responsibility of educators is to attune the minds of their pupils on sound moral lines. In other words, Islamic education is basically ideological and, therefore, can, by its very nature, not remain indifferent to the values involving perception of right and wrong.¹⁴

The purpose of education in Islam, as understood by Fazlur Rahman, therefore, must fundamentally be to produce human beings with proper moral conduct and conscience, and it is incumbent on an Islamic state to draw up a plan of education accordingly.¹⁵

Thereafter Fazlur Rahman articulates the necessary attitude towards knowledge that the education system must strive towards: 1) to recognize and acknowledge that all knowledge is rooted in observation and experimentation—as opposed to primacy of pure speculation;¹⁶ 2) to recognize and acknowledge that knowledge is ever-growing and dynamic—as opposed to static and stagnant; and 3) to recognize and acknowledge that knowledge must not be fragmented, and thus the education system for the Muslims must inculcate a "total organic picture" (or in traditional Islamic metaphysics, "*al-kullī*"—universal knowledge) and not fall for unbridled indulgence in pure fragmented knowledge which have becoming widespread in the modern world.¹⁷ He states,

¹⁴ Ibid., 315.

¹⁵ Ibid., 316.

¹⁶ This position of Fazlur Rahman appears to be derived from Muhammad Iqbal as indicated in the following endnote of this paper: "Iqbal, in his lecture on 'the Spirit of Muslim Culture' . . . has dealt at length with this subject and has quoted extensively from Briffault's *Making of History* to show that the scientific method owes its existence to the Arabs. We may add here the observation of George Sarton that the creation of the experimental spirit, or more exactly, its slow incubation was primarily due to Muslims down to the end of the twelfth century." Ibid., 325n12.

¹⁷ The question of the fragmentation of knowledge had been gaining wider attention in the West since the 1960s through the likes of David Bohm (d. 1992), the physicist, who remarked in his later work, "It is especially important to consider this question today, for fragmentation is now very widespread, not only throughout society, but also in each individual; and this is leading to a kind of general confusion of the mind, which creates an endless series of problems and interferes with our clarity of perception so

Unbridled indulgence in pure fragmented knowledge renders a man into a robot, a purely mechanical being. Fragmentation of knowledge ultimately results into a vicious fragmentation of the human personality and makes him oblivious of the real overall human needs. Our age is generally suffering from the results of this fragmentation of knowledge and personality. Science, therefore, is liable to be used for inhuman ends and knowledge, instead of being a guide for man, threatens destruction.¹⁸

To awaken the inner perception of man, Fazlur Rahman proposes that the following content be given due priority in the education of Muslims. There are three branches of knowledge based on his understanding of the Qur'ān, which for him are necessary for the believers to wield their knowledge properly and in the ultimate goal of establishing a just social order: 1) study of their own nature (psychology), 2) study of the nature of the universe (cosmology), and 3) the history of human societies:

The Qur'ān asks man to study his own nature, the nature of the universe and the history of human societies on this earth deeply and carefully and to draw moral lessons from them in order to wield his knowledge properly and not indulge in conduct which has been destructive of other societies. It is incumbent on an Islamic State, therefore, to draw up a plan of education in such a manner that a human positive attitude would be inculcated among those who would come out of this educational system as products. An Islamic State has to take this matter with grave seriousness and cannot neglect it except on pain of accepting the consequences, which have beset earlier societies and are besetting the present "developed" societies in their mutual relations and confrontations before our own eyes. The end of education is to save man *from himself by himself for himself*.¹⁹

To produce an ethical individual who will in turn be able to realize justice in society or in Fazlur Rahman's terms "a moral social order," the precondition that is emphasized by Fazlur Rahman is the education of man that allows him to overcome his petty or shortsighted outlook and a narrow vision of life by broadening the horizon of his thinking, thus freeing the self from selfishness and greed. It is against this backdrop that he calls for an educational reform in Muslim societies to achieve justice in the individual and collective life:

Educational reform is the only approach for a long-term solution of the current problems of the Muslim societies--mental dichotomy and unintegrated collective and individual life, resulting in confusion in all fields of human endeavor and frustration and crises that paralyze life.²⁰

seriously as to prevent us from being able to solve most of them." David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge, 1980), 1.

¹⁸ Fazlur Rahman, "Qur'ānic Solution," 320.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 316; italics in the original.

²⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*.

Fazlur Rahman evaluated the medieval educational system of the Muslims as well as the modern attempts to reform that educational system. He maintains that the central problem of the Muslim world is the widespread dichotomy between the traditional Islamic and modern Western systems of education—but more crucially, if the fields of higher learning are not imbued with an “Islamic orientation,” then the graduates’ outlook is bound to be secularized. For him, “the effort to inculcate an Islamic character in young students is not likely to succeed if the higher fields of learning remain completely secular, that is, unpurposeful with regard to their effect on the future of mankind.”²¹

It follows then, for Fazlur Rahman, that to prevent the secularization of the outlook of the Muslims, it is necessary that in higher learning, the domain of the humanities are given due recognition vis-à-vis the natural sciences—more specifically, the aspect of the humanities which he strongly argues for is the “metaphysics” (of Islam) which to him is the source of all values and gives unity to knowledge and the meaning and orientation this unity gives to life. He argued,

Although the *content* of physical or exact sciences cannot by definition be interfered with—else they will be falsified—their orientation can be given a value character. Sometimes certain mistaken ideological attitudes try to interfere with the content of these sciences as well, as, for example, when Stalin ordered Russian biologists to emphasize the influence of environment at the expense of heredity. Under such influences or pressures, science must become a mockery, but it is possible and highly desirable for a scientist to know the consequences his investigations have for mankind. It is also equally and, indeed, urgently important for scientific knowledge to be a unity and to give an overall picture of the universe in order to answer the all-important questions, “Does it mean anything? Does it point to a higher will and purpose? Or is it, to use [Alfred] Whitehead’s famous words, “a mere hurrying of material endlessly, meaninglessly”?”²²

Following this, Fazlur Rahman pursued the question of what it meant to reform Islamic education in his *Islam and Modernity*. After identifying what he viewed as the fundamental weakness of modern attempts to reform traditional education and integrate the old knowledge with the modern, he advocated that the most important and urgent thing to do is to “disengage” mentally from the West and “to cultivate an independent but understanding attitude toward it, as toward any other civilization, though more particularly to the West because it is the source of much of the social change occurring

²¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 133.

²² *Ibid.*, 131; italics in the original.

throughout the world.”²³ In this book, he explicitly expresses his disagreement with the secular liberals’ attitude towards education.²⁴

In the *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*, Fazlur Rahman appears to argue against the empiricists, atheists, and secularists among the Muslims as follows: without the aforementioned prerequisite knowledge (traditionally termed *farḍ ‘ayn*), empirical knowledge will be of little benefit: “‘Empirical’ knowledge itself is of little benefit unless it awakens the inner perception of man as to his own situation, his potentialities, his risks, and his destiny.”²⁵ He also attempts to persuade his educated readers to broaden the conception of “scientific” knowledge, linking it to the question of moral perception: “This knowledge is ‘scientific’ knowledge, for it is based on observation by the ‘eyes and the ears’; yet this scientific knowledge has finally to ‘strike the heart’ and to kindle a perception in man which will transform his scientific and technological skills in accordance with the moral perception that will, one hopes, be born in him.”²⁶

Contrary to what was remarked by Farid Panjwani in his article “Fazlur Rahman and the Search for Authentic Islamic Education: A Critical Appreciation,” this study finds that Fazlur Rahman did provide concrete examples of how his ideas could be applied to actual educational contexts.²⁷ To have a better idea of how Fazlur Rahman views his ethical framework to be applied in actual educational contexts, two documents were found by the study which are instructive: 1) A note on the task before the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Pakistan), written in 1975; and 2) recommendations for the improvement of IAIN curriculum and method of instruction: submitted to the Minister of Religious Affairs (Indonesia), written in 1985.

In his recommendations to Pakistan’s Ministry of Religious Affairs in 1975, he recommended that there be dedicated training of the ‘*ulamā*’ and preachers for a period of four to six years, which integrates both traditional religious and modern subjects in the humanities, social sciences, and basic natural science:

An Islamic Academy or University for the training of Ulama and preachers should be established. The enrollment qualifications for the University might be set at either matriculation or ten years of certified training at a

²³ Ibid., 136.

²⁴ Ibid., 159.

²⁵ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*, 34.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Farid Panjwani, “Fazlur Rahman and the Search for Authentic Islamic Education: A Critical Appreciation,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2012): 48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2011.00574.x>.

good Madrasa. The training period in the University might be set at from four to six years. The training should be intensive and should contain both traditional religious and modern subjects like history, philosophy, psychology, political science, sociology, and basic natural science. Matriculation recruits should get their 70% training in religious subjects and 30% in modern subjects, while the case with Madrasa recruits will be vice versa.²⁸

Fazlur Rahman's recommendations for the training of the future '*ulamā*' and preachers (community imams, *khaṭīb*s, *madrasah* teachers, and researchers) indicate a certain mechanism to ensure that the best talents are given further training. For the first category of future community imams and *khaṭīb*s, with the criteria of aptitude in public speaking and a high level of piety, the following mechanism was recommended:

After common courses for two years, the students should be divided into two categories. Those with an aptitude for public speaking and with a high level of piety should get special emphasis on subjects dealing with Waz-o-Irshad (say about 50% of their time should be devoted to this) while the rest of half of their training should continue to be in other subjects common with the other category. At the end of a total training of four years (equivalent to B.A.) they should be appointed as apprentices for a year in the Directorate or the Department of Waz-o-Irshad and then appointed as Imams with salaries equivalent to those of an average B.A. with a special skill. Those who will complete six years' training (equivalent to M.A.) should be appointed as Khatibs with a higher salary, after a similar apprenticeship period under the Directorate of Waz-o-Irshad.²⁹

While the second category, for those with more intellectual aptitude, the following mechanism was recommended:

The second category, with a more intellectual aptitude should continue with a purely academic training and should also be given B.A. or M.A. Degrees according to their corresponding period of training. They should be appointed as junior or senior teachers either in the Madrasa or in Schools and Colleges. Exceptionally good students from this second category should be allowed to do a PhD Degree and appointed either in the Islamic Research Institute or the Universities' Islamiyat Departments.³⁰

The second document in which Fazlur Rahman's ethics as applied to education can be gleaned is "Recommendations for the Improvement of IAIN Curriculum and Method of Instruction: Submitted to the Minister of

²⁸ Fazlur Rahman, "A Note on the Task before the Ministry of Religious Affairs," (unpublished copy from the Fazlur Rahman Collection at ISTAC Library, August 23, 1975).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

Religious Affairs, His Excellency Munawir Sjadzali,” dated August 23, 1985. This document enables us to see how Fazlur Rahman’s views on ethics are incorporated in an actual higher education institution, according to his specific recommendations to Indonesia’s Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) at the request of the Minister of Religious Affairs.³¹

There are three salient features in these recommendations which reflect how Fazlur Rahman understands ethics in Islam. Firstly, he calls for an integration of knowledge as his first premise is that the Qur’ān refers to both the physical universe and the Qur’ān as the signs of God (*āyāt Allāh*), contrary to the perspective borne out of the fragmentation of knowledge in modern times due to the dominant Western scientific framework.³² Secondly, insofar as what constitutes a *fard ‘ayn* knowledge (obligatory to all), although Fazlur Rahman does not use the term, he proposes a critical religious history of Islam, viz. historical development of *ḥadīth*, the schools of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), dialectical theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*), metaphysics (*taṣawwuf*), political theory (*siyāsah*), and education, be taught alongside the traditional religious sciences (*sharī‘ah*, *uṣūl al-dīn*, etc.).³³ And thirdly, he made an administrative recommendation which can be interpreted as constituting what he considered to be a moral obligation—that teachers’ workload should be reduced to enable them to conduct purposeful, scientific, and sound research, which he felt was necessary if Islamic scholarship is to play a critical and constructive task for the present-day Muslims.³⁴

What can be surmised is that Fazlur Rahman is advocating a reform of the educational system of the Muslims, which addresses the “traditional” and the “modern” dichotomy as a matter of moral obligation, as current education has not been contributing positively to the ethical and moral development of Muslims and to the establishment of a moral social order. He is thus calling for an educational reform to arrest the current Muslim problems of mental dichotomy and unintegrated collective and individual life. To undertake such reforms, the higher fields of learning must not remain completely secular and unpurposeful in their effect on the future of mankind. Otherwise, for Fazlur Rahman, many of the new generation will in fact grow into animals or chaos instead of cosmos.

³¹ Fazlur Rahman, “Recommendations for the Improvement of IAIN Curriculum and Method of Instruction: Submitted to the Minister of Religious Affairs, His Excellency Munawir Sjadzali,” August 23, 1985.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

In tendering his advice to the Pakistan Peoples Party's election manifesto on the subject of Islam (1976), Fazlur Rahman further suggested the following to be implemented in the realm of education: 1) An Islamic university is to be established for the purpose of integrating traditional and modern education which will produce imams, *khatibs* and research scholars in Islamic studies who will, in turn, enable Islam to inform modern knowledge and to play its due role in the solution of modern problems; 2) learning of Arabic shall be actively encouraged and facilitated; 3) higher research in all fields of human knowledge will be adequately facilitated to help bring Pakistan on par with scientifically developed nations and to fulfil the recurrent Qur'ānic demand to study the universe, man himself, and history; and 4) adequate opportunities shall be provided for women's education.³⁵

Ethics as Applied in the Economy

In total, there are three articles written by Fazlur Rahman that deal directly with ethical questions in the domain of economic life,³⁶ as well as his suggestions to the Pakistan Peoples Party's (PPP) election manifesto at the request of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.³⁷ It should also be noted that in his books, one can find him restating his articulations on ethics in the domains of economic life from the aforementioned articles. Thus, it could be interpreted that in Fazlur Rahman's corpus, there is an attempt to respond to ethical issues in this domain, as well as an attempt to reconstitute ethics into economics.

While it is unclear when did Fazlur Rahman arrived at the understanding of socio-economic justice in Islam (since his initial academic training and concentration revolved around philosophy, though it may have been derived informally from his exposure to Muhammad Iqbal's corpus), it should be noted that he was acutely aware of the widespread poverty in Pakistan, regarding it as a moral problem as indicated in his autobiography.³⁸ By 1966, he had already arrived at the view that Muslims had begun to deviate from the original Islamic

³⁵ Fazlur Rahman, "Suggestions for the PPP Election Manifesto (1976) on the Subject of Islam," unpublished, the personal collection of Fazlur Rahman at Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas Library, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

³⁶ Fazlur Rahman, "Ribā and Interest"; Fazlur Rahman, "Economic Principles of Islam," *Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (1969): 1-8; Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice," *The Pakistan Economist* 14, no. 34 (1974): 14-39.

³⁷ Fazlur Rahman, "Suggestions for the PPP Election Manifesto (1976)."

³⁸ Fazlur Rahman, "An Autobiographical Note," in *The Courage of Conviction*, ed. Philip L. Berman (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

impulse for socio-economic justice almost immediately after the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs:

Until the time of the third Caliph, 'Uthmān, the original Islamic impulse for socioeconomic justice remained strong, particularly thanks to certain measures of 'Umar I, and the state was seen as an instrument for such justice. But the situation changed for the worse in the latter half of 'Uthmān's Caliphate. Owing largely to the vast social revolution, which brought increasing discontent to many bedouin tribes, the Persian clients, and others, and partly to the greed of the Marwānid family of 'Uthmān, the state lost that image which was hardly ever to be effectively restored in Islamic history; even though some rulers were better than others, the organic link envisioned by the Qur'ān between the ideals of the state and economic justice was severed for good.³⁹

At the same time, he was aware of the fact that the modern Muslim countries were at a critical juncture of history where they were pressured to choose between the two dominant economic ideologies and systems (i.e., capitalism vs. communism) of modern times:

The Muslim world is today passing through a period of rapid social change, and at the center of this change lies the problem of economic reconstruction and economic justice. Governments and leaders throughout Muslim countries—as in all developing countries—are desperately grappling with the question of mass poverty and the two basic issues are: how to create sufficient wealth for at least the basic human needs, and how to distribute wealth equitably so that every man can preserve and exercise his dignity as man and is able to develop and realize the potentialities latent in him. At this crucial juncture, Muslim nations, like other developing ones, have to make certain choices: the two gigantic and competing economic systems in the world—capitalism and communism—necessarily tend to draw developing countries into their respective orbits and accordingly orient their socio-economic policies. The irony of it all is that, while both claim to man all his due dignity, in either case the individual has become no more than a cog in the gigantic wheel of production.⁴⁰

Thus, Fazlur Rahman sought to restate or reformulate the economic principles of Islam with the intention of enabling Muslims to take an independent ideological stand in addressing their own problems in accordance with their own ethos and demands, rather than blindly aping foreign models, and providing them with a source of inspiration that will motivate them for positive action.⁴¹

This can be interpreted as Fazlur Rahman's attempt to situate his discussion on economic justice in engagement with the secular models of

³⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 259.

⁴⁰ Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice," 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

capitalism and socialism, to appeal to Muslim countries to pursue the middle path—an ethics of creation and distribution of wealth—that would lead to economic justice based on the principles of Islam:

It undoubtedly accepts private ownership on principle with the warnings that private ownership carries with it heavy social responsibilities—responsibilities which, if not discharged properly by the owners of private wealth, must compel the state to interfere in private wealth to the extent that the overall needs of the society demand. The law of Zakat was supposed to fulfill just this function, supported by the general principle enunciated by the Qur'an that "wealth shall not circulate only among the rich [but must circulate in the society as a whole] (Surah 59, 7).⁴²

For Fazlur Rahman, two basic factors distinguish Islamic teaching from other monotheist religions (i.e., Judaism and Christianity). First, in the Qur'ānic teaching, monotheism was organically linked to the idea of economic justice, or in his words, "monotheism and socio-economic justice appear as two sides of the same coin."⁴³ Secondly, it is the deep sense of the gravity of the situation expressed in the idea of judgment.⁴⁴ Therefore, to Fazlur Rahman, the first step towards attaining socio-economic justice is to recognize and acknowledge that it is central in the religion of Islam, making it an individual and communal obligation of the Muslims, without which, worship to God (*'ibādah*) is meaningless and sheer hypocrisy (*nifāq*).⁴⁵

Thus, in his interpretation of the Qur'ān, Fazlur Rahman deduced that one of the central messages of the Qur'ān is the establishment of socio-economic justice or an ethical social order and implied that it was an individual and communal obligation of the Muslim community to realize.⁴⁶ He argued further that to denounce the social and economic injustice right from the beginning of the history of Islam has been the concern of the Qur'ān, for it was the most difficult of social ills to remedy and is at the heart of social discord.

In this regard, Fazlur Rahman saw the necessity and obligation to earn and create wealth (*al-māl*) in its ethical sense in view of eliminating poverty and ultimately, establishing social justice within the Islamic framework.⁴⁷ For him, as in the case with the *ahl al-taṣawwuf*⁴⁸ and Sunni

⁴² Ibid., 25.

⁴³ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 62.

⁴⁷ Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice," 23.

theologians in the past,⁴⁹ to earn and create wealth in the interest of society is an individual obligation (*farḍ ‘ayn*) for the Muslims.⁵⁰ Thus, for man to be just in society should include earning and pursuing wealth for higher ends.

Failure to do so is an injustice to one's self and even makes one's prayers hypocritical.⁵¹ This is because 1) not all wealth earned by the believer was rightfully the earner's;⁵² 2) the believers should not spend as they wish, for, in the words of Fazlur Rahman, "they could not become islands of plenty in a sea of poverty"⁵³; and 3) the believer should spend in the cause of Allah rather than invest in usury (*ribā*). He sums up the place of wealth in relation to justice in Islam as follows: "Wealth is good and necessary in order to create a just, healthy and progressive social order but it cannot become the sole purpose of life."⁵⁴

Fazlur Rahman believes that *zakāh* plays a key role in establishing socio-economic justice as it is a "principle of interference in the private wealth in the interest of the general welfare of society" to prevent a disproportionate distribution of wealth in society, which is the source of injustice in society.⁵⁵ Citing the Qur'ānic verse "wealth should not circulate only among the rich,"⁵⁶ he argues that this is the key principle in distributive justice in Islam and the general economic policy of the Qur'ān.⁵⁷ The measure or mechanism through which this principle is to be executed is *zakāh*.

For Fazlur Rahman, the Qur'ān and the Prophet have given clear moral guidelines on the imperative of work—regarding it as a right and

⁴⁸ For instance, see 'Abdullāh ibn Muḥammad Abū Bakr Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *The Restoration of Wealth: Iṣlāḥ al-Māl*, trans. Nicholas Mahdi Lock and Adi Setia (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2016).

⁴⁹ For instance, see Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *The Book of the Proprieties of Earning and Living: Kitāb Ādāb al-Kasb wa-al-Ma'āsh*, trans. Adi Setia (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2013).

⁵⁰ Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice," 25–27.

⁵¹ Ibid., 17; Qur'ān 107:1–7.

⁵² Qur'ān 70:25; 51:19.

⁵³ Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice," 18.

⁵⁴ The next piece of writing by Fazlur Rahman after the *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* that delves into the question of justice at length is his article "Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice." In this paper, he outlines certain major doctrines, policies, decisions, and patterns of conduct advocated by the Qur'ān, the *sunnah*, the caliphal authorities, and the Muslim jurists in view of eliciting the principles and basic orientation for producing socio-economic justice in Islam.

⁵⁵ Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice," 15.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 25; Qur'ān 59:7.

⁵⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 41.

obligation—over beggary, which he sees that some pseudo-Sufis have adopted in practice on the pretext of *zuhd*:

Beggary is, indeed, a curse because it debases a man. It is in this connection that the Prophet declared work (*amal*) to be “human dignity.” The Qur’an expressly states, “Man shall not get but that which he endeavors for” (Surah 41, 40). Accordingly, work is both the right of a man and his obligation—it is the very fountain of life.⁵⁸

In addition, he elaborated further on the meaning of work in Islam by drawing forth the Qur’ānic notion of “*amal*” and “*kasb*” to ensure that it is consistent with the ethical framework of Islam:

Work is, of course, of various kinds. Manual labor is work, intellectual labor is work, and indeed, moral endeavor or labor is equally work. The division of work into manual labor and other “services” is purely technical, for all work is geared to production, its facilitation, its level, and its quality. The Qur’an, therefore, employs the two basic terms “*amal*” (work or labor) and “*kasb*” (earning) interchangeably and inclusively for all work – whether manual, intellectual, or moral. But since for the Qur’an all work has a moral import, the moral aspect is more commonly mentioned in the Qur’an. In the eyes of the Qur’an, indeed, both *amal* and *kasb* are “holistic” terms, i.e., they refer to the total performance of a man or a society—whether it be manual work or other—rather than to the discrete actions.⁵⁹

In attempting to reconstitute an ethical attitude towards work, Fazlur Rahman sought to re-establish the positive worth of agriculture in the hierarchy (*marātib*) of work, which has increasingly been devalued in modern societies:

We know fully well that most of the Companions of the Prophet at Madina were agriculturists. How could the Prophet have condemned their way of livelihood? Ta’if which came to Muslim hands and its citizens became Muslim a little after Mecca, grew fruits, including grapes, and was a prosperous town from where even Meccans raised capital for their trade. Indeed, labor in general has a great deal of Hadith to support it, some of which we have already quoted. According to a report from the Prophet, all forms of productive labor are endowed with positive worth and many Prophets themselves pursued such profession: Nuh was a carpenter, Idris a tailor, and David used to manufacture helmets, while Moses was employed as a shepherd.⁶⁰

Thus, as part of Fazlur Rahman’s attempt to reintegrate ethics into economics and to realize economic justice in Islam, the re-establishment of the proper attitude towards the idea of creating and earning wealth

⁵⁸ Fazlur Rahman, “Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice,” 25.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 33-34.

(*kasb ṭayyib*) is considered imperative to him.⁶¹ In this context, he was engaging in dialectic with the Weberian logic of the Protestant ethic,⁶² which implied unmitigated capitalism, a cut-throat and brutal competition in earning wealth, which is the supreme value of life, and does not put much store by the creation of a healthy moral social order as the Qur'ān envisages it.⁶³

Fazlur Rahman also takes recourse to the *ḥadīth* literature to further support the view that Islam extolls proper earning of wealth as part of moral upliftment with the goal of the creation of a healthy moral social order. These *aḥādīth* include the following: "The honest merchant is more dear to me because he is like the holy warrior: the devil comes to him [to seduce him] in the matter of his weights and measures . . . and thus he unleashed a holy war against him"⁶⁴ and "Earning wealth by honest means is an unceasing duty [upon Muslims]."⁶⁵

For Fazlur Rahman, contrary to the capitalist or socialist systems, the economic system of the Muslims has to be directed under the guidelines of more ultimate values—in particular, based on the principle of *kasb al-ḥalāl* (permissible earnings) in the case of economic production and distribution:

Since, however, economic values, although absolutely necessary and basic for realising the Islamic purpose in society, are, nevertheless, essentially means to an end, it follows that the economic order has to be controlled and directed under the guidelines of other and more ultimate values. If, for example, in the pursuit of wealth, man begins to eat his fellow-man, the entire purpose is defeated. The avenues of economic production and distribution have, therefore, to be strictly controlled and engineered. This is what the principle of *Kasb Ḥalāl* precisely yields.⁶⁶

The economic priorities of an Islamic state, in Fazlur Rahman's view, are to ensure adequate means for satisfying the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, health, education, and defence before it is possible for the society to move towards the Islamic ideal (of moral social order), which he claims to derive from Shāh Walī Allāh's work, *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bālighah*.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Ibid., 25.

⁶² Ibid., 18.

⁶³ Ibid., 18-21.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Fazlur Rahman, "Economic Principles of Islam," 2.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Ṣadaqah-Based System of Economy: Welfare Cooperative Commonwealth

How does Fazlur Rahman envisage the economic system as an expression of this ethics? In his 1964 article, “*Ribā* and Interest,” one can find his earliest articulation on the system of economy, or what he terms the “*ṣadaqah*-based system of economy,” that follows from his ethical framework, which he regards as a moral duty for the Muslims to build and as an opposing system to the *ribawī* (usurious) one.

It must be noted that the term “*ṣadaqah*,” for Fazlur Rahman, does not imply an economic life or system wherein begging and the giving of alms are encouraged.⁶⁸ Rather, he sees co-operation and mutual consideration as the essential spirit of *ṣadaqah* as an economic system, contrary to the practice of pure competition and profiteering, which is aligned with the spirit of *ribā*.⁶⁹ Therefore, this co-operative and mutual consideration spirit manifested as an economic system is termed the Welfare Cooperative Commonwealth of Islam, an ideal which Fazlur Rahman considers the noblest *jihād* of our times:

The general Qur’ānic teaching wants to develop the maximum of co-operative spirit and socio-economic justice, which is called *ṣadaqah* by the Qur’ān and which must not be confused with the begging and giving of alms. The co-operative spirit envisaged by the Qur’ān was well illustrated by the *mu’ākhāt* established by the Prophet after his migration to Medina between the *Muhājirūn* of Mecca and the local *Anṣār*. In the Welfare Co-operative Commonwealth of Islam, based on the true spirit of *ṣadaqah*, bank-interest will certainly be eliminated, because in this ideal Commonwealth, there will be competition among men, but only for virtue and mutual help. To strive to achieve this ideal is the noblest *jihād* of our times. But if we are to carry on this *jihād* for the setting up of the Islamic Welfare Co-operative Commonwealth, it is equally necessary that we should not close our eyes to the present realities, howsoever unpalatable they may be. The abolition of interest presupposes the highest degree imaginable of co-operative spirit and, therefore, cannot be implemented today unless the country’s economy and production are to be left in the direst jeopardy. At present this type of Islamic spirit of co-operation is wanting in our society and, indeed, we are now at the opposite pole from the social order envisaged by the Qur’ān.⁷⁰

Fazlur Rahman also considered that building up a system of economy based on the spirit of *ṣadaqah* is a moral duty to depart from the prevalent practice of pure competition and profiteering, which he

⁶⁸ Fazlur Rahman, “*Ribā* and Interest,” 32.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 39.

considered to be at the opposite pole from the social order envisaged by the Qur'ān.⁷¹ Furthermore, in 1969, when Fazlur Rahman dedicated an article on “Economic Principles of Islam,” he suggested that the form of enterprise that would be in agreement with the economic principles of Islam is “joint stock companies”:

The nearest form of free enterprise to the teaching of the Qur'ān is undoubtedly a kind of cooperative industry in the form of joint stock companies. This would liberalise the economic base. It would keep the freedom of the initiative intact, which would, in turn, be a factor in the fast generation of wealth; it would avoid the gross form of capitalistic exploitation symbolized by cartels. The wealth thus generated will partly be distributed among the investors and partly through fiscal measures over the society as a whole.⁷²

In 1976, at the request of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (d. 1979), Fazlur Rahman made seven practical suggestions in the domain of the economy for the former's political party's (Pakistan Peoples Party) election manifesto—which is a clear example of the applied dimension of his vision of the Welfare Cooperative Commonwealth of Islam, of his ethical framework and more specifically, his conception of justice—which includes 1) the need for an appropriate legislation to put a ceiling on private ownership; 2) the need for measures to maximize national production; 3) the need for a just regulation of worker-employer relationships; 4) the need for a ban on hoarding and luxurious living; 5) the need to eradicate nepotism, bribery and corruption; 6) the need to prevent fraudulent business practices; and 7) the need to give special attention to under-developed provinces and regions.

The following are the detailed wordings of the aforementioned suggestions: 1) In view of the insistence of Islam on socio-economic justice, eradication of exploitation and optimum creation and distribution of wealth, appropriate legislation will be enacted to put a realistic ceiling on private ownership (of say hundred or fifty acres of agricultural land, and, say, fifty percent of industry or certain industries). 2) Measures shall be adopted to mobilize the workforce of the country and to guide workers in their respective fields of work to maximize national production. 3) Worker-employer relationships shall be regulated to ensure justice and smooth working of the sources of production. 4) Excessive profiteering shall be checked. Inflation will be controlled by optimum production, a ban on hoarding and on inordinately luxurious living, and, if necessary, price controls or nationalization. 5) Concrete steps shall be taken to promote honesty in

⁷¹ Ibid., 40.

⁷² Fazlur Rahman, “Economic Principles of Islam,” 6.

public life and, if necessary, through legislation, to eradicate nepotism, bribery, and corruption at all levels, for these are not only social evils but defeat the end of economic justice. 6) Fraudulent business practices, including adulteration of food, shall be severely dealt with and appropriate measures taken on that behalf. 7) Underdeveloped provinces and regions shall be given special and adequate attention to enable them to reach developmental parity with the rest of the country. This is required both by Islamic justice commitments and by the pressing need for national integration.

As a whole, Fazlur Rahman's ethics as applied in economic life and system can be interpreted as an attempt to reconstitute ethics into economics, with the goals of addressing what he deemed the primary moral problems in Pakistan at the time, namely, those of poverty, exploitation, and economic injustice generally. Such a system wherein ethics is reconstituted into economics is termed by Fazlur Rahman as "Islamic Welfare Co-operative Commonwealth," which is based on the spirit of *ṣadaqah* instead of the spirit of *ribā*.

Ethics as Applied in Politics or Statecraft

In the context of politics or statecraft in Islam,⁷³ Fazlur Rahman has written extensively on what could be interpreted as Fazlur Rahman's attempt to respond to ethical issues in this domain, as well as reconstituting ethics into politics (in particular, to redirect politics towards the Qur'ānic goal of establishing a just or ethical sociopolitical order).⁷⁴ These writings can be classified as follows: 1) on principle of *shūrā* (application of virtue of *ta'āwun* or cooperation);⁷⁵ 2) concept of the state;⁷⁶ 3) on political action;⁷⁷ 4) on Iqbal's political thought;⁷⁸ 5) on non-

⁷³ The tradition of political theory or political thought in Islam is known as *siyāsah* or *tadbīr al-mudun*. For an overview of this tradition, see Felicitas Opwis, "Siyāsah Shar'īyah," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*, ed. Emad El-Din Shahin (Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref:oiso/9780199739356.001.0001/acref-9780199739356-e-0062>.

⁷⁴ In recent times, there have been many studies on this subject. For example, see Anthony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001) and Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁷⁵ Fazlur Rahman, "Principle of Shura," 1-9 and Fazlur Rahman, "A Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of Shūrā," *History of Religions* 20, no. 4 (1981): 291-301.

⁷⁶ Fazlur Rahman, "Implementation of the Islamic Concept of State in the Pakistani Milieu," *Islamic Studies* 6, no. 3 (1967): 205-23; and Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and the State," unpublished manuscript, Fazlur Rahman Personal Collection at the Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas Library, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Muslim minorities;⁷⁹ 6) on suggestions for Pakistan Peoples Party's election manifesto, and Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs. While there have been past studies that examine Fazlur Rahman's discussions on politics or statecraft, chiefly in Navin Haider Ali's study, it was not examined in the context or in relation to Fazlur Rahman's overall discussions on ethics.⁸⁰

A close examination of Fazlur Rahman's discussions concerning the sociopolitical order as an extension of the elaboration of his interpretation of the Qur'ānic ethical vision and framework, reveals that on the one hand, he is engaging in certain dialectic with the secularists and proponents of secularism who argue for the separation of religion from the state or the total shedding of the people's historic being such as the project embarked by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (d. 1938), while on the other hand, he sought to engage with the views of those he refers to as fundamentalists, such as Abū 'l-'Alā Mawdūdī (d. 1979) and Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) who outrightly dismiss the modern Western democratic political system.

The ethical issues in the political domain which Fazlur Rahman sought to address can be deduced as follows: 1) the relationship between state and religion (which, according to him has been a point of contention between revivalists, modernists, and secularists);⁸¹ 2) the one-sided emphasis on obedience, conformism, and pacificism in (mainly Sunni) Muslim political thought;⁸² 3) the proper model of governance that is conducive for the establishment of the moral social order (the

⁷⁷ Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and Political Action: Politics in the Service of Religion," in *Cities of God: Faith, Politics and Pluralism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Nigel Biggar, J. S. Scott, and W. Schweiker (London, Greenwood Press, 1986), 153.

⁷⁸ Fazlur Rahman, "Iqbal, the Visionary; Jinnah, the Technician; Pakistan, the Reality," in *Iqbal, Jinnah and Pakistan: The Vision and Reality*, ed. C. M. Naim (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1979), 1-9.

⁷⁹ Fazlur Rahman, "Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State," *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs Journal* 7, no. 1 (1986): 13-24.

⁸⁰ Fazlur Rahman's discussions on *shūrā* and politics have been treated extensively by Navin G. Haider from Pakistan, though it is mainly in the context of Fazlur Rahman's reassertion of Islamic modernism. See Navin G. Haider, "Fazlur Rahman, a Muslim Modernist with a Difference: A Survey of Evolution in His Thought" (PhD diss., University of Karachi, 2014), 284; Navin G. Haider Ali, "Concept of *Shūra* in Fazlur Rahman's Political Ideas at Practical Level," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 8, no. 2 (2018): 110-26, <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.82.07>; Navin G. Haider, "Islamic Resurgence and Fazlur Rahman's Case for Democracy," *Islamic Studies* 58, no. 3 (2019): 423-38, <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v58i3.723>. Also see Ben Peterson, "Visions of the Islamic State: Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Nomocracy," *Islamic Studies* 62, no. 2 (2023): 161-88, <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v62i2.2658>.

⁸¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 229.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 239.

shūrā, which, he holds, has been distorted in the course of Muslim history); and 4) the moral role of Muslim community in the world as expressed in politics.⁸³

Writing in 1966, Fazlur Rahman had already identified the ethical and moral challenges of Muslims in the field of politics as follows:

The task before the Muslim in the field of politics, after a candid appraisal of his history, is to reformulate the orthodox content on this point and to create adequate institutions to ensure (1) the solidarity and stability of the community and the state and (2) the active, positive and responsible participation by the public at large in the affairs of the government and the state. Once these bases have been fully restated, some stable form of the Islamic state will emerge and much of the present controversy, often superficial and prejudiced, as to whether Islam is democratic or not, will come to a natural death. Of course, if the public are to participate with responsibility in the affairs of the state, the state must be some form of democracy. But it is imperative that the Muslims decide the issue *from the inside*, keeping free from external pressures, both direct and indirect (in the form of external propaganda), although drawing lessons from the experiences of other peoples. They will find the Islamic principles broad enough to admit a varying range of constitutions, within a democratic framework, depending on social and political climates actually obtaining.⁸⁴

How Fazlur Rahman envisions the state within the ambit of his discussions on ethics in Islam can be seen in his 1967 article, "Implementation of the Islamic Concept of State in the Pakistani Milieu,"⁸⁵ wherein he argues that in the context of Pakistan 1) the Muslims in the state should follow the dictates of justice as enunciated in the Qur'ān and as illustrated in the glorious example of the Prophet Muḥammad;⁸⁶ 2) the democratic state is to be structured through the working of *shūrā*—the participants should not confront each other as is often the case in certain democratic societies in the West, but to discuss constructively with a mutual purpose and high sense of responsibility;⁸⁷ 3) in terms of the administration of the Islamic state, the head of the state should be elected by the will of the people, and he should be responsible for all executive powers viz. the civil, military, and religious, to avoid a bifurcation of functions into secular and religious as in the case with a secular state;⁸⁸ 4) since the head of an Islamic state is vested

⁸³ Ibid., 258.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 240; italics in the original.

⁸⁵ Fazlur Rahman, "Implementation of the Islamic Concept of State," 205-23.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 209.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 210.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 212.

in him Islamically to safeguard the interests of the Muslim community, he should work with a council of ministers who should consists of men of capability, sound judgement of good character and in whose hearts the interest of the nation lies supreme;⁸⁹ 5) the public servants has to be instilled with the belief that devoted public service is a paramount form of *'ibādah*;⁹⁰ 6) the judicial system shall be independent of the executive, the necessity of the dispensation of unadulterated justice, and to root out corruption from the judiciary and the Police;⁹¹ and 7) in international relations, to keep the sanctity of international pacts and obligations, to contribute adequately to the promotion and establishment of a sane, progressive and viable world-order, and to cement inter-Muslim unity in order to contribute positively to the rest of the world.⁹²

One year later, in 1968, Fazlur Rahman focused his attention on “Some Aspects of Iqbal’s Political Thought,”⁹³ which described certain basic and broad features of the political order Iqbal had in mind, as well as his views on political questions such as “democracy,” the “state,” etc. One of these basic features includes the centrality of the Muslim community, which would espouse the ideals of Islam, which reflects Fazlur Rahman’s own views in his writings.⁹⁴ In examining Iqbal’s position on democracy, Fazlur Rahman remarked:

The truth seems to be that Iqbal believed in a “spiritual democracy of developed individuals.” There is a little doubt that this must be final aim of the realization of his philosophy, viz., the creation of a society of truly developed and emancipated individuals whose corporate presence would be the unity of such a society. As soon as one realizes this, one can understand why Iqbal, who praises democracy so much, would nevertheless, not allow absolute democracy of undeveloped individuals, i.e., exercise of total irresponsibility. This is exactly what he meant when he said criticizing the actual modern Western democracy: “Democracy is a system where people are counted but not weighted.” It is in this context then, that a great individual is expected by Iqbal—a super-man who would develop the potentialities of these undeveloped individuals and, in fact, usher in the true spiritual democracy.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Ibid., 214.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 215.

⁹¹ Ibid., 218-19.

⁹² Ibid., 219-20.

⁹³ Fazlur Rahman, “Some Aspects of Iqbal’s Political Thought,” *Studies in Islam: Quarterly Journal of the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies* 5 (1968): 161-66.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

In 1975, at the request of the Minister of Religious Affairs (Maulana Kausar Niazi),⁹⁶ Fazlur Rahman wrote a note that details his views on the task for Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs, which gives us a clearer idea of how he envisions his approach towards ethics being implemented at the state level.⁹⁷ Firstly, aside from the broader ideals of socio-economic progress and justice, Fazlur Rahman also called for the "emotional element in religion" to be channelled towards "positive moral and social virtues" through effective communication during occasions like *Isrā'-o Mi'rāj* and *Mawlid al-Nabī*.⁹⁸ Secondly, the Islamic Research Institute should be given greater prominence with the necessary areas of focus, including enlightening the educated public on social-moral issues (from an Islamic viewpoint).⁹⁹ And finally, the entire activity of the ministry should be geared towards "refurbishing the moral fiber of the society in the social field" and "enabling Islam to take a positive stand towards modern problems," to prevent the religion from being reduced to sloganeering in the state.¹⁰⁰ Fazlur Rahman extended these views on the role of Islam in the state when he was asked to advise on the Pakistan Peoples Party's election manifesto on the subject of Islam, where he sought to clarify the role of Islam in public life.¹⁰¹

In his 1983 article, "Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'ān," there are further discussions on how Fazlur Rahman relates the concepts of *īmān*, *islām*, and *taqwā* in the sociopolitical domains, as well as how his interpretation differs from others in his time: Firstly, for Muslims to build a political order in the world, a social order based on *īmān*, *islām*, and *taqwā*, must be laid firmly for this is what he understands the Prophet Muḥammad did, contrary to the Muslim movements in the twentieth century which aims in establishing political power without first creating the aforementioned social order.¹⁰² Secondly, Muslims must decide their affairs through *shūrā* in all fields, and this implies that the gap between

⁹⁶ See Fazlur Rahman, "Report of Professor Fazlur Rahman's Visit to Pakistan in Summer, 1975, in Connection with the 'Islamic Education' Project of the University of Chicago," Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas Library, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁹⁷ Fazlur Rahman, "A Note on the Task before the Ministry of Religious Affairs."

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Fazlur Rahman, "Suggestions for the PPP Election Manifesto (1976)."

¹⁰² Fazlur Rahman, "Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'an," 182-85.

religio-moral leadership (*‘ulamā*) and the masses must be minimized so that the masses can be better equipped to be involved in *shūrā*.¹⁰³

The question of *shūrā* was further expanded by Fazlur Rahman in his 1984 article titled, “The Principle of *Shura* and the Role of the Ummah in Islam,” which gives a brief outline of the following: the relationship between religion and state under the Prophet; what he draws from the Qur’ān to be the task of the Muslim community; the basis on which the individuals are to be formed in this community; *shūrā* as the basic procedural principle to regulate the process of decision-making; *shūrā* in practice vis-à-vis what had happened in history;¹⁰⁴ and finally, an outline of the debate over Islam and democracy and the discourses of the Muslim modernists in this debate, which Fazlur Rahman regards as an “achievement.”

The culmination of Fazlur Rahman’s discussions on ethics in the context of politics can be found in his article “Islam and Political Action: Politics in the Service of Religion” (1986), wherein his prior discussions on *shūrā*, justice, and the role of the community are woven into a coherent whole. This article, being his last on political questions, differs from the last one “The Principle of *Shura* and the Role of the Ummah in Islam,” in the following regard: 1) on the necessity of properly formed individuals based on *taqwā* in the broader vision and agenda of establishing a moral social order; 2) the importance of a major trend in Islamic political thought, viz. the works of Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm b. Tayyimiyyah (d. 728/1328) and Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762), whose special emphasis on the Muslim community and the implementation of the *sharī‘ah* was so influential with many Muslim modernist reformers in recent times; and 3) a critique on Ayatollah Khomeini’s concept of the Islamic state and on others who reject democratic participation of the community in the governance of the state in favor of some kind of elitism, contrary to what he believes the Qur’ān espouses. Thus, this article is instructive in seeing how Fazlur Rahman attempts to integrate ethics into Muslim political thought, as well as how he addresses contemporary ethical questions in this domain.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 184.

¹⁰⁴ Fazlur Rahman, “Islam and Political Action,” 155.

Shūrā¹⁰⁵ (*Mutual Consultation*)

As stated at the onset of this section, Fazlur Rahman was working against the backdrop of increasing scepticism and dismissal of the modern Western democratic political system (by the likes of Mawdūdī,¹⁰⁶ who proposed “theo-democracy” as an alternative, and Ayatollah Khomeini, who proposed “*wilāyat al-faqīh*” model), as well as increasing debate on the form of political institution the Muslims should adopt in a post-colonial world—all of which involved ethical and moral questions.¹⁰⁷ Against this backdrop, this study finds that Fazlur Rahman attempts to offer a solution to what he perceived as the ethical and moral flaws of his contemporaries based on his interpretation of the ethics and moral role of the individual Muslims and the Muslim community.

For Fazlur Rahman, although the institution of *shūrā* was present in the Arab tribes before the advent of Islam, the Qur’ān brought about a basic change from being a tribal institution to a community institution based on the bonds of faith.¹⁰⁸ Thus, he suggests that the institution of *shūrā* be properly developed as an institution and reintroduced in the modern context since it was discontinued with the introduction of the dynastic rule of the Umayyads.¹⁰⁹ In addition, he claims that both Sunni

¹⁰⁵ In the intellectual tradition of Islam, the idea of *shūrā* has been widely discussed, chiefly in the literature on mirror of the princes and political ethics. The famed tenth-century Persian Prime Minister, Nizām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), in his book titled *Siyar al-Mulūk*, wrote about the importance of *shūrā* as follows: “Holding consultations on affairs is a sign of sound judgement, high intelligence and foresight.” Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, trans. Hubert Darke (London: Routledge, 2002), 95. He also said, “Everybody in the world agrees that there has never been any mortal wiser than the Prophet (upon him be peace); and with all the wisdom that he had—for he could see behind him as well as in front; and the skies and the earth, the tablet and the pen, the throne and seat [of God], paradise and hell and all things in between were revealed to him, and the Angel Jibril often used to visit him, bringing him inspiration and giving news of things past and things to come—in spite of all this perfection, in spite of all his miracles, God (be He exalted) said to him [in the Qur’an 3.153], ‘Consult them in affairs.’ Since God commanded him to seek advice and even he needed counsel, it is obvious that nobody can need it less than he.” Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ For instance, see Valerii. V. Pugachev, “Abul A’la Mawdudi’s Concept of *Hakimiyya* and Its Critical Assessment in Islamic Legal-Political Thought,” *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University: Law* 9, no. 2 (2018): 230–41, <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu14.2018.208>.

¹⁰⁷ This scenario was summed up in his “Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur’ān,” 185. Also see Fazlur Rahman, “Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State,” 19.

¹⁰⁸ Fazlur Rahman, “Islam and Political Action,” 155–56.

¹⁰⁹ Fazlur Rahman, “Islam and the State.”

and Shia 'ulamā' have distorted the idea of *shūrā* with their respective interpretations of the political order in Islam.¹¹⁰

By emphasizing reintroducing *shūrā*, Fazlur Rahman does not necessarily reject Western democracy. Rather, following Muhammad Iqbal (and similar to the position held by Muhammad Asad in his *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*), he considers that it is the substance of the Western democratic systems that is in error. In Fazlur Rahman's words, "it is not their democratic forms and processes where they are in error, but in their orientations and value systems."¹¹¹

In his article "The Principle of *Shura* and the Role of the Ummah in Islam,"¹¹² Fazlur Rahman discusses the question of the form of an "Islamic state," in particular, whether or not democracy should be adopted. To answer this question, he examines what the Qur'ān had indicated about the *ummah* and its task and function—that by being the "median community": 1) the Muslims are the scale or judge whereby extremes are to be determined and they are also the modifiers whereby those extremes are to be smoothed out; it is an intellectual and operational function; the task of the community is to establish order on earth by effectively prohibiting evil and commanding good based on belief in a one and unique God (i.e., a sociopolitical order on a valid ethical basis); 2) the Qur'ān envisages the Muslim community as a perfectly egalitarian one; and 3) the internal life of the Muslim community is based on good will and cooperation.

As an extension of this egalitarian vision, Fazlur Rahman argues that the Qur'ān laid down the principle of *shūrā* to guide the decision-making process of the community. Thus, the Muslim *ummah*, by its very constitution and definition, is charged by the Qur'ān with a certain global moral task.

Conclusion

Fazlur Rahman's scholarship and intellectual legacy offer a thoughtful and systematic vision for the reintegration of ethics into the core of Muslim public life. His engagement with education, economics, and statecraft reveals an ethical framework rooted in the Qur'ān, yet meticulously attentive to the complexities of modernity. By emphasizing the organic unity between metaphysical principles and practical obligations, he reorients Islamic ethics from a predominantly doctrinal concern into a living, operative force capable of shaping practical, social realities.

¹¹⁰ Fazlur Rahman, "Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'ān," 184–85.

¹¹¹ Fazlur Rahman, "Principle of *Shura*," 8.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

In the realm of education, Fazlur Rahman challenged both the stagnation of traditional religious instruction and the fragmentation of modern secular curricula. His call for an integrated system of knowledge—where religious, humanistic, and scientific disciplines are harmonized—was not merely pedagogical but profoundly ethical. He viewed education as the primary means of cultivating morally responsible individuals who can contribute meaningfully to society.

His economic thought, meanwhile, sought to realign economic behaviour with Qur'ānic values of justice, equitable distribution, and human dignity. In critiquing both capitalist exploitation and socialist materialism, he advocated for a *ṣadaqah*-based economic system grounded in cooperation, moral accountability, and purposeful production. His insistence on the ethical imperative of *kasb al-ḥalāl* and the redistributive function of *zakāh* exemplifies his vision for an Islamic economic order responsive to the problem of poverty and social disintegration.

In the domain of politics, Fazlur Rahman promoted a normative model of Islamic governance anchored in *shūrā*, accountability, and ethical leadership. Rather than adopting an uncritical stance towards modern democratic institutions or retreating into dogmatic traditionalism, he encouraged a rethinking of political structures through the lens of Qur'ānic morality. For him, the state is not merely a legal apparatus, but a vehicle for realizing the moral goals of Islam in the collective life of the *ummah*.

Taken together, Fazlur Rahman's applied ethics illustrate a dynamic, integrative, and traditionally dynamic-oriented vision of Islamic ethical thought—one that bridges the gap between normative ideals and lived realities. His work continues to challenge scholars, policymakers, educators, and religious leaders alike to reclaim the transformative potential of Islamic ethics as a guiding force in modern life. In reaffirming the centrality of moral purpose in human affairs, his project is not only an intellectual legacy (which requires critical engagement) but also a continuing call for action.

* * *