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THE DISCOURSE OF RENEWAL:
ASSESSING FAZLUR RAHMAN'S HERMENEUTICS
AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

*Arief S. Arman*¹

Abstract

Central to any thriving society are questions of ethics and law, and how (and if) these questions are met with appropriate responses. Such thoughts will necessarily lead to a deliberation of whether ethics and law are divinely ordained, or if we, as human beings with the capacity to think and to conceptualise, are its sole creators. Fazlur Rahman, an Islamic reformist thinker, has called for the gates of ijtihād (independent reasoning) to be opened again. The context for this opening is a response to the rigidity of interpretations made by jurists (both traditional and contemporary, primarily of the Sunni orthodoxy²; deemed to represent the 'original' Islam), on matters of Shari'a; generally believed to be Divine Law. The purposes of this chapter are varied. We do not intend to agree nor disagree with Rahman's interpretative propositions, but to (i) provide a brief context of his argument for reform as well as the theological underpinnings which guide it. Next, and in order to develop a preliminary understanding of Rahman's hermeneutics, (ii) we shall engage with his 'Double-Movement Theory', as well as its possible advantages and pitfalls. A brief comparison with Hans-Georg

¹ Graduate of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Email: 705243@soas.ac.uk. This writer disagrees with Rahman's claim that the Prophet Muhammad's Ascension (*mi'rāj*) was based on superstition and was merely a spiritual ascent. To reiterate, the purpose of this paper is to highlight Rahman's hermeneutical claims without necessarily agreeing with his opinions on other matters of faith.

² Rahman believed that the formation of Sunni orthodoxy in tandem with the appearance of 'dynastic rule' (beginning with the Umayyads), had the most deleterious impact on the development of Islam. (See: Abdullah Saeed, 'Fazlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-Legal content of the Qur'ān' in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān*, Ed. Taji-Farouki, (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 41.)

Gadamer's phenomenologically influenced hermeneutics is made here. It is our belief that Rahman did not mind if one agrees with him or not; for what is of utmost importance is a 'rediscovery' of Islam and its inherent beauty and order, which is definitely not a perpetuation of intellectual sterility.

Keywords: Fazlur Rahman, hermeneutics, Islam, *ijtihad*, Islamic reform, Pakistan, Qur'ān, Sacred Law

Introduction

We begin with a brief context of the time in which Fazlur Rahman³ as writing, which was the mid-20th century. He was engaging in various ideas – both Islamic and Western – against the backdrop of a perceived decline within Muslim polities. This decline, as it were, had a negative impact on various facets of life, such as economics, education, politics, and social relations. According to Rahman, the revival of modern Islamic societies requires far more than merely adopting various Islamic institutions and attitudes, but to embrace Western institutions and current praxis.⁴ In the 1960s, Rahman was part of General Ayyub Khan's modernising project in Pakistan; a nation founded as a 'homeland for Muslims' (after Partition), but torn between a 'traditionalist' Islam of the laity and a 'modernist' Islam espoused by the intellectual and secular elite of the country.⁵ He also opines that the cause of such deterioration took root in the intellectual legacy of Islam. To put it differently, the present-day issues that Muslims face stem directly from the tradition which has developed

³ The Pakistani-American thinker, Fazlur Rahman (1919 – 1988) was one of the most daring and original minds to the discussion on the reform of Islamic thought in the twentieth century. He attended Punjab University in Lahore, and obtained a Bachelors and Masters degrees in Arabic. He then went on to Oxford, where he wrote his dissertation on Ibn Sina's (Avicenna) philosophy. Though his primary interest in his early academic career was Islamic philosophy, Rahman was widely read in Islamic law and history, as well as ethics, tafsir and hadith. (See: Abdullah Saeed,(2004), p.41.)

⁴ Basit S. Kosul, 'Fazlur Rahman's 'Islam and Modernity' Revisited' (1994) in *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4 p. 404.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

due to the understanding of the faith by Muslims themselves, rather than Islam itself.⁶ Moreover, Rahman believes that reform in Islam is not necessarily predicated as a response to modernity, but has always been an internal pursuit within Muslim societies.⁷ To add, he argues that the aforesaid decline comes from a literal understanding – and its consequent implementation – of the Qur'ān by literalists, who are assumed to be stuck within the rigidity of law, as opposed to appealing to the higher precepts of an ethical-moral order to be found in the Qur'ān.

“The Qur'ān regards the conduct of man, individually and collectively, in private and in public, as being under divine command”⁸. This statement is one that holds weight, since it will inevitably have an impact on Muslims and non-Muslims alike (by way of agreement or opposition, either knowingly or otherwise), in making sense of the world around them, and beyond; metaphysically. From here, we are led to the juncture of justiciable and non-justiciable actions. Rahman argues that in many Muslim polities, the *Sharī'a* has been implemented in purely human terms, but its assumed legitimacy has been falsely attributed to divine sanction. What happens then is a narrow conception of Sacred Law (which also constricts divine grace), and creates an environment of intellectual sterility within the aforesaid polities, and the *Ummah* at large.⁹ Rahman goes on to contend that:

“... in the overall structure of human conduct, the primary valuation is religiomoral (sic) and, although of course humanly administered justice plays a basic role

⁶ Ibrahim Özdemir, ‘The Concept of Islamic Tradition in Fazlur Rahman’s Thought’ in *American Journal of Islam and Society*, 1992, Vol. 9 No.22, p. 244. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v9i2.2558>

⁷ Fazlur Rahman, ‘The Impact of Modernity on Islam’ in *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (June 1966), pp. 113-114.

⁸ Fazlur Rahman, ‘Law and Ethics in Islam’ in *Ethics in Islam: Ninth Giorgia Levi Della Vida Biennial Conference*, Ed. Hovanissian. (Undena Publication, 1985), p. 3.

⁹ According to Rahman, central to this conundrum is the emphasis on *taqlid* (blind imitation) of scholars by the laity. (See: Saeed (2004:40).

in ordering society, it is definitely secondary to the real value-order, which is the moral order.”¹⁰

This moral order can be comprehended as the intimate relationship a believer has with God, and how it is manifested in conduct within the private and public domains. There is an appreciation of the Mu'tazilite stance (to be discussed further), whereby the individual, by his/her own accord, is able to discern between good and evil, as well as truth from falsity. This is done independently from revelation, but the conclusions derived are strengthened by it. The argument here is that once moral rectitude is established and maintained, the overbearing application of a very human interpretation of the *Sharī'a* by way of *fiqh* (through jurists) can ideally be minimised. One of the scathing remarks made by Rahman on the point of an overbearing application of *Sharī'a* is that the '*ulamā*' class played a pivotal role in the process of favouring political expediency over upholding Islamic principles.¹¹ According to the Pakistani-born academic, the '*ulamā*' class failed to articulate a comprehensive Islamic *Weltanschauung* which caused Islamic principles to be vulnerable to the whims of power politics.¹² Furthermore, such an environment led to intellectual sterility and the displacement of genuine scholarship based on original thought, which was replaced by an increase in extensive commentaries, and commentaries upon commentaries.¹³

At the core of Rahman's argument is that the Qur'ān has a *moral ethos which is prior to any legalistic formulation* derived from the various verses within it.¹⁴ There is no denying the fact that there are many different interpretations of Islam's sacred text, which comes from multitudes of scholars from different generations. Furthermore – and within the current social milieu – the multiplicity

¹⁰ Fazlur Rahman, 'Law and Ethics in Islam', (1985), pp. 3-4.

¹¹ Basit S. Kosul, 'Fazlur Rahman's', (1994), p. 406.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The Holy Qur'ān repeatedly calls upon human beings to think and reason, applying words such as *nazar* (observe), *tafakkur* (think), and *tadabbur* (reflect). The faith of a believer is thus a reflection of such concepts. (See: Nurul Ain Norman, 'Ibn Sina's Theory of the Soul: A Taxonomy of Islamic Education' in *Islam and Civilisational Renewal*, (IAIS Malaysia, 2021, Vol. 12, No. 2), pp. 275-289.)

of interpretations is not only necessary, but essential for the 'revitalisation' of Islam and the contemporary relevance of the Qur'ān. The assertion here is that objective morality can be attained by way of the intellect. Reason, or specifically *ijtihād*, is applied to extract the values and ideals within the Qur'ān, whereby the reader 'deciphers' the message and the necessity of its contingent implementation in his/her life.¹⁵ Rahman, a revivalist¹⁶ in his own regard, calls for the reading of the Qur'ān against the background of its revelation (contextual), which is hardly a 'black and white' approach.¹⁷ For Rahman, such Manichean binaries have proven to be a barrier in recognising the full worth of diversity within Islam. In order to ensure the dynamism of the divine text, interpretation in a systematic, holistic, and contextualist manner (as per his Double-Movement Theory) becomes imperative. Holding other things constant, the multiplicity of perspectives attained from here is indicative of the Qur'ān's 'readability' and its relevance which cuts across space and time. However, Rahman argues that there is an urgent need to do away with piecemeal readings of the text in order to derive jurisprudential rulings, as is often the case.¹⁸ He persisted to retrieve the moral élan of the Qur'ān in order to formulate a Qur'ān-centred ethics.¹⁹ Piecemeal readings and atomistic

¹⁵ It is perhaps of interest to note that philosophers from Plato onwards have consistently criticised the suggestion that moral obligations are created by God's commands. "The commands of a legitimate human ruler do not create obligations; if such a ruler tells you to do X, this makes it obligatory for you to do whatever the ruler tells you (within the sphere in which X lies). The same applies to God. He can make it obligatory for us to do Y by so commanding only because there is first a general obligation for us to obey him (sic)." (Mackie, 2013:114,115). (See: J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and Against the Existence of God*, (2013), Chapter "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God.")

¹⁶ It is crucial to note however, that the terms 'revival' and 'fundamentalist' can be misleading, since both are in reference to the trends in religion. (See: Fred Halliday, *Nation and Religion in the Middle East* (2000), "This Islamic current involves not a revival of religious belief, but an assertion of the belief of the relevance" (p. 132).)

¹⁷ Abdullah Saeed, 'Fazlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-Legal content of the Qur'ān' in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān*, Ed. Taji-Farouki, (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 61.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 43.

¹⁹ Ibid.

interpretations run counter to such a formulation, undermining the ethical foundations that the Qur'ān inspires human beings to aim for, and it is in this striving that character and resolve are built, emboldening the faith and conviction of, and in God. Rahman argues for a 'rediscovery' of Islam in that "the Qur'ān's message must be understood as a unity and not as so many isolated commands and injunctions."²⁰ In order for this understanding to take place, "one must start with the theology of ethics of the Qur'ān and only then approach the realm of law."²¹

Theological Underpinnings

Now, there is no doubt that theological underpinnings play a crucial role in how one interprets the Qur'ān. Before proceeding any further, it is crucial to note that the status of the Qur'ān as the verbatim words of God has become an irrefutable belief among Muslims. Almost all (if not all) schools and theological streams within Islam are in agreement that the Qur'ān was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) before its message was disseminated to the locality and beyond.²² From here and across time, cleavages begin to appear between those who believe and insist that the Qur'ān is uncreated, and those who believe and insist that the Qur'ān was created. This was the main difference between the Mu'tazila and their opponents, the Ash'arites, who are of the belief that right and wrong originate from "the divine imperative rather than rational propositions, and that 'good' and 'bad' (sic) are known through Revelation rather than through Reason."²³ The scholars who believe in the eternity – and thus uncreatedness – of the Qur'ān, uphold the position by relating it to the manifestation of the 'God speaking attribute' (*kalām*) which is in coexistence with His essence (*dhāt*). On the contrary, the scholars

²⁰ Fazlur Rahman, 'Law and Ethics in Islam' in *Ethics in Islam: Ninth Giorgia Levi Della Vida Biennial Conference*, Ed. Hovanissian. (Undena Publication, 1985), p. 11.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Safrudin Ediwibowo, 'The Debates of the Createdness of the Qur'ān and its Impact to the Methodology of Qur'ānic Interpretation' in *Ulumuna*, 19(2), pp. 353-388. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v19i2.357>

²³ Fazlur Rahman, 'Law and Ethics in Islam', (1985), pp.13-14.

who believe in the createdness of the Qur'ān hold on to the notion that the text is a phenomenal being (*makhlūq*) as it is composed of letters and sounds, which are arranged alternately.²⁴ The 'uncreatedness doctrine of the Qur'ān can be traced to the *wasiyat* of Abū Hanīfah, written around 210 AH/825 AD^{xv}. In his *Wasiyat*, Abū Hanīfah explains that the Qur'ān is the Word of God and is eternal, although the letters (*huruf*) to write in in form, is created. On the other hand, there were reputable Muslim theologians who took up the position of the createdness of the Qur'ān, or that it is *makhlūq*. Among them were al-Ja'd ibn Dirham and al-Jahm ibn Safwan, whose ideas later formed the primary doctrine of Mu'tazilite theology (most of the arguments from this school focused on 'the why' the Qur'ān had to be created, and 'not the how'). This became the official stance of the Abbasid state of Al-Ma'mun.²⁵

Can an interpretation be fully independent from the reader and his/her conditions? Is there a way in which biases and presuppositions can be removed before engaging with a specific text? These are the fundamental questions that Rahman engages in. In interpretation, the function of language cannot be overlooked.²⁶ It is difficult to deny the significance of the Arabic language in trying to 'understand' Islam and all that it holds. In his compelling text, *Beings and Their Attributes: The Teaching of the Basrian School of Mu'tazila in the Classical Period*, Richard Frank opines that "it is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of the Arabic language and of the Koran (sic) within Islamic culture and especially in its earlier periods. In no culture, perhaps has speech and the eloquent use of language been so praised and admired"²⁷. Therein lies the issue of translation (which necessarily brings about the

²⁴ Safrudin Ediwibowo, 'The Debates of the Createdness of the Qur'ān and its Impact to the Methodology of Qur'ānic Interpretation' in *Ulumuna*, 19(2), p. 355. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v19i2.357>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 357.

²⁷ E. Sumaryono, *Filsafat Hermeneutik Sebuah Metode Filsafat*, (Kanisius, Yogyakarta, 1993), p. 38. "... Misalnya berkaitan erat dengan bahasa. Manusia untuk mengerti atau membuat interpretasi harus lewat bahasa, tidak mungkin kita berbuat apapun tanpa menggunakan bahasa. Hermeneutik adalah cara baru untuk 'bergaul' dengan bahasa." (Bahasa Indonesia).

tremendous difficulty in interpretation), and if accurate meaning can be transferred to a different tongue altogether.

Rahman's Double-Movement Theory and his Reading of Gadamer

There are other Muslim reformists who talk about the centrality of reason within religion (in general). Among them was Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), who – in his magnum opus, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* – mentions; "... religion stands in greater need of a rational foundation of its ultimate principles than even the dogmas of science."²⁸ Indeed, such a claim necessarily includes Islam as a faith system, and highlights the embodied (empirical, tangible) cannot be removed from the transcendental. Since religion (most, if not all) engages in the questions of life after death, there will always be scrutiny from those who are embedded within scientism. There is no doubt that the separation of faith from science, and vice versa, has led to disastrous consequences in the world today. However, its elaboration is not within the scope of this paper. On the notion of being embedded creatures, Iqbal points out; "thought and intuition are organically related and that thought must necessarily simulate finitude and inconclusiveness because of its alliance with serial time."²⁹ By the very fact that we are within time, it is necessary for us to interpret its seemingly apparent passage – and within the Muslim context – realise that time itself is a gift from the Creator. To add to the value of reason within religious deliberations, we focus our attention towards the statement of another towering figure in Muslim scholarship, Ismā'il Fārūqī, that "the *Ummah* is not a *gemeinschaft*, but a *gesellschaft*, not a community-by-nature, but a community-by-decision; a 'society'".³⁰ It is irrefutable that such a decision to be part of a community, stems from the application of reason.

²⁸ Richard Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes: The Teaching of the Basrian School of the Mu'tazila in the Classical Period*, (State University of New York Press, 1978), p. 9.

²⁹ Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, (Stanford University Press, 2013), p.2.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 4

On the point of time and how we relate to it, Rahman raises the point that values have practical impact, and “this impact transcends the historicity of time and place in which they may be articulated.”³¹ At the core of Rahman’s criticism of traditional jurists is that they were too focused on developing a highly structured legal system. For him, the fluidity that stems from the broader socio-moral élan which the Qur’ān holds, is left behind and neglected in such a system.³² He suggests an approach to the Qur’ān which does away with any commentators or intermediaries. This leads us to the question, ‘What is Hermeneutics?’. To put it simply, ‘Hermeneutics’ is a method of understanding and interpreting ancient text, such as scripture.³³ The term comes the Greek word, *ἑρμηνεύω* (*hermeneuein*), which gives us the definition ‘to interpret’.

We now move to Rahman’s ‘Double-Movement Theory, which functions on two levels; ‘the ideal’ and ‘the contingent’.³⁴ His approach is methodological, moving from the normative application of a certain text to a certain situation. Rahman summarises his theory as follows;

“In building any genuine and viable Islamic set of laws and institutions, there has to be a two-fold 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

³¹ Ismā’il Fārūqī, *Al Tawhīd: Its Implications for Thought and Life*, (The International Institute of Islamic Thought; IIIT, 1992), pg. 116.

³² Norman K. Swazo, ‘Islamic Intellectualism: Rahman, Gadamer, and the Hermeneutics of the Qur’ān’ in *American Journal of Islamic Sciences*, (2011.Vol. 28, No. 4, IIIT), p. 3.

³³ Abdullah Saeed, ‘Fazlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-Legal content of the Qur’ān’ in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’ān*, Ed. Taji-Farouki, (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 44.

³⁴ E. Sumaryono, *Filsafat Hermeneutik sebuah Metode Filsafat*, (Kanisius, Yogyakarta, 1993), p. 38.

account the necessary and relevant conditions now obtaining.”³⁵

In other words;

- I. The first movement then, consists of understanding the meaning of the Qur’ān as a whole (the moral élan intrinsic to it) as well as in terms of the specific tenets that constitute responses to specific situations.
- II. The second movement is to generalise moral-social objectives that can be ‘distilled’ from specific texts in light of the socio-historical background and often stated *rationes legis*.
- III. The third movement is a going back to the Qur’ān and thus realising its ethical moral ethos, which takes precedence over the rigidity of law.

The simple illustration below shows the movement between context to text and back to the context again. In the interpretation of the Qur’ān, the context of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*; occasions of revelation) is given due consideration before moving to the present moment of interpretation, so as to derive a potential solution to any problem at hand.

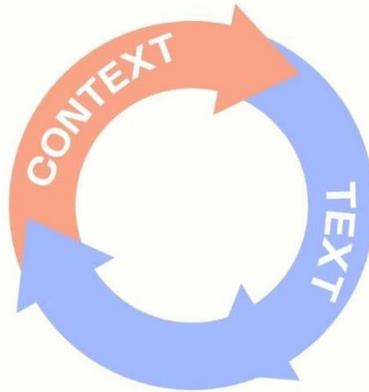


Figure 1.0: Dynamic Flow of Qur’ānic Interpretation: From Context to Text and Back

³⁵ Ibid. pp. 49-50.

For Hans-Georg Gadamer, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl has to be deliberated on, that is the 'protentional' and 'retentional' aspects of experience – the assertion that every experience has implicit horizons of meaning of what comes prior, and after, a given experience.³⁶ In Gadamer's approach, the subjectivist understanding of the reader (interpreter) has to be considered. Only if there is a pre-understanding (bias or preconceived notions, but not understood pejoratively), one is able to dialogue with the text. There is no *tabula rasa* here. Gadamer highlights the assumption that the reader has his/her own horizon and the text itself has its own horizon. In order to understand a specific text and its injunctions, the reader must try as best to limit his/her horizon, so as to give priority to the horizon of the text.³⁷ This is what Gadamer relates to as the 'fusion of horizons', as a core aspect of all human thought and clarification of meaning. The point to be grasped here, is that we have to move away from the subject-object dichotomy that is taken as a given in modern epistemology, and its resultant ontology.³⁸

The primary difference between Rahman and Gadamer is that for the former, the approach to interpreting the Qur'ān is one that is objective, in that human beings are endowed with a predisposition towards ethical conduct; hence it is a latency that has to be activated by one's own volition. Here, Rahman accepts the notion of values which represents an ideal objectivity, follows its own trajectory of lawfulness.³⁹ On the contrary, Gadamer's starting point is not one that necessarily recognises an ethical starting point or a latency within the mind towards such interpretations. This is our understanding of Rahman's objectivity in interpretation. In this instance, *religiomoral* values cannot be merely discovered; they have their status historically according to epistemological boundaries of

³⁶ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, (Chicago University Press, 1982), p. 20.

³⁷ Norman K. Swazo, 'Islamic Intellectualism: Rahman, Gadamer, and the Hermeneutics of the Qur'ān' in *American Journal of Islamic Sciences*, (2011, Vol. 28, No. 4, IIIT).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ "What Husserl means... is that we cannot conceive subjectivity as the opposite of objectivity, because this concept of subjectivity would itself be conceived in objective terms." (Norman K. Swazo, 'Islamic Intellectualism', (2011), p. 5).

practical reason wherein *apodictic* certainty is given the status of an impossibility.⁴⁰ We do have to keep in mind that Rahman attends to the Qur'ān with a preconceived question, that is of how to obtain a new ethics from it. Another significant factor seems to be at play here. It appears to be the case that different hermeneutical approaches depend on different theological starting points. For Rahman, revealed texts point at God's "otherwise hidden will-to-be-done."⁴¹

In contemplating revelation, believers learn about the kind of life that the Almighty directs them to lead. On the other hand, Gadamer's starting point squares well with the biblical concept of revelation that points at our given reality. There is truth-claim to be followed up in the world, which gives impetus to the reader's own experience (horizon), as mentioned prior. From this perspective, events prove to be God's self-revelation.⁴² As such, the distinction between both thinkers can be distilled to a theological difference. Rahman's view is directed from the text to the proposed author (due to the fact that this is where revelation comes from), "whereas a Gadamerian, non-psychologist view is directed from the text to the world."

Arguments Against?

For the Malaysian Sufi-metaphysician⁴³, Syed Naquib Al-Attas⁴⁴, an incessant questioning of things intuited by the senses – that which can be touched, seen heard, smelled, and tasted – is a testament of how much human beings have fallen from true apperception, and of

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Felix Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology: Rethinking Islam*, Chapter 2: Adil Çiftçi: The Koran as Ethical Order. (Würzburg Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2005), p. 121.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Al-Attas prefers this term over the title of 'Muslim Philosopher'.

⁴⁴ Born on the 5th of September 1931, Al-Attas pioneered the concept of the 'Islamisation of knowledge'. His almae matres include McGill University (MA), and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London (PhD). His notable works include *Islam and Secularism*, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*, and *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin* (in Malay).

pure knowledge.⁴⁵ Such a situation rests on the fact that “man has a dual nature, he is both body and soul, he is at once physical being and spirit. God taught him the names (*al-asmāʿ*) of everything. By the names, we ‘infer’ that it means the knowledge (*al-ʿilm*) of everything (*al-ashyaʿ*).”⁴⁶ What this means is that we are privy to almost everything around us, and that such awareness was (and is) only made possible due to God’s mercy and grace. In this temporal life then, we are merely grasping at concepts that are murky representations of true understanding, originating from a time before this one we currently find ourselves in. As such, these representations are also observed in how we try to interpret law from the Qurʾān, and to apply it in varying contexts and circumstances. Al-Attas talks about the value of upholding the primordial covenant between God and Man;

“In virtue of the truth that man knows God in His absolute unity as his Lord, such knowledge and the reality of the situation that necessarily follows from it, has bound man in a covenant (*al-mīthāq*, *al-ʿahd*) determining his purpose and attitude... with respect to his self in his relation to God.”⁴⁷

The moral rectitude alluded to earlier is one that ought to be sincere (*ikhhlās*), and embedded within the self as a form of submission to God. In human affairs, a believer has to keep in mind that the creation is a reflection of the Creator, and any transgression acted out on other human beings (as well as the natural world) will inevitably stain one’s relationship with Him. Perhaps of significance, but not often talked about is the role of *adab* in the life of a believer. *Adab* can be understood – but is not limited to – proper conduct, manners, order, and the good relationship one has with the world around him/her.⁴⁸ An argument can be made here that the moral impetus of

⁴⁵ Understood here as a receiving from God that is removed from any sort of comment, judgement, or opinion.

A form of unparalleled comprehension of what was intended to be comprehended.

⁴⁶ Syed Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, (ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur, 1995), p. 143.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.144.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

being a Muslim can be upheld, and without the need or requirement of a rigid implementation of *Shari'a* by way of the rulers of the day (sincerity plays its part, sans coercion). Here, it is interesting to point out that even though Al-Attas and Rahman differ in their approach, their goal is arguably the same.

For Al-Attas, there is no call for the alteration of *ahkām* (rulings), or of the *maqāsid* (goals or objectives of the Sacred Law), while for Rahman, there is a need to change the rulings of the *Shari'a* (which stems from his hermeneutics of the Qur'ān). The 'bigger picture' as it were, is an honest realisation of the purposes of Sacred Law, whereby "man's purpose is... to know and to serve God (*'ibādah*) and his duty is obedience (*tā'ah*) to God, which conforms with his essential nature created for him by God."⁴⁹

The discussion on interpretation thus far relates to the fact of life's impermanence. From the Heideggerian perspective that Being itself is interpretation, it can be extricated here that there will always be a gap between observation and true understanding.⁵⁰ The latter is the domain of God alone, and any attempt of reaching it in a transient world will only be met with frustration and the further need of interpretation, *ad infinitum*. Given Rahman's earlier apprehensions towards Sunni orthodoxy, it would be interesting to take into consideration a Shi'i perspective on the hermeneutics of the Qur'ān. One of the great scholars from the aforesaid perspective is the eminent Allāmah Sayyid Ṭabāṭabā'ī, who mentions:

"What has been rightly called *ta'wil*, or hermeneutic interpretation, of the Holy Qur'ān, is not simply concerned with the denotation of words. Rather, it is concerned with certain truths and realities that transcend the comprehension of the common run of men..."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Martin Heidegger's Being-Onto-Death. "As ways in which man behaves, sciences have a manner of Being which this entity – man himself – possesses. This entity we denote by the term 'Dasein'. Authentic Being only happens when Dasein confronts its own temporality by... perpetually (and without escape), on a journey towards its own demise. See Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (Trans. J. Macquarie & E. Robinson, 1962).

⁵¹ Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Shi'ite Islam* (Trans. Seyyed Hossein

He goes on to say;

“The whole of the Qur’ān possesses the sense of ta’wil, of esoteric meaning which cannot be comprehended by human thought alone. Only the prophets and the pure among the saints of God who are free from the dross of human imperfection can contemplate these meanings while living on the present plane of existence. On the Day of Resurrection, the ta’wil of the Qur’ān will be revealed to everyone.”⁵²

On the above statement, we see that human thought alone is not sufficient in coming to terms with the verses of the noble Qur’ān. From Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s perspective, there are individuals who are endowed by the Almighty to understand Qur’ānic verses without recourse to reason, that is of grasping its meaning intuitively. This could potentially be a counter to what Rahman has suggested thus far.

An obvious limitation to Rahman’s ideas is that there seems to be a chasm between the individual (moral agent) to the collective, vice versa. If the individual realises his/her moral purpose and potential through the guidance of Islam, it does not necessarily follow that other individuals are able to (either willingly or otherwise), realise their moral purpose and potential (for varied reasons). Moreover, Rahman’s stance can be read as one that places emphasis on individual accountability, but does not provide a clear picture of how it can be translated to the collective or society at large. Perhaps, this is where he leads us to think, whereby one must remember that the lack of a ‘clear picture’ adds to the obligation that we have in making it clearer, for both the self and for others. From here, the claim that reason does not require revelation, requires further examination. We would do well to remember that any moralistic arguments have always stemmed from a religious starting-point.⁵³

Nasr), (Islamic Book Trust, Kuala Lumpur, 2010), p. 70.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ See: Husam al Mallak, “Ibn al-‘Arabi and the (Postmodern) Philosophical Heritage of Nietzsche,” lecture presented at the 34th Symposium of the Muhyiddin

If the interpretation of the Qur’ān does not require any sort of intermediary on a societal level, what then is the role of traditional scholars with regards to the sacred text? Not only that, but is Rahman against social hierarchy in all its forms? It is perhaps a point of concern for traditionalists, that Rahman’s approach seems to mirror extensive re-interpretations of sacred texts within the Jewish and Christian tradition. Scholars like Oliver Leaman believe that contemporary Islam is going through a phase reminiscent of a ‘medieval gloom’, “such that a proper understanding of the Islamic sources requires an enlightenment similar to that represented by the Spinoza critique.”⁵⁴

Conclusion and Moving Forward

On Rahman’s strong emphasis on the need for *ijtihād* today, we would do well to remember an incident that took place during the lifetime of the blessed Prophet (SAW). An authentic *hadīth* narrated by Bukhārī and Muslim tells us that the Prophet (SAW) had appointed Mu ā’dh ibn Jabal to be the arbiter amongst the people of Yemen, after the Yemenis had made a request for peace to be established between peoples.⁵⁵ Upon being questioned about the source of his legal opinions, Mu ā’dh ibn Jabal informed the Prophet (SAW) that the Qur’ān was (and would be) his primary source. If an explicit answer cannot be attained therein, he would refer to the Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW), and that failing, *he would take recourse to his own ijtihād*. To this, the Prophet (SAW) approved the hierarchy of sources brought forward, stating; “What the messenger of the Messenger of Allah has spoken has pleased the Messenger of Allah.”⁵⁶

Ibn ‘Arabi Society, SOAS, London, May 2017. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_7oGUYenI8.

⁵⁴ Norman K. Swazo, ‘Islamic Intellectualism: Rahman, Gadamer, and the Hermeneutics of the Qur’ān’ in *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* (2011, Vol. 28, No. 4), p. 2.

⁵⁵ Basit S. Kosul, ‘Fazlur Rahman’s ‘Islam and Modernity’ Revisited’ (1994) in *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4 p. 410.

⁵⁶ Quoted by Mohammad Hashim Kamali in *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge, England: The Islamic Text Society, 1991), pp. 218-219

Admittedly, many scholars have written extensively on Fazlur Rahman and his works. As such, our discussion has been one of an introductory nature. With regards to the conversation on the createdness/uncreatedness of the Qur'ān, and its implications, the differences of opinion and strong stances adopted by both proponents and opponents are indicative of human imperfection. Such a situation should not leave one to be in a consigned or defeated state, rather, it provides a clear picture that perfection only belongs to the Almighty. With this in mind, Fazlur Rahman's concerted effort ought to be celebrated rather than eschewed, as he opens up the conversation on the significance of human thought, and the herculean task of directing those thoughts for the sake of upholding the *Dīn*. Among the key points that can be extracted from the Pakistani-born thinker is the need for the establishment of Godconsciousness; *taqwa*. The essential aim of Islam's sacred text is to create pristine conscience and to ensure that moral energy is dispensed accordingly, and in the right direction. To reiterate, Rahman argues that Muslims should not treat the Qur'ān as merely a legal manual (or in some cases, a scientific textbook). He also reminds us that the Qur'ān often provided explicit reasons for its legal and/or quasi-legal pronouncements. If these reasons were/are not manifest, it could be arrived at by studying the context to which those pronouncements were made. For the sake of brevity, we did not touch on the practical application of Rahman's hermeneutics (which include topics like polygamy and divorce laws, among others), which could be an undertaking in a different time. On the point of reform within Islam, the idea of renewal espoused by Rahman should be deliberated on, and weighed on its own merits. Perhaps it is indeed time for the gates of *ijtihād* to be opened again, insofar as reason is sincerely directed towards the Almighty.

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