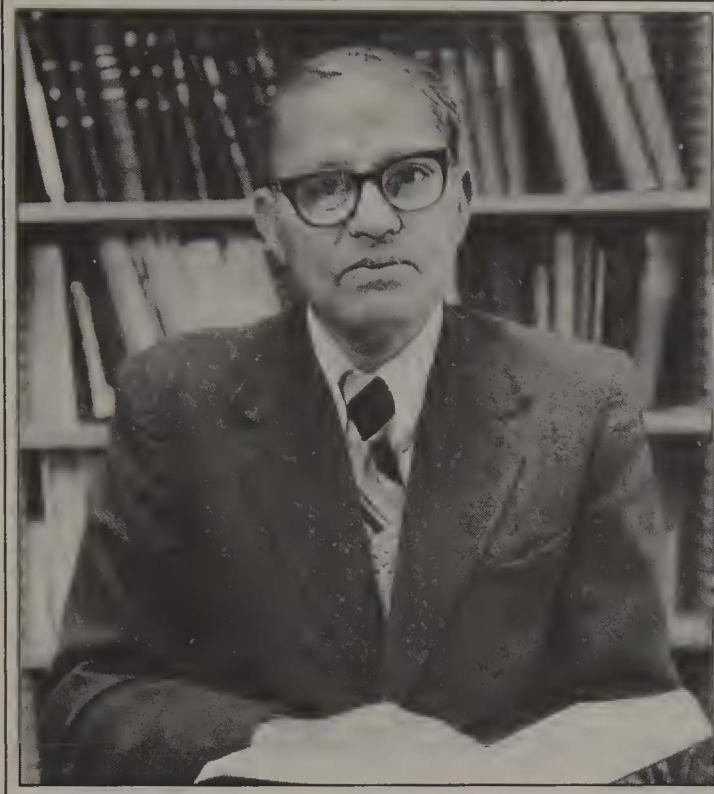




Fazlur Rahman

B. 1919



Born in undivided India, in what is now Pakistan, educated there and at Oxford University, Fazlur Rahman has traveled, taught, and lectured in many parts of the world. The author of some of the classic works on Islam, Dr. Rahman has been characterized as "one of the most learned and acute of modern Islamic thinkers," as "an outstanding intellect, an immensely erudite scholar straddling traditional and modern learning," and "one of the clearest and wisest Islamic thinkers in the world today." Over a long and often controversial career, Dr. Rahman's combination of learning and commitment has almost single-handedly made Islam comprehensible and respected in circles that in the past have tended to dismiss Muslim scholarship.

During the regime of Ayub Khan in Pakistan (1962–68), Dr. Rahman headed the Islamic Research Institute charged with carrying out the religious-ideological policies of the government. This rare opportunity for a scholar to bring religious reform to a developing country through modernized

Islamic thinking was caught in a political web that ultimately resulted in the Institute's forcing Dr. Rahman to resign the directorship. Since that time, while serving as professor of Islamic thought in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, he has tried to disseminate his ideas through numerous articles and books, including *Major Themes of the Quran* (1979) and, most recently, *Islam and Modernity* (1982).

Dr. Rahman has written that over the last decade or so there is "some reason to believe that an increasing number of educated Muslims are accepting my line of thought . . . the reason being that traditionalism is unworkable in practice and some solution on modern Islamic lines is requisite."

I was born into a Muslim family that was deeply religious. We practiced Islamic rites of prayer, fasting, etc., with meticulous regularity. By my tenth birthday, I could recite the entire Quran from memory.

My mother and father had a decisive influence in the shaping of my character and earliest beliefs. From my mother I was taught the virtues of truthfulness, mercy, steadfastness, and, above all, love. My father was a religious scholar educated in traditional Islamic thought. Unlike most traditional Islamic scholars of that time, who regarded modern education as a poison both for faith and morality, my father was convinced that Islam had to face modernity both as a challenge and an opportunity. I have shared this same belief with my father to this very day.

In 1933, we moved from our ancestral home in what is now northwest Pakistan to Lahore, which was called the "City of Gardens and Colleges." There I went to a modern college, while at home my father put me through the traditional course of Islamic study he had undergone at the Deoband Seminary in northern India.

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

In 1956, I wrote a book entitled *Prophecy in Islam*, in which I discussed the head-on collision between the views of traditional Islamic theologians and those of Muslim philosophers who derived their theories on the nature of religion from the precepts of Greek philosophy. The philosophers were intellectually clever, excelling in subtlety of argument, but their God remained a bloodless principle—a mere intellectual construct, lacking both power and compassion. Although intellectually less skillful, the theologians were nevertheless instinctively aware that the God of religion was a full-blooded, living reality who responded to prayers, guided men in

dividually and collectively, and intervened in history: "He speaks and acts," as Ibn Taimaya so poignantly put it.

Convinced that the Muslim philosophers were headed in the wrong direction, I was "reborn" with a new impulse to understand Islam. But where was that Islam? Had I not studied it with my father? But then my father had transmitted to me a fourteen-century-old tradition, and my skepticism had been directed at certain important aspects of that tradition. I then realized that although Muslims claim their beliefs, law, and spirituality are "based upon the Quran," the scripture embodying the revelation of the Prophet Muhammad (570–632), the Quran was never taught by itself in any seat of traditional learning, but always with the aid of commentaries. A study of the Quran itself, together with the life of the Prophet, enabled me to gain fresh insight into its meaning and purpose, making it possible for me to reevaluate my tradition.

Soon thereafter, I came to believe that while traditions are valuable for living religions in that they provide matrices for the creative activity of great minds and spirits, they are also entities that ipso facto isolate that tradition from the rest of humanity. Consequently, I am of the belief that all religious traditions need constant revitalization and reform.

The Quran insists that divine guidance has come to all peoples and that it is not the exclusive possession of any single community. It definitely regards mutually exclusive and mutually confronting religions as a form of polytheism. It sternly rejects Jewish electionism and also castigates Christians for laying proprietary claims on truth. At the same time, it tells Muslims that if they turn their backs upon the divine message, "God will bring another people who will not be like you." Muslims are therefore required to believe in the totality of divine guidance and "in any book God may have revealed"—not just the Quran and other Semitically revealed books. Early in its career, however, the Muslim community was led to declare itself infallible!

The entire fabric of my belief rests upon the Quranic teaching. Now, the Quran is not a treatise about God. The God of the Quran is not something to be proved but to be "discovered." Why is there this plenitude of being rather than pure nothingness? This fundamental question needs a decisive answer. But although Allah (God)

is considered necessary and mentioned well over 2,500 times in the Quran (let alone other equivalents of the divine name), its central aim is directed toward guiding the affairs of mankind. The Quran's theme, first and last, is man's conduct, both individual and collective. Belief in God is absolutely essential, of course, but not in order to entice us to pry into His nature, but in order to save and develop the integrity of the human personality: "Do not be like those who forgot God, and eventually God caused them to forget themselves." The God of the Quran intervenes between "man and his own heart," and also between man and man, for "There is no meeting of three but that God is the fourth, nor of five but that he is the sixth, nor yet of less or more than God is there."

Islam means "to be safe, integral, whole" through accepting God's law. One who accepts God's law is a Muslim. The Quran calls all nature "Muslim" because nature obeys the law of God ingrained in it. Thanks to this, nature is one huge, well-knit system—a cosmos, not a chaos. But while nature is automatically Muslim, God was not content with nature's Islam and created man to be Muslim by choice—to be the unique locus of responsibility, and God's assistant on earth. The Quran's recurrent theme is that "man has not yet fulfilled this trust," the trust of moral responsibility. Humanity still needs to become a human cosmos rather than a chaos.

This trust cannot be discharged by isolated good individuals, no matter how virtuous their intentions. Certainly, the locus for a fully developed consciousness of responsibility is the individual, but the task of assisting God falls upon humanity as a whole. It was for this purpose that the "Muslim Community" was set up by the Quran to "remove corruption from the earth and reform its affairs," to "commend good and prohibit evil," to establish a social order on a viable ethical basis.

My whole statement up to now culminates in the following point: one God—one Humanity. This is the invitation with which the Quran started in 610 and with which it ended in 632. While it protested against the polytheism of the Meccan Arabs, it protested equally passionately against the grave socioeconomic unevenness in the corrupt, commercial Meccan marketplace. The Quran made a sustained effort to lift the downtrodden segments of society—

have-nots, orphans, women, and slaves. It abolished all distinctions based on ethnicity, color, etc.: "We have made you into different nations and tribes only for the purpose of reference; otherwise the best of you in the sight of God is the one with the most sense of responsibility."

The above task of reforming the earth has obviously not been fulfilled by historic Islam. As a result of the astonishingly swift conquests in early Islam, so many slaves and slave-women swarmed into Muslim cities that the Quran's policy of sociopolitical programs was inhibited. Further, the Quranic vision of establishing a moral social order was submerged under the tide of a mixture of cultures that imposed itself on Islam. The community expanded rapidly but at a great cost. This is not to say that the history of Islam has been a total failure, for Muslims built a civilization, which in its heyday was truly remarkable. Under the Muslim aegis (particularly in Spain and the Middle East) Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and others cooperated to create an intellectual culture in science and philosophy, literature, and medicine, that was brilliant, international, and interfaith. Moses Maimonides, for example, of whom every educated Jew is proud, was court physician to Saladin, the Muslim adversary of the crusader Richard the Lion-Hearted. There are innumerable other examples.

Nevertheless, I passionately believe that we Muslims owe it to ourselves and to the world to resurrect the Quranic vision from the debris of history, for in the Quran the real and the ideal coalesce. I contributed my part to this when I was in Pakistan (1961–68) at the invitation of the President, Ayub Khan. I was in charge of the Islamic Research Institute, established by him to advise the government on religious policies that would be true to the principles of Islam, interpreted by us for application in the changing context of the modern world. At the time, Pakistan was desperately poor, so poverty was its primary moral problem. To remedy this situation, wealth had to be created, which could then be distributed fairly throughout the populace. Accordingly, I strongly advised the government and the society at large, on Islamic bases, to do just that. This meant large-scale introduction of modern technology—technology imported from the West. But the West itself, in the process of developing its technology and accompanying knowledge, has

come dangerously close to sweeping aside human and moral values. Under the impact of pure technology, man's vision becomes so myopic that he lives from day to day and loses sight of the "morrow," to use the word of the Quran, and hence his deeds "lose all weight" and meaning. His priorities become warped and distorted. He first manufactures atomic weapons and piles them up and only then thinks of the consequences. He flies to the moon while the affairs of the earth become ever more complicated and dangerously intractable. As the Persian poet Firdausi said:

Have you managed the affairs of the earth so well that you've
got yourself involved with the heavens?

I therefore warned the Pakistani government and people against the pitfalls of pure technology while emphasizing the necessity of its adoption through our advice, publications, and lectures.

The stiffest resistance I faced was from religious conservatives, and it centered mainly on the question of the rights of women and the reform of family law. Throughout medieval Islamic development, women's rights have been steadily encroached upon. A woman could not even exercise the right of divorce, which the Quran had granted her from the first day. I believe that the current feminist movements in the West cannot be a model for Muslim women, and I also believe that this Western phenomenon is a severe reaction against the medieval condition of the Western woman, who was decidedly worse off than her Muslim counterpart. Yet it is undeniable that the Muslim woman has been suffering from severe disabilities, verging on oppression. The situation still needs urgent improvement. I wholeheartedly defended and supported the progressive law promulgated by the Ayub Khan government in 1961 streamlining and reforming Muslim family law.

As a cumulative effect of these and other similar controversies, large-scale uproar and disturbances broke out against my views in the summer of 1968. I resigned in September of that year; the Ayub Khan government fell six months later. Since 1969, I have been writing books and articles trying to disseminate the Quranic message from the University of Chicago, where I am professor of Islamic thought. During these past fifteen years, the views defended by me

and like-minded persons have exerted visible influence on an increasing number of Muslim intellectuals in several countries. Most recently (summer 1985) I have visited Indonesia, at the invitation of the government of that country, to assess the situation of Islam there and have tendered advice particularly on the reform of higher Islamic education, which seeks to confront modernity in a more creative manner. At the same time, conservative Islam has become the official policy of governments in Iran, Pakistan, and the Sudan. Islam at present stands radically polarized and is in unmistakable ferment and transition.

Medieval conservatism cannot, however, supply genuine and effective answers to today's problems. It appears largely to be a reaction against Western colonialism. I am therefore confident of the eventual success of the pure Islam of the Quran, which is fresh, promising, and progressive. It will take a few years and considerable effort, however, for the current obscurantism to be laid to rest in its grave. During the ensuing years of my life the bulk of my activity will be directed toward the realization of this end.

The COURAGE *of* CONVICTION

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

All royalties from the sale of this book go to the Center for the Study of Contemporary Belief, the organization established by Philip Berman, M. T. S., to promote the study of belief and to foster cross-cultural, interdenominational, and interracial tolerance and understanding. Contributions to further this work are tax-deductible and may be sent to the Center for the Study of Contemporary Belief, P.O. Box 4728, Santa Barbara, California 93140, U.S.A.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 85-90722

ISBN: 0-345-33296-2

This edition published by arrangement with Dodd, Mead & Company

Cover design by Andrew Newman

Designed by Ann Gold

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books Edition: October 1986

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2