

Fazlur Rahman: From the Qur'an to Life and Back Again to the Qur'an

A Traditional Scholar

Fazlur Rahman (i.e., Fazl ur-Rahman Malik), one of the most important voices within the discussion of the reform of Islamic thought in the twentieth century, was born on 21 September 1919 in the province of Hazara, now located in Pakistan. His father, Mawlana Shihab al-Din, was an *'alim*, a religious scholar, and it was from him that Rahman received an education in the classical disciplines of the Islamic sciences, namely, in *tafsir* "exegesis", *hadith* "traditions of the Prophet", *fiqh* "jurisprudence", *usul al-fiqh* "theoretical jurisprudence", *kalam* "theology" and *falsafa* "philosophy". After receiving his high school diploma he attended Punjab University in Lahore and earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree in Arabic literature.

Subsequently Rahman went to Oxford where he wrote his dissertation on the Persian philosopher Avicenna (980–1037). After receiving his doctorate he taught Islamic philosophy at the University of Durham in Great Britain from 1950 to 1958. He soon realized, however, that while the philosophers were certainly very clever in their arguments, "nevertheless their God remained a bloodless principle – a purely intellectual construct lacking in power and passion."¹ Accordingly he

1 Ebrahim Moosa, "Introduction" to Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, edited and with an introduction by Ebrahim Moosa (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 5.

turned to theology and, in particular, to those religious thinkers – such as al-Ghazali (1058–1111), Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) and Shah Wali Allah (1703–1762) – who had created a synthesis between their expertise in jurisprudence and theology. In 1958 Rahman accepted the position of assistant professor in Canada at McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies. He stayed there for three years until, at the instigation of General Ayyub Khan, the then-president of Pakistan, he went back to his homeland. Ayyub Khan wanted him to be the director of the Islamic Research Institute that had been founded, according to Rahman, to advise the government on its religious policies. These were to be based on Islamic principles, as interpreted, however, by Rahman and his colleagues, and suited to changing conditions in the modern world.

Above all the Institute was to lend intellectual support and backing to Ayyub Khan's project of modernization. Pakistan, founded as a homeland for Muslims, was from the outset torn between the traditionalistic Islam of the populace and the modern Islam of the intellectual and secular elite. For the president, it was important to introduce modernization without bringing the traditionalists down on his head. With his traditional Islamic scholarliness, and because of his longstanding contact with the West, Rahman appeared to be one of the few candidates equal to this challenge.

In his new position Rahman glimpsed a possibility of reforming the religious establishment and, in particular, its educational system – for Islamic reform can only begin with education. In this way, he began to train young academics to approach the Islamic tradition from a critical perspective. In the journal *Islamic Studies*, published by the Institute for Islamic Research, Rahman gave his opinions on all the actual issues in Islamic thought, for example, on the position of the individual, or on the effects of modernization upon religion. He also took on questions addressed to him from a Western angle. Hence, he wrote that Islam is seen in the West as a religion that emphasizes the community but not the individual. Even so, he turned again and again directly to a Pakistani readership and, in particular, his opponents among the clergy. He declared directly to them that if the state of Pakistan were not to solve

the problems that arose between Islam and modernity, secularization would inevitably come about.

An essential part of the mandate given to him by Ayyub Khan consisted of providing policy makers with practical suggestions concerning every kind of Islamic query. This ran the gamut from the prohibition on interest to the alms tax and family law. On all of these points Rahman adopted a liberal outlook which quickly brought him into conflict with the traditionalistic religious establishment. The most vehement opposition, which arose over the issues of women's rights and reform of family law, came from the conservatives. The resentment of Ayyub Khan's adversaries discovered an ideal target in Rahman; for them he symbolized the worst aspects of the modernization project: religious and social reform.

In this way, the scholar caught between the two factions; he became a pawn in the power struggle between the president and the mighty religious establishment. To attack the government's readiness to reform, the opposition seized on the architect of this reform and demonized him. Deeply rooted traditionalism together with the illiteracy of the masses intensified the problem incrementally. When hysteria began to reign, and after Rahman began receiving death threats, he decided to resign from his position.

The specific occasion for these threats was the translation into Urdu of Rahman's book *Islam*. He was reproached for having claimed that the Qur'an is not divine – an allegation that was not, in fact, true. Rahman and the Justice Minister S.M. Zafar held a press conference in response to the public outcry. So charged was the situation that the justice minister, who had pledged his complete support to his vilified colleague during the press conference and had stated that he found "nothing objectionable" in his formulations, urged the journalists afterwards to strike out the words "nothing objectionable". For the politicians it was a calculation of interests: politics versus principles. Rahman was sacrificed to politics.

At this point Rahman left Pakistan with his wife and children and resumed his academic life in the West. He was offered a professorship for Islamic thought at the University of Chicago where he remained

until his death in 1988. Amongst his students was Michael Sells, currently Professor of Islamic History and Literature at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Earle H. Waugh, another of his students, paid tribute to Rahman's life, thought and influence, as well as his significance with regard to Islam in America, in an essay and a monograph. In Waugh's view he was an utterly new phenomenon on the landscape of the American university because he firmly opposed the neutral secularism of scholars. Waugh writes about Rahman, his teacher:

Fazlur Rahman brought with him a rigor of mind and heart that could be objected to but which could not be rejected. Equally appalled by sloppy scholarship among Muslims as among his students, he represented a tough-minded Islamic scholar that demanded self-criticism before all else. Certainly, he would not compromise on the essentials of Muslim belief, as his many studies testified, but he did not object to the claim that there were other ways of engaging Islam than those validated by Muslim history.²

In Chicago he also played an important role in the formation of Muslim doctoral candidates. These came mostly from Turkey and Indonesia and because of this, his ideas were particularly widespread there afterwards. His students Mehmet Aydın, Mehmet Dağ and Alparslan Acıkgenc made his thought available in Turkey through translation. Aside from Turkey he has been achieved acceptance nowadays in Indonesia, though less so in Arab countries and in Iran. All his major works have been translated into Turkish and Indonesian. Rahman had a considerable influence on the so-called "Ankara School" that emerged in the mid-1990s at Ankara University and that from 1996 on propagated its ideas through the scholarly theological journal *İslamiyat*. His regular visits to Turkey, together with his publications, provided the initial catalyst for new thinking at the theological faculty in Ankara.

² Earle Waugh, "The Legacies of Fazlur Rahman for Islam in America," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 16/3 (1999): 31.

One representative of this school is, for example, Ömer Özsoy, a professor of theology who has been teaching in Frankfurt am Main since 2007 and whom Felix Körner, who has dealt extensively with the Ankara School, calls a “Fazlur-Rahmanist”.

That Rahman has been only partially accepted in the Arab world may have to do with the fact that many Arabs, even today, have little confidence in the abilities of non-Arab thinkers and intellectuals, despite the fact that many non-Arab thinkers played a leading role in early Islamic history. Tabari (839–923), for example, and Zamakhshari (1074–1144), who were both Persian, give us the most outstanding examples in the realm of Qur’anic studies. Because of this mentality, the influence of non-Arab scholars remains limited, even though the most innovative ventures in Islamic thinking are undertaken by them today, as Abu Zaid once affirmed in a note of self-criticism.

The German academic community has hitherto scarcely accepted Rahman. There has been no dissertation on the Pakistani thinker in the German-speaking world, despite the fact that the quality of his writings – in comparison, for example, with those of Muhammad Shahrour on whom three PhD dissertations have appeared in recent years – certainly does not fall short of these but in fact, in the opinion of many, far surpasses them.

Many of his former students have since attained high academic positions in their native countries; so, for example, Nurcholish Madjid, for example, taught as Professor of Islamic Studies in Jogjakarta until his death in 2005 and, like Rahman, motivated by his faith as a Muslim, linked scholarship with a dedication for the betterment of society. His efforts were taken up and further developed in the US as well. The best-known examples of here are Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas who applied his ideas with respect to Qur’anic interpretation based on gender equality. Others fervently acknowledge the influence of his ideas. This is so, for example, for the reformist thinker Farid Esack who calls him “one of the profoundest thinkers of the century”³, as well as Ebrahim Moosa who writes:

3 Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 11.

Though I was not Fazlur Rahman's student I consider myself to be someone who has benefited greatly from his writings and his ideas.⁴

Unlike Abu Zaid, Soroush and Shabestari, Rahman never consciously adopted the analytical approaches of Western thinkers. Even though he spent the major part of his academic life in the West, his interests lay exclusively with Islamic thought. The Islamic world was always his frame of reference; he regarded it as his mission to explicate tradition and renewal to a Muslim public above all. For this reason, Rahman, who read German and French, took a rather critical stance vis-a-vis Western study of Islam, which he continually confronted. Apart from a few exceptions – Kenneth Cragg, Toshihiko Izutsu, Angelika Neuwirth and Josef van Ess – few scholars met with his approval. He reproached most of those who dealt with the Qur'an for being concerned only with certain closely defined aspects. They never viewed it in its entirety, in its unity, and never sought to investigate it in its own terms and, as a result, had not understood it.

Rahman's writings encompass a broad spectrum, proceeding from Islamic philosophy, with which he had begun his career, and extending far beyond. Amongst his countless articles there are those on the reform of Islamic education, on Qur'anic hermeneutics, on hadith criticism, on the early developments of the Islamic intellectual tradition, the reform of Islamic law, and Islamic ethics. In his scholarly work he was concerned with striking a balance between reason and revelation and finding an answer to the question: how can Islam, with its cultural, religious, political and ethical heritage, deal with a world that is ever modernizing and changing?

The Decline of Muslim Societies

Rahman was convinced that the decline of Muslim societies did not begin originally with the encounter between the Muslim and Western worlds in the nineteenth century, as Muslims mostly believe, but in

4 Moosa, "Introduction" to Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, vi.

fact occurred much earlier. In his view, the so-called pristine Islam, formulated as orthodoxy and later identified with Sunni Islam, has been lost. Sunni Islam may claim to be the original Islam but for Rahman it is a deviation from pure Islam. He dates what he calls the tragic turn away from the Qur'an to the moment when the formation of Sunni orthodoxy occurred, in other words, with the emergence of Umayyad rule. In his view, the advent of a dynastic rule had the most deleterious effects on Islam.

The first step therefore had to involve a historical critique of the theological and legal developments in Islam. It seemed essential to Rahman to indicate the rejections that took place among the various areas of the Islamic sciences: theology, exegesis, jurisprudence and the worldview of the Qur'an. The Qur'an had nothing to do with what the other disciplines made of it after the event. In particular, the jurisprudence and political philosophy of Islam lost their connection with the ethics of the Qur'an – for Rahman something of central importance – and this led to fundamentalism and stagnation.

As a Sunni, Rahman had a great fondness for the Mu'tazilite conception of prophecy and the nature of revelation and these, along with history, formed the most important components of his own Qur'anic hermeneutics. The Mu'tazilites had developed a theory of rational ethics based on the notion that good and evil can be discerned only by the use of reason, that is, without the aid of revelation. Consequently, primary or general ethical truths about good and evil are rationally discernible by means of intuitive reasoning. In Rahman's view, mankind needs revelation solely for carrying out its obligations to secondary ethical truths.

Other things about the Mu'tazilites fascinated him even more. He was convinced by their notion of the Qur'an's createdness, and so, he contradicted contemporary Sunni mainstream belief. His sharpest critique took on the ideological adversaries of the Mu'tazilites, the theological movement of the Ash'arites. More than anything else, he considered this tenth century school's doctrine of predestination to be truly pestiferous. In his view, one had to take responsibility here and now for one's deeds. The Ash'arite position struck him as a mutilation

of the Qur'anic message which, in his opinion, regards the human person as a free and responsible individual.

As a reformer Rahman had great models. He esteemed modern Islamic renewers such as Muhammad 'Abduh and the Indian Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) because they had developed an awareness of the necessity for reform and change, but he also praised key figures of fundamentalist Islam, such as Hasan al-Banna and Abu al-A'la Maududi (1903–1979). They had resisted the excesses of Islamic modernism and had protected Islam from secularism. True, he criticized them for lacking any method and for offering ad hoc solutions to ongoing problems. In his opinion the fundamental questions of methodology and hermeneutics had not been correctly addressed by Muslim thinkers.

The chief problem for him was the decline of Islamic intellectualism. To overcome this, in Rahman's view, a new way of interpreting the Qur'an was needed. He believed that a fresh interpretation of Islamic methodology in the light of the Qur'an was a prerequisite for any reform of Islamic thinking. In particular, he was concerned with a Qur'an-centred ethics that rested on two pillars: a theory of prophecy and the nature of revelation together with a grasp of history. The theory of prophecy would form the basis of a theory of Qur'anic interpretation which was made up of two steps or a double movement. It was first of all imperative to study the context in which the Qur'an was proclaimed; in this way it would be possible to understand the original message. From this, the principles and values which the Qur'an promulgated as norms could be inferred. The question is, therefore, how these norms might have an enduring relevance for the Islamic community without becoming anachronistic:

In building any genuine and viable Islamic set of laws and institutions, there has to be a twofold movement: First one must move from the concrete case treatments of the Qur'an – taking the necessary and relevant social conditions of that time into account – to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. Second, from this general level there must be a movement back to

specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant social conditions now obtaining.⁵

Rahman criticizes any attempt at exegesis that treats the Qur'an as a series of isolated verses and thereby fails to convey any understanding of the Qur'anic worldview. Muslims have not understood that the Qur'an is a unity and instead have taken an atomistic approach. Moreover, this fragmentary treatment of the Qur'an has increased in modern times.

It was for this reason that he wanted to develop an Islamic metaphysics based squarely on the Qur'an. Only if the metaphysical part is rightly understood can a coherent reconsideration of the Qur'an's moral, social and legal message become possible. Rahman's goal was to rescue the moral core in order to formulate a Qur'an-centred ethics. He complained that Muslim scholars had never attempted an ethics of the Qur'an. But no close study of the Qur'an could avoid its ethical passion. Its ethics form its essence and they also form the requisite connection between theology and law. True, the Qur'an tends to concretize the ethical, to clothe the general in a specific paradigm and to convert the ethical into legal or quasi-legal prescriptions. But it is precisely a token of its moral passion that it is not content to stay with generalizing ethical prescriptions but is eager to translate them into actual paradigms. The Qur'an always illustrates the goals and principles that are the essence of its laws.

The Dictation Theory

Rahman's theory of prophecy represents a radical shift away from the orthodox Sunni account of revelation, which he found unsatisfying, terming it the "dictation theory". The dictation theory reduces the Prophet's role in revelation to that of a recipient of God's message which he – rather like a tape recorder – repeated exactly just as he had received it. For Rahman, however, revelation (*wahy*) is something

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

more complex. That the Prophet was the recipient of God's final verbal revelation is not at issue but he tries to go further to delineate the creative process that was effected in the Prophet's mind by the revelation. He believes that the source of this creative process surpasses what human beings can understand. On the other hand, this process does take place in the mind of the proclaimer. Thus he comes to the conclusion that it is his word in the usual sense in that it involves a psychological process. But it is also the revealed word inasmuch as its source lies beyond his reach.

Since "word" is not the same as "sound" for Rahman there is no real contradiction in saying that the Qur'an is the word of the Prophet as well as the word of God. In his opinion, an organic relation exists between feelings, ideas and words. During inspiration, even during poetic inspiration, this relation is so consummate that feeling-idea-word becomes a whole and possesses its own individual existence.

According to Rahman, during the process called *wahy* – a word whose translation as "revelation" is somewhat unsatisfactory – ideas and words come to be born in the Prophet's mind. To be sure, their source cannot lie in his mind, as the Qur'an explains, because these ideas and words are so novel. For this reason, Rahman says, they must derive from a source beyond. He wishes to distinguish the character of the divine *wahy* from poetical, mystical or other forms of creative thinking or from artistic creation. Even if these appear psychologically similar, the Qur'an has a wholly different rank by virtue of its moral content.

In his view *wahy* is the result of a meeting of two spheres, that of the created and the uncreated world. The Prophet was indeed inspired by the divine but his own world is clearly mirrored in the linguistic result of this encounter. Hence, in the Qur'an the expectations, fears and anxieties of the Prophet and his community are reflected. The fact that the revelation mentions things that personally befall the Prophet cannot be ignored. As one example he cites verses 80:1–3:

He frowned and turned away
when the blind man came to him.
For all you know he might have grown in spirit.

Decades later, what Rahman here terms “encounter” Abu Zaid would designate as the dialogic relationship between Muhammad and his milieu. Rahman saw this aspect of the connection between the Prophet and an event that occurred as something that had been completely neglected in Islamic theology. The revelation came from God but at the same time, the location of the revelation was the Prophet’s heart. Rahman thought it a great mistake that no significance was accorded to this.

Moreover, the science of the *asbab al-nuzul* (poorly rendered as “bases” or “occasions” for the “sending down” of revelation), one of the oldest of all the Qur’anic sciences, had been neglected increasingly over the course of time. In Rahman’s opinion, in order that the Qur’anic instructions might be applied to as many situations as possible. Precisely here, however, as Rahman affirms, the *asbab al-nuzul* bear witness to the close relationship between the revelation and its social and cultural context that must once more be made plain.

The Qur’an as Ethical Guide

For Rahman the Qur’an is not a book of law at all. He was quite critically opposed to this currently prevalent view amongst Muslims. The Qur’an stands as a guide for people, with the Prophet as a moral reformer for humanity. People should live in accord with the ethical rules of the Qur’an and not attempt to extract laws from them. Legal directives constitute only a very small part of the Qur’an and relate to a particular situation in a particular context.

Furthermore, in his opinion, the Qur’an’s ethical and legal instructions operate on two levels, that of the ideal and that of the so-called “share”. The ideal was the goal towards which believers should fundamentally strive but that was not necessarily attainable at the time of revelation. By contrast, what Rahman calls the level of the share denoted what was attainable in the Prophet’s time. His close connection with his environment and its problems implied that the Qur’an did indeed address specific problems in their specific situations but on the other hand, that it had reference to the ideal. In concrete terms this

means that the Qur'an first sought to change whatever at that time lay in the realm of the possible. Ultimately, however, it pursued a much higher goal.

For example, the Qur'an did not abolish polygamy, which was permitted in the time of the Prophet. Even so, it was stressed that a man should marry only one woman if he could not do justice to more than one wife. That means, moreover, that however much the man might try, he might not be able to treat several wives justly. For Rahman, the Qur'an had formulated an ideal, monogamy, that was nevertheless adjusted at one and the same time to seventh century circumstances, hence polygamy was allowed. The legislation made no claim to be everlasting but took society as it then existed as its point of reference. Finally, the Prophet wanted people to move towards the ideal and turn it into reality. To be sure, over the course of Islamic history many of the Qur'anic pronouncements were held up as the ideal even though they had a descriptive rather than a normative character. Examples of this are the *hadd*-penalties, i.e., the punishments for transgressors, such as amputation of the hand for theft, and family law.

Still, what is the ideal? For Rahman it is unequivocally social justice. This is why in every generation there should be reflection on just how this ideal can best be realized. He emphasizes that all the Qur'anic teachings should be viewed as directed towards the creation of equality. Accordingly, Islam's goal cannot be attained as long as there is no freedom from all forms of exploitation – social, spiritual, political and economic. To attain this an ethics is required. And yet, ethics has not been one of the disciplines within the Qur'anic sciences in Islamic history. All the writings on ethics were based exclusively on Greek and Persian sources. For Rahman the basis for the ethics that needs to be developed is *taqwa* (usually translated as "fear of God" but probably better understood as "awe of God" or "awareness of God"); by this he means the ability, as well as the requirement, to make the distinction between good and evil. This is not a matter of the legal question about what is permitted and what forbidden, on which Muslims today are so fixated, but about the moral core.

The People of the Book

The integral approach that Rahman's mode of interpretation represents is very clearly revealed in his handling of the question about the Qur'an's attitude towards believers of other faiths. Alongside the question of women's rights, he regards this question as the central challenge for Islamic thought in the modern age.

As is well known, there are pronouncements in the Qur'an about Jews and Christians; the so-called Sabians are also mentioned. In Islamic history these religions were indeed recognized as "religions of the Book", a notion that was extended to Zoroastrianism and Hinduism as well, but whose adherents were not accepted as of equal value. This is reflected even today in the law of many Islamic states: Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians are free to practice their religion but are nevertheless second-class citizens. A series of rights available to Muslims are unavailable to them. This is the case, for example, in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Furthermore, it is still disputed in Islamic theology as in mainstream Islam who the so-called *kuffar*, "unbelievers", in the Qur'an are. Whereas in Islamic history for the most part only polytheists were seen as such, today radical groups include Jews and Christians in this category as well. Moreover, there are differing notions as to just how the Qur'an stands in theological terms to the *ahl al-kitab*, "people of the book", i.e., Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians. Do they have a share in divine truth? Will they find some sort of redemption? Are they souls who have strayed and who should be brought back to the right path? Or are they really Muslims without knowing it?

Rahman tries to answer these questions in his book *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. The fact that religions as such differ not only from one another but also comprise subgroups within them is a theme he notes repeatedly. But the Qur'an also offers a solution in his view: humanity was one but this unity was shattered through acceptance of the divine message brought by the prophets. He deems it a divine mystery that the prophets' messages formed a kind of turning point; if God had willed He might have led humanity along a single path. He cites verse 2:213:

Mankind was a single community,
 then God sent prophets to bring good news and warning,
 and with them He sent the Scripture with the Truth,
 to judge between people in their disagreements.
 It was only those to whom it was given
 who disagreed about it after clear signs had come to them,
 because of rivalry between them.
 So by His leave God guided the believers to the truth
 they had disagreed about.
 God guides whomever He will to a straight path.

And verse 11:118:

If your Lord had pleased, He would have made
 all people a single community,
 but they continue to have their differences.

And verse 10:19:

All people were originally a single community,
 but later they differed.
 If it had not been for a word from your Lord,
 the preordained judgment would already have been passed
 between them regarding their differences.

This is why the Qur'an speaks in the Meccan period of Jews and Christians as sectarians but later of the communities of Jews and Christians. Moreover, they had been invited to accept Islam but now were acknowledged as an exclusive community. Rahman attempts here, in conformity with his own methodology, to imagine the circumstances of the revelation. He puts himself inside the Prophet's perspective: he withdrew his original request and came towards the Jewish and Christian communities with a new attitude. He acknowledged them. Rahman cites Qur'an, verse 2:113, as evidence:

The Jews say, "The Christians have no ground whatsoever to stand on", and the Christians say, "The Jews have no ground whatsoever to stand on", though they both read the Scripture, and those who have no knowledge say the same. God will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning their differences.

And verse 2:111:

They also say, "No one will enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian".
This is their own wishful thinking.
Say, "Produce your evidence
if you are telling the truth".

And verse 2:120:

The Jews and the Christians will never be pleased with you unless you follow their ways.
Say, "God's guidance is the only true guidance".
If you were to follow their desires
after the knowledge that has come to you,
you would find no one to protect you from God or help you.

For Rahman the Qur'an's response to the exclusivist claims of the Jews and the Christians is absolutely unequivocal. Right guidance is not the responsibility of communities; it is God's responsibility. Hence, no community can claim to be exclusively chosen and justified. The entire tenor of the Qur'an is opposed to chosenness. Rahman cites verse 2:124 to this effect:

When Abraham's Lord tested him with certain commandments,
which he fulfilled, He said,
"I will make you a leader of men".
Abraham asked, "And will You make leaders

from my descendants too?" God answered,
 "My pledge does not hold for those who do evil".

And verse 2:134:

That community passed away.
 What they earned belongs to them,
 and what you earn belongs to you:
 you will not be answerable for their deeds.

In complete accord with this firm rejection of exclusivity and cho-senness the Qur'an accepts the fact that there are good people in other communities.

The believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians –
 all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good –
 will have their rewards with their Lord.
 No fear for them, nor will they grieve. (2:62)

The Qur'an even makes this statement many times:

The believers, the Jews, the Sabians, and the Christians –
 those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds –
 will have nothing to fear or to regret.

Here Rahman distances himself from traditional Muslim exegesis. The great majority of Muslim commentators have been desperately occupied with misunderstanding the obvious meaning of this verse; they maintain that by Jews, Christians and Sabians is meant those who have become Muslims or else those Jews, Christians and Sabians who lived before the coming of the Prophet. Rahman calls both interpretations nonsense; the verses say unequivocally that all people who believe in God and the Resurrection and who do good will be saved. As for the claim of Jews and Christians that the next world is for them alone, the response of the Qur'an is to say:

Any who direct themselves wholly to God and do good
will have their reward with their Lord.

(2:112)

One aspect of the logic that all who do good and believe in God and the Resurrection are to be acknowledged is, of course, that the Muslim community be also acknowledged by members of other faiths. According to Rahman's reading of verse 5:48, the Qur'an gives its final answer in this context to the complex of problems in a pluralistic world:

We sent to you [Muhammad] the Scripture with the truth,
confirming the Scriptures that came before it,
and with final authority over them:
so judge between them according to what God
has sent down. Do not follow their whims,
which deviate from the truth that has come to you.
We have assigned a law and a path to each of you.
If God had so willed, He would have made you one community,
but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you,
so race to do good: you will all return to God
and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about.

Rahman also addresses the question as to why there are so many religions and societies. The value of this pluralism resides in the fact that they should compete with one another in doing good. The primary message which he distilled from the Qur'an within the framework of his double-movement theory, is that plurality is something willed by God.

Each community has its own direction to which it turns:
race to do good!

(2:148)

The essential matter is to do good; verse 2:177 expresses this:

Goodness does not consist in turning your face
towards East or West.

The truly good are those who believe in God
and the Last Day, in the angels, the Scripture and the prophets;
who give away some of their wealth, however much
they cherish it, to their relatives, to orphans, the needy,
travellers and beggars, and to liberate those in bondage;
those who keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms;
who keep pledges whenever they make them; who are
steadfast in misfortune, adversity, and times of danger.
These are the ones who are true,
and it is they who are aware of God.

The Muslim community in Medina, which is lauded (2:144) and praised as the best of humanity (3:110), enjoys no guarantee “of automatically being God’s favourite”.⁶ It must first act well. In verse 47:38 Muslims are even warned that God can withdraw His love from them:

You are called upon to give in the cause of God.
Some among you are ungenerous; yet whoever is ungenerous
to this cause is ungenerous to himself.
Indeed, God does not need you, but you need Him.
If you pay no heed, He will replace you by others
who shall bear no resemblance to yourselves.

Apart from Judaism and Christianity, Rahman did not make any concrete statements about other religions. Unfortunately, we don’t know what his theological opinions were on the Ahmadiyya who were persecuted in his native Pakistan. The Ahmadis consider themselves Muslims but this is widely disputed. According to this latter view, the founder of their community of faith, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908), who saw himself as a renewer, was a heretic, for he even made the claim of being the promised Mahdi at the end of time.

6 Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 167.

For Muslims in the Indian subcontinent the Ahmadiyya movement poses a serious theological challenge. Nevertheless, when Rahman declares that it is the deciding factor that one believe in God and the Resurrection and do good, then they too, at least theoretically, must have earned his acceptance. In his above-cited *Major Themes of the Qur'an* he does not deal with them, which is understandable enough given that post-Islamic religions do not crop up in the Qur'an. But he did criticize the ban on the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan in 1974, which he attributed to pervasive and negative Saudi influence.

The subject of the believers of other faiths was not the only one that Rahman considered utterly misunderstood. In connection with Islamic penal law he was convinced that the pertinent passages in the Qur'an had been knowingly misinterpreted. Here too, he believed, the jurists had represented an interpretation from the outset that completely runs counter to the Qur'an. Thus, the term *hadd* means a "limit". It denotes a boundary, a barrier, that one should not cross, as verses 2:229–230 make utterly clear:

Divorce may be pronounced twice, and then a woman must be retained in honour or allowed to go with kindness. It is unlawful for husbands to take from them anything they have given them, unless both fear that they may not be able to keep within the bounds set by God; in which case it shall be no offence for either of them if the wife ransoms herself. These are the bounds set by God; do not transgress them. Those that transgress the bounds of God are wrongdoers. If a man divorces his wife, he shall not remarry her until she has wedded another man and been divorced by him; in which case it shall be no offence for either of them to return to the other, if they think that they can keep within the bounds set by God. Such are the bounds of God. He makes them plain to men of understanding.

Notwithstanding this, Islamic law uses this term to designate a fixed punishment for consumption of alcohol, mugging and the like. Even

in the earliest second-century legal literature the notion is reported in the sense of a Qur'anically-determined punishment. Thus, yet again, the misinterpretation of the Qur'an stands at the centre of the argument. But how can one arrive at a correct understanding? Through the double-movement theory, according to Rahman. And it is precisely here that criticism of Rahman begins.

Reception and Criticism

Mehmet Paçacı, a member of the Ankara School who was born in 1961, subjects the double-movement theory to a critical examination. If understanding the Qur'an requires an understanding of it in the context of Muhammad's times, Paçacı asks, how can we be so sure of comprehending the past? How can one know with any certainty what norm lies concealed behind this or that Qur'anic directive? Can one confidently state that it is to be applied nowadays in this way rather than that? True, in his 1996 essay "The Qur'an and I – how historical are we?" Paçacı does accept Rahman's characterization of the Qur'an as an ethical handbook as well as his double-movement theory. Even so, Paçacı regards the situation of the interpreter differently. In his view, it is possible to speak of a correct application of the Qur'an today only if one possesses a correct understanding of the present. But since every reader stands fixed in a specific historical situation that is thereby limited he cannot know the present totally.

For this reason Paçacı introduces the notion of "pre-understanding" into the methodology of Qur'anic interpretation. In contradistinction to Fazlur Rahman, who believes that an objective grasp of history is possible, he recognizes that every consideration of the Qur'an proceeds from a specific perspective. Finally, he constructs a synthesis of the thought of Gadamer and of Fazlur Rahman (who had rejected Gadamer, stating that if he were right, his double-theory could not work). Paçacı sees this differently. Like Gadamer, he sees the exegete in a system of coordinates of time and space while with Fazlur Rahman he discovers the universal principles that underlie the Qur'an. Paçacı does not relinquish Rahman in accepting Gadamer.

The Ankara School thus developed Rahman's approach further and it worked through possible objections to it. Its members do not practice some sort of avant-garde theology in an ivory tower without a wider effect. Rather, the theologians form a school as well in that they educate Turkey's younger generation of theologians. Every year some 100 students, male and female, complete their studies at the Ankara faculty and afterwards are active as teachers of religion, as imams and as officials in the Turkish religious authority. Furthermore, theology in Turkey is of worldwide significance in new intellectual approaches to Islam. Its ideas have been taken up by students in Central Asia and the Balkans, all of whom read Turkish. In the Persian and Arabic-speaking, however, world they have not yet attracted significant attention, even though they have much to offer that is both exciting and novel. As Abu Zaid put it: "What is new comes from the peripheries".

In response to the call for a study of theology like that in the West, Turkish officials set development in motion in 1948. In 1949, a faculty of theology was brought into being based upon a modern scholarly model at the newly founded University of Ankara; today it stands as the parent faculty of all the educational institutions of theology in Turkey. Since the faculty does not use the term "Sharia" in its title, and so does not put jurisprudence, formerly of huge significance, at its centre, but instead identifies itself with "theology" (*ilahiyat*), as is common in the West, its founders were sending an unmistakable message. They wanted a modern institution in which the professors would not pass on handed-down knowledge to the students but would rather teach them independent thinking. By the end of the 1940s Muslim theology was being practised in conjunction with such critical disciplines as empirical psychology, sociology, and history. Even non-Muslims such as Annemarie Schimmel taught the history of religion there. Other important advances came from such now-retired professors as Mehmet Said Hatiboğlu and Hüseyin Atay. Furthermore, during their studies students were expected to spend a certain amount of time in Europe or the US in order to experience Western influence. Islamic theology should thus be practised as a scholarly discipline; so neutral and objective should it be that Ömer Özsoy, who came to prominence at this faculty (and who

today is decisively engaged in the establishment of Islamic theology in Germany), still flinches when he hears that this discipline should now be practised as a normative science from an internal perspective, in other words, that a Muslim subjective approach should be introduced.

Certainly Ömer Özsoy has been strongly influenced by Rahman; yet, he also draws a line between himself and Rahman. As a result, in an effort to distinguish *what* the Qur'an means to say from *how* it says it, he takes the sunna far more into consideration than Rahman does. Like Abu Zaid, toward whom the Ankara School was highly receptive, he wishes to regard the Qur'an in its interplay with reality, that is, with the history of its first auditors. For Özsoy, anyone who reads the Qur'an as a text, as a self-contained system that can be understood on its own terms, can only read it wrongly. Only when one considers how Muhammad and his milieu reacted to the revelation, and how the Qur'an, in turn, entered into their reactions, is it possible to understand its message. For it is not text but *discours*, speech, as Özsoy puts it with reference to Paul Ricoeur. In this way Özsoy avails himself of a term for describing a complex reality, a term, moreover, that Abu Zaid in his last years considered more suitable for conveying what the Qur'an really is.

Ömer Özsoy agrees expressly with Fazlur Rahman that it is possible to interpret a past set of circumstances. But like Paçacı, he holds that every interpretation of one's own present is nevertheless riddled with errors. Here it becomes clear that what his Turkish students preach today is no longer unadulterated "Fazlur-Rahmanism". Even so, the Pakistani scholar has left his mark on Turkish thinkers – who alongside the Iranians are credited with the greatest originality of all modern theologians – in an unmistakable way. And for that reason he will also mark Islamic theology in Germany with his stamp.

KATAJUN AMIRPUR

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