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FAZLUR RAHMAN, THE QUR'ANIC MORAL-ETHICAL FERVOR, AND THE PROCESS OF THE REVELATION

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Abstract: The purpose of my paper is to elucidate some of Fazlur Rahman's theories of the Qur'anic moral-ethical fervor which was almost absent in the classical Islamic history and Fazlur Rahman's dynamic view of the unique process of the revelation coming down to the heart of the Prophet that triggered massive protests and demonstrations from the circle of the Pakistani Muslim conservative. For Fazlur Rahman, his theory of revelation was not really new since the Qur'an itself has a strong testimony of it.

Introduction

Fazlur Rahman was a serious, keen, and bold student of the Qur'an and other Islamic disciplines such as, philosophy, theology, law, şufism, and education, classical as well as modern. Rahman's deep concern on many crucial issues in Islamic history is because of the fact that so far there have no Muslim scholars attempted seriously to delve into the Qur'anic moral-ethical principles as inseparable parts of its holistic and comprehensive worldview, systematically or otherwise.\(^{44}\) The Qur'an's claim as guidance (hudan) for mankind should be correctly understood as something functional and has its practical values in guiding human collective life since this revealed Book "is a document that is squarely aimed at man"\(^ {45}\). Or, in Muhammad Asad's term, the Qur'an has offered a comprehensive answer to the question, "How shall I behave in order to achieve the good life in this world and happiness in the life to come?"\(^ {46}\) This paper wants to trace Rahman's views on the Qur'anic moral-ethical fervor and on the process of the revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad based upon his important and challenging works on the Qur'an and other aspects of Islam.


Fazlur Rahman and the Qur'an

Born in pre-partition India on September 21, 1919, graduated from the Punjab University in 1942 for his M.A. and completed his Doctor of Philosophy degree from Oxford University in 1949, Rahman then travelled a lot, teaching in various universities in United Kingdom, Canada, and the USA. His long academic career was at the University of Chicago, from 1969 until his death in July 1988. But before he joined the faculty of the University of Chicago, Rahman from 1961 to 1968 devoted his scholarly career, first as the director of the Central Institute of Research and then as the Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology in Pakistan. Although Rahman had studied the central position of the Qur'an for mankind in his book Islam, first published in 1966, it was during his teaching career in Chicago two other important writings emerged, Major Themes of the Qur'an and Islam and Modernity. Both works attempted with a great success to formulate an Islamic world view based primarily on Rahman's understanding of the Qur'an.

By his understanding of a Medinese verse declaring 'If We had sent down this Qur'an on a mountain, you would have seen it humbly submit (to the Command) and split asunder out of fear of God' (LIX, 21), Rahman concluded that the task of the Qur'an had also changed in the Medinese era (622-632 A.D.): from “the thud and impulse moral and religious exhortation”… “to the construction of an actual social fabric.” In other words, the Qur'an commands mankind to establish a just and ethically-based society on earth, or, in Rahman's words, “an ethical and egalitarian social order” which was totally absent in pre-Islamic commercial Meccan society. “The Meccans,” observed Rahman, “contended that they had earned their wealth, which they, therefore, rightfully owned and which they could spend or dispose of as they wished.” The Qur'an strongly criticized this attitude because “In their wealth there is a definite right of the indigent and the deprived” (70-25; also 51:19). Therefore, the Meccans “could not become islands of plenty in a sea of poverty.” In the eyes of the Qur'an, even prayers have no meaning in “the absent of concern for the welfare of the poor.” For the Meccans, the pursuit of wealth is 'the height of their knowledge' (53-30), since they knew only the 'exterior of life, being heedless of its higher ends' (30:7).

48 See footnote no. 1 and 2.
51 Rahman Major p.30.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid. see the Qur'an chapter 107 verses 7.
54 Ibid.
These profane phenomena have, unfortunately, continued in various stages of Muslim history until present time. The so-called Muslim world now is in the very critical and downtrodden juncture of history when seen from the Qur'anic perspective. It is almost completely aloof from the condition of socio-economic justice. Most of the elites in the Muslim world have no longer taken the Qur'an as the source of guidance for their collective life. They have just shown the attitude of a lip-service to this Book.

Of course the Qur'an has always sided with the poor, but at the same time poverty should be temporary in nature. Then the poor must liberate themselves from the chain of these social ills. But without the enforcement of principles of justice by the men in authority, it would be almost impossible to eradicate the phenomena of poverty as no doubt found in pre-Islamic Meccan society. On this, Rahman wrote: “Mecca was a prosperous commercial town, but it had a subterranean world of exploitation of the weak (the tribeless, slaves, and hirelings), and the variety of fraudulent commercial and monetary practices.”

The Qur'an persistently criticized the socio-economic disparities found in Mecca that one day demanded radical and desperate reform. Rahman then cited the testimony of the Qur'an describing the competition in accumulating wealth among the Meccan elites: “Competition in accumulating wealth keeps you preoccupied until you visit your graves. Nay, you shall find out soon; nay, you shall find out soon (107:1-6).”

The Qur'an certainly aimed at launching radical social reforms in order justice enforced for the benefit of all segments of society, particularly the weaker. “In understanding the Qur'an's social reforms,” wrote Rahman, “...we will go fundamentally wrong unless we distinguish between legal enactments and moral injunctions.” Here lies the failure of the Muslim classical legal tradition “which essentially regarded the Qur'an as a law book and not the religious source of the law…” The permission of polygamy in the Muslim legal domain is a good example for this case. In the Qur'an (4:3) we read: “And if you

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55 Ibid., p.38.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., p.47.
58 Ibid.
fear that you cannot do justice to orphans, then marry from among [orphaned] women such as you like, two, three, or four. But if you fear you will not be fair [to your wives], then [marry] only one." But in the same chapter (4:129) the Qur'an states, "And you shall never be able to do justice among women, no matter how much you desire to do so." The two verses seem apparently contradictory one to another.

How to reconcile these two verses? Rahman's argument below is interesting to follow which is in line with the view adopted by Muslim modernists:

There is apparently a contradiction between permission for polygamy up to four; the requirement of justice among co-wives; and the unequivocal declaration that such justice is 'in the nature of things impossible.' The traditionalist interpretation was that the permission clause has legal force while the demand for justice though important is left to the conscience of the husband... The weakness of this position from the viewpoint of normative religion is that something should be left to the good conscience of the husband, even though in the nature of things it is certain to be violated. Muslim modernists, on the other hand, tend to give primacy to the demand for justice plus the declaration of the impossibility of justice, and say that the permission for polygamy was meant to be only temporary and for a restricted purpose. 59

In other words, the ideal marriage system, according Rahman's understanding of the above two verses is monogamy "towards which the society was expected to move, since it was not possible to remove polygamy legally at one stroke." 60 The same treatment should also be applied to the problem of slavery which was rampant in pre-Islamic Arabia. The Qur'an first accepted legally the institution of slavery, "but strongly recommended and encouraged emancipation of slaves (90:13; 8:89; 58:3)," however, the classical Muslim lawyers, according Rahman, interpreted the Qur'an's imperatives to emancipate slaves not as a command, but only as a recommendation. 61 In brief, in Rahman's understanding of the Qur'an, the slavery institution should be deconstructed once and for all, because it was an anathema to the very dignity of mankind.

60 Ibid., p.48.
61 Ibid.
Why was a serious study of the Qur'an so central and crucial to Rahman's long academic career? The answer is clear that for Rahman during the classical times “One cannot point to a single work of ethics squarely based upon the Qur'an, although there are numerous works based upon Greek philosophy, Persian tradition and Şufi piety.” 62 This does not mean, however, that the classical Muslim scholars did not attempt to integrate their works with the Qur'an, but “they cannot be regarded essentially as expression of it.” 63 Again, Rahman stressed his conclusion that “the Qur'an is primarily an ethical teaching (with a theological base), and not a book of law.” 64 In his Major Themes of the Qur'an, Rahman informs us that in this work, “the Qur'an has been allowed to speak for itself: interpretation has been used only as necessary for joining together ideas.” 65 This work is only an introductory study of the Qur'an that to be continued to write a more comprehensive treatment of the Qur'an in order to have a systematic formula of its general world view. Alas, Rahman's death had stopped this dream! In my knowledge, his former Chicago's students have so far no intellectual and spiritual capacity to realize Rahman's ambitious project of the Qur'an.

Fazlur Rahman's theory of the Prophet's revelatory experiences

The Prophet's experiences in receiving God's revelation are in final analysis to guide him in order to act in this world. As a recipient of the message from God the Prophet Muhammad was fully aware of the weighty word bestowed upon him by God, as the Qur'an has said: “Verily, We shall bestow upon you a weighty word (message)” (73:5). We shall not go further to discuss the content of the revelation, since our focus here is Rahman's theological-philosophical understanding of how the revelation came down to the Prophet, a heated controversial issue debated by Muslim scholars during the second and the third centuries of Islam. The Prophet himself “was unshakably convinced that he was the recipient of the message from God, the totally Other...This 'Other' through some channel 'dictated' the Qur'an with an absolute authority. The voice from the depths of life spoke distinctly, unmistakably and imperiously”66 to the heart of the Prophet.

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
66 Rahman, Major, p.xi.
The Muslim orthodoxy in order to safeguard the otherness emphasized the externality of the revelation vis-à-vis the Prophet which the Qur'an certainly rejects. The Qur'an declares, 'The Trusted Spirit has brought it down upon your heart that you may be a warner' (26:194). "But orthodoxy (indeed, all medieval thought)," Rahman insisted, "lacked the necessary tools to combine in its formulation of the dogma [of] the otherness and the verbal character of the Revelation on the one hand, and its intimate connection with the work and the religious personality of the Prophet on the other..." In other words, the Muslim orthodoxy "lacked the intellectual capacity to say both that the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also the word of Muhammad. The Qur'an obviously holds both, for it it insists that it has come to the 'heart' of the Prophet, how can it be external to him?"

It was because of Rahman's revolutionary and controversial statement on the character of the revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad which triggered a massive protest from the Pakistani conservative 'ulama, declaring that Rahman "was a munkir-i Qur'an (disbeliever in the Qur'an)." Rahman not only tried to dethrone the Islamic conservatism which was deeply pervasive in the Muslim world, "he also disputed many of the Western attempts to understand Islam... portrayed it as a fatalistic, archaic, and static creature..."

In short, Rahman's contributions to the modern Islamic studies, particularly during his Chicago tenure, were phenomenal and influential. "Fazlur Rahman," wrote Donald L. Berry, "represented a refreshing voice which exposed the West to an Islam that it had never seen before." Unfortunately, many of the Muslim traditionalists have, except in Turkey and Indonesia to some degree, still closed tightly their ears and hearts to try to critically understand Fazlur Rahman's. The Muslim world in general, included Pakistan, is too late to highly appreciate one of its smart and serious scholars of Islam: Fazlur Rahman. As one of his students in Chicago, 1979-1982, I deeply and sorrowfully missed Rahman when death came to him on July 26, 1988.

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67 Ibid., p.31.
68 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
Final words

It would not be out of context here to remember Rahman by quoting his words on the basic èlan of the Qur’an for mankind:

The distinctive as well as the practicality of Islam may be demonstrated ...by a bona fide attempt ...to found an ethically based social order on earth. If the Muslim can successfully attempt this task, he will have implemented the basic èlan of the Qur’an and saved mankind from what seems to be nothing less than suicide. Otherwise, there is little left for him to do but indulge in a trivial and vainglorious self-satisfaction; only 'vainglory can be no substitute for Truth,' as the Qur’an has it (LIII, 28).

For me, this is a very strong, inspiring, and purposeful statement made by Rahman to remind the Muslim on his/her historical responsibility and obligation to save mankind from a tragic suicide vis-à-vis atheistic and wild modernity.

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