The Legacies of Fazlur Rahman for Islam in American

Earle H. Waugh

Abstract

In this paper, a student of Fazlur Rahman advances critical reflections on the meaning of Fazlur Rahman's work to the development of Islamic thought and understanding among Muslims of America. The paper not only examines Rahman's impact on Islamic thought but also explores his influence on the American academy. How the presence of an Islamic thinker affected the secular neutrality of American universities and the study of religion itself is an important aspect of this article. The author explores Rahman's endeavors to remind the West of its Islamic heritage and his challenge to Muslims to reinterpret their traditions. The author seeks finally to identify the methodological basis of Fazlur Rahman's work and how it enriched the tradition of Islamic modernism.

The study of Islam in North America is now a well-established subdiscipline of Islamic studies, and one of particular importance in American religious development.[1] Fazlur Rahman, a Muslim modernist, has made an important intellectual contribution to the tradition's development. What is the scope of this contribution, and how will it continue to have an impact in the next century? Obviously, the ramifications of these questions are larger than could be explored here, but some of the most pertinent issues can be raised. Thus, what follows can only be some preliminary thoughts on the legacy of this significant Muslim academic for the Muslim community in America.

A Student's Reflections

The role of Fazlur Rahman has been of interest to me since I sat in his classes at the University of Chicago in the late 1960s and discovered his

Earle H. Waugh *is Professor and Chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Comparative Studies at the University of Alberta, Canada.*

international connections and contemporary interests in Islamic expression. Ultimately, this led me to explore his career that is now the subject of a recently completed study.[2] Perhaps some personal reflections on his life and scholarship will be helpful to set the stage.

Before we begin our examination of his legacy, I must mention that much has changed since he commenced his studies early in this century.[3] As the twentieth century draws to a close, when information girdles the globe in nanoseconds and conflict in distant lands becomes everyone's business, America's intellectuals continue to struggle with the delineation of human meaning, as witnessed in the recent turbulence around *The Closing of the American Mind*.[4] Some scholars continue to construe the human being without acknowledging the spiritual dimensions of his existence. And the religious academy continues to worry whether it belongs at the heart of the university's mission.[5] Notwithstanding evidence to the contrary, it seems really quite obvious from the last decade of world history that religion must be returned to its place as a fundamental characteristic of human meaning, and the academy must commit itself to comprehending it.[6] Notions of what our lives mean, crafted as they are upon ancient modes of belief now beyond the possibility of collective recovery, texture every intellectual exercise — even one so simple as what a valued individual has contributed to the common good. One can legitimately argue, then, that the assumption of a basic secular attitude cannot be justified if there is evidence that religious values play continuing roles in human understanding. Even when it seems clear that no overt religious meaning is present there are problems: When people use neutral or antireligious rhetoric, they make claims and espouse positions that are founded upon belief and affirmation. Are these not also religious in some way? Hence, it seems illogical not to make religious value a key part of investigations from the beginning.

Within the American context, Fazlur Rahman represents one who stood tall against neutral secularism in the academy. This secularism, he thought, was denigrating the truths of humanity's long and arduous discovery; there was a reality beyond the constructs of our finitude. Moreover, from his perspective as a Muslim, that reality had not remained aloof. It had embodied itself in the community of human beings who interacted with God in obedience. Hence, for Fazlur Rahman, the humanist agenda was not a narrow one, but one encompassing the full range of human existence. That existence, he understood, included the human experience with God. It was a scholarly position very much compatible with religionist scholars at the

University of Chicago like Eliade and Tillich, except that those thinkers had quite different ideas about the meaning of God in human experience.[7]

There is more to the Fazlur Rahman legacy than a humanism with religious assumptions. There was a genuinely original aspect to his work. Naturally, Fazlur Rahman would be the last to claim that his stance brought anything new. Yet, in the American context, and within the academic milieu of university life, he did. Intellectually, he represented a religiosity that had always been held to be outside the frame of American life; he represented a tradition that has usually been judged foreign to North America and its claims emotionally inconsequential. Will Herberg said it best: "To be a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew are today the alternative ways of being American."[8] Yet Fazlur Rahman was present in America, at one of its greatest universities, insisting that Islam had to be encountered by Americans in order for them to correctly comprehend their own sense of the human. At the same time, historical events suddenly exposed the truth of what he was contending, for with immigration and the Black Muslim movement of the fifties and sixties, Islam became a North American religion.

Almost by instinct, it was clear to students that the religious meaning of Islam would not and could not be reduced to a few theological cliches, to be summoned in point form, and accommodated through adjustments to institutional structures (as conservatives claimed Christianity had been within the liberal academic system). Acknowledging Islam's contribution to a common destiny required more. Rather, important intellectual resources and massive amounts of time had to be given over to comprehending a phenomenon that suddenly was among us. The consciousness that Islam was part of the "natural" religious environment meant that it had to be "accounted for" or "placed analytically" within the religious framework, a new task that paralleled the intellectual encounter with Hinduism and Buddhism in America.[9] It was this logic that centered Islamic studies at the heart of the history of religions and of American religious history.

Once Islam assumed a position among the self-conscious intellectual roots of collective existence, students had to look around to see how deeply this tradition had run. What was stunning was that these roots had been passed over in relative silence both experientially and rationally since the Middle Ages. While the sources clearly demonstrated the contribution of Islamic scholarship to Western development, somehow the major ramifications of this never became part of conscious analysis. They seemed to be

"forgotten." How could this occur? The fact of this "forgetfulness" was posed as an unalterable truth that those of us who came to the University of Chicago to study had to confront, and this was and is the basis for a genuine intellectual position for Islam in America.

Thus, despite the ingrained tendencies of our "Enlightenment" mind and even the blatant denial of many segments of our Western memory, Islam had been part of our collective history all along. What Fazlur Rahman represented and was validated just down the street from the University of Chicago in the Honorable Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam was the requirement of engagement. From then on, the inclusion of Islam has been a requirement of any attempt to comprehend the West's (and America's) meaning. He firmly established that nothing would be gained (and academic integrity would be lost) by dismissing Islam from the world's intellectual discourse. Better to disregard the law of gravity than that. What was obvious was that Islam was too universal a religion with too long and distinguished an intellectual tradition to discount. Even if it was only the creation of the human spirit, it still had to be acknowledged for what it told us of our collective selves.

Just how were we to get at this phenomenon? The tradition called "Islam" was riddled with problems. On the one hand, the center of this tradition forever shifted, indicating a very dynamic religion. On the other, our ability to understand it seemed not to fit our usual patterns: our analytic tools were shaped by a different discourse and had evolved in response to quite other significances, so they functioned only imperfectly in the Muslim context. Fazlur Rahman acknowledged the problems we faced. He also recognized the analytic disjunction. His reaction was not to abandon the intellectual enterprise, but to set to work to help us recast the tools so they fit the task better. More than anything, then, his legacy is the will to engage what our ancestors glossed over or our intellectual traditions could not encompass.

Fazlur Rahman rejected one notion prevalent today, i.e., the relativity of all knowledge. He recognized that there were common goals in knowing and common threads in understanding. He saw a contiguity between the toil of a historian of religion in trying to bring critical skills to bear on Islam and the Muslim scholar struggling to separate authentic Muslim principle from the subjectivity of Islamic history. His view continues to be critical: Human beings will not win the day by denial of problems, but by the vigorous and exhaustive business of laboring to understand.

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. Herein lies another telling dimension of his legacy: Intellectual tradition must be founded upon a culture of tolerance. This was more the reason for his opposition to the Islamists than that they were relatively poor Islamic scholars. He believed that Islamic greatness had been nurtured in intellectual tolerance. He found it difficult to conceive of an Islam that could not open itself to all manner of stances. Of course, he had limits to what he would accept as legitimate discourse and still remain true to Islamic ideology, but Muslims themselves debate that issue and he never consciously restricted his students.

Still, for all his sojourn in the West, and his importance at the University of Chicago, Fazlur Rahman never consciously introduced analytic procedures derived from Western thinkers in a major manner. Even in those areas that influenced his methodology, a few of which we will briefly explore, he was not attracted to the ongoing debate. He felt very deeply his Islamic origins, remained committed to an Islamic process of knowledge, and rested within an essentially traditional framework in his theoretical underpinnings. Such grounding within the well-trodden paths of normative Islam indicated that his international reputation as a liberal and as the purveyor of an American radical Islamic modernism is off the mark. As I will argue, no special character signals the "Fazlur Rahman approach." It follows, therefore, that one cannot speak of a Fazlur Rahman school, or a Chicago school, or even of a Fazlur Rahman tradition in scholarship.

The Loci of Interpretation

Within his scholarship in Islam, Fazlur Rahman reflects the desire to bring a valid intellectual process to the principal problems facing Islam today, and to do it in a way that does not override the basic premises of the Qur'an and Islam. It is, rather, the structure of his thought that reflects his distinctive contribution to the scholarship of his day.[10] Out of the intellectual ferment of the Europe of his youth, he turned to Hans-George Gadamer to provide a hermeneutical articulation to apply to the Qur'an and Sunnah;

his interpretation of Gadamer's first principle of that articulation is: "All experience of understanding presupposes a preconditioning of the experiencing subject."[11]

Gadamer had held that the great classical texts were not just used by the early humanists to pass on information about the past, but as a standard by which to judge their own achievements. Hence he says:

> As "humanists," they take pride in recognizing the absolute exemplary nature of classical texts. For the true humanist his author is certainly not such that the interpreter would claim to understand the work better than did the author himself. We must not forget that the highest aim of the humanist was not originally to "understand" his models, but to imitate or even surpass them.[12]

The bringing of expectations/anticipations to the text frees the interpreter from any absolute rendering of it. Put another way, all attempts to uncover an objective meaning in history must fail because human consciousness has already built in assumptions about what can be known and understood. These notions are then unconsciously read into the text in the interpreting process. Gadamer called this *vorurteil,* or "prejudgment," which means that we already have a structure in place that allows us to project an initial meaning onto the text:

> A person who is trying to understand a text is always performing an act of projecting. He projects before himself a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the latter emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. The working out of this fore-project, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there ... This constant of new projection is the movement of understanding and interpretation.[13]

In comprehending what is there, one uses all the interpretive material at hand, grammar, rules of expression, history of notions, ideas in the text. Once this methodology has finished its task, it is really up to the interpreter to render what all this means in a credible manner for the reader. The process then becomes one of the interpreter relating his grasp of the material to "the movement of understanding and interpretation." That is why, for example, no original meaning can be uncovered, since the original meaning presupposes a constituting individual from that moment in history and that moment is now dead. Therefore, one must interpret the text in the pres-

ent time.[14] Fazlur Rahman applied this modern humanist methodology to his project of understanding the Qur'an.

For Fazlur Rahman, the first and possibly most important interpretive locus is the attitude to be taken toward the Holy Text — it is to be held as the Word of God in its completeness, not as the Word of God as a sum of its discrete elements. In effect, he argued that the Qur'an must be read as an entire book and understood as an entire message, reflecting the basic theological claim that it makes. Moreover, his attitude toward the Qur'an was that it opened out back onto God, almost as if the Qur'anic text should rather be read with concerns for God's intentions than as a book constructed of words. The expectation was that one encountered the Writer of the text through the words, not that the words were the final resting place for meaning. There was something analogous to the Sufi notion that the sacred text embodied the divine *ruh*, and that in reciting it, one was put in touch with its reality.[15] This meant that the message was not restricted to the individual words in the text, but rather resided in the overall concern of God to convey to humans His true will. This general intent Fazlur Rahman regarded as essential for correct interpretation (a factor, incidentally, he believed missing from Orientalist analyses). This characteristic inspired his writing on themes within the Qur'an as a means of interpreting its most pressing concerns.

The primacy of the Qur'an in interpreting Muslim affairs is not new,[16] but the insistence of the modernist movement away from reliance on the Sunnah as the basis for Muslim norms shifts the weight of interpretation directly onto the Qur'an.[17] The hadith were to serve the purpose of charting the community's self-awareness on issues of importance to Qur'anic interpretation. They were not, however, to take precedence over other kinds of analysis of the Qur'an, such as using the Qur'an to interpret itself.

The second locus is his insistence that history must be reintroduced into Qur'anic analysis. Thus, for the individual passages, the meaning of God is not separate from the occasion of its giving, since the facticity of the moment is an assumption behind God's revelation. It was the historically-validated rejection and modification of His word that required a new revelation, and it was likewise the contextual situation that generated the need for the precise words that were given to the Prophet. That occasion must therefore be known for human beings to understand the meaning that God has enshrined in the word. As he said in an interview in 1979:

> All the passages in the Qur'an came out of a concrete situation. Whenever a special problem arose Muhammad made a reply. The background for his reply is contained in the "occasions of revelation." It is my firm belief that modern Muslims must study the "occasions" because it is there that the dynamics of faith are found. The rationales, the reasons behind the laws, are the essence of the revelations.[18]

Once one had determined the "essence of the revelations," one could extrapolate how God wants the revelation to be understood today.

If one accepts that God revealed His Word at specific times and places, then one has also to accept that interpretations of revelation are also subject to specific times and places. The Muslim scholar has the task of re-examining each piece of revelation within its precise historical context, determining its import, and then reformulating it in ways appropriate to present circumstances. This entire undertaking must be based on a clear understanding of the overall spirit of the Qur'an as well as the dynamics of today's complex society.[19] He thus would have argued for a distinctive understanding of the Qur'an for the Muslim community in America.

Fazlur Rahman thus accepted the modern contention that revelation was subject to a historical context. He held that, compared with Judaism and Christianity, Islam is far more aware of its historical contextualization. This is expressed symbolically in the role that the Muslim calendar plays in defining Islamic life, but also in the many historical references within the body of the Qur'an's text. It is reflected too in the notion that God has a long covenantal relationship with mankind, commencing with Abraham and culminating in the revelation of the Qur'an through the Prophet Muhammad. Thus history is essential as a ground or background for the true meaning of the revelation. Consequently, the revelation itself cannot escape it. Indeed, Tamara Sonn, who has analyzed his methodology in a recent article, sees Rahman affirming a historicist awareness at Islam's core.[20]

Insofar as modernists are defined as people who accept history as an ultimate constraint on intellectual understanding, he accepted the designation.[21] However, Fazlur Rahman actually belongs in a distinctive group of Islamic modernists, that is, those who call for a new hermeneutical stance to be taken to the whole Islamic corpus of knowledge. This group includes such noteworthy scholars as Hasan Hanafi, Muhammad Arkoun, Muhammad al-Jabiri, 'Abd Allah al-'Arwi (Abdallah Laroui), and Abdullahi an-Na'im, all of whom consciously embrace a methodological

analysis of the means by which the Islamic corpus has been produced.[22] They argue that the system of traditional interpretation has to be reconfigured if Islam is to be intellectually viable into the next century.

Such a viewpoint was not only opposed by traditionalists, but was seen as too radical by the lay believer. For most Muslims, the modernists have the cart before the horse: Modernity should conform to Islamic jurisdictions, not the other way around.[23]

The third locus is his revision of the role of the Hadith. Where the Hadith has traditionally developed as an absolute feature of Qur'anic meaning, Rahman insisted that *ahadith* are themselves relative to the ongoing life of the community — not an objective chronicle of unchangeable norms. Once again, contextual history must be used to ascertain the validity of the Hadith. Rahman seems to have accepted that most *ahadith* arose after the fact, as Western scholars insist. But he refused to accept that they must be rejected as interpretive tools. Fazlur Rahman was thus a central figure in the rethinking of hadith, a rethinking that described the Sunnah as "the Muslim community's collective interpretation of the Prophetic example,"[24] rather than a necessarily authentic expression of Prophetic behavior. By arguing that the individual hadith could not be held to be what had been claimed for it, and introducing the further proviso that some authoritative group had to determine just how and to what extent the hadith should be applied today, he raised the fundamental question of who should determine authenticity. The issue of authority became paramount. His answer did not lean to an authoritative person. Such an emphasis continued the long-standing divide between the Sunni and Shi'i positions on community formation, since he did not adopt the role of the inspired leader or Imam in determining the true meaning of the "collective interpretation" as Shi'is would insist. At the same time, the problematique of how the correct collective interpretation is determined shifted the search for norms back to the Qur'an.

The fourth locus is his insistence that Islamic philosophy had to be rekindled as a structure of Islamic consciousness. Without the potential of philosophy to open up new avenues of interpretation, Islam would more and more resolve itself into a narrow traditionalism. He did not regard philosophy as the queen of sciences, as had been held in the West during the medieval period, but he believed that Muslims had disregarded the potentials in *falsafa* to their lasting detriment. The suspicion surrounding philosophy that arose in Islam following al-Kindi and al-Farabi forced thinkers to clothe their speculations in the language of belief, or to move away from

metaphysical arguments into the language of their respective traditions.[25] From the Sunni perspective, Sufism became the most fertile ground for these kinds of intellectual constructions. Fazlur Rahman believed that Muslim thinkers had to return to these roots in order to rescue philosophical reasoning for religious issues.[26] His views on philosophy were important, because he held that no modification in the traditional view of the Islamic corpus would be possible without developing new ways of shaping key doctrines. Indeed, his concerns in this area lead us directly to the next locus, the role of ijtihad in the modernizing effort.

Thus the fifth locus deals most specifically with the adaptations required in treatments of the Shari'ah. Almost all modern interpreters of the Qur'an have argued for a reinstatement of ijtihad. That process, once a key ingredient in the application of the generality of the law to the minutiae of human life, was slowly eliminated in the medieval period. It was fundamental to Fazlur Rahman as well, who called it intellectual jihad. Ijtihad was absolutely essential to Islamic hermeneutics because none of the conceptions we have explored are possible without the interpretation of the Qur'an's message in the light of current circumstances. Fazlur Rahman held that the absolutely basic premise of Islam was the construction of an egalitarian, ethical social order.[27] Any attempt to build such a social order is an interpretive activity, since the meanings of "ethical" and "egalitarian" are historically defined. It is "the effort to understand the meaning of a relevant text or precedent in the past, containing a rule, and to alter that rule by extending or restricting or otherwise modifying it in such a manner that a new situation can be subsumed under it by a new solution."[28] He blamed the stagnation that has characterized the Islamic world since the Middle Ages, in fact, on the limitation and eventual cessation of ijtihad:

> Most modern Muslim thinkers have laid the blame ... on the destruction of the caliphate in the mid-thirteenth century and the political disintegration of the Muslim world. But ... the spirit of Islam had become essentially static long before that; indeed, this stagnation was inherent in the bases on which Islamic law was founded. The development of theology displays the same characteristics even more dramatically than does legal thought.[29]

For although the early Muslim leaders clearly exercised independent judgment regarding how best to implement Islamic principles and achieve the Islamic goal of social justice, they failed to stress the need for continued ijtihad, much less to institutionalize it:

> There is no doubt that early scholars of Islam and leaders of the community exercised a good deal of freedom and ingenuity in interpreting the Qur'an, including the principles of ijtihad (personal reasoning) and *qiyas* (analogical reasoning from a certain text of the Qur'an and arguing on its basis to solve a new case or problem that has certain essential resemblances to the former. There was, however, no well-argued-out system of rules for these procedures, and early legal schools sometimes went too far in using this freedom. For this reason in the late eighth century c.e., al-Shafi'i successfully fought for the general acceptance of "traditions from the Prophet" as a basis of interpretation instead of ijtihad or *qiyas*. Yet the real solution lay only in understanding the Qur'anic injunctions strictly in their context and background and trying to extrapolate the principles or values that lay behind the injunctions of the Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah. But this line was never developed systematically, at least by Sunni Muslims.[30]

Extrapolating these principles, then, became his hermeneutic for contemporary Islam. Therefore, he calls for a critical assessment of the intellectual legacy of Islam, with a view to understanding how it happened to assume the form in which it has been inherited; distinguishing in the process between essential Islamic principles and their particular formulation as a result of the needs of specific, and probably now outmoded, socioeconomic and political contexts; and determining how best to apply the essential principles of Islam in contemporary circumstances. His notions of ijtihad thus tie back to his insistence on a philosophical renewal within the Islamic intelligentsia.

The seventh locus is his interpretation of contemporary Islam, particularly the fundamentalist movement. In an article titled "Roots of Islamic Neo-Fundamentalism" published in 1981,[31] he placed current Islamic beliefs into four: traditionalist-conservative, which is "interested in preserving Islam's religious and cultural heritage"; neofundamentalism, which "absolutize[s] Islamic laws contained in the Qur'an"; modernism, which promotes the belief that "the Qur'an produced certain solutions for certain problems in a certain place but [that] the responsibility of the contemporary Muslim is to get behind the letter of these laws to the spirit that animated them"; and secularism, which makes "no appeal to religion at all."[32] Since secularists were regarded as atheists, he believed their perspective to be so irrelevant for Muslims that it could be safely discarded. Traditionalist-conservatives, on the other hand, were well-intentioned but ineffective because

they were out of touch with the needs of the modern world. He contrasted them with the neofundamentalists because they regard Islamic history and tradition as "their" purview and thus took a proprietary role over its jurisdiction. They could not, however, move beyond what traditionally has been affirmed. The original fundamentalists stepped back from the message to obey God because of eternal rewards and punishments, opting instead for a narrower "obedience to God" rendered in terms of behaving properly in this world. Such obedience was inflexible because it was entirely literalist. Empirical data were ignored by these believers because they held that obeying God was something entirely beyond the reach of facts.

The neo-fundamentalists were also out of touch with the contemporary world. Still, for Fazlur Rahman, they clearly go beyond the conservatives' simple disengagement from the real world. They are far more sophisticated because they are postmodernist in thrust. Moreover, the neo-fundamentalists needed the postmodernist world in order to define their beliefs. He thus defined neofundamentalism as

> an Islamic bid to discover the original meaning of the Islamic message without historic deviations and distortions and without being encumbered by the intervening tradition, this bid being meant not only for the benefit of the Islamic community but as a challenge to the world and to the West in particular.[33]

Rahman felt the neofundamentalists actually propogated positions that were dangerous: To hope that Muslims could straighten out the problems of the world without solid intellectual effort was a dangerous mistake. While the neofundamentalists talked much about ijtihad, their treatment of Islam showed that they had done little to reinterpret any of the stale atmosphere of traditionalism. He held that they could not because they were reacting both to the modernists' agenda of imposing Western solution to Islamic problems and because they were not schooled in Islam itself. By reacting against the West and modernist within, their primary motivating power comes from negativity. By insisting on a form of Islam completely divorced from the real world of Muslims, the neofundamentalists cut themselves off from their own Islamic traditions. For Rahman, the lack of sound Islamic training among them was significant:

> There is no one among the fundamentalists that I know of — with the exception of Ayatollah Khomeini — who is a well-trained alim in the traditional sense. So far as Islamic learning is concerned, they are dilettantes: indeed, neofundamentalism is basically a function of lay-

men, many of whom are professionals — lawyers, doctors, engineers.[34]

While he accepted that these people had a right to interpret Islam, they did not have the authority to use their superior economic and social position to sway people to their views. They did not have the traditional sciences available to them and hence could not make claims based on Islamic prerogatives. This was a misplacing of Muslim purpose.

The eighth interpretive locus is more prescriptive, in that he urged Muslims to approach the Qur'an with the view to making it relevant for all people, not just for Muslims. He was advocating a particular mission for Muslims today, that is, the task of bringing the Qur'an to the diverse world today in a fresh and invigorating manner. This concern was born out of his conviction that Muslim validity cannot rest upon material aggrandizement or humanist development, both of which are firmly fixed in orbits outside Muslim jurisdiction, but in the most spectacular asset Islam has: the Book of God. That the Qur'an seemed to have little impact beyond the piety of believers was tragic for Rahman. He held that all dimensions of modern life and all nations should be challenged by its message.

If it was not serving this purpose, there can only be one group responsible: Muslims themselves. Hence his activism for a renewed Qur'anic vision that would appeal to the contemporary rational/scientific environment — attracting the non-Muslim intelligentsia to Islam.

Islamic Studies and the Future of Islam in America

Despite the significance of Fazlur Rahman as a prime mover in this century's Islamic modernist response, the rise of the religious right has altered the intellectual agenda. For many Western scholars, the focal point of Islamic studies is already skewed away from the study of Islam qua religion to Islam qua contemporary political movement. The trend is evident in the selection of issues to research, as, for example, how first century Islam handled its political conflicts.[35] Were this trend to continue, it could move Islamic scholarship far beyond the confines of a renewed Qur'anic mandate, the chief concern of Fazlur Rahman. Unfortunately, the claims of the scripturalists, like the Ahl al-Qur'an,[36] are very much compatible with fundamentalist attitudes in Christianity and elsewhere and pose severe problems for his Qur'anic focus. No new "theology" of the Qur'an has appeared

as the ground for community construction. There is little impetus within the Muslim world to develop such theology since Muslims themselves have not widely rejected the Sunnah, a course of action urged by those convinced of its alleged weaknesses and a necessary ingredient if Muslims are to be thrown back on the Qur'an as a means to defining themselves.[37] Those who would look to Islam in America for the development of this alternative will be disappointed: American Islam espouses the same positions found throughout the Muslim world, despite its freedom to experiment. Among American Muslims, with their greater potential for diversity, the trend is conformity to the traditionalist position, if the organization of Warith Din Muhammad can be taken as representative.[38]

Scholarship on Islam in America is still very much tied to the traditional issues that have exercised Islam since the advent of modernization: women's issues, conflicts with mainstream society, and preservation of the community. For example, there is little interest in how Muslims are writing about themselves in novels, poems and short stories, that is, in writing themselves into existence in America.[39]

At the same time, far greater diversity exists among scholars of Islam today than he might have appreciated. In addition to the natural differences arising out of community history and sectarianism, the study of Islam in the larger sense itself may also contribute to this diversity. For example, it may be true to say that in general among scholars the old notions of comparative religion have passed into oblivion, and the tendency to reduce each religion to certain discrete (usually theological) ingredients is now happily abandoned; still, the notion lingers on that Islam operates in ways scarcely amenable to Western religious analysis. Thus some scholars neglect what Muslims say about their own tradition because they assume Muslims only extricate meaning compatible with Muslim faith, as if the scholars themselves have no need to listen to those claims. The Orientalist tradition may now have become much more subtle, with both Muslim and Western scholars involved in the process. At least one thing seems clear: The future of Islam in America, at least, will make the traditional Orientalist stance almost impossible to maintain.

Beyond the Fazlur Rahman corpus, however, we see another issue being debated: At what point in any reading of an Islamic phenomenon is a full-blown religious perspective needed for proper explanation? Once that issue is broached, future debates will swirl around not whether Islamic views should be heeded, but just how much, what type, and from which Islamic

discourse. Scholarship on Islam in America, then, may lift the issues above sectarianism toward a position beyond the configuations of Islamic groups themselves without denying the essentially Muslim nature of the analysis. In this, the contributions of Muslim scholars will be necessary.

Much of Islamic thought and debate over the last century has focussed upon Qur'an and Hadith; Fazlur Rahman was an exemplar of this emphasis. There is in this approach more than a return to the roots of Islam — more than an affirmation of foundations. There is the assumption that "origins" define meaning. Yet most would acknowledge that origins are obscure. This problem is a fate experienced by all religions. Being forced to validate traditions by confirming the "facts" at the beginning, subjects religions to criteria that apply to little else in our cultures and deny the importance of change in religious conceptions. When, at some time in the future, Islam is recognized fully for its distinctive gifts to world culture, it may be possible to leave aside the more contentious deliberations of this search into the "true origins" of Muslim identity, and agree that Islam provides certain fundamental religious characteristics to societies in its own distinctive style. At that point, we may then see a scholarship that searches for the commonalities and tensions within Western religious history that spawned three contrasting spiritual visions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Scholarship will then undoubtedly be more complicated, but hopefully more legitimate. The fact of an American Islam makes that proposal much more necessary.

Finally, American Islam itself will doubtless influence that future through the peculiar impact that racial tensions have had on the growth of indigenous Islam in the United States. If in the next century, as expected, Islam becomes the second largest religion in North America, the very examination of the road to that position will modify understandings about the nature of religion in the hemisphere. That will, in turn, have an impact on law, government, social conceptions, and religious sentiment. Scholarship will have to shift considerably to accommodate the new reality within its understanding. Fazlur Rahman's views will certainly be part of that scholarship.

Notes

1. See Earle H. Waugh, Baha Abu-Laban, and Regula B. Qureshi (ed.), *The Muslim Community in North America* (Edmonton, Alberta: The University of Alberta Press, 1983); Earle H. Waugh, Sharon McIrvin Abu-Laban, and Regula Burckhardt Qureshi (ed.), *Muslim Families in North America* (Edmonton, Alberta: The University of Alberta Press, 1991); Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Byron Haines, and Ellison Findly (ed.), *The*

Islamic Impact (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984); Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Adair T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (ed.), *Muslim Communities in North America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Shahid Athar, *Reflections of an American Muslim* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1994); Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

2. Earle H. Waugh and Frederick M. Denny (ed.), *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahman* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1998).

3. Fazlur Rahman was born in the Pakistan section of predivided India in 1919. Most of his Islamic learning came from his father, who was a graduate of Deoband Seminary in northern India. He completed an M.A. at Punjab University in 1942 and a Ph.D. from Oxford University in 1949. He died in Chicago in 1988.

4. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). For a scholarly critique of his views, see Fred Matthews, "The Attack on Historicism: Allan Bloom's Indictment of Contemporary Historical Scholarship," *Amercan Historical Review* 95, no. 2 (April, 1990): 429–447.

5. Surely it cannot be merely the desire to turn over old bones that leads the former dean of America's top-ranked school for the study of religion, The Divinity School at the University of Chicago to ask, "Should a University Include Theology?" *Criterion* 16, no. 5 (Autumn, 1997): 18–27. Fazlur Rahman would have been mystified by such a question, since Islam would just assume that central academic configuratons of religious heritage should be part of a great intellectual environment.

6. The most elegant expression of this issue is found in the massive, ground-breaking study of fundamentalism, *Fundamentalisms Observed. The Fundamentalism Project, Vol.*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and the subsequent 4 volumes published between 1993 and 1995 by the same press. See my review of the whole project in "Fundamentalism: Harbringer of Academic Revisionism?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 1 (1997): 161–168.

7. For an overview of America's 1960s religious life, see Robert S. Ellwood, *Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religious Movements from Modernism to Post-Modernism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994). For a critical analysis of Mircea Eliade, see Roger Corless, "After Eliade, What?" *Religion* 23 (1993): 373–377; Bryan Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996). A recent summary of theoretical issues is *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of Social Sciences for the Study of Religion*, Thomas Idinopulous and Edward A. Yonan (eds.), *Studies in the History of Religions* (Numen Book Series) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994); and Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956). Tillich's thought, somewhat neglected for a period, may be making a comeback; see, for example, Michel Dion, "La theologie/philosophie feministe de Mary Daly et le socialisme religieux de Paul Tillich," *Studies in Religion* 25, no. 4 (1996): 379–396.

8. Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (New York, Doubleday, 1955), 294.

9. For example, Susan Walker (ed.), *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way*, (Boulder, Colo.: Naropa Institute, 1987); Mary Pat Fisher (ed.) *Loving God: The Practical Teachings of Baba Virsa Singh* (New Delhi: Gobind Sada Institute for Advanced Studies in Comparative Religion, 1995). Swami Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India* (Hollywood, Calif.: Vedanta Press, 1979).

10. The issues discussed below are given greater treatment in my article "Beyond Scylla and Kharybdis: The Discourses of Islamic Identity in Fazlur Rahman" in Waugh and Denny (ed.), *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse.*

11. *Islam and Modernity*, 9.

12. H.G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1965), trans. as *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 171.

13. Ibid., 236.
14. Ibid.,149.
15. Louis Massignon mentions this notion in his article, "The Idea of the Spirit in Islam," *The Mystic Vision: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks,* ed. by Joseph Campbell, *Bollingen Series* 30, Vol. 6 (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1968), 319–323, where he says: "They (early Muslims) hoped to recapture the initial divine breath which had first dictated the sacred text by means of this insinuating, persuasive collective declamation which pierces the heart" (p. 320).
16. It was known to al-Shafi'i, for example. See Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi'i, *Kitab al-umm,* Vol. 7 (Cairo), 250, but was ultimately rejected by his school.
17. For background to the issue, see Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43ff.
18. See the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Collapse of Islamic Fundamentalism Seen," March 31, 1979.
19. See his treatment in *Islamic Methodology in History* (Karachi: Central Institute of Islamic Research, 1965).
20. See Tamara Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman's Islamic Methodology," *Muslim World* 81, nos. 3–4 (1991): 212–230.
21. Scholars such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), and Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) have the term "modernists" applied to them because they call for the application of Islamic principles to new or changed circumstances. They arrive at these principles on other grounds, however, than Fazlur Rahman's source analysis.
22. See, e.g., 'Abd Allah al-'Arwi, *Al-'arab wa al-fikr al-tarikhi* (Beirut: Dar al-Haqiqa, 1973); and *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), translated from the French by Diarmid Cammell; and Abdallah Laroui, *La crise des intellectuels arabes: traditionalisme ou historicisme?* (Paris: Librairie Francois Maspero, 1974). See also Mohammed Arkoun, *La pensee arabe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), translated from the French by Adil al-'Awwa; Muhammad Arkun, *Al-fikr al-'arabi* (Beirut: Manshurat Uwaydat, 1983); Mohammed Arkoun and Louis Gardet, *L'islam: Hier-Demain* (Paris: Editions Buchet/Chastel, 1978), translated from the French by Ali al-Muqallid; Muhammad Arkun and Louis Gardet, *Al-islam: al-ams wa al-ghad* (Beirut: Dar al-Tanwir, 1983); Hasan Hanafi, *Les methodes d'exegese: Essai sur la science de fondements de la comprehension. 'Ilm usul al-fiqh* (Cairo: Conseil Superieur des Arts, des Lettres et des Sciences Sociales, 1965); and *Al-turath wa al-tajdid: mawqifuna min al-turath al-qadim* (Beirut: Dar al-Tanwir, 1981).
23. Imam Khomeini is a prime example of a cleric who espoused this viewpoint, but Sayyid Qutb and other conservatives take the same approach. For Ruhollah Khomeini's views see his *Vilayat-i faqi* (Teheran, 1979), in English as *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, Hamid Algar (trans.) (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 233–235.
24. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition,* 102.
25. A good example of this is found in Paul Walker's fine study of al-Sijistani, *Early Philosophical Shiism: The Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abu Yàqub al-Sijistani* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially 25–45.
26. His clearest published statement of this is found in *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), but is also approached from a different angle in "Islam: Legacy and Contemporary Challenge," in *Islam in the Contemporary World*, edited by C.K. Pullapilly (Atlanta, Georgia: Cross Roads Books, 1980), 403–415.
27. See *Major Themes*, 38.
28. *Islam and Modernity*, 7–8.
29. Ibid., 26.
30. Ibid.,18.
31. Fazlur Rahman, "Roots of Islamic Neo-Fundamentalism," in *Change and the Muslim World*, edited by Philip H. Stoddard, David C. Cuthell, and Margaret W. Sullivan (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981), 23–35.

32. *The Sun-Times* article, "Collapse of Islamic Fundamentalism Seen" has slightly different categories, namely, secularism, modernism, traditionalism, and neo-fundamentalism. His shift to neofundamentalism appears to rest upon his belief that the reformist tradition, what he calls "Islamic Positivism," was an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century phenomenon. See "Roots," 25.

33. "Roots," 33.

34. Ibid., 34.

35. See, for example, Wilfred Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), where the roots of Islamic authority are compared to Christianity: "In a wider historical perspective, Islam was now taken over by the state. Just as three centuries earlier Roman-Byzantine despotism had appropriated Christianity, strangled its pacifist religious core, and turned it into a tool of imperial domination and repression, so it now appropriated Islam, strangling its spirit of religious brotherhood and community and using it as an instrument of repressive social control, exploitation, and military terrorization" (p. 327).

36. Founded upon the work of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Aligarh, 1297 A.H.).

37. Brown makes this point at the conclusion of his study, *Rethinking Tradition*, 140–141.

38. See Kambiz Ghanea Bassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States: A Study of Los Angeles* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), 159–166, for a succinct overview.

39. A fact brought home to me when researching "Hijra to the Wilderness: The Growth of a Muslim Literary Tradition in Canada," presented at the conference Islam and English at Kuala Lampur, Malyasia, December 1996.