

Mapping Reformist Trajectories in Modern Islamic Thought

Fazlur Rahman's Islamic Modernism: A Historiographical Analysis of His Intellectual Legacy (1919–1988)

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a historiographical analysis of Fazlur Rahman's intellectual legacy, situating him as a foundational figure in 20th-century Islamic modernism. Bridging classical Islamic scholarship and modern Western philosophical inquiry, Rahman advanced a reformist hermeneutic that foregrounded contextual and ethical readings of Islamic texts. The study traces the development of Rahman's thought across distinct phases—from his early focus on classical philosophy to his mature advocacy of a neo-modernist, normative approach to Islamic theology. Central to Rahman's methodology is the "Double Movement Theory," which emphasizes the dialectic between historical context and contemporary relevance in interpreting the Quran. Through a comprehensive review of primary and secondary literature, this paper maps the evolving academic reception of Rahman's work, highlighting his influence on Islamic studies, educational reform, political thought, and contemporary hermeneutics. While acknowledging critiques regarding his limited engagement with comparative religion, the paper underscores Rahman's enduring relevance in shaping modern Islamic thought and its intersections with global discourses on religion, identity, and modernity.

KEYWORDS:

Fazlur Rahman; Islamic Modernism; Quranic Hermeneutics; Islamic Reform; Modern Islamic Thought.

ترسيم خرائط الإصلاح في الفكر الإسلامي المعاصر الحداثة الإسلامية عند فضل الرحمن: قراءة تأريخية في إرثه الفكري (1919-1988)



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الملخص:

تقدم هذه المقالة تحليلاً استعراضياً لميراث فضل الرحمن الفكري، من خلال وضعه في سياقه بوصفه أحد الأعلام المؤسسين للحداثة الإسلامية في القرن العشرين. فقد سعى رحمان إلى بناء جسر بين التراث العلمي الإسلامي الكلاسيكي والفلسفات الغربية المعاصرة، مطوياً منهجاً إصلاحياً في التأويل يركز على القراءة السياقية والأخلاقية للنصوص الإسلامية. ويتتبع البحث المراحل المختلفة لتطور فكره: من انشغاله المبكر بالفلسفة الإسلامية الكلاسيكية إلى بلورته اللاحقة لمشروع ما بعد حداثي "يقوم على بناء منهج معياري في علم الكلام".

ويعد "مبدأ الحركة المزدوجة" محورياً أساساً في منهجيته، إذ يربط بين فهم السياق التاريخي للنص واستحضار دلالاته في الواقع المعاصر. ومن خلال مراجعة شاملة للأدبيات الأولية والثانوية، يرسم البحث خريطة لتطور استقبال أعماله في الحقل الأكاديمي، مبرزاً تأثيره في الدراسات الإسلامية، وإصلاح التعليم، والفكر السياسي، ومناهج التأويل الحديثة. وإذ يقرر البحث بوجود نقد وجهه إلى الرحمن، خاصة ما يتعلق بضعف انخراطه في الدراسات المقارنة للأديان، فإنه يؤكد في الوقت نفسه على راهنية مشروعه وأثره المستمر في تشكيل الفكر الإسلامي الحديث، وفي تفاعله مع النقاشات العالمية حول الدين والهوية والحداثة.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

فضل الرحمن؛ الحداثة الإسلامية؛ التأويل القرآني؛ الإصلاح الإسلامي؛ الفكر الإسلامي الحديث.

I. INTRODUCTION¹

Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) stands as a pivotal figure in the modern discourse on Islamic thought, particularly in the context of the challenges posed by modernity. Emerging from an era when Muslim intellectuals began critically engaging with Western ideologies, Rahman's contributions sought to bridge the often-divergent worlds of traditional Islamic scholarship and contemporary philosophical inquiry. His work emphasized a nuanced understanding of Islamic principles, advocating for a contextual interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah that resonates with modern societal needs.

By integrating his extensive knowledge of Islamic tradition with insights from Western thought, Rahman sought to redefine the contours of Islamic scholarship, making it relevant in an increasingly globalized world. This historiographical exploration traces the evolution of Rahman's ideas and their impact on Islamic studies, highlighting his significance as a modernist thinker who championed educational reform, independent reasoning, and a dynamic approach to interpreting Islamic texts.

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

Fazlur Rahman was a distinguished Islamic philosopher and liberal Muslim thinker of the 20th century. Born in 1919 into a scholarly family, he received his early education under the guidance of his father, Shihab al-Din, a graduate of Dar ul-Uloom, Deoband. By age ten, Rahman had memorized the Quran, which, alongside his father's intellectual influence, profoundly shaped his early

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education. In 1933, at the age of fourteen, he relocated to Lahore to pursue his Dars-i-Nizami degree, immersing himself in the vibrant intellectual environment influenced by Muhammad Iqbal's philosophical and political ideas. In 1938, he enrolled at Punjab University for a B.A. (Hons) in Arabic, graduating with first-class honors in 1940 and completing his master's degree in 1942. In 1946, Rahman received a scholarship to Oxford University, where he completed his doctorate on Avicenna's Psychology in 1949.²

Rahman's academic career began at Durham University (1950–1958), where he challenged Western perceptions of Islamic philosophy. In 1958, McGill University appointed Rahman as an Associate Professor at its Institute for Islamic Studies, contributing to a vision of an inclusive academic environment for Muslim and Western scholars. Rahman's tenure at McGill marked a significant shift in his academic focus from Classical to Contemporary Islam, allowing him to engage with modern issues while maintaining a strong grounding in Classical Islamic thought. In 1961, President Ayub Khan of Pakistan invited him to lead the Central Institute of Islamic Research to foster a modern Islamic state.³

Rahman's intellectual stance elicited diverse responses, particularly from Traditional Islamists who swiftly opposed his perspectives. This opposition was rooted in philosophical disagreements and skepticism regarding his Western educational background. The controversy surrounding Rahman's ideas permeated Pakistani mass media for approximately a year, culminating in widespread demonstrations and strikes across various regions of Pakistan in September 1968. Agustono and Zain argue that the backlash against Rahman's ideas in Pakistan was not solely rooted in theological disagreement but also reflected broader political tensions, particularly opposition to President Ayub Khan's regime. Beyond the political turbulence under Ayub Khan, traditionalist ulama leveled substantive theological objections to Rahman's project. They criticized aspects of his ijtihad-centered methodology, his emphasis on ethical objectives in law (over literalist applications), and his

² Ahad M. Ahmed, *The Theological Thought of Fazlur Rahman: A Modern Mutakallim* (Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2017), 23–26. See also: Boulaouali, Tijani, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* Fazlur Rahman, *Journal of Namaa*, Nama Center, Egypt, V 8, issue 4, 2024, 174 - 188.

³ Ibid., 27–30.

treatment of the Sunnah and Hadith within a historical and contextual framework. For these critics, Rahman's approach risked undermining established hermeneutical authorities and loosening legal continuity with the classical tradition. This view reframes the public controversy as both a reaction to Rahman's modernist interpretations and a manifestation of dissent against state authority.⁴

After leaving Pakistan in 1968, Rahman spent two decades in self-imposed exile, holding positions at UCLA and the University of Chicago. Rahman's scholarly achievements were recognized through various honors, including the Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal and the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professorship. He also contributed to the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences. He served as a consultant to the U.S. State Department and the White House, leaving a lasting legacy in Islamic studies that endured until his death in 1988.⁵

MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Scholars have offered different frameworks for periodizing Fazlur Rahman's intellectual development, each reflecting distinct interpretive priorities. Ahad M. Ahmed proposes a four-phase model based on geographic and institutional shifts: the "Initial Pakistan period," the "UK and Canada period," the "Final Pakistan period," and the "American period."⁶ This model chronologically traces Rahman's life, linking his locations to his evolving scholarly focus.⁷ In contrast, Ihwan Agustono and Naura Safira Salsabila Zain suggest a three-phase framework—formation, developmental, and maturity periods—which categorizes his work thematically based on the evolution of his thought and subject matter. While Ahmed's model is more biographical, emphasizing stages of Rahman's professional journey, Agustono and Zain focus on the intellectual character of his output across time. Presenting both models enriches the historiographical analysis but also invites further synthesis: the

⁴ Ihwan Agustono and Naura Safira Salsabila Zain, "Fazlur Rahman's Perspective on the Concept of an Islamic State in the Quran," *AL HIKMAH: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 13, no. 2 (September 2023): 67, <https://doi.org/10.36835/hjsk.v13i02.4042>.

⁵ Ahmed, *The Theological Thought of Fazlur Rahman*, 37–38.

⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁷ Juneeffa Bilal, "Academic Researches on Fazlur Rahman: An Assessment," *Analisa Journal of Social Science and Religion* 6, no. 1 (July 30, 2021): 47, <https://doi.org/10.18784/analisa.v6i01.1288>.

thematic phases largely align with Ahmed's timeline, suggesting that the two models are not contradictory but complementary lenses through which Rahman's scholarly trajectory can be understood.

The formation period spanned the 1950s and was characterized by his focus on classical Islamic philosophy, particularly through his scholarly work on Avicenna and the topic of prophecy. His publications during this time included translations and analyses of Avicenna's works, such as *Avicenna's Psychology* (1952) and *Avicenna's De Anima* (1959), as well as *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (1958), which explored the philosophical and orthodox interpretations of prophetic doctrine. The developmental period of the 1960s, marked by his return from the UK to Pakistan and his subsequent departure to the US, saw Rahman broaden his scope to include methodological and historical analyses of Islamic thought. His work, *Islamic Methodology in History* (1965), examined the historical evolution and practical application of Islamic thought. During this same period, he authored *Islam*, providing a comprehensive overview of Islam's fourteen-century development.⁸

From the 1970s until his death, the final maturity period witnessed Rahman's tenure at the University of Chicago and the production of his most normative works, including *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (1975), *Major Themes of the Quran* (1980), and *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (1982). Rahman's Works from the first period are primarily historical, while those from the second period combine historical and interpretive elements. In contrast, the third period's publications are predominantly normative. By this stage, Rahman openly identified himself as a spokesperson for neo-modernism, marking a significant shift in his engagement with Islamic thought.⁹

Rahman's significance in Islamic scholarship stems from his position as a "liberal and modernist thinker of the twentieth century." His contributions to Islamic philosophy and scholarship were substantial, characterized by revolutionary literature that has made his thought a compelling subject for academic inquiry. Recognized as "one of the most daring and original voices"

⁸ Agustono and Zain, "Fazlur Rahman's Perspective on the Concept of an Islamic State in the Quran," 68.

⁹ Ibid., 69–70.

in the discourse on “Islamic reform in the twentieth century,” Rahman's work challenged traditional interpretations. It proposed innovative approaches to understanding Islam in the modern context. His intellectual legacy continues to influence contemporary discussions on Islamic thought, underscoring the enduring relevance of his contributions to the field.¹⁰

Unlike many Muslim scholars who outright rejected Western methodologies, Fazlur Rahman engaged with them critically to develop a contextual understanding of history and truth in Islam that is resilient to Western critique. Several key aspects characterized his approach. He emphasized the depth of the Islamic intellectual tradition, highlighting its strong connections to Western thought. By personally engaging with his Western students, Rahman challenged the perception of an unbridgeable divide between Islam and the West. He employed hermeneutical methods, drawing on thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer, to reinterpret Islamic texts. While accepting Western historical evidence regarding Islam, he aimed to integrate it into a broader understanding that reconciled Islamic thought with contemporary intellectual trends. Rahman's work represented a nuanced approach to Islamic identity, avoiding outright rejection and uncritical acceptance of Western scholarship. His significant contributions spanned traditional sources, Islamic philosophy, Islamic statehood, and the modernization of Muslim law, positioning him as a pivotal figure in 20th-century Islamic discourse.¹¹

ACADEMIC RECEPTION AND EVOLVING INTERPRETATIONS

Early Academic Reception (1960s–1980s)

This historiographical trajectory reveals a gradual deepening and broadening of scholarly engagement with Rahman's work. The academic discourse evolved from initial reviews and foundational analyses to include critical evaluations, applications to contemporary issues, and examinations of his lasting impact on Islamic thought and practice in various contexts. Rahman's

¹⁰ Bilal, “Academic Researches on Fazlur Rahman,” 47.

¹¹ Earle H. Waugh, “Beyond Scylla and Kharybdis: Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Identity,” in *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahman* (Tampa: University of South Florida, 1998), 18–20.

scholarly work emphasized “educational reform and the revival of independent reasoning in Islamic thought.” Rahman's approach focused on understanding the historical processes that shaped Islam, distinguishing essential principles from contextual formations, and applying these principles to contemporary issues. His scholarly work, particularly *Islam*, garnered significant academic attention during this period. Muin-Ud-Din Ahmad Khan's review in 1967 highlighted Rahman's objective examination of Islamic teachings and the faith's historical evolution.¹²

In 1968, Ismail R. al-Faruqi's review praised the comprehensive nature of Rahman's treatment of Islamic history and thought, while critically engaging with his perspectives on modernity and the transformation of Islamic concepts.¹³ Richard M. Frank's review in 1969 noted the apologetic tone of *Islam* and Rahman's efforts to reconcile traditional Islamic beliefs with contemporary issues, emphasizing his insights into Muslims' identity crisis.¹⁴

Rahman's work began to influence many scholars in Islamic studies. In 1972, Muhammad Yousuf Guraya cited Rahman to support his argument that normativeness is a fundamental aspect of the Sunnah in his work "The Concept of Sunnah: A Historical Study." Guraya aligned his historical analysis with Rahman's conclusion that the concept of Sunnah cannot be separated from its normative implications.¹⁵ In the same year, S. D. Goitein referenced Rahman when discussing revival and reform movements in modern Islam. Goitein appreciated Rahman's critical perspective on the socio-political roles of Islamic sects, noting how Rahman's insights contributed to a nuanced understanding of contemporary Islamic scholarship.¹⁶

¹² Muin-Ud-Din Ahmad Khan, *Islamic Studies* 6, no. 4 (1967): 407–10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20832897>.

¹³ Ismail R. al-Faruqi, *The Journal of Religion* 48, no. 1 (1968): 110–11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1201909>.

¹⁴ Richard M. Frank, *The Catholic Historical Review* 55, no. 2 (1969): 269–71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25018441>.

¹⁵ Muhammad Yousuf Guraya, “The Concept of Sunnah: A Historical Study,” *Islamic Studies* 11, no. 1 (1972): 13–15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20833050>.

¹⁶ S. D. Goitein, review of *A New World History of the Islamic Peoples*, by P. M. Holt, Bernard Lewis, Ann K. S. Lambton, and Claude Cahen, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 62, no. 3 (1972): 209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1453547>.

Other scholars also engaged with Rahman's work during this period. Detlev H. Khalid's "Theocracy and The Location of Sovereignty" (1972),¹⁷ Ahmad Hasan's "Modern Trends in Ijma" (1973),¹⁸ and Nur Yalman's "Some Observations on Secularism in Islam: The Cultural Revolution in Turkey" (1973)¹⁹ all referenced Rahman's contributions to Islamic thought. This period marked a significant shift in academic attention towards Rahman's broader contributions to Islamic thought, moving beyond his earlier work on Pakistan's political structure. The growing scholarly discourse centered on Rahman's *Islam* and other works signaled his emerging influence in shaping contemporary understanding of Islamic principles and their application in modern contexts. In 1983, Mazheruddin Siddiqui's work, "Islam and Human Reason," examined the compatibility of reason and faith in Islam, echoing Rahman's own emphasis on the rational interpretation of Islamic principles.²⁰

Following Rahman's death in 1988, several tributes highlighted his significant contributions to modern Islamic thought. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Ali Raza Naqvi, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr's "In Memorium: Dr. Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988)" outlined Rahman's role in shaping contemporary interpretations of Islam.²¹ The Middle East Studies Association of North America published "In Memoriam Fazlur Rahman" by Kenan Heise, which highlights Rahman's life, scholarly work, and influence on Islamic studies, particularly his advocacy for the contextual interpretation of Islamic texts.²²

Rahman's integration of reason and revelation has profoundly shaped contemporary Islamic thought, particularly among scholars seeking to reconcile tradition with modernity. His double-movement hermeneutic (often termed the "Double Movement Theory") operationalizes this aim through a

¹⁷ Detlev H. Khalid, "Theocracy and the Location of Sovereignty," *Islamic Studies* 11, no. 3 (1972): 187–209, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20833070>.

¹⁸ Ahmad Hasan, "Modern Trends in Ijma'," *Islamic Studies* 12, no. 2 (1973): 121–53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20846877>.

¹⁹ Nur Yalman, "Some Observations on Secularism in Islam: The Cultural Revolution in Turkey," *Daedalus* 102, no. 1 (1973): 139–68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024113>.

²⁰ Mazheruddin Siddiqui, "Islam and Human Reason," *Islamic Studies* 22, no. 1 (1983): 11–22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20847227>.

²¹ Muhammad Khalid Masud, Ali Raza Naqvi, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "In Memorium: Dr. Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988)," *Islamic Studies* 27, no. 4 (1988): 390–400, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20839922>.

²² Kenan Heise, "Fazlur Rahman," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 22, no. 2 (1988): 310, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23060709>.

two-step procedure: first, the interpreter moves from a present, concrete problem to the Qur'an's original socio-historical context to discern its purposes and governing moral principles; second, those principles are brought back to the present to generate context-sensitive norms that remain faithful to the Qur'an's objectives. This method encourages balanced interpretation and underwrites efforts toward religious moderation.

Rahman's *Major Themes of the Quran* (1980) quickly became a touchstone for this approach. Patrick D. Gaffney's 1982 review in *The Journal of Religion* offered an early critical assessment of Rahman's thematic reading, noting his attempt to articulate the Qur'anic message in a register accessible to modern readers without compromising its theological integrity—an appraisal that helped frame subsequent debate over Rahman's method and legacy.²³

Reassessments and Thematic Applications (1990s–2000s)

The 1990s marked a significant shift in the academic reception of Rahman's work. Mona Abul-Fadl's 1990 chapter "The Historical Parameters Redefined" engaged with Rahman's ideas, suggesting that his emphasis on Islamic perspectives could contribute to redefining historical understandings of the Middle East.²⁴ This period also saw a more critical examination of Rahman's hermeneutical approach, as evidenced by Amhar Rasyid's 1994 thesis, which scrutinized Rahman's interpretation of Quranic legal texts.²⁵ Mary Catherine Jesse's 1991 thesis represented a foundational analysis of Rahman's work, focusing on integrating reason into Islamic thought and key concepts such as the Unity of the Quran and the Living Sunnah. This early scholarship laid the groundwork for understanding Rahman's innovative approach to Islamic studies and set the stage for more nuanced analyses in subsequent years.²⁶

As academic interest in Rahman's work grew, scholars began to apply his ideas to contemporary challenges. Basit B. Koshul's 1994 article revisited Rahman's "Islam and Modernity," examining his interpretation of Islamic

²³ Patrick D. Gaffney, *The Journal of Religion* 62, no. 1 (1982): 88–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1203392>.

²⁴ Mona Abul-Fadl, "The Historical Parameters Redefined," in *Islam and the Middle East: The Aesthetics of a Political Inquiry* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1990), 9–40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvkc67bq.5>.

²⁵ Bilal, "Academic Researches on Fazlur Rahman," 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

thought in the context of modern issues.²⁷ Ali Mabrook's 1998 work further explored Rahman's views on the interplay between Islam and modernity, particularly in post-colonial discourse in South Asia.²⁸ The impact of Rahman's thought extended beyond theoretical discourse, as evidenced by Earle H. Waugh's 1999 study on "The Legacies of Fazlur Rahman for Islam in America." This work highlighted Rahman's significance in shaping contemporary Islamic discourse and identity among American Muslims, demonstrating the practical applications of his scholarly contributions.²⁹

The late 1990s and early 2000s marked a significant diversification in the historiography of Rahman's work. Fatimah Rahman's 1997 study explored Rahman's philosophical thought.³⁰ Mohamed Shaid Mathee's 2004 work examined his concept of the "Living Sunnah," reflecting a growing interest in the nuances and implications of Rahman's ideas across various aspects of Islamic studies.³¹ This period saw scholars delving deeper into specific aspects of Rahman's intellectual contributions, moving beyond general overviews to more specialized analyses.

Donald L. Berry's 2003 book marked a pivotal moment in Rahman's scholarship, as it contextualized his thought within the broader framework of religious traditions grappling with modernity. Berry's work provided a model for diverse readers and offered valuable insights for non-Muslim audiences, suggesting how Rahman's conclusions could inform non-Islamic approaches to modernity and biblical interpretation. This cross-cultural application demonstrated the broader relevance of his work beyond Islamic studies.³²

Bernard K. Freamon's reference to Rahman's "Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition" (1982) in his work "on post-Enlightenment Quranic hermeneutics" highlighted the enduring influence of

²⁷ Basit B. Koshul, "Fazlur Rahman's 'Islam and Modernity' Revisited," *Islamic Studies* 33, no. 4 (1994): 403–17, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20840179>.

²⁸ Ali Mabrook, "من الاستعارة إلى الاستعادة: الإسلام والحداثة عند فضل الرحمن / From Borrowing to Retrieving: Fazlur Rahman's Islam and Modernity," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 18 (1998): 157–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/521902>.

²⁹ Earle H. Waugh, "The Legacies of Fazlur Rahman for Islam in America," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1999): 27–44, <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v16i3.2116>.

³⁰ Bilal, "Academic Researches on Fazlur Rahman," 52.

³¹ Ibid., 52.

³² Donald L. Berry, *Islam and Modernity Through the Writings of Islamic Modernist Fazlur Rahman* (Boiling Springs, NC: Gardner-Webb University, 2003), <https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/fbg/8/>.

Rahman's emphasis on scholarship in addressing contemporary issues within the Islamic tradition. This engagement with Rahman's ideas in the context of hermeneutics and education underscored the continued relevance of his work in shaping Islamic discourse.³³

Safet Bektovic's 2016 study, "Towards a neo-modernist Islam: Fazlur Rahman and the Rethinking of Islamic Tradition and Modernity," further cemented Rahman's position as a foundational figure in Islamic reform discourse. Bektovic's exploration of Rahman's contributions to hermeneutics, contextual Quranic interpretation, and critiques of traditionalist approaches demonstrated the ongoing relevance of his ideas in contemporary discussions about Islam and modernity.³⁴

Contemporary Engagements (2010s–2020s)

More recent scholarships have sought to contextualize Rahman's reformist ideas within contemporary challenges. Katharina Voelker's 2017 thesis and Ali Akbar's 2020 work exemplify this trend, highlighting Rahman's continued relevance in modern discussions on Islamic thought. Voelker's comparative study of "Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Arkoun, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd" offered valuable insights into Rahman's distinct approach, particularly his more traditional acceptance of the Quran's infallibility and divine nature, as well as his optimism regarding its direct applicability to modern challenges. His optimism regarding the Quran's direct applicability to modern challenges and support for state-led Islamic education set him apart from his contemporaries who favor more secular approaches.³⁵

Recent scholarship underscores Rahman's pivotal role in modernizing Islamic theology. In 2017, Ahad M. Ahmed utilized Rahman's theological framework to explore contemporary Islamic thought, positioning Rahman as a central figure in this modernization process. Ahmed's analysis focused on Rahman's contributions to kalam (Islamic theology), the concept of God, and

³³ Bernard Kenneth Freamon, "Some Reflections on Post-Enlightenment Quranic Hermeneutics," *Michigan State Law Review* (2006), Seton Hall Public Law Research Paper No. 1107032, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1107032>.

³⁴ Safet Bektovic, "Towards a Neo-modernist Islam," *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology* 70, no. 2 (July 2, 2016): 160–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338x.2016.1253260>.

³⁵ Katharina Voelker, *Quran and Reform: Rahman, Arkoun, Abu Zayd* (University of Otago, 2017), 179–80, <https://ourarchive.otago.ac.nz/handle/10523/2245>.

the concept of prophethood. He emphasized his contextualist approach to the Quran and his ethical worldview, which aligned with themes of liberation theology.³⁶ Navin G. Haider Ali's 2018 work, "Concept of Shura in Fazlur Rahman's Political Ideas at Practical Level," explored the concept of Shura (consultation) in Islamic political thought through Rahman's ideas. Ali examined how this concept evolved in response to Pakistan's socio-political conditions in the 1960s, using Rahman's critiques of both traditionalists and modernists to argue for adapting Islamic principles to modern democratic values. Ali contrasted Rahman's views with those of other thinkers, such as Maududi, particularly regarding community representation in governance, and emphasized the importance of social justice and ethical governance in shaping an Islamic state.³⁷

In 2019, Ali challenged the notion of Rahman's alignment with elitist perspectives within Islamic resurgence, instead emphasizing his advocacy for democracy and the people's right to rule. Ali highlighted Rahman's belief in Shura as a political institution, arguing that Rahman interpreted Quranic principles as supporting a participatory approach to governance. This analysis positioned Rahman as a proponent of democratic values within the Islamic context, countering conservative thinkers who distrusted the general populace's capabilities.³⁸ Ali Akbar's 2020 work comprehensively examined Rahman's impact on modern Islamic scholarship. Akbar emphasized how Rahman's innovative "hermeneutical approach" to the Quran has inspired various Muslim scholars, including Abdolkarim Soroush, Arash Naraqi, Abdullah Saeed, and Amina Wadud. Rahman's emphasis on the historical context of revelation and the ethical foundations of the Quran has been instrumental in shaping new interpretations that address contemporary issues, particularly in feminist exegesis and Islamic liberation theology.³⁹

³⁶ Ahmed, *The Theological Thought of Fazlur Rahman*, 12.

³⁷ Navin G. Haider Ali, "Concept of Shūra in Fazlur Rahman's Political Ideas at Practical Level," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 8, no. 2 (December 1, 2018): 110–26, <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.82.07>.

³⁸ Navin G. Haider, "Islamic Resurgence and Fazlur Rahman's Case for Democracy," *Islamic Studies* 58, no. 3 (2019): 423–38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26899431>.

³⁹ Ali Akbar, "Fazlur Rahman's Influence on Contemporary Islamic Thought," *The Muslim World* 110, no. 2 (June 1, 2020): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12334>.

In the past five years (2020–2024), scholars have continued to engage with Rahman's ideas, exploring their relevance to contemporary Islamic discourse. Humaira Ahmad's 2023 study examined “neo-modern and postmodern Quranic interpretations,”⁴⁰ utilizing Rahman's hermeneutical framework to address modern issues in Islamic thought. Juneefa Bilal's 2021 work comprehensively assessed academic research surrounding Rahman, underscoring his significant influence on Islamic studies.⁴¹ Muhammad Yusuf, Nahdhiyah, and Anwar Sadat (2021) focused on Rahman's "Double Movement Theory,” discussing its relevance for interpreting texts in relation to contemporary socio-historical contexts and its potential contribution to religious moderation.⁴²

LEGACY, INFLUENCE, AND METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Influence on North American Islamic Studies

Fazlur Rahman's contributions to Islamic Studies in North America were multifaceted and transformative, as highlighted by Donald L. Berry. Rahman's unique intellectual background, combining “Sunni Islamic traditionalism, progressive Islamic modernism, and Western scholasticism,” allowed him to offer nuanced insights into Islamic thought. His courage in challenging both traditional Islamic attitudes and Western interpretations of Islam set him apart as a transformative scholar, willing to critique orthodox views despite facing significant controversy. Rahman developed an interdisciplinary methodology that demanded a holistic, multi-dimensional approach to studying Islam, encouraging students to examine Islamic contexts through various lenses. His gentle demeanor and intellectual prowess enhanced the receptivity of his work, helping to dispel preconceived notions about Muslim scholars. Perhaps most significantly, Rahman's enduring legacy is evident in his academic descendants, who continue to shape Islamic Studies across North American

⁴⁰ Humaira Ahmad, “Mapping Neo-Modern and Postmodern Qur’ānic Reformist Discourse in the Intellectual Legacy of Fazlur Rahman and Mohammed Arkoun,” *Religions* 14, no. 5 (May 1, 2023): 595, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050595>.

⁴¹ Bilal, “Academic Researches on Fazlur Rahman,” 52.

⁴² Muhammad Yusuf, Nahdhiyah Nahdhiyah, and Anwar Sadat, “Fazlur Rahman’s Double Movement and Its Contribution to the Development of Religious Moderation,” *IJISH (International Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities)* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 51, <https://doi.org/10.26555/ijish.v4i1.2667>.

institutions, bridging traditional and modern understandings of Islamic thought.⁴³

Critical Reflections from Religious Studies

However, Rahman's work is criticized for not fully integrating Islamic studies with comparative religious studies. Richard C. Martin, in his appraisal, notes that Rahman's scholarship often remained confined within the boundaries of Islamic studies, lacking the necessary dialogue with other religious traditions to establish a more unified field of religious studies. Despite these critiques, Rahman's legacy continues to exert significant influence through the enduring relevance of his texts in academic curricula and his impact on subsequent generations of scholars. His unique approach to interpreting Islamic texts distinguished him from many Orientalists. He engaged deeply with theoretical and hermeneutical issues in interpreting religious texts, addressing these concerns more comprehensively than most scholars in Islamic studies. This nuanced understanding of Islam has inspired many to explore the complexities of religious identity in contemporary contexts.⁴⁴

Martin's "critical assessment" of "Rahman's contribution to Religious Studies" begins with acknowledging his limited personal interaction with the scholar despite his deep respect for Fazlur Rahman. While recognizing his significant contributions to Islamic Studies, Martin presents a nuanced critique of Rahman's impact on the broader field of Religious Studies. He argues that Rahman's focus was primarily on interpreting Islam for the modern world and understanding Islam in light of modernity rather than religion as a broader study category. This specialized approach, while valuable, did not significantly contribute to the theoretical foundations of Religious Studies as a discipline. Although Rahman's work undoubtedly enriched the field of Islamic Studies, Martin suggests that it did not directly address the comparative and theoretical aspects central to the Study of Religion. Martin posits that Religious Studies could have benefited from Rahman's philosophical acumen and clear thinking to establish theoretical connections between various religions and the concept

⁴³ Donald L. Berry, "Dr. Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988): A Life in Review," in *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahman*, 40–42.

⁴⁴ Richard C. Martin, "Fazlur Rahman's Contribution to Religious Studies: A Historian of Religion's Appraisal," in *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahman*, 246–47.

of religion itself. However, he notes that Rahman's intellectual environment, shaped by a focus on specialized disciplines, may have hindered his engagement with these broader theoretical questions.⁴⁵

Over time, Rahman's writings have addressed the complexities of religious identity in a non-religious world, appealing to Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. His personal struggle with identity, particularly as a Muslim intellectual in the West, has resonated with many as he navigated the challenges of establishing his identity after moving from South Asia to Great Britain. This dual perspective has made his work relevant, bridging the gap between Islamic thought and Western academic discourse. Although framed in an Islamic idiom, Rahman's methodology was deeply influenced by Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which emphasized the role of context in shaping meaning. This philosophical underpinning of his work, articulated on non-sacred intellectual grounds, has made his theoretical position open to productive scholarly debate.⁴⁶

Philosophical Methodology and Hermeneutics

Rahman distinguished himself from postmodern scholars by advocating for a holistic rereading of the Quran, emphasizing the recoverability of meanings intended in language, which he believed were essential to understanding religious texts. His methodology, particularly his hermeneutical principles, has influenced subsequent scholarship. Tamara Sonn, for instance, has explored how Rahman's hermeneutical principles can be applied to Islamic feminism. Rahman emphasized the importance of interpretation (hermeneutics) in understanding religious texts. He argued that religious texts, including the Quran, require contextual and critical analysis to reveal their deeper meanings. His methodology aimed to reconcile traditional Islamic interpretations with modern philosophical inquiry, demonstrating how Islamic teachings remain relevant in contemporary discourse. One of Rahman's significant contributions lies in his exploration of Islam's role in the modern world. He articulated the need for Muslims to engage critically with modernity while remaining true to their religious identity. *Islam and Modernity*, among his seminal works,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 248-49.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 245, 247-48.

challenges both Muslims and non-Muslims to reconsider Islam's relationship with contemporary society.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that Fazlur Rahman's intellectual legacy has not only endured but also expanded across diverse academic contexts. Since the early 1990s, his hermeneutical approach has become a focal point of debate—especially around the integration of reason in Islamic thought and the operational roles of the Quran and the Sunnah—underscoring the continuing relevance of his method in contemporary discourse. Equally significant is Rahman's capacity to translate between Islamic and Western intellectual vocabularies, a contribution that reshaped Islamic and Religious Studies in North America and made complex concepts accessible to broader audiences.

The historiography mapped here clarifies the internal logic of Rahman's development. Read together, Ahmed's four-phase model and Agustono-Zain's three-phase scheme converge on a common arc: from early work on classical philosophy and prophecy to a mature, neo-modernist, normatively oriented project. Key hinge texts—*Islamic Methodology in History*, *Major Themes of the Quran*, and *Islam and Modernity*—anchor this trajectory and crystallize the “double movement”: moving from present problems to the Quran's historical horizon to recover purposes and principles, then back to the present to derive context-sensitive norms faithful to scripture.

Reception patterns further illuminate the scope of his influence. Early assessments (1960s–1980s) tested the coherence and reach of his proposals, with Gaffney's 1982 review framing later debate about thematic interpretation. In the 1990s–2000s, scholarship diversified—reassessing method, situating Rahman within post-colonial and hermeneutical discussions, and demonstrating practical uptake in North American contexts. Since the 2010s, studies have extended his framework to new problem-fields (e.g., democratic theory, feminist exegesis, pedagogy, and religious moderation) and traced lines of influence on thinkers across the Muslim intellectual landscape. Together,

⁴⁷ Tamara Sonn, “Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Feminism,” in *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahman*, 123.

these waves of engagement corroborate both the durability and adaptability of Rahman's approach.

At the same time, critiques from Religious Studies highlight a productive horizon for future work: Rahman's project, though methodologically rich, rarely engaged comparative religion as such. Addressing this gap would involve testing the portability of double movement in explicitly comparative settings and in domain-specific case studies (such as law, finance, and bioethics), while continuing to refine its philosophical underpinnings. Pursued along these lines, Rahman's legacy remains less a closed chapter than a research program—one that equips scholars to negotiate continuity and change with intellectual rigor and ethical clarity, and to articulate a modern view of Islamic understanding grounded in the Quran and the Sunnah.

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