

THE FORMATION AND SOURCES OF FAZLUR RAHMAN'S MORAL THOUGHT*

MUHAMMAD SYAFIQ BORHANNUDDIN**

ABSTRACT

This article examines the formation and sources of the moral thought of the renowned and controversial 20th-century scholar Fazlur Rahman (1911-1988)—who held the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor of Islamic Thought at the University of Chicago until his passing—which hitherto has not been scrutinized. Drawing from published and unpublished materials from various sources, including the Fazlur Rahman Collection at the library of ISTAC Malaysia, as well as accounts from his former students and contemporaries, this article finds that the emphasis on ethics in Fazlur Rahman's works appears to be due to certain peculiar features in his intellectual journey. These features include his exposure to Western philosophical methods and epistemic framework leading to his acute skepticism early on in his career, inner dialectics and tensions dealing with conflicting postures of traditionalists or conservatives, and the reformists or modernists, as well as his encounters with secular thought and ideas. The various ethical concerns and arguments on ethics in the life and career of Fazlur Rahman are also presented for the first time with further scrutiny. It is found that Fazlur Rahman was inclined towards the views—and to some extent draws from—Ibn Taymiyyah, Shāh Walī Allāh, Ahmad Sirhindi, and Muhammad Iqbal but based on his method in light of the Qur'an. Moreover, an examination of his life and career reveals that unlike many of his contemporary Western counterparts, he did not merely theorize or philosophize about ethics but strove to live according to it. Thus, this indicates that the formation of his moral thought was not influenced by secularization as a philosophical program and that he was actively attempting to contradict what he perceived to be the shortcomings of the secularized outlook.

Keywords: Fazlur Rahman, Islam in Modernity, Islamic Ethics, Muslim Moral Thought

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** Fellow, Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) • syafiq@ikim.gov.my

The field of Islamic ethics in contemporary Muslim scholarship has seen a departure from the traditional concerns of the individual's purification of the soul and cultivation of virtues as expressed in the literature of Sufism (*tasawwuf*) and in the literature of philosophical ethics (*ilm al-akhlaq*) towards a more social and public concern. While the departure does not totally abandon these traditional individual or character perfection concerns, it places a heavy emphasis on rearticulating the ideas of social ethics and socio-economic justice in Islam which was traditionally the purview of *fiqh*. This article argues that Fazlur Rahman's expositions on Islamic ethics and his moral thought as a whole represent one example of this modern departure which is one of the reasons for the common association of Fazlur Rahman with the 'Muslim modernist' strand by various commentators. To better understand the implications of such a departure and whether such a departure is justified at all, it is instructive to examine the thoughts and sources of one of its representatives – particularly with the intention to understand the motivations or motive for such expositions before performing a thorough evaluation of such efforts. This is necessary as many contentious ethical issues in contemporary Muslim thought continue to emerge, with a number of them claiming inspiration from the expositions of Fazlur Rahman.¹

While there have been past studies that examine the life and works of Fazlur Rahman such as Fredrik Matheson Denny², Alparslan Acikgenc³, Mary Catherine Jesse⁴, and Navin Ghulam Haider Ali⁵, these studies did not attempt to contextualize Fazlur Rahman's biography vis-à-vis his key discussions on ethics in his broader milieu. This article shall thus attempt to answer the following questions: (i) What were the factors that could have shaped his own awareness of ethical questions and formed his moral thought? (ii) At which stage of his scholarly career did Fazlur Rahman begin to pay attention to ethical questions? And (iii) how consistent was Fazlur Rahman in his discussions on certain aspects of ethics? In order to effectively investigate how the question of ethics featured in the various phases of Fazlur Rahman's life, this article will revisit his autobiography, biographies, and relevant accounts of others as well

1 For a survey of those deriving inspiration from Fazlur Rahman, see Akbar, A. (2020), "Fazlur Rahman's Influence on Contemporary Islamic Thought", *The Muslim World*, 110: 129-153.

2 Fredrik Mathewson Denny, "Legacy of Fazlur Rahman" in *The Muslims of America*, (ed.) Y.Y. Haddad, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 96-108.

3 Alparslan Acikgenc, op. cit., 239.

4 Mary Catherine Jesse, *A Modern Muslim Intellectual: The Thought of Fazlur Rahman with Special Reference to Reason*, A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for the Masters of Arts in Religious Studies, University of Regina, 1991 (unpublished), 1-27.

5 Navin Ghulam Haider Ali, *Fazlur Rahman: A Muslim Modernist with a Difference: A Survey of Evolution in His Thought* (University of Karachi, 2014).

as the intellectual and historical contexts, as it gives the study more room to connect his ideas even when specific autobiographical and biographical information is not available.

I. THE FORMATIVE YEARS IN PAKISTAN (1919-1933-1946 – THE FIRST 27 YEARS): THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF HIS MORAL THOUGHT AND THOUGHTS ON ETHICS IN ISLAM

The formative years of Fazlur Rahman can be considered between the period of 1919 to 1945 (the first 26 years of his life), the years when he lived in Punjab and Lahore during the British colonial period (or British India) right up to the years of the death of the renowned Muslim figure of the Indian subcontinent—Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938)—which occurred when he was 19 years old; to the Partition of India and the founding of Pakistan in 1947 which occurred when he was 28 years old. While it is not certain how the event of the Partition of India affected his moral consciousness, it is reported once that he alluded to the event in relation to his personal life when he related to a former student Frederick Denny, that his translation of Ignaz Goldziher's *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*⁶ into English was lost in the confusion of India's partition in 1947.⁷ It must be noted that when the Partition had occurred, Fazlur Rahman had already been at the University of Oxford a year earlier and thus did not witness the chaos firsthand, though it is likely that his parents (and other family members) were there and that he must have been extremely worried to hear about the event.⁸

According to his own personal accounts, Fazlur Rahman studied the *Dars-i Ni āmī* curriculum outside of formal schooling under the tutelage of his father, *Mawlana* Shahab al-Din, who is likely regarded as an *ʿalīm* within the Deobandi circle after studying under leading figures of the Deobandi learning tradition, and who would continue to lead a career as a teacher of this tradition—proficient enough to teach his own son the various traditional sciences.⁹

6 “The work is largely based on his (Ignaz Goldziher's) study and translation of Arabic primary sources. He treats the evolution of the science of tafsir from its most elementary stage, the ‘Uthmanic’ recension, down to early twentieth century interpretations of Rashid Rida and Syed Ameer Ali, touching upon dogmatics, asceticism, mysticism as well as rationalism.” (Taken from Google Books)

7 Frederick Denny, *The Legacy of Fazlur Rahman*, op. cit., 106.

8 For an extensive archive materials on the Indian Partition, see < <https://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2020/08/collections-in-the-uk-on-indian-independence-and-partition-.html> > and < <https://www.bl.uk/projects/partition-and-independence-of-india-1947#>>

9 *Mawlana* Shihab al-Din was a graduate of *Dar al-Ulum* under the tutelage of Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (d.1905) and Mahmud al-Hasan (d. 1920), two of the three most prominent early teachers of the Deobandi learning

One can speculate that aside from memorization of the Qur'an (which he completed by the age of 10), the studies of 'ulūm *al-Qur'ān* (sciences of the Qur'an), *hadith*, Arabic linguistic sciences (*nahw-ṣarf-balāghah*), Arabic literature (*adabiyāt*), logic (*manṭiq*), and jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the study of ethics must have been taught as a living tradition, as described by Brannon Ingram in his study on the Deobandi tradition.¹⁰

Furthermore, according to his own account, his study of hadith from his father traces a chain of transmission (*sanad*) that goes back to Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762), which may have influenced him psychologically and morally.¹¹ It is also reported that Fazlur Rahman had studied under his uncle who was a "*shaykh*" of the Naqshbandi Sufi order who taught him both *fiqh* and the *Masnavi* of Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (d. 1273), resulting in Fazlur Rahman committing large portions of Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī's *Masnavi* by heart.¹²

tradition in Indian subcontinent during the early 20th century. Rashid Ahmad Gangohi was among the descendent of Abu Ayyub Ansari (companion of the Prophet Muhammad); the (spiritual) patron (sarpast) of the Deoband madrasa, whose sober Sufism and law-centered piety shaped the Deoband movement's ethos from its origins to the present day; he regards "adab" as the entirety of Sufism; according to a report, his "extreme passion and love (*intihai 'ishq o mahabbat*) for the Prophet was such that he owned a tiny piece of the green cloak the Prophet wore during the Hijra from Mecca to Medina and would occasionally display it to his disciples, which they would kiss and place upon their eyes in reverence."

While Mahmud Hasan (d. 1920) was famously at the forefront of Muslim participation in anticolonial politics, considered as a freedom fighter by Muslims in the subcontinent, and responsible for laying the foundation stone of Jamia Millia Islamia at Aligarh in Northern India in 1920. Mahmud Hasan had also prepared a plan to start an armed revolution against the British rule in India for which he launched a programme to train volunteers from among his disciples in India and abroad who joined this movement in a large number. The most eminent among them were Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi, who was also an associate of Mawlana Shihab al-Din (Fazlur Rahman's father). Adapted from: (i) https://www.jmi.ac.in/aboutjamia/profile/history/Founders-14/_Shaikhul_Hind_Maulana_Mehmud_Hasan-2149

10 Brannon D. Ingram's *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 143: "The Deobandis believe that perfecting one's ethics [takmil-i akhlaq] and purifying one's self by taking initiation and being in the presence of Sufi masters are beneficial and necessary forms of spiritual guidance. However, the Sufi path [tariqa] is not a path different from the Shari'a, which is transmitted from one heart to the next. The Sufi path is simply the internal and ethical dimension of the Shari'a, the path of reforming the heart [islah-i qalb], principles of which are firmly established by the Qur'an and Sunna." Also instructive in this regard is understanding how ṭaṣawwuf was imparted or presented in the Deobandi tradition, as it may directly or indirectly leave a certain impression on Fazlur Rahman leading to his own views on ṭaṣawwuf at the later stage of his life. Brannon Ingram notes that: "...Deobandi Sufism is largely "invisible," subsiding in the disciplinary training that a Sufi undertakes with his or her master, or in commentaries on classical Sufi texts that few read outside of highly elite scholarly circles. It may surprise some readers, therefore, that Deobandis have penned lengthy commentaries on the likes of Jalal al-Din Rumi, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, and Ibn 'Arabi," *ibid*, 12.

11 Reported by Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud in his introduction to Fazlur Rahman in the Malay translation of the latter's "Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice" (*Islam dan Masalah Keadilan Ekonomi*, terjemah Saiful Azhar Rosly, KL: A.S. Noordeen, 1991, v).

12 Abdul Ghani, "A Short Biography of the Late Scholar Fazlur Rahman", internet article, dated 14/06/1997;

During his years in Lahore where he attended a modern matriculation college, and University of Punjab's Oriental College for his B.A and M.A. in Arabic (from 1940 – 1942), is it difficult to ascertain the extent of other major influences.¹³ It must be remembered that University of Punjab¹⁴ was established by the British during the colonial period, and the time when Fazlur Rahman was a research student there from 1943 to 1946 were the final years before the Indian Partition and during the peak of World War II. It is known however that Fazlur Rahman's supervisor for his master's degree is a learned academic called (Professor Dr.) Muhammad Shafi.¹⁵

cited from Navin Haider Ali's thesis, University of Karachi, p. 85. His former student Marcia Hermansen thought she may have heard of this account; Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud did not know of this information, but opined that it is most possibly true because Fazlur Rahman's own father was a traditional Deobandi *alim* and the widespread historical influence of *tasawwuf* in the region. While Alparslan Acikgenc when asked if he was aware of this information, replied in the negative and wondered why Fazlur Rahman did not mention about this in his autobiography—although Alparslan Acikgenc too think this source is probably true because it is not far-fetched for Fazlur Rahman to have committed large portions of Mathnawi considering that Fazlur Rahman have on various occasions displayed his remarkable memory by recollecting poetic verses and philosophical passages in his classes at the University of Chicago. It must be remembered also that Fazlur Rahman has committed the Qur'an to memory since he was 10 years old.

13 Muhammad Khalid Masud and Ali Raza Naqvi, "In Memorium: Dr. Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988)", *Islamic Studies*, 27, No. 4 (Winter 1988), 390.

14 "The University of the Punjab (as it is now spelled) was formally established in Lahore, in present-day Pakistan, in 1882. It was the fourth university founded by the British colonial authorities on the Indian subcontinent, the first three being at the initial British strongholds of Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. The University of the Punjab was from the beginning both a teaching and an examining body, and it was the first higher education institution in India in a majority Muslim area." J. F. Bruce, *A History of the University of the Panjab*, (Lahore: N.p., 1933).

15 Mentioned in Ahmed M. Ahmed's *The Theological Thought of Fazlur Rahman*, 3 – but no source is cited. According to a brief account of the life and works of Mohammad Shafi, it is possible that Fazlur Rahman received from him rigorous training in research methodology, manuscript research, historical research, and the study of languages: "Muhammad Shafi was born in Kasur, Punjab, on Aug 6, 1883. Having done his MA in English from F.C. College (Lahore) and MA in Arabic from Punjab University, Muhammad Shafi briefly worked for the Punjab education department and taught at different colleges between 1905 and 1915. Going to Cambridge University on scholarship for higher education enhanced his acumen in research methodology and broadened his views. During his stay in England, from 1915 to 1919, he greatly benefitted from some renowned scholars such as Prof Anthony Ashley Bevan, Prof R.A. Nicholson and Prof. E. G. Browne. Browne acknowledged Muhammad Shafi's helping hand in the preface to his famous Literary History of Persia. At Cambridge, he studied oriental languages and their literature, including Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Hebrew. At Cambridge he taught for about a year as a Teacher of Hindustani (Urdu). On his return to Lahore, he was made head of the Arabic department at Punjab University, a post that he held till 1942. Later, he served as principal and dean of Punjab University Oriental College. A researcher who loved to collate rare manuscripts and an authority on oriental languages and textual criticism, Muhammad Shafi had a keen eye for calligraphy, lexicography, bibliography, grammar, history and archeology, not to mention the languages he knew. Some of his books, written or edited, in different languages, are *Maqalat-i-ilmi-o-deeni*, *Maqalat-i-Moulvi* (in five volumes), *Kitab-ul-iqd-ul-Fareed*, *Maikhana*, *Masnavi-i-Vamiq-o-Azra*, *Kashf-ul-mahjoob*, *Aulia-i-Kasur*, *Sanadeed-i-Sindh*, *Yaad daasht-i*. Some of his works remain unpublished. Prof Dr Muhammad Shafi died in

The only writing available to us during the period in which Fazlur Rahman was a research student between 1943 to 1946 is an essay titled “Iqbal and Mysticism”¹⁶—which other studies and biographies on Fazlur Rahman make no mention of. This essay demonstrates that at the age of 25, Fazlur Rahman had a keen perception of the discourses and experience of the *ṣūfīs*, a profound grasp of Muhammad Iqbal’s thought, and an analytical mind: he attempts to situate Iqbal in a wider tradition of ‘mysticism’ in Islam and the West, analyzes Iqbal’s attitude towards mysticism, Iqbal’s treatment on the mystical experience, and the *ṣūfīs* from which Iqbal draws his inspiration from.

The intellectual connection between Fazlur Rahman with one of the most influential modern Muslim thinkers of the Indian subcontinent—Muhammad Iqbal—was further pointed out by the likes of Charles J. Adam who stated: “He belonged to the generation that was powerfully influenced by the thought of Iqbal whose intellectual activity, I think it is no exaggeration to suggest, was a kind of model for him.”¹⁷ This assertion by Charles Adam is plausible considering Fazlur Rahman was 19 years old (and was in college) when Iqbal died in 1938 in Lahore, Pakistan.¹⁸ Fazlur Rahman’s later writings do indicate that he must have been familiar with the corpus of Muhammad Iqbal like most religiously conscious youth and educated Pakistanis of his time, though in some previous studies on Fazlur Rahman, this influence was not properly positioned in his life chronology. Furthermore, according to his former student at the University of Chicago, Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, Fazlur Rahman personally knew the personal assistant to Muhammad Iqbal.¹⁹

Lahore on March 14, 1963.” Source: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1394649>, Published in Dawn, March 12th, 2018.

16 In a volume on *Iqbal as a Thinker* (Lahore: Ashraf Press, 1944).

17 Charles J. Adams, “Fazl al-Rahman as a Philosopher”, *Journal of Islamic Research*, 4, No: 4, (October 1990), 265.

18 C.T.R Hewer’s study on Fazlur Rahman does make the connection of Iqbal being a model for Fazlur Rahman’s life and scholarship, 25.

19 See Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, “Personal Anecdotes on a Great Scholar, Teacher and Friend”, *Journal of Islamic Research*, 4, No: 4 (October 1990). According to one source, Iqbal’s assistant’s name is Mian Ali Bakhsh. See Mumtaz Hasan, *Tribute to Iqbal*, (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1982).

II. A NEW TRAJECTORY IN ENGLAND & CANADA (1946-1961 – 14 YEARS) DEVELOPING A STAND ON ETHICS IN ISLAM & THE WEST

Subsequently, Fazlur Rahman would pursue his doctoral studies at University of Oxford under the mentorship of renowned Orientalists, Simon van den Bergh²⁰, Richard Walzer²¹ and H.A.R Gibb²², where he would devote much time in mastering classical Greek and Latin as part of his training and thesis on Ibn Sīnā's psychology²³. It would be reasonable to assume that Fazlur Rahman would have exhausted to a large extent the corpus of Ibn Sīnā during his 3-year doctoral study in addition to other major texts and ideas in Western and Islamic philosophy – which he completed at the age of 30 (in 1949).

It is also probable that Fazlur Rahman may have been exposed to the scholarly discourses on ethics and morality in the West during his time at the University of Oxford and later at Durham, either that of the consequentialist ethics of G.E Moore, or W.D Ross's (who was possibly one of Fazlur Rahman's tutor at Oxford University²⁴) ethical intuitionism – though he notes in the Epilogue of his *Islam* (1965) with reference to the situation in modern West, "There has, of course, been a vast amount written on ethics, but almost all of it is an intellectual,

20 According to the synopsis of the book on Simon Van den Bergh titled *Quest for Perfection* (PJ Steel, 2009): "Simon Van Den Bergh was a philosopher who dedicated much of his life to studying, interpreting and explaining the works of the 12th century Andalusian Muslim philosopher Averroes. His "Averroes' *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*" (*The Incoherence of the Incoherence*), the book he spent some 30 years working on and published for the first time in 1954, is still in publication, features in encyclopaedia, is used in universities and praised by academics. There were no obituaries in either Dutch or English newspapers when he died at the age of 97 in 1979. He led a charmed, vibrant, sometimes controversial life that witnessed fundamental economic, social and technological changes. He embodied the Western European, cosmopolitan opportunities of the 20th century, while constantly seeking to understand the history, culture and philosophy of an ancient, Eastern society - a perspective that has much relevance today."

21 Richard Walzer (d. 1975) was a scholar of Greek and Arabic philosophy. Born in Berlin, Walzer left Germany when Hitler came to power and, from 1933 to 1938, was lecturer in Greek philosophy at the University of Rome. He went to Oxford where he lectured in Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew philosophy. Walzer discovered much lost Greek material in Arabic philosophical writings, and contributed both to the understanding of Greek thought and of its use and development by medieval Islamic thinkers. Taken from: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/walzer-richard-rudolf>.

22 Albert Hourani, "Gibb, Sir Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen (1895–1971)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

23 Published as: *Avicenna's Psychology: An English Translation of Kitab al-Najat, Book II, Chapter VI with Historical-Philosophical Notes and Textual Improvements on the Cairo Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

24 According to Muhammad Zainiy Uthman who came across a correspondence letter between the two at the University of Oxford's archive, of which we are unable to trace at the time of research.

analytical game.”²⁵ It was during this period in England that an inner conflict was ‘activated’ according to Fazlur Rahman which would then lead to an “acute skepticism”²⁶ brought about by his study of philosophy – which could be due to his exposure to ancient Greek and Western philosophy, as well as the contemporary Western discourse of moral philosophy from the likes of Sir David William Ross.²⁷

Fazlur Rahman’s first academic post was at Durham University where he taught Persian studies and Islamic philosophy for 8 years (1950-1958) before being appointed as an Associate Professor at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University where he worked for 3 years (1958-1961) at the recommendation of H.A.R Gibb to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who was himself Gibb’s former student. While in the summer of 1951 Fazlur Rahman was invited to Cairo, Egypt by the Cultural Department of the Arab League to undertake a critical edition of Ibn Sinā’s Arabic text on the Soul (*De Anima*) from the *Kitāb al-Shifā’* (*The Book of Healing*) which was later published in 1959.²⁸ It is well known that most of his time at Durham was devoted in rebuilding his position and views on Islam as an intellectual and moral tradition in the context of modernity afresh through an extensive revisiting of the Qur’an and life of Prophet Muhammad. During this period. In addition, by the age of 36 (in 1955), Fazlur Rahman sought to critically analyze the internal religious developments of Islam in the present century²⁹, and he sought to evaluate modern Muslim thought.³⁰

25 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, Notes: no. 8 of Epilogue, 273.

26 Fazlur Rahman, “An Autobiographical Note”, *The Courage of Conviction*, ed. Phillip L. Berman (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 154-155: “According to his personal account:
After I went to England, where I studied for my doctorate at Oxford and then taught at the University of Durham a conflict between my modern and traditional educations was activated. From the later forties to the mid-fifties I experienced an acute skepticism brought about by the study of philosophy. It shattered my traditional beliefs.”

27 According to Professor Muhammad Zainiy Uthman, his former student at the University of Chicago, he had come across a correspondence between Fazlur Rahman and Sir William David Ross at the University of Oxford archives. During this period in the University of Oxford, based on available records on the scholarship and debates of that time, Fazlur Rahman must have been aware of the publication of H.A.R Gibb’s *Modern Trends in Islam* (1947) and *Mohammedianism: A Historical Survey* (1949), and W.D. Ross’s *Foundations of Ethics: the Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of Aberdeen, 1935-6*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939).

28 *Avicenna’s De Anima (Arabic Text): Being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifā’*, edited by Fazlur Rahman, (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

29 Fazlur Rahman, “Internal Religious Developments in the Present Century Islam”, *Journal of World History*, Vol. III, 3, (1955). His key points in this article include: that Muslim modernism is limited in depth and extremely circumscribed in its extension – after Iqbal there is not a single name in the field, and finally, that Islam currently is going through a crisis generated internally and externally and is marked by confusion and conflicts of extremes.

30 Fazlur Rahman, “Modern Muslim Thought”, *The Muslim World Journal* (1955).

In 1956, Fazlur Rahman presented an outline of Shāh Walī Allāh's (d. 1762) contributions, context, approach, and thought which was published in *Pakistan Quarterly*.³¹ While Fazlur Rahman sees that the chief shortcoming of Shāh Walī Allāh's efforts is the lack of the formulation of some central principles which should render his thought into a cohesive system, he did recognize the following contributions which may have informed his own thoughts on ethics in Islam:

- (i) Shāh Walī Allāh's application of the principle of *tatbīq* (to make the structure more cohesive and to give a creative adaptability to the traditional structure vis-à-vis newer elements) with a striking new feature viz. his concern with the socio-economic basis of the human society within the context of religion;
- (ii) The close relations of the spheres of *irtifaqāt* (supports of civilization) and *iqtirāb* (spiritual evolution) in his system of thought;
- (iii) The idea that the essence of a human personality is to act morally with a view to become an element in the structure of Reality and thereby enriching it and strengthening it against the negative forces of evil;
- (iv) The idea that the basic feature of the new religious insight (of Islam) was the direction of the Statecraft towards building a sound and healthy society and the enunciation of definite principles of social welfare; and
- (v) the two possible methods Shāh Walī Allāh suggested on how the new society should proceed: the *Sunna* should be regarded as a model or standard example for future societies whose actual performance and results may be comparable to those of the model or, the *Sunna* itself should be accepted as it stands as material for the new development i.e. as something which not merely gives inspiration for creativity but also as something on which the creative impulse is to act.

While there is no direct evidence that Fazlur Rahman's new intellectual trajectory after his phase of acute skepticism was the result of his investigation and reflections on Shāh Walī Allāh's works, it is probable that this might be the case considering that the aforementioned characterization and contributions of Shāh Walī Allāh's in his article "The Thinker of Crisis: Shah Waliy-Ullahh" can be found either explicitly or implicitly rearticulated in Fazlur Rahman's later writings, particularly concerning the question of ethics – albeit in modified form.

There is also evidence of Fazlur Rahman's admiration and appreciation of Aḥmad

31 Fazlur Rahman, "The Thinker of Crisis: Shah Waliy-Ullahh", *Pakistan Quarterly*, 6, Issue 2 (1956), 44-48.

Sirhindī (d. 1624)—whom he regarded as a *mujaddid*³²—in his publication on the latter during his time at Durham University which included a critical edition of Aḥmad Sirhindī's Letters (*Maktubat-i Rabbani*).³³ Fazlur Rahman's appreciation of Aḥmad Sirhindī can be gleaned in the extensive introduction of this work where he draws a wider connection to Aḥmad Sirhindī's thought in the context of the intellectual history of Islam, chiefly in relation to Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), and ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240).³⁴

Also in 1958, his book *Prophecy in Islam* was published which is said to represent Fazlur Rahman's working out the acute skepticism he was experiencing. This book is particularly instructive in understanding the entire intellectual trajectory in the rest of Fazlur Rahman's life because it is here where he found the approach of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) most convincing compared to the Muslim philosophers and other theologians.³⁵ More specifically, the following point made in the conclusion of the book (*Prophecy in Islam*) is most instructive to understanding Fazlur Rahman's point of departure in evaluating the discussions and contributions of other schools of thought in the intellectual tradition of Islam towards ethics, viz. Fazlur Rahman finds that Ibn Taymiyyah (more so than the other Muslim theologians whom he analyzed in this book) explicitly formulates the issue of intellectualist-mystical attitude to life vis-à-vis the life of religio-moral action or moral dynamism, as well as the

32 A notion derived by a statement (hadith) from the Prophet Muhammad that at the beginning of each century, God will inspire an individual to revive their understanding and practice of the religion of Islam.

33 *Selected Letters of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī* (Karachi: Iqbal Academy, 1968), translated and edited by Fazlur Rahman. The more recent edition of the entire *Maktubat* in its original language is as follows: Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī, *Maktubat-i Imam Rabbani*, ed. Mawlana Sa'īd Ahmad Naqshbandi (Lahore: Millat Publications, 2006). In 1968, Fazlur Rahman was finally able to publish his critical edition with an introduction of Aḥmad Sirhindī's Letters with the assistance of the Director of Iqbal Academy, though it was originally made ready for publication nearly a decade ago. In the introduction of this work, several matters are instructive to this study which gives a better idea on Fazlur Rahman's own discussions on ethics in his later writings, namely: (i) what Fazlur Rahman deemed to be the shortcomings of Ibn Sīnā's, Suhrawardī's, and Ibn 'Arabī's thoughts; (ii) Aḥmad Sirhindī's own viewpoint in contrast with Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī, and Ibn 'Arabī; and (iii) the discussions on *amr-khalq* and *wilayah-nubuwwah*.

34 *Selected Letters of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī* (Karachi: Iqbal Academy, 1968), Preface: "This book is an attempt to introduce Shaikh Ahmad's thought and effort. He himself was so conscious of his originality in Islamic thought—particularly in Sufi thought—that he described his function as "renovation of the second millennium" of Islam. An attempt has been made in the Introduction to bring out this originality—a positive world-affirming role assigned to the Shari'ah as opposed to the negative and world-denying forces of hollow spiritualism prevalent around him. Shaikh Sirhindī is a bold thinker. He ranks among the class of reformers before him like Ibn Taymiyya; his style is at times unusually telling and modern. In this sense, with all the richness of his thought, Iqbal has but simply rendered in magical poetry what Shaikh Ahmad, the Mujaddid, had preached as his central theme three hundred years before."

35 According to Professor Muhammad Zainiy Uthman, he recalls this being mentioned by Fazlur Rahman during his studies at the University of Chicago.

evaluation of the *Sharī'ah* in this context, whereas it is partly explicit in al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and implicit in Sunni *Kalām*.³⁶ In other words, Fazlur Rahman was inclined to agree more with the stand taken by those Sunni scholars compared to the Muslim philosophers and more specifically, based on Ibn Taymiyyah's arguments against the Muslim philosophers.³⁷

It is at this stage of his life and career, and his inclinations for the arguments and viewpoints of Ibn Taymiyyah, Shāh Walī Allāh, Ahmad Sirhindī, and Muhammad Iqbal, that one can better understand the backdrop and basis of his infamous criticisms of Ash'arite theological school of thought, Shafi'i legal school of thought, as well as Sufi metaphysicians of the past, chiefly al-Ghazali and ibn 'Arabi.³⁸

At McGill, he began writing his book *Islam* which was to be published six years later (in 1966).³⁹ According to Fazlur Rahman's own accounts, while at McGill, he participated in a seminar given by Toshihiko Izutsu during the 1960-61 session where he discussed some of the ideas contained in a book Izutsu subsequently published titled *God and Man in the Qur'an* (Keio University, 1964). In a review of this book, Fazlur Rahman indicated that while he appreciated the contributions of Izutsu to Islamic scholarship, describing it as a "welcome addition to the existing literature on Islam", he saw several limitations in its approach: Firstly, he saw the lack of a historical consideration in Izutsu's approach:

That the Qur'an's chief aim is to create a moral-social order, is actually proved if one historically studies the process of the revelation of the Qur'an—the actual challenges which the Prophet flung initially to the Makkkan society. These challenges were not only to the pantheon of the Makkans at the Ka'bah but also to their socio-economic

36 *Prophecy in Islam*, 110.

37 The fact that he supports the stand of Sunni 'ulama in this book is made explicit in his response to Maulana Ehteshamul Haq who mistakenly thought that Fazlur Rahman's treatment of the Muslim philosophers in this book was an endorsement or a support of their views. See, *Dawn*, Karachi, 9 October 1973, 4 (Appendix in Christopher T.R. Hewer's doctoral dissertation, *Fazlur Rahman: A Reinterpretation of Islam in the Twentieth Century*, The University of Birmingham, 1998, lviii).

38 I am not promoting or endorsing these criticisms, but only highlighting for the purpose of research. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine these criticism. A more critical examination of these criticisms will be presented in a forthcoming article, while a general treatment can be found in my PhD thesis titled *Fazlur Rahman on Ethics in Islam*, submitted at the Raja Zarith Sofiah Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science, and Civilisation (RZS-CASIS), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

39 Published by Holt, Rinehart and Winst (New York) in 1966, and republished in Lahore by Anchor Books, 1968. A footnote in Muhammad Qasim Zaman's *Islam in Pakistan: A History* indicates that this book was caught in a controversy and it was minuted in a cabinet meeting of the Government of Pakistan (Notes to Chapter 2, p. 297, footnote 119: "File 331/CF/68-2620: Controversy on Dr. Fazlur Rahman's book "Islam"; minutes and decisions of the cabinet meeting on September 4, 1968 (NDC)."

structure. This shows the superiority of the historical approach to the approach of the pure semanticist...⁴⁰

Secondly, Fazlur Rahman felt that Izutsu offered an insufficient emphasis on the Qur'an as a living monument of moral and spiritual guidance:

One wishes the author had shown more elaborately and decisively that the Qur'an, far from being a work of speculative thought interested in system building, was as a living monument of moral and spiritual guidance, interested in keeping alive all the moral tensions which are requisite for good and fruitful life. It is because the Qur'an is interested in action that it is not shy of putting side by side the contradictory and polar terms of moral tension. But probably the preoccupation of Dr. Izutsu to build out a system himself from the Qur'an did not allow him to do so.⁴¹

In the introduction of his *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, Fazlur Rahman continues to recognize the work of Izutsu, regarding it as "remarkable" although he occasionally disagrees with Izutsu on his analysis of certain key terms like 'taqwā'.⁴²

III. EVENTFUL YEARS IN PAKISTAN (1961-1969 – 7 YEARS): ARTICULATING ISLAMIC RESEARCH, SOCIAL-ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL ETHICS

While it is unclear what were the reasons or context of Fazlur Rahman's decision to leave McGill University and to return to Pakistan, it is known that there were lucrative offers made for him to teach at Punjab University. Be that as it may, when Fazlur Rahman returned to Pakistan in 1961, he was first appointed as a Visiting Professor of Pakistan's Central Institute

40 *God and Man in the Qur'an* by Toshihiko Izutsu, reviewed by Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Studies*, 5: 2 (1966).

41 Ibid.

42 Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, xvi. "Although the books (referring to *The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran*, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Koran*, and *God and Man in the Koran*) deal primarily with religious ethics and attitude, a good deal of the general Qur'anic worldview comes under discussion. Though I occasionally disagree with Professor Izutsu on his analysis of certain key terms like taqwā, I recommend his work as highly useful."

of Islamic Research.⁴³ After some months, due to some disagreement with I.H Qureshi's leadership and direction of the Institute, Fazlur Rahman took the initiative to draft a letter on how best to organize and manage the Institute which he hand-delivered to President Ayyub Khan⁴⁴ himself.⁴⁵ This led to Fazlur Rahman's appointment as the new director of the Islamic Research Institute on the personal orders of the president of Pakistan on 4 August 1962. It appears that from the onset of his directorship, Fazlur Rahman had made ethical consideration a prime consideration of his work (and not just academic) when he proclaimed that the institute's duty is "as academic as it is ethical."⁴⁶

In terms of Fazlur Rahman's approach towards research and scholarship during this period, it is instructive to note that he sees himself as engaging in 'constructive Islamic research' which is necessarily ethical. While he does not see anything objectionable in collaborating with Western orientalist to benefit from their scientific techniques of research, his goal is for Muslim scholars and researchers to be entirely independent of Western orientalist in the modern academic setting.⁴⁷

43 Fazlur Rahman's Curriculum Vitae. According to Fazlur Rahman in his "The Impact of Modernity on Islam" (1966, p. 126), the Central Institute of Islamic Research was established in 1960 by the government of President Mohammad Ayub Khan to carry out research into and interpretation of Islam for modern needs. In 1962, this institution was given a constitutional status and, in addition, was meant to compliment another body created in the same year known as the Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology.

44 Fazlur Rahman appeared to genuinely appreciate the leadership of President Ayyub Khan as indicated in his review of the President's autobiography: "Indeed, the Revolution which President Ayub brought in October, 1958, in Pakistan, was only technically a military one; it was actually a revolution of a fundamental type in the social, political and economic life-pattern of Pakistan based on an original appraisal of the actual demands of the Pakistani situation. Yet the changes introduced in different spheres of life, although far-reaching and pervasive, were characterized by sobriety and moderation and carefully avoided excesses and extremism." (*Islamic Studies*, 6. 2 (1967), 197.

45 I have not been able to trace this letter. However, we do know that on 25th October 1961, Fazlur Rahman co-wrote a letter with Ismail Faruqi to the then Director of the Institute, Professor I. H. Qureshi, which outlines their proposition on re-programming research at the institute. See Megan Brankley Abbas, "Between Western Academia and Pakistan: Fazlur Rahman and the Fight for Fusionism", *Modern Asian Studies*, 51, 3 (2017), 749.

46 See Megan Brankley Abbas, "Between Western Academia and Pakistan: Fazlur Rahman and the Fight for Fusionism", *Modern Asian Studies*, 51, 3 (2017), 749. In 1966, Fazlur Rahman elaborated further on how he envisioned the role of the Institute of Islamic Research as follows: "The Institute, therefore, argued that, in order to apply Islam today, it is in the first place essential to understand the background of the Qur'an in order to determine the kind of purposes in moral, spiritual, and socio-economic fields which the Qur'an wanted to fulfill; that the implementation of the Qur'an cannot be carried out literally in the context of today because this may result in thwarting the very purposes of the Qur'an and that, although the findings of the Fuqaha' or ulama of Islam during the past thirteen centuries or so should be seriously studied and given due weight, it may well be found that in many cases their findings were either mistaken or sufficed for the needs of that society but not for today."

47 *Dawn*, Karachi, 9 October 1963, 4 – Taken from Appendix 1.19 of Christopher Thomas Radbourne Hewer's

Fazlur Rahman addressed a range of ethical and moral issues facing Pakistan during his time. Aside from addressing the issues of *ribā*, Muslim family law, the constitution of Pakistan, the Islamic ideology of Pakistan, and Islamic Methodology, Fazlur Rahman was also involved in a pioneering 4-year program to train researchers to be able to respond to such issues at the Central Institute of Islamic Research which was launched at the end of September 1963.⁴⁸ It is also of relevance to this study to note that during the inauguration ceremony of this program, Shaykh Ibrahim Niass (d. 1975) of Senegal was invited as the principal speaker, and subsequently, it is reported that Fazlur Rahman had expressed his personal admiration for Ibrahim Niass after having met him during this occasion.⁴⁹ This information is instructive to understand further Fazlur Rahman's attitude towards a figure of the Sufi tradition in contemporary times – though it does not necessarily mean Fazlur Rahman became more agreeable with the content of the Sufi doctrines, it may have softened his stance towards it.

Subsequently, Fazlur Rahman was also appointed to the Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology⁵⁰ (for the period between 1964-1969) by President Muhammad Ayyub Khan in

unpublished PhD thesis titled *Fazlur Rahman: A Reinterpretation of Islam in the Twentieth Century*, (University of Birmingham, 1998). "I think that constructive Islamic research cannot be developed except by Muslims themselves. But the Muslims, in order to do this have to combine the analytical and critical modern approach with the knowledge of traditional materials of Islam. When they have done so, they will become entirely independent of the Western orientalist and will be able to displace them. Unfortunately, our religious scholars have been unable to develop this scientific technique of research. In order to get this technique, I believe it is essential to use those who have it. Those who have it at present happen, unfortunately, to be non-Muslims and Westerners. But the technique in itself is neither Eastern nor Western. Our earliest forefathers during the first and second centuries of Islam obtained everything they could by way of knowledge and techniques from neighboring civilizations and cultures. Even as late as early eleventh century A.D. a man like al-Biruni could go into the homes of the bigoted Brahmins and learn Sanskrit to the glory of Islam... We must remember however, that the Western orientalist techniques of research are one thing and the interpretations and conclusion they may have reached quite another. If a Muslim is intellectually adult he can be expected to distinguish between the two and to necessarily accept the one and equally necessarily reject the other. It is we, however, who have to decide whether we want adulthood."

48 It is highly probable that the this program is Fazlur Rahman's idea, seeing that he viewed the institute and Pakistan in general were lacking the kind of creative researchers needed with the goal of making the Islamic society a "living force". The programme involved training the sciences of the Qur'an, the *Sunnah*, *Fiqh*, *Ilm al-Kalam*, as well as intensive courses in Arabic and other Islamic and Western languages. Fourteen students were recruited for the programme.

49 See Navin Ghulam Haider's study on Fazlur Rahman. He was a teacher from the Tijani Sufi order and one of West Africa's most influential Muslim leaders in the twentieth century. The fact that Fazlur Rahman had expressed his personal admiration for Ibrahim Niass is mentioned in Navin Ghulam Haider's PhD thesis, p. 85-86. For an authoritative study on Ibrahim Niass, see: Rüdiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrāhīm Niass and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival*, (Oxford University Press, 2011).

50 For an extensive study on the Council of Islamic Ideology, see Mansoor Ahmed, *Governmentality in Pakistan: A Study of Council of Islamic Ideology (1956-1988)*, doctoral thesis (these de doctorat), de l'Université de recherche Paris Sciences et Lettres PSL Research University, 2018.

1964—the highest-level Islamic advisory entity in Pakistan.⁵¹ These two institutions (the Central Institute of Islamic Research and the Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology) were supposed to complement each other to address the most pressing issues on Islam in Pakistan. Such was the influence of Fazlur Rahman in the government apparatus of Pakistan that later commentators saw him playing a role almost like a “philosopher-king” – harking back to the Platonic vision of the ideal role of a philosopher in a state.⁵² In fact, during this period, Fazlur Rahman completed an unpublished book entitled “Pakistan as an Islamic State” written at the special behest of President Mohammad Ayub Khan.⁵³ Thus, this can be seen as the moment where Fazlur Rahman engaged with the question of political ethics more prominently in his life.

By 1964, Fazlur Rahman’s next book was published, *Islamic Methodology in History*, which is a compilation of his articles that appeared in the Central Institute of Islamic Research’s journal between March 1962 to June 1963. This book represents his attempt to revisit the historical evolution of the application of the four basic principles of Islamic thought, and their actual working in certain key developments in the earlier history of the Muslims. His objective in this was not only historical research but to consider the practical consequence that can indicate the way for further ‘Islamic developments’. There are several discussions in this book (*Islamic Methodology in History*) which is particularly of relevance to understanding the prominence of Islamic ethics in Fazlur Rahman’s thought, namely: (i) during the post-formative developments in Islam, Fazlur Rahman, interpreted that certain trajectory had occurred in the domains of theology which affected matters at the moral plane on fundamental questions of human freedom and accountability⁵⁴, and (ii) on how certain

51 Apart from Fazlur Rahman, the members of this advisory council of Islamic ideology of Pakistan included: Vilayet Hussain, Mr. Abdul Jabbar Khan, Maulana Abdul Hai, Maulana Abdul Hameed Badayuni, Mr. Abdul Hashim and Mohammad Ali (Vice Chancellor of Peshawar University). The tenure of the initially appointed members expired during the year 1965 so three new members Mr. A.B.A Haleem, Maulana Abdul Manan, Mufti Jaffar Hussain were appointed while the other five members including the Chairman were reappointed. Source: Mansoor Ahmed, *Governmentality in Pakistan: A Study of Council of Islamic Ideology (1956-1988)*, doctoral thesis (these de doctorat), de l’Université de recherche, Paris: Sciences et Lettres PSL Research University, 2018, 106.

52 Ebrahim Moosa, “Introduction”, in Fazlur Rahman’s *Revival and Reform in Islam*, p. 2; see also: <https://medium.com/@ibn.maghreb01/the-philosopher-king-the-case-of-fazlur-rahman-96269a4198ff>

53 Stated in Fazlur Rahman’s Curriculum Vitae. This unpublished book was meant to include his published articles such as “God, Man and the Universe in the Qur’an,” (*Islamic Studies*, March 1967), “Some Reflections on the Reconstruction of Muslim Society in Pakistan”, (*Islamic Studies*, June 1967), and “Implementation of the Islamic Concept of the State in Pakistani Milleu,” (*Islamic Studies*, September 1967).

54 Under the subtitle, “The Moral Principles”, 97-105.

major features of Sufism also have had disastrous consequences for the moral constitution of the Community such as one sided-*Zuhd*, an excessive preoccupation with world-negation, an unintegrated spirituality and gradually a formal system of “moral gymnastics” at the expense of the building of a socio-moral order⁵⁵.

By 1965, Fazlur Rahman had come to the conclusion that a systematic attempt must be made to elaborate on ethics on the basis of the Qur'an since he considered that past works on Islamic ethics were based on Greek philosophy, Persian tradition, and Sufi piety, and not essentially expressions of the Qur'an.⁵⁶ This was expressed by Fazlur Rahman in a book that he started either during his time at Durham University or McGill University—about seven years earlier—simply titled *Islam*. It is an extensive historical survey of the teachings of Islam in its theological, legal, and spiritual formulations intended for Western and Muslim readers. Many parts of this book indicate his overriding concerns on ethics in Islam, especially the chapters on the ‘Prophet Muhammad’, ‘the Qur'an’, ‘Dialectical Theology’, ‘The Shari'ah’, ‘the Philosophical Movement’, ‘Sufi Doctrine and Practice’, ‘Sufi Organizations’, ‘Pre-Modernist Reform Movements’, ‘Modern Developments’, ‘Legacy and Prospects’, and the ‘Epilogue’.

His article on “The Status of Individual in Islam”, published in 1966, reveals the beginnings of his detailed discussions on a key element in his ethical system—that of *taqwā*, as well as the source of thinking on how ethics ought to be seen as an integrated system within a society—via the writings of Shāh Walī Allāh:

In his writings, Shah Waliy Allah always emphasized the establishment of just and balanced society and tried to formulate principles of social organization while remaining true to the Islamic spiritual ideal, viz., the creation of the good individual. He tells us that in the constitution of reality, every individual has his proper place and scope, which are irrevocable and indissoluble. The proper aim of a society, therefore, is to provide for the nourishment of each individual according to his capacities. But without an adequate and effective social fabric no individual life can be really nurtured.⁵⁷

In his 1967 article, “Some Reflections on the Reconstruction of Muslim Society in Pakistan,” one year before his professional departure from Pakistan for the USA, Fazlur

55 *Islamic Methodology in History*, 105-118.

56 *Islam*, 257.

57 Fazlur Rahman, “The Status of Individual in Islam”, *Islamic Studies*, 5: 4 (1966), 319-330.

Rahman outlined a kind of a blueprint for the development of Muslims in Pakistan by taking into account both the role of the government and the religious leadership ('Ulamā')

- (i) A prefatory statement on how Islam envisages the social order and the fundamental principles of social organization according to the Qu'ran (namely: social justice, cooperation, brotherhood and self-sacrifice for the sake of common good);
- (ii) On what social justice implies in Islam;
- (iii) The need to eradicate social discrimination, economic exploitation and political subjugation;
- (iv) The need to realize Islamic cooperation in the sense of self-sacrifice; and
- (v) The participation of the entire community in the development (in the sense of eradication of poverty and creation of wealth) and defence work—on this point, it needs to be point out that Fazlur Rahman proposed that the teachings of who he terms as “great personages” such as Aḥmad Sirhindī, Shāh Walī Allāh, and Muhammad Iqbal be fully utilized in the light of the Qur'an.⁵⁸

Subsequently, in September 1967, his article “Implementation of the Islamic Concept of State in the Pakistani Milieu”⁵⁹ was published with themes connected to ethics and morality includes: on the moral duty of the state and government to safeguard the larger interests of the public; on applying the principles of justice and fair play as enunciated in the Qur'an and as illustrated in the example of the Prophet; the paramount necessity of the dispensation of unadulterated justice; the need for the Muslims to keep their pacts and international obligations, and the imperative for the Muslim state to the task of cementing inter-Muslim unity to contribute positively to the rest of the world.

Few months later, in December 1967, his article “The Qu'ranic Solution of Pakistan's Educational Problems”⁶⁰ was published where we can also glean ethical and moral considerations being incorporated such as:

- (i) That the first responsibility of educators is to attune the minds of their pupils along sound moral lines, and they cannot remain indifferent to the values involving the

58 Fazlur Rahman, “Some Reflections on the Reconstruction of Muslim Society in Pakistan”, 118. While it could be argued that Fazlur Rahman proposed these figures because these are the most influential and recognized figures in the consciousness and imagination of the Muslims in the subcontinent, it is evident in his writings that Fazlur Rahman finds more inclination and affinity with these figures' teachings.

59 Fazlur Rahman, “Implementation of the Islamic Concept of State in the Pakistani Milieu”, *Islamic Studies*, 6, No. 3 (1967), 205-223.

60 Fazlur Rahman, “The Quranic Solution of Pakistan's Educational Problems”, *Islamic Studies*, 6: 4 (1967), 315-326.

- perception of right and wrong;
- (ii) That knowledge must be pursued with the proper awakening of the corresponding moral consciousness;
 - (iii) That science must be used for the serviceable ends of mankind;
 - (iv) The study of the inner world i.e. the human mind, must be used to cure imbalance delinquencies and the raising of the moral standards of mankind;
 - (v) The historical study of societies must be used as an instrument of self-criticism and self-assessment;
 - (vi) The judgment that modern civilization tends to be blind to genuinely moral bases of life; and
 - (vii) Pakistan's educational standards were deteriorating such that even the basic minimal sense of honesty and responsibility threatened to disappear.

The last writing published during his period in Pakistan is: "Economic Principles of Islam"⁶¹, which presented the question of economic values and social order within the moral ambit of Islam; the guaranteeing of basic necessities as a precondition of satisfying the requirements of socio-economic justice—which Fazlur Rahman draws from Shāh Walī Allāh's idea of *irtifaqāt* (translated by Fazlur Rahman as "socio-cultural-political development", while Marcia Hermansen translates it as "supports of civilization"); the concept of labour (which he interprets as *kasb halal* – literally means 'legitimate means of earning') as the keynote of economy in Islam; the position of wealth and right of ownership in Islam; on how Islam provides a charter for interference (of private wealth) in society by the State in the basic interest of socio-economic justice; his opinion on how Islam views capital in the production of wealth vis-à-vis economic justice and how it compares with the Communist theory; and finally in connection to the question of capital in the economy, Fazlur Rahman makes a brief statement on why bank interest should be allowed for it is not the same as economic exploitation or the Qur'anic prohibition of usury (*ribā*).

Thus, during the period of Fazlur Rahman's directorship of the Islamic Research Institute (between 1962–1969), this study was able to trace the following themes of research and writings by Fazlur Rahman related to ethics: (i) about Iqbal (ii) about Islam and the State in the context of Pakistan, (iii) about economic principles in Islam. In total, Fazlur Rahman wrote twenty (20) articles between 1962 and 1969 (during his career in Pakistan) on a range of themes such as the ideological questions of Pakistan, the question of Islam in relation to the state and

61 *Islamic Studies* (1969), 1-8.

democracy, the question of overcoming socio-economic challenges, moral issues such as *ribā* versus interest, and the methodological issues in Islamic scholarship (whose collection of articles was published in the book *Islamic Methodology in History*). While the themes he wrote on were varied, it is evident that there is a recurring thread in all of them and that was chiefly on the question of ethics or the establishment of a moral social order.

IV. AS PROFESSOR OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT IN THE USA (1968/69-1988 – 20 YEARS): EXPANDING THE DISCOURSE ON ISLAMIC ETHICS & BUILDING A RESEARCH PROGRAMME

After his turbulent years in Pakistan, Fazlur Rahman's years in the United States of America can be said to be where his ideas come to fuller maturity and fruition during the twenty-year period of 1968 right to his passing in 1988.⁶² This can also be seen in the number of his publications compared to prior periods in his life as well as new areas of research trajectory emerging such as Islamic ethics, revival and reform in Islam, health and medicine in Islamic tradition, and Islamic political thought.

The earliest published writing of Fazlur Rahman during his period in the USA is a chapter published in 1970 on "Revival and Reform in Islam" in a volume titled *Cambridge History of Islam*.⁶³ In this piece, it can be found that he regards the contributions of Ibn Taymiyyah, Aḥmad Sirhindī, Shāh Walī Allāh, and the Sanusi Sufi Order positively since they combated the "purely world-negating attitude of medieval Sufism", developed a much more "positive Sufism", endeavored to eradicate the "socio-moral evils that came in the wake

62 After spending a brief period as visiting professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, in spring of 1969, the remainder of his life was spent at the University of Chicago where he taught history of Islamic theology and philosophy, Islamic Mysticism, Islamic Epistemology, Islamic Political Thought, Islamic Modernism, Islamic Family Law, the readings of Qur'an, the readings of many books in *Ilm al-Kalam*, *Fiqh*, *Tafsir*, *Tasawwuf*, and dedicated readings on Ibn 'Arabī, and Muhammad Iqbal. "Rahman Course Listing", Department of Near Eastern Civilizations and Languages, University of Chicago, n.d. Courtesy of Mary Catherine Jesse's Master of Arts thesis on the *Thought of Fazlur Rahman with Special Reference to Reason*, 24. I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Alparslan Acikgenc for pointing out to me that his reading classes varied from books in the disciplines of *Ilm al-Kalam*, *Fiqh*, *Tafsir*, and *Tasawwuf*.

63 Chapter 7 in the *Cambridge History of Islam*, edited by P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton, Bernard Lewis, (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 632-656.

of the spread of Sufism”, and on the whole, “gave it a more dynamic outlook”.⁶⁴ Their only shortcoming in Fazlur Rahman’s opinion is that they were not able to contribute sufficiently to the reformulation of the content of Islam.⁶⁵

Fazlur Rahman would revisit a point about ethics in Islam he first made in his 1966 book, *Islam*, in an article published in 1971 as part of a volume on *Theology and Law in Islam*, titled “Functional interdependence of law and theology”⁶⁶. While this article focuses more on the disciplines of theology (*ilm al-kalām*) and law (*fiqh* or *sharī‘ah*) in Islam, he mentions the important role a system of moral principles derived from the Qur’an or a system of moral philosophy could play as an effective “public link”; he also explains how the absence of a “self-conscious and independent ethics” seems to be a major problem in the history of Islam, before making an elaborate case on how a science of Islamic morals can be made possible only when man is put in the center of interest, for the Word of God has come to man for the sake of man.

Then, Fazlur Rahman wrote what was to be his last treatment on ethics in connection to the question of economic ideology (or meta-economics) in 1974: “Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice”⁶⁷ which discusses the importance for Muslim nations to pause and think to formulate their own ideological stand in the light of the two gigantic and competing economic systems in the world (capitalism and socialism); the distinction between economic principles which pertains to economic ideology (which is what Fazlur Rahman is focusing on in this essay), and economic programs, plans, and blueprints which pertains to economic engineering; the nature of Islamic movement at the beginning of its history – that poverty and other social evils was a fundamental factor in the rise of the Islamic movement and thus monotheism (affirmation of Divine Unity) and social justice are two sides of the same coin (social justice reform thrust constituted the very heart of the Islamic movement).

Fazlur Rahman also presents an account of the place of wealth and economic values in Islam wherein wealth is seen as good and necessary in order to create a just, healthy, and progressive social order though it is not the sole purpose of life; the moral imperative to study the signs of God or ‘āyatuLlāh (which, based on his understanding of the Qur’an implies knowledge of history and geography, the physical universe, and inner laws of human behavior);

64 “Revival and Reform in Islam”, 639-640.

65 Ibid, 640.

66 *Theology and Law in Islam*, ed. Gustave E von Grunebaum (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, Undena Publications, 1971).

67 *The Pakistan Economist*, 1974, p. 14-39. The previous articles on this subject being: “Riba and Interest”, *Islamic Studies*, (1964), 1-43; “Economic Principles of Islam”, *Islamic Studies*, (1969), 1-8.

and the central theme of this essay—a discussion on the principles and conceptual instruments given by the Qur'an and other Islamic sources explicitly and implicitly for economic justice and equitable distribution of wealth which includes discussions on the application of the economic justice teachings of Islam in the modern context.

In 1980, Fazlur Rahman's *Major Themes of the Qur'an* was published by Bibliotheca Islamica. This work is Fazlur Rahman's attempt to present the Qur'an as a unity based on the themes of 'God', 'Man as an individual', 'Man in Society', 'Nature', 'Prophethood and Revelation', 'Eschatology', 'Satan and Evil', and 'Emergence of the Muslim Community'. It can be seen as Fazlur Rahman's understanding of how the Qur'an should be presented in the contemporary age adopting his double-movement method. While some of the chapters were his articles that had previously appeared elsewhere, it remains relevant to this study as it represent among his works towards the last phase of his professional career. His discussions highlight his position on the various elements that would constitute his understanding of ethics and morality.

A landmark moment that signals Fazlur Rahman's life-long commitment to the field of ethics in Islam can be seen in May 1983, when he was awarded the Levi Della Vida Award⁶⁸ in Islamic Studies wherein he chose the theme "Ethics in Islam" as per the tradition of this award where the winner is given the freedom to choose a theme and deliver the keynote lecture in an international conference on the theme.⁶⁹ He thus presented a paper titled "Ethics and Law in Islam"⁷⁰ which revisits the distinction between law and ethics in the intellectual history of Islam and how scholars of the past such as al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyya dealt with this matter, before expounding his own views on how ethical principles expressed in the Qur'an

68 "The Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal of the Gustave E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Los Angeles is awarded biennially to give recognition to an outstanding scholar whose work has significantly and lastingly advanced the study of Islamic Civilization. The scholar is selected by a committee appointed by the chancellor of the University of California, Los Angeles, meeting under the chairmanship of the director of the Gustave E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies."

69 Fazlur Rahman was the ninth recipient of the award. In Richard G. Hovannisian's prefatory note of the volume for the ninth conference in-conjunction with the award, he remarked among others, "Among Muslim scholars calling for a return to the ethical spirit of the Qur'an, Fazlur Rahman stands at the forefront...Professor Rahman's combination of the highest standards of scholarship and his deep personal commitment to the faith and future of Islam has given him a unique position among contemporary scholars and has led to his selection as the ninth recipient of the Giorgio Levi Della Vida award... A recurring theme in his works is the need to reinterpret Islam in light of ethical and moral thoughts true to the beliefs expressed in the Qur'an." (p. 1-2)

70 This paper was published in 1985: "Law and Ethics in Islam", *Ethics in Islam: Ninth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Conference 1983 in Honor of Fazlur Rahman*, (ed.) R. Hovannisian (Malibu, California: Undena Publications, 1985), 3-15.

(or the general requirements of the Qur'an) ought to be reintegrated with issues seen solely from the legal (*fiqhi*) prism previously, and finally making the case on the need for Muslims to develop a system of ethics that grows out of the Qur'an which according to him have never been attempted before.

Towards the end of 1983, Fazlur Rahman also published another article on what can be considered as 'meta-ethics' titled "Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'an" in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*⁷¹, which analyses the trio concepts of *īmān*, *islām*, and *taqwā*. Fazlur Rahman considers these concepts as the foundation of Qur'anic ethics – in engagement with T. Izutsu's and Wilfred Cantwell Smith's interpretations. In addition, Fazlur Rahman also discusses some of the implications of these concepts (*īmān*, *islām*, and *taqwā*) for the Muslim community in its social and political dimensions which includes (i) the fact that Muslims need to restore a healthy socio-political order based upon a viable foundation since the Qur'an calls them to be the Medinan Community, (ii) the gap between the average members of the Community and their religio-moral leadership must be minimized due to the "egalitarian" constitution of the actual Muslim community, and (iii) that affairs must be decided through mutual consultation (*shūrā*) which means that democracy is positively and patently enjoined by the Qur'an as the moral foundation of the Community's life.

In 1984, Fazlur Rahman developed his research on ethics in the intellectual tradition of Islam further which can be seen in his extensive encyclopedia entry on "*Akhlāq*".⁷² In this entry, Fazlur Rahman presents a survey and review of the landmark ideas and works on ethics in the intellectual tradition of Islam which includes the religious, literary, Sufi, and philosophical currents of ethical thought with a brief treatment of landmark works in this category such as Ibn Miskawayh's *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*⁷³, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī's *Akhlāq-i-Nasiri*⁷⁴, al-Dawānī's *Akhlāq-i-Jalali*, al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*⁷⁵ and *Mīzān al-'amal*⁷⁶, Ḥusayn al-Wā'iz Kāshifī's *Akhlāq-i Muḥsinī*, 'Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī's *Risalat al-Akhlāq*,

71 "Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'an", *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 170-185.

72 Fazlur Rahman, "Akhlāq," in Ehsan Yarshater (editor), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, London: Routledge Kegan Paul, continued by New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, continued by New York: Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, 1982-, 1: 719-723.

73 Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq wa tathīr al-a'rāq*, ed. Ibn al-Khatīb (Cairo: al-Matba'at al-misriyyah, 1977).

74 *Akhlāq-i Nasiri (The Nasirean Ethics)*, trans. G.M. Wickens (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964).

75 Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad. *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, Cairo, ed. Halabi, Cairo, I vol. (1346 H); vols. II, III, IV 1352/1933; 1939, 4v.

76 Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad. *Mizan al-'Amal* (Damascus: Dar al-Hikmah, 1986).

Akhlāq-e Rūhī by ‘Aṭā’allāh Rūhī, and Ḥasan Esfandīārī’s *Akhlāq-e Mohtašemī*.⁷⁷ This shows that Fazlur Rahman was aware of the entire breadth of past literatures on ethics in the Islamic intellectual tradition but he felt that some fundamental emphases of the Qur’an came to be seriously modified in the Muslim intellectual tradition as indicated at the beginning of this entry—with the question of socio-economic justice given as example.

One of Fazlur Rahman’s major work, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, would be published by University of Chicago Press in 1984. Based on his prior field research in various parts of the Muslim world with a grant from Ford Foundation, this work constitutes his proposal for the reconstruction of the education of contemporary Muslim society by reassessing the intellectual heritage of the past, past attempts to reform the Muslim society, as well as his specific suggestions to reform education in Muslim societies. It is relevant as the question of reforming Muslim societies through education is directly linked to his discussions on ethics and morality in Islam. It is in this book that he would also include ‘ethics’ as part of his suggestion for systematic reconstruction of the Islamic disciplines.

In his “The Principle of Shura and the Role of the Ummah in Islam”⁷⁸, in the context of broader debates on the form of an “Islamic state”, in particular, whether or not democracy should be adopted, Fazlur Rahman examines what the Qur’an had indicated about the Ummah and its task and function—in sum, Fazlur Rahman states that (i) the Muslims are the scale whereby extremes are to be identified and they are also the modifiers whereby extremes are to be addressed (it is an intellectual and operational function); (ii) that the task of the Muslim community is to establish on the earth an order by effectively prohibiting evil and commanding good on the basis of belief in a one and unique good (a socio-political order on a valid ethical basis); (iii) the Qur’an envisages the Muslim community as “perfectly egalitarian”, and (iv) that the basis of the internal life of the Muslim community is based on goodwill and cooperation. As an extension of this egalitarian vision, Fazlur Rahman interprets that the Qur’an laid down the principle of *shūrā* to guide the decision-making process of the community. This article can be regarded as a more complete articulation by him of ethics as extended in the socio-political context.

In September 1986, he completed an unpublished paper titled “Law and Morality in Islam”⁷⁹ in which he discusses a range of issues on this subject primarily revolving around

77 Tehran, 1314H/1935.

78 *American Journal of Islamic Studies*, 1984, 1-9.

79 Found in the ‘Fazlur Rahman Collection’, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas Library, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

the question of the source and nature of the law and its relation to morality in Islam, as well as how it differs with the Christian tradition, Communism, and secularism. Furthermore, in this article, he states the following views, which will enable one to better understand how he interprets the notion of 'morality': firstly, that law must be squarely morality-based instead of a set of rules to be enforced by sanctions; secondly, that *taqwā* is the essence of the Islamic concept of morality; thirdly, the fact the Qur'an makes no distinction between the religious duties and the secular obligation—as in the case of secularism; fourthly, that Muslims must develop a morality on a rational basis because the Qur'an is insistent that humanity must govern its affairs rationally; fifthly, that this is made for urgent today since Muslims did not take seriously the ethical teaching of the Qur'an which they took to be primarily a book of law; and finally, he posits that the historic formulation of Islam had lost the ethical and metaphysical vision of Islam leading to the continues ethical deterioration of Muslim nations.

A sudden turn of concern appeared in 1987 with his *Health and Medicine in the Islamic Tradition* book, which was Fazlur Rahman's last published in his lifetime. While it represents an attempt to "portray the relationship of Islam as a system of faith and as a tradition to human health and health care", it shows that Fazlur Rahman attempts to connect his previous exposition on ethics and morality in the Qur'an to this domain as demonstrated in the chapter on "Wellness and Illness in the Islamic Worldview"; he extended his concerns on ethics to medical ethics; and he engaged with contemporary and secular ethical issues in this domain generally.

His last published article is titled "Islamization of Knowledge: A Response",⁸⁰ which appears to be an indirect criticism and response to Ismail Faruqi's formulation of Islamization of Knowledge⁸¹ that was advanced on a large scale in the 1980s by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT).⁸² In this article, Fazlur Rahman again took the question of ethics and morality as the thrust of what ought to be the focus of Islamic intellectuals. He argues that since the modern world has misused knowledge, the question to be focused on is *how to make man responsible, instead of merely Islamizing the disciplines of knowledge as the prime focus of IIT*; on the need to be conversant on how modern systems of thought lack *moral priorities* instead of uncritically accepting them; on the need to re-examine the Muslims' intellectual tradition based on what he considered to be the criteria presented by the Qur'an such as the

80 *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 5, No. 1, 1988.

81 Whose book on this subject was titled *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1982.

82 The IIIT was founded in 1981. For more details on their work, see: <https://iiit.org/en/about-us/>

role of the community and Islam in the world; and finally, to cultivate this procedure of judging the Muslims' intellectual tradition first before proceeding to judge the Western tradition as to what is right and what is wrong from their body of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Fazlur Rahman's single-minded devotion to ethical and moral questions must have been shaped by the upbringing and basic ethos of his parents; the traditional Dars-i Nizāmī educational tradition to which he was exposed to; the reformist spirit and works of Muhammad Iqbal, Aḥmad Sirhindī and Shāh Walī Allāh; his philosophical training and in particular in his intellectual trajectory subsequent to the acute skepticism he experienced after studying at the University of Oxford. The acute skepticism Fazlur Rahman experienced in his 30s could be seen as a result of years of possibly unconscious inner tension of negotiating the conflicting postures of the Dars-i Nizāmī tradition, the Muslim philosophers, the reformist spirit of Iqbal vis-a-vis emerging modern ideologies and issues. Thus to the question at which stage Fazlur Rahman began to develop a deeper interest in ethical questions, is probable that it may have been triggered by the intense atmosphere leading to the Partition of India in 1947 which occurred when he was 28 years old, and possibly by the great socio-economic challenges and human suffering as a result of the partition. Some writers have suggested that Fazlur Rahman belonged to a generation that was powerfully moved by the works of Muhammad Iqbal (who died when Fazlur Rahman was 19 years old), and while many Pakistani youths who were inspired by Iqbal became followers of the *Jamā'at-i Islāmī* movement, Fazlur Rahman did not – he declined Maududi's invitation to join the *Jamā'at* on the basis that he preferred to further his studies. Whether his decision was informed or inspired by Iqbal or his father remained unclear – to answer this requires further examination of the ethical-moral debates in Pakistani society before and during that part of his life. In his later years, however, it is clear that Fazlur Rahman would criticize the activism of modern Muslim movements which neglects substantial intellectual content as part of their reform program. It can also be inferred that the main reasons for Fazlur Rahman's concerns on ethical and moral questions stem from his acute skepticism after studying at Oxford University – which in turn may have made him more conscious of how the growing secular-atheistic influence in the world would negatively impact the moral life of the Muslims, and more prominently in his work at Pakistan as Director of the

Islamic Research Institute – which compelled him to consider deeply how Islam can contribute to the improvement of the severe socio-economic conditions of Pakistan; his perception of the influence of the rigid conservatism of traditional teachers of religion or world-negating Sufis in engaging modernity instead of what he terms as ‘enlightened conservatism’ and ‘positive Sufism’. As indicated throughout this article, Fazlur Rahman has been consistent in his discussion on ethics until the end of his life albeit a vastly modified version of his predecessors’ approach towards ethics namely that of Ibn Taymiyyah, Shāh Walī Allāh, and chiefly, Muhammad Iqbal, with the Qur’an as his supreme guide, which he considers as Word of God like every learned Muslim. The Qur’an remained for him as a “living monument of moral and spiritual guidance” and he would contradict approaches that he considered not committing to such viewpoint, whether Muslims or non-Muslims. This article also finds that the formation and approach towards sources on ethics and morality (whether it be the revealed sources of the Qur’an and its elaboration in the Prophetic Statements or Hadith, or the works of earlier scholars on Islamic sciences) in Fazlur Rahman’s works is more due to his intellectual journey, not necessarily due to any direct exposure to Modernist Muslims – though Iqbal’s thoughts and works featured prominently in his scholarship. It is against this backdrop that one can better understand his infamous criticisms of *aspects* of Ash’arite theological school of thought, Shafi’i jurisprudence, as well as Sufi metaphysicians of the past, chiefly al-Ghazali and ibn ‘Arabi, which is beyond the scope of this article. It must be noted also that Fazlur Rahman lived in the West for thirty-four years of his adult life and his encounters and engagement with secular Western ideas may have impacted his thoughts directly or indirectly. Be that as it may, based on the survey of his life and as accounts of his contemporaries indicate, Fazlur Rahman tried his best to live in accordance with his knowledge of religion (in particular, an ethical life)—in other words, he does not live a life of secular dichotomy wherein his scholarship and personal life are fragmented or are in contradictions.