The Concept of Islamic Tradition in Fazlur Rahman's Thought*

When one considers the thought of the late Fazlur Rahman, it can be seen that his main endeavors are confined to "a true understanding of the Qur'an and the Sunnah" — in other words, a "recourse to the Qur'an and the Sunnah in order to get from there an understanding of and a guidance for solving our new problems."[1] This point cannot be ignored by contemporary Muslims striving to overcome their social, political, legal, and religiomoral problems. However, it is not a simple and easy task to return to the Qur'an in order to have a true understanding of it, for there are many obstacles which ensue from history or traditional Islam itself.

I will therefore elucidate and discuss what Rahman means by the concept of tradition and, more specifically, the Islamic tradition or, as he sometimes prefers to call it, the Muslim tradition.[2] We cannot appreciate his views on his Qur'anic methodology and on contemporary issues unless we sufficiently acquaint ourselves with what he means by Islamic tradition and the problems found within Islamic civilization, by which he means the influence that Islamic tradition that had on Islamic civilization and its ultimate consequences on that civilization's outcome.

When we confront the Islamic heritage as a whole, it is important to elicit and bring into the open what "Islamic" and "un-Islamic" meant at that particular point in the past, for this would appear to be crucial for a better understanding of the problem at hand. Once we identify those un-Islamic elements and then eliminate them from our way to development and modernization, we can confine our attention to solving our current problems in light of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. We cannot find adequate answers to our current problems if we are incarcerated in a tradition which is, according to Rahman, contrary to the Qur'an's dynamic and ongoing spirit. On the other hand, there is the naive view which claims that

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[1]Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History* (Karachi, Central Institute of Islamic Research, 1965), 143, hereinafter referred to as *Methodology*.

[2]Fazlur Rahman, "Islamization of Knowledge: A Response," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (September 1988): 3-11.

Islam does not address our modern societies and that it cannot offer solutions for contemporary problems faced by today's Muslims. Watt points to this problem by saying that:

> The thinking of the fundamentalist Islamic intellectuals and of the great masses of ordinary Muslims is still dominated by the standard traditional Islamic worldview and the corresponding self-image of Islam. This is a fact of great importance at the present time when the influence of Islam is increasing throughout the world, since it means that how contemporary problems are seen by many Muslims may be different from how they look to Western observers and statesmen.[3] . . . Unchangingness is an all-pervading assumption which colors most aspects of the standard worldview, and this justifies giving it a prominent place in the presentation. Moreover, it is something which a Westerner finds difficult to appreciate without deliberate effort of thought. The idea of development is part of our general intellectual outlook.[4]

Rahman appeals to Muslims to direct their attention to this end by saying that: "The first task I submit to you, indeed, the urgent task, is to reexamine the Islamic tradition itself."[5] In other words, he perceives the present-day problems of Muslims as stemming directly from the tradition which has developed owing to the Muslims' understanding of Islam, rather than from Islam itself. To use his own words, after the third *hijrī* century, the views of certain prominent thinkers were "hardened" in the form of a tradition that is taken to be the sole and unique representation of Islam. Rahman therefore inclined towards the view that "the understanding of our forefathers is the true and only possible understanding of Islam and therefore unchangeable" is responsible for all subsequent developments in Islamic civilization.

The purpose of this article is to examine Rahman's understanding of tradition and, more specifically, Islamic tradition, and how he believes that this tradition can be utilized to solve certain problems confronting contemporary Islam and Muslims.

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[3]Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1989), 1. Rahman's view of fundamentalism is that "it is even something of a misnomer to call such a phenomena in Islam fundamentalist" except insofar as they emphasize the basis of Islam as being the two original sources: the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. Otherwise, they emphasize ijtihad (original thought), which is something forbidden by Western fundamentalists who, while emphasizing the Bible as the "fundament," reject original or new thought. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 142.

[4]Watt, *Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity*, 3.

[5]Rahman, "Islamization of Knowledge," 8.

Islamic "Tradition" or "Traditional" Islam

The English word "tradition" is derived from the Latin verb *tradere* (lit. to transform, to deliver).[6] Thus, the original meaning of "tradition" refers to "transformation" and, as such, has a religious or ecclesiastical connotation. In this sense, the literal meaning is "the handing down from generation to generation of opinions, beliefs, customs, and so on."[7] Everything that is transformed to us from the previous generations constitutes tradition. But we cannot ignore the fact that what we receive has already been *transformed*, i.e., altered by the interference of that generation. "Transformation" in the first sense simply means "transmitting" or "handing down," whereas in the latter case it means "change," both of which coalesce in the signification of tradition. Therefore, whatever has been transmitted in the tradition has necessarily undergone a "transformation." It is this sense of transformation (i.e., change) which Rahman emphasizes in the very meaning of tradition. If this aspect of alternation in the phenomenon of tradition is not sufficiently perceived by us, we will be unable to appreciate his approach to the whole Islamic tradition, for every critique or modification of a tradition involves a consciousness of what is being criticized or rejected.[8]

Rahman uses the terms "traditional Islam" and "Muslim tradition" interchangeably, thereby maintaining the original meaning of the term "tradition" as both "transformation in the sense of transmission" and "transformation in the sense of alternation." His concept of Islamic tradition views the contributions of former generations as an integral part, a view which implies that there are some new elements that have been contributed to Islam over the course of time, mainly in the area of understanding the Qur'an and the Sunnah. There is, therefore, always the possibility that some un-Islamic elements will be found in that tradition, a development that would arise if Islam were not understood as consisting of only the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

This development, according to Rahman, is normal and acceptable. However, it is both unacceptable and unreasonable to regard traditional Islam as Islam itself and, as a result, to regard it as sacred and unchangeable.[9] This fact led Muslims to the "misunderstanding of the views and interpretations of early generations as the only possible understanding and as a result sacred and unchangeable."[10]

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[6]Carl J. Friedrich, *Tradition and Authority* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 14.

[7]*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1984).

[8]For example: "Islamic tradition was never the same again after the conscious activity of each and all of them": namely al Ash'arī, al Ghazālī, and Ibn Taymīyah. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 10.

[9]For the sacred conception of tradition see Seyyed H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 65-8.

[10]Rahman, *Methodology*, 86-7.

which is patently evident in our political life; its moral emphases could lead only to pessimism. Where cynicism and pessimism are allowed to grow, the life itself revolts and seeks other avenues of self-expression and self-fulfillment — healthy or not-so-healthy.[21]

The same is also true for educational institutions, such as the orthodox schools (*madrasah*), and for philosophy.[22]

Rahman is thus seeking to explain his understanding of Muslim tradition by means of a historical survey. This is also a critical study which is apparently his assessment of the views of early Muslims and, moreover, how some of the concepts under review acquired their meanings in such a context. In addition, he is analyzing how the meanings and contents of these concepts changed over time. In addition, he applies this technique to such concepts as "Sunnah," "*ijmā*," and "ijtihad," and reaches the following conclusion — one which is very important if we are to assess his understanding of tradition:

> The community as a whole had assumed the necessary prerogative of creating and recreating the content of the Prophetic Sunnah, . . . (within which) ijma' was the guarantee for the rectitude, i.e., for the working infallibility (as opposed to absolute or theoretical infallibility, such as assumed by the Christian Church) of the new content.[23]

Early Muslims, by means of this intellectual activity and under the direction of "the spirit in which the Prophet acted in a given historical situation," constructed a dynamic concept of the Sunnah which enabled them to be creative and active in all possible situations. This activity and creativity was controlled by the community's use of *ijmā* (consensus). Rahman calls this active procedure "the living Sunnah," for it is an ongoing process[24] which "created a tremendous effulgence in the intellectual, spiritual, scientific fields."[25] However, the equilibrium and consolidation resulting from the development of the Islamic tradition was not maintained over time. In other words, although the social equilibrium achieved did bestow an extraordinary fecundity and creativity on the Muslim tradition, this phenomenal growth was relatively short-lived, since its structure's content was invested with a halo of sacredness and unchangeability,

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[21]Ibid., 106. See also Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 13-22.

[22]Rahman, *Methodology*, 131-2; 133-4. See also Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, chap. 3; Rahman, *Islam*, 181-93.

[23]Rahman, "Islam and Modernity," 19. For the concepts of *ijmā* and *qiyās*, see Rahman, *Islam*, 68-75.

[24]Rahman, *Methodology*, 87. See also *Islam*, 50-67; Fazlur Rahman, "Some Islamic Issues in the Ayyub Khan Era," in *Essays on Islamic Civilization*, ed. by Donald Little (Leiden: Brill, 1976).

[25]Rahman, *Methodology*, 86.

as an understanding on the part of our predecessors. Islam came to be understood and studied through this established image of Islam. Although Rahman claims that this established tradition contains many Islamic and un-Islamic elements, as well as others which might be said to be on the borderline, the end result, in its entirety, is regarded as the only possible understanding of Islam and, therefore, as unchangeable.[17]

Before going into the details of how this tradition has developed over the course of Islamic history, we will scrutinize Rahman's main argument with regard to its emergence in order to grasp his main objective concerning Islamic tradition. He seems to discern two main stages in the development of early Islamic tradition:

1. Islamic orthodoxy was led, during its early formative phase, to adopt certain more or less extreme remedial measures in order to face certain particular historical exigencies of an extreme nature.
2. These early measures became part of the permanent content of Islamic orthodoxy after the cessation of ijtihad (rethinking, reinterpreting).[18]

In other words, "a particular extreme solution, designed for a particular extreme ailment at a particular juncture of Islamic religious history, became a permanent feature of the orthodox content of Islam, and, further, this extreme solution became extremer and extremer as century after century passed."[19] Rahman thus tries to explain the decline and stagnation of Islamic civilization through trying to determine what exactly is "Islamic tradition" and how it has influenced subsequent generations. He asks: "What is responsible for the sudden flowering of the brilliant Muslim civilization?"[20] His response, found in his critique of Islamic tradition, supplies us with an answer to this question and, at the same time, illumines his concept of tradition and, more specifically, his approach to Islamic tradition. According to his understanding of Islamic tradition, certain consequences can be anticipated:

In the politico-social sphere and, more particularly at the moral plane, the combined effects of some of the doctrines regarded as fundamental by our orthodoxy did have, and could not fail to have, disastrous consequences for the moral constitution of the community; its political attitude was a strong contributory cause of inducing political cynicism

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[17]Rahman, "Islamization of Knowledge," 8; Rahman, *Methodology*, 86-7.
[18]Rahman, *Methodology*, 105.
[19]Ibid., 103.
[20]Ibid., 141.

which is patently evident in our political life; its moral emphases could lead only to pessimism. Where cynicism and pessimism are allowed to grow, the life itself revolts and seeks other avenues of self-expression and self-fulfillment − healthy or not-so-healthy.[21]

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[21]Ibid., 106. See also Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 13-22.

[22]Rahman, *Methodology*, 131-2; 133-4. See also Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, chap. 3; Rahman, *Islam*, 181-93.

[23]Rahman, "Islam and Modernity," 19. For the concepts of *ijmā* and *qiyās*, see Rahman, *Islam*, 68-75.

[24]Rahman, *Methodology*, 87. See also *Islam*, 50-67; Fazlur Rahman, "Some Islamic Issues in the Ayyub Khan Era," in *Essays on Islamic Civilization*, ed. by Donald Little (Leiden: Brill, 1976).

[25]Rahman, *Methodology*, 86.

as it came to be looked upon as uniquely deducible from the Qur'an and the prophetic Sunnah. The growth and flowering of Islamic tradition was, therefore, stifled at its very roots and almost at the very moment when it began to blossom.[26]

Thus, according to Rahman, if we take into consideration the intellectual history of Islam, some of the important political, theological, and moral doctrines which originated in the "living Sunnah," as a result of the Islamic tradition acting on the Qur'an and the prophetic Sunnah, were transformed through "the medium of the Hadith into immutable articles of Faith."[27] Consequently, Rahman's "traditional Islam," or "Muslim tradition" or "established tradition," took its place in the history of Islam and affected the future developments of the Islamic community up to the present day.

There were many attempts and movements (especially during the eighteenth century) which started in different parts of the Muslim world and had as their goal the regeneration of the Islamic tradition and the resolution of the problems arising within that tradition. It is within this trend of regeneration that Rahman's approach to tradition should be evaluated. Therefore, his criticism of Islamic tradition cannot be understood as a destruction, but rather as a reconstruction, of traditional Islam. This means that his concept of Islamic tradition has a complex structure, one projected by his efforts to analyze the problems of contemporary Muslims in accordance with the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In order to see this more clearly, we need to examine Rahman's efforts in other fields of the Islamic tradition, such as society, law, and morality. We shall therefore briefly examine his analysis of what he calls the "making of the Islamic tradition."

It is appropriate here to give some concrete examples as to how Rahman approaches the problem. It seems that his approach is critical and that his attitude is constructive, having as its purpose the restoration of Islam's original vitality and dynamism. His model seems to be the early Muslim community. His treatment of the social fabric of the early generations bears a resemblance to modern critical social theories, such as those of the Frankfurt School. In this case, he can be compared with Habermas for, despite the major differences in their aims and the contexts of their endeavors, there are similarities in their method vis-à-vis social phenomena. A few more words will be said on this point in the concluding section. Here, it is sufficient to point out that Rahman's critical attitude cannot be treated with the fairness it deserves unless one also examines the arguments in defense of his views, which are sometimes in conflict with their more widely accepted counterparts among the adherents of traditional Islam. It should also be noted that his attitude implicitly conforms to Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions and paradigm change.[28]

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[26]Ibid., 87.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970), 43.

Sociopolitical Theory and "Traditional Islam"

Rahman evaluates the emergence of "traditional Islam's" political theory through an analysis of the early Muslim community's political activities or views. The early political upheaval in Islam led to the emergence of certain sects such as Khawārij, the Shi'ah, and the Sunnis (Orthodoxy). Rahman asserts, in accordance with his above-mentioned argument, that the emergence and the political views of the Khawārij and the Shi'ah supplied Sunnism with its political content. Thus, the development of Sunni political views took place over time and as a response to the extremism of the Khawārij and the Shi'ah.[29]

The main motivation behind Sunnism was to maintain the ummah's external solidarity and to save it from dogmatic civil wars. Rahman emphasizes this by pointing out that Sunnism's main feature is "doctrines of submissiveness to the de facto authority."[30] This is an important aspect of his argument, for it explains and underlines the fact that because of this view the doctrine of authority became part of the permanent Sunni belief structure: "The Sunnis had, for ever, become the king's party, almost any king."[31] This understanding of politics led the Sunnis to political opportunism, i.e., to a position which could easily adapt itself to the prevailing political authority. The end result was that the Sunnis chose not to make any serious attempt to challenge or change the existing regime even when it violated Islamic principles.

Rahman's critical analysis of this early formative phase of Islamic political tradition led him to the conclusion that "in political theory . . . the Orthodoxy of the two political extremes adopted the extreme of absolute obedience and conformism."[32] And so in the name of preserving the community's integrity and safety, this Sunni doctrine was forever after maintained as a permanent feature of orthodoxy.

What seems even more interesting in this context is that the ulama did not attempt to develop *shūrā* (a Qur'anic term which can be worked out in some detail and would be more suitable to the spirit of the Qur'an) into an effective and permanent organization. Instead, the ulama "continued to strenuously advocate absolute obedience and, on the other hand, to draw perfectionist pictures of an ideal caliph,"[33] with the result that "the ground was prepared and justification supplied [within the 'Islamic tradition'] for visitation of the Muslim world from the fourth century onward by sultan after sultan and amir after amir."

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[29]"This orthodox political doctrine is the direct result of the political events that occurred in the early history of Islam." Rahman, *Methodology*, 88. See also Rahman, *Islam*, 237-40.

[30]Rahman, *Methodology*, 88; Rahman, *Islam*, 238-40.

[31]Rahman, *Methodology*, 96.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid., 94; Rahman, *Islam*, 239.

Rahman does not accept this account of political theory and thus falls into a crucial conflict with the political sphere of Islamic tradition. However, he neither ignores nor completely brushes this theory aside; he rather points out that there were some historical exigencies which required the adoption of this position[34] and then asserts that the original needs have, over time, passed away and were even forgotten by the orthodox. As a result:

> A genuine historical need was erected into a kind of dogma, with serious results for the politico-social ethic of the Muslim society in the latter Middle Ages, where it encouraged political opportunism on the one hand, and generally inculcated political apathy among the people on the other.[35]

Morality and Traditional Islam

In the case of morality, the most important problem confronting Muslims is the traditional understanding of human freedom. (There is also the problem of good and evil, which will be dealt with in a later section due to its theological implications.) Here, I would like to examine Rahman's approach to freedom from the point of view of traditional Islam. In essence, his contention is that "the same story, as mentioned above, is repeated at the moral plane on the fundamental questions of human freedom and accountability."[36]

To begin with, Rahman's main argument with regard to human freedom and accountability is based on and developed from the Qur'an and the "living Sunnah." He asserts that both the Qur'an and the Prophet's behavior had provided an adequate framework to ensure, on the one hand, the maximum capacity of creative human energy and, on the other hand, to keep this human creativity on the right moral track. He then argues that the Qur'an vividly and forcefully emphasizes the tension that is necessary to bring about the right moral action. At the same time, the Qur'an also severely warns against the nihilist trend, which may trick humanity into considering itself a law unto itself. Thus, he concludes that:

> The Qur'an is not interested in a discussion of the problem of the "freedom of human will" or "determinism" but, on the basis of a true appreciation of the human nature, in releasing to the maximum the

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[34]Rahman, *Methodology*, 96.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid., 97. See also Rahman, *Islam*, 241, in which he states that the case of political dogma is exactly the same: "the thoughtless perpetuation of a dogmatic solution arrived at to meet a particular extreme situation."

creative moral energy of man. The Prophet, in his deeds and sayings, was an actual paradigm of this attitude and the response he evoked from his Companions was nothing essentially otherwise.[37]

This is Rahman's main argument and standing before analyzing the emergence of the traditional account of human freedom and accountability. Pure and speculative discussions or reasoning on the problem, he asserts, began about a century after the Prophet's death with the appearance of two extremist contenders: the Mu'tazilah and their opponents. The Qur'an, in order to keep in view the moral creativity of humanity, emphasizes its potentialities and accountability and the strict justice of God, whereas the Mu'tazilah asserted only the latter point. As a result, "they became irretrievable prisoners of their own position by emphasizing the absolute freedom of the human being. Thus their opponents, especially the Orthodoxy, criticized them for denuding God of all godhead and substituting a naked humanism for the essentials of religion."[38] Orthodoxy, however, "accentuated the Will and Power of God only," so much so that they became totally and irrevocably mortgaged to this doctrine and, over time, erected determinism into an unalterable part of its creed.[39] Rahman then concludes:

> . . . the Orthodoxy was once again manoeuvered into an extreme position. In place of the living, concrete and synthetic moral tension of the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah we have again a conflict of pure and naked extremes. What the Orthodoxy did was essentially to take the latter of these two extremes and install it into its dogmatic structure. Or, rather, the Orthodoxy came into existence on the very plea and with the very programme of installing the omnipotence of God and the impotence of man into a dogma.[40]

As is clear from the above quotation, Rahman treats this issue in a manner which aims at constructing a more dynamic and viable understanding which, at the same time, is (to us) more faithful to the Qur'anic spirit. In fact, this represents his critical approach to other problems of Islamic tradition.

Going into other aspects of this moral issue gives us a better grasp of Rahman's thinking. Two good examples are the doctrine of the independence of faith and the legal definition of a Muslim. In his opinion, "the doctrine of the essential independence of faith vis-à-vis acts was regarded by the majority of the

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[37]Rahman, *Methodology*, 97; Rahman, *Islam*, 241-4.
[38]Rahman, *Methodology*, 98. See also Rahman, *Islam*, chap. 5.
[39]Rahman, *Methodology*, 98.
[40]Ibid.; Rahman, *Islam*, 143-4.

Community as a necessary defence against Kharijism and was adopted in a modified form."[41] But this majority attitude, while harmless in itself, was supported by the Umayyad state which, fearing that an emphasis on human freedom and initiative might unseat it,[42] favored determinism. As a result, certain theories which blatantly contradict the Qur'anic worldview began to emerge in traditional Islam. In the face of such negative developments, how could Islamic tradition pass without the keen criticism of such sincere scholars as Rahman?

Thus once more Rahman tries to show the importance of the historical situation which influenced the nature and direction of intellectual development. He evaluates the problem and points out that the Orthodoxy has adopted this doctrine in order to provide only an external legal definition of a Muslim, and that it did not describe the content of Islam as such. He maintains that the particular historical situation "was not kept in view and the doctrine of the independence of faith and works was allowed to become not merely formal, but a real definition of a Muslim."[43] Rahman regards this formulation of faith, which at the beginning was undoubtedly a reaction against Kharijism and other internal disputes, as extreme and, in the long run, a morally suicidal measure, for he saw it as being almost an exact Muslim replica of the Christian doctrine of "justification by faith."[44]

As a result of this development, determinism became part of the orthodox creed, has been defended ever since by scholars, and gradually became regarded as an unchangeable creedal pillar. During the fourth and fifth centuries AH, for example, Muslim philosophers (being pure rationalists) developed determinism even further and, by identifying causal, rational, and theistic forms of determinism, produced a truly imposing deterministic structure of the universe and of humanity.[45] It is enough to recall Fakhr al Dīn al Rāzī (d. 606AH), the famous and influential theologian who was also a theistic predestinarian of a truly frightening order. Even worse, Rahman maintains, was Sufism, for "most Sufi theosophers carried the doctrine to much greater lengths and, in fact, transformed it completely under their utterly monistic worldview; instead of saying, 'Every act or occurrence is created by God,' they ended up by saying, 'Every act or occurrence is God' through the intermediate statement, 'Every act or occurrence is a manifestation of God.'"[46] Thus not only was there no agent besides God – there was nothing besides Him.

As a result, this attitude eventually generated an undue easing of the religious conscience, a development which obviously lowers the tensions inherent in

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[41]Rahman, *Methodology*, 99.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Ibid., 101.

[46]Ibid., 102; Rahman, *Islam*, 141-8 and chaps. 8 and 9.

making moral decisions and, proportionately, moral standards. In Rahman's view, therefore, the chief property of a Muslim's spiritual and intellectual life — the whole Islamic tradition — became fatalist from approximately the seventh century AH onward, and the accompanying moral-psychological attitude turned out to be passivity.[47] In the face of such developments, if the same train of thought is followed to the end, Islamic tradition cannot remain unquestioned.

Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh) as the Basis of "Islamic Tradition"

As we have seen, Rahman believes that the attitude of the first Muslim generation, namely that of relying on the Qur'an and regarding or understanding the Sunnah as a "living" process, was gradually changed by later developments in Islamic tradition. For example, in the case of Islamic law (fiqh), the second and third generations of Muslims appealed to individual Qur'anic verses and *aḥādīth* in their efforts to resolve issues legally. After this practice was no longer used, two significant and new approaches emerged:

1. If a sufficiently direct and obvious text was available, the matter was considered "settled" for good, and thus a decision on the basis of a "clear text" was given.
2. If such was not the case, a text had to be found that was close enough to the case under consideration so that the issue could be resolved on the basis of similarities, although allowing for differences (*qiyās*).[48]

Both of these traditional legal methods are regarded by Rahman as "loose tools" and as inadequate for resolving any given problem. He believes that this attitude had the consequence of bringing about a proliferation of *aḥādīth* which, in turn, resulted in the cessation of an orderly growth in legal thought in general.[49] Rahman claims that this static attitude on the part of Muslim jurists led to the stagnation of the Islamic tradition's legal sphere and thus gave birth to legal secularism in many Muslim countries.

Although "most modern Muslim thinkers have laid blame for this relative-

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[47]Rahman, *Methodology*, 102; In Rahman, *Islam*, 244, he points out that "it is obvious that any attempt to reconstruct Muslim society and restate Islam, a task in which all important Muslim countries seem to be engaged in their own ways, must take into account the colossal moral and spiritual debris which is the legacy of Sufism."

[48]Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 25. See also Rahman, *Islam*, chap. 4.

[49]Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 26.

ly static state of affairs on the destruction of the caliphate in the mid-thirteenth century [AH] and the political disintegration of the Muslim world," Rahman claims that "the spirit of Islam had become essentially static long before that; indeed, this stagnation was inherent in the bases on which Islamic law was founded."[50] Unfortunately, this fabric of Islamic law or jurisprudence, which was formulated and constructed during the Middle Ages, was thereafter accepted and maintained as the only possible way of understanding it. In other words, it gradually became unchangeable and above criticism. Rahman tries to illustrate some weaknesses in this attitude by means of a question from al Awzā'ī, a younger contemporary of Abū Ḥanīfah, thus once more pointing out this issue's historical character:

> . . . who takes the legislation of alcohol from the Kufans, the legaliza-
> tion of mut'ah "temporary marriage" from certain Makkan fuqaha',
> the legalization of drugs from other Makkan fuqaha' and the legaliza-
> tion of music from the Madinans, he has collected all the evil that
> he can.[51]

Considering the weakness superimposed on the basis of fiqh, as developed in Islamic tradition, it is suggested that Rahman's position regarding this tradition be reconsidered. Can the traditional legal methodology still be effectively employed today in the legal sphere as an integral part of Islamic tradition? The fact that the Qur'an includes many legal injunctions is clear evidence that fiqh can be considered as the basis of the entire Islamic tradition. If this is true, then Rahman's position imposes a crucial task on the Muslims: they should question the very basis of their tradition. This does not, however, mean a total annihilation of Islamic tradition. On the contrary, according to Rahman, without that tradition we would be unable even to understand the Qur'an, the very source of that tradition. In that case, the legal tradition of Islam must be reevaluated in light of the Qur'an itself, for only on such a basis would that tradition be worthy of the name Islamic.

Traditional Theology (*Kalām*) and Sufism

The emergence and development of theology, according to Rahman, displays the same characteristics even more dramatically than the legal tradition. Traditional theology (*kalām*), which took shape during the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries AH, gradually claimed for itself the exalted function of being the

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[50]Ibid.
[51]Rahman, "Islamization of Knowledge," 6.

"defender of the basis of Islamic law" in its more dominant and enduring form of Ash'arī thought.[52] Due to this development in Islamic tradition, Muslim theologians speculated on issues such as: Does an individual have the power to act or not? Does the *qadar* (decree) of Allah include in itself everything as predestined or not? Are good and evil knowable through revelation or reason? Do the divine commandments in the Qur'an have any purpose or are they to be obeyed solely because they are divine commandments?[53]

Such questions have been discussed for centuries. In addition, the main elaborator of Ash'arī doctrine, al Baqillānī (d. 403 AH) even recommended that "every Muslim just as he/she believes in Allah, the Books, the Messengers, the Angels, and the Last Day, must also believe in atomism," which is another characteristic of Ash'arī thought. According to this doctrine:

> The world is all made up of atoms. These atoms are brought together in a certain way, structured in a certain way, so that living beings like us come into existence. Then, when a person dies, the atomistic struc-ture falls apart. Something of this atomic structure, however, remains and then Allah, on the Day of Judgement, will re-create that body around that nucleus.[54]

The Ash'arī doctrine of resurrection, as well as many of their important theological doctrines, is based on this doctrine of atomism. This is perhaps why al Baqillānī recommended that Muslims accept atomism as an article of faith. He viewed it as so basic and so important that he thought that Muslim leaders ought to legislate belief in it. Rahman, however, argues that "this is the Ash'ari doctrine. We may accept it; we may reject it; we may question: 'What is therein that is fully Islamic and what is therein that is less Islamic, and what is therein that is un-Islamic?'"[55]

Holding such a view conveys the idea that there is a gradual development in the making of Islamic tradition. People such as al Ghazālī, al Rāzī, and al Baqillānī belong to a specific time. Their views should therefore be treated and evaluated accordingly, for it is obvious that, as demonstrated by Kuhn, people are influenced by the dominant views and doctrines of their own time (i.e., paradigms)[56] when they try to understand and interpret the Qur'an. Any new elements, which may sometimes be called un-Islamic and new interpretations, arise from this attitude.

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[52]Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 26-7; Rahman, *Islam*, 93.

[53]Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 27; Rahman, "Islamization of Knowledge," 7-8; Rahman, *Islam*, 91-4.

[54]Rahman, "Islamization of Knowledge," 8.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 43, 176.

Rahman gives several concrete examples. For instance, after discussing how al Ghazālī and al Rāzī contributed and developed theology as a system and as an answer to the philosophical system, he once more asks: "How far is al Razi's Ash'arism in conformity with the Qur'an? How far is al Ghazali's teaching in conformity with the Qur'an?"[57] These cases are concrete examples of his analysis and show how Islamic tradition came to be regarded as a static and fixed body of opinions, one which is considered as sacred as the Qur'an itself.

Rahman then applies the same method of critique to Sufism, using the widespread Sufism of the seventh century AH as an example. Ibn al 'Arabī (d. 638 AH) asserted that there was one and only one existence in reality — namely God — and regarded all else as illusion, shadow, or appearance.[58] Rahman, while not rejecting or denying the spiritual refinements or the intellectual sophistication and originality shown by many great Sufis, asks: "Does this Sufism with its pantheistic matrix bear any relationship either to the theology or to the social message of the Qur'an; or indeed, to the conduct of the Prophet himself and that of the early generations of Muslims?"[59]

Within this context, he relates al Ghazālī's life story and his spiritual and intellectual development so that he can demonstrate how a man of al Ghazālī's caliber developed his personality and changed over time. Thus Rahman once again points out the developmental character of the issue by asking if we want to understand Islam from al Ghazālī, how do we go about it? For example: "Was the teaching of theology and law the first phase? Was his second phase more or less Islamic? How about his third phase?"[60]

Although al Ghazālī goes on to say that Sufism is undoubtedly the best path when compared and contrasted with the others (i.e., the paths of the *mutakallimūn*, the philosophers, the Ismā'īlīyah [al Bāṭinīyah]), Rahman still criticizes him for following a path which is not Qur'anic. It is indeed only such a path that has the true characteristic of Islamicity. Rahman thus agrees with Ibn Taymīyah that al Ghazālī is absolutely correct when choosing the Sufi path, for

> it is absolutely correct that, from among these four paths, the path of the Sufis is undoubtedly the best, and despite the fact that there are extremist Sufi groups of all sorts espousing strange views and practices, on the whole, the Sufis are very pious people, God-fearing, and genuine Muslims. But there is another path, a fifth path, and that is the path of the Qur'an and the Prophet.[61]

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[57]Rahman, "Islamization of Knowledge," 8.
[58]Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 27; Rahman, *Islam*, 145-8.
[59]Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 27-8.
[60]Rahman, "Islamization of Knowledge," 9.
[61]Ibid.

But Ibn Taymīyah also noted that al Ghazālī had not thought of this (fifth) path at all. Therefore, when analyzing traditional Islam, all of these facts have to be carefully considered so that a clear and true justification of traditional Islam will be possible.

Considering all the spheres of Islamic tradition discussed above, there is only one remaining aspect: the sources of that tradition – the Qur'an and the Sunnah. It is clear that all of the above specific traditions sprang from these sources as Muslims tried to understand them. Therefore the intellectual efforts of Muslims are the integral part of Islamic tradition as a whole. Indeed, it is this aspect of Islamic tradition which Rahman suggests should be critically reexamined using the perspective of our present-day situation. Such a proposal has significant consequences.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the concept of Islamicity plays a major role in Rahman's understanding of tradition. It is therefore of great importance to inquire into what he means by this concept, for this will enable us to grasp and appreciate his position with regard to the Islamic tradition as a whole.

It is evident from Rahman's works, especially his *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, that he wants to base his views primarily on the Qur'an. As for the Sunnah, he is very cautious about using the *aḥādīth*. In fact, he considers history books (i.e., *siyar, maghāzī, ṭabaqāt*) more reliable than the hadith literature proper.[62] Moreover, he distinguishes the "concept" of the Sunnah from its "content." If we call the former a "conceptual Sunnah" and the latter a "literal Sunnah," then for Rahman it is the "conceptual Sunnah" which gives us universal normative principles. A "literal Sunnah," on the other hand, enables us to understand the *ratio legis* behind the general principles, so to speak. Thus the "conceptual Sunnah" is the one which is binding (it is normative), not the "literal Sunnah." Hence "tradition" in his view is not a cumulative static and unchanging heritage from our past, but rather a dynamic and ever-changing process which should be directed according to the principles derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah.[63] Only in this way can it qualify as an Islamic tradition.

In this context, therefore, it is important for Rahman to distinguish the *Islamic* from the *historic*, which leads him to distinguish normative Islam from historical Islam. The former is temporal, whereas the latter can be properly called tradition. His criterion of true Islamicity is as follows: "A doctrine or an institution

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[62]See, for example, Rahman, "Some Islamic Issues. . . ," 287.

[63]Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 23.

[64]Ibid., 22-3.

is genuinely Islamic to the extent that it flows from the total teaching of the Qur'an and the Sunnah."[64] If this condition is not met, the doctrine is not truly Islamic and thus belongs to Muslim tradition (provided that it is developed by Muslims). If this criterion of true Islamicity were to be applied to the Islamic tradition as a whole, we might be able to elicit its Islamic and un-Islamic components.

There now arises a crucial question: Is Rahman rejecting the Islamic tradition as such? It is clear that he does not accept the unquestionable authority of the past.[65] Hence tradition can be questioned. But, does being critical of tradition involve its rejection? We know that this is not true in Rahman's case, for he criticizes in order to demarcate the tradition's Islamicity from its historical aspect (i.e., its historicity which may be introduced from without) so that when he reaches a new solution for a given contemporary problem, he can justifiably claim that his new solution may be in conflict with the tradition's historicity but not with its Islamicity. Therefore one should not say that Rahman is ignoring or rejecting the tradition.

To him, it is impossible to understand the Qur'an in the absence of tradition and what tradition provides, for: "Although the method I have advocated here is new in form, nevertheless its elements are all traditional. It is the biographers of the Prophet, the Hadith collectors, the historians, and the Qur'an commentators who have preserved for us the general social-historical background of the Qur'an and the Prophet's activity."[66] Thus Rahman's attitude towards tradition does not involve a total annihilation of Islamic tradition: moreover, without that tradition, Rahman claims that we would be unable to understand the very sources of that tradition — the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

To sum up, Rahman's method is both critical and dialectical, as he wants to study in a critical manner both traditional Islam and how this tradition was formed, i.e., the environment in which the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet and its subsequent development, so that the un-Islamic elements in our tradition can be discerned and discarded. Such a method gives us the opportunity to develop a more effective hermeneutical interpretation of the Qur'an, one which considers the Qur'an as a whole and in its proper context. Since, as Rahman claims, "no systematic attempt has ever been made to understand the Qur'an in the order in which it was revealed,"[67] he asserts that his method is original and can be summarized as follows: The Qur'an must first be taken as unity or as a whole on the one hand, and the Sunnah of the Prophet on the other. He then says that "any viable set of Islamic laws and institutions must be derived from a twofold movement: First, one must move from the concrete case of treatments of the Qur'an — taking the necessary and relevant social conditions of the time into

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[65]Ibid., 143.
[66]Ibid.
[67]Ibid.

account — to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. Second, from this general level there must be a movement back to specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant social conditions now obtaining." In short, the process of interpretation proposed by Rahman consists of a double movement, first from the present situation to Qur'anic times and then back to the present.[68] This can also be done over time, and new interpretations might sometimes be available. In other words, it is not necessary that a certain interpretation, once accepted, be accepted forever; there is always enough room, and the necessity, for new interpretations. This also explains why Rahman claims that tradition is not normative and hence not binding. Our interpretation of the Qur'an is also open to criticism and rejection by subsequent generations of Muslims.

Rahman's critical method can be compared and contrasted with Habermas's critical theory, for there are many similarities between the two contemporary thinkers despite their very different backgrounds and different aims for employing the critical method.

The role and function of a critical theory, in brief, is precisely that of emancipating us from our present stage of false consciousness by enlightening us about its causes. This process takes place, according to Habermas, in three stages:

1. It makes us aware of the unconscious determinants of our present consciousness. We come to see that our current legitimating beliefs have not in fact been rationally acquired, and thus our present desires and corresponding patterns of social behavior are out of line with our real human interests.
2. Then, we rise to a true understanding of our social situation and attain an objective knowledge of the social world.
3. This objective knowledge is claimed to set us free.[69]

In other words, Habermas attempts to develop a critical theory of society with practical intentions: the liberation of the human being, with the aid of an analysis of modern society, from all forms of unnecessary domination. The resultant critical theory is to be directed at overcoming the systematic distortions of thought, speech, and action inhibiting the self-understanding of those social groups capable of bringing about an emancipatory transformation of social life.[70]

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[68]For details of this method, see Ibid., 1-11.

[69]R. Roderick, "The Theory of Communicative Action," *Political Theory* 14, no. 1 (February 1986): 152.

[70]Q. Skinner, "Habermas's Reformulation," *The New York Review* (10 July 1982): 37. See also Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. T. McCarthy, vol. 1 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), IV; Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundation of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 3.

Therefore, according to Habermas, the lifeworld must not be viewed as a transcendental constitute but as one reproduced over time, which means that its structures change dynamically and temporally. So a critical social theory, in the Habermasian sense, not only diagnoses social crises but also evaluates the present in light of its future emancipatory potential, namely, "critical social theory gives us the hope of a better future, provides the courage to live in the present."[71] What distinguishes Rahman from Habermas is that he uses reason enlightened by revelation, whereas Habermas employs in his method the criticism of reason by reason.[72] I have attempted here to point out by way of allusion a palpable similarity between Rahman and Habermas. This point, however, needs to be investigated more deeply in order to assess Rahman's position as a Muslim social scientist.

When we consider the general outline of Rahman's Qur'anic insight, as presented here, we see that in order to break the vicious circle of stultifying tradition, a Muslim must make a clear distinction between "normative" Islam and "historical" Islam, i.e., Islamic "tradition." From this initial distinction follows Rahman's dialectical and critical approach to Islamic tradition and his distinctive method for understanding and interpreting the Qur'an.[73] By means of this critical method, tradition can be evaluated and even changed, a possibility which gives us the courage to overcome our current problems in light of the total teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Considering the task Rahman assigns to Muslims, we have a long way to go before we achieve that goal.

Ibrahim Özdemir
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[71]Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, 15.

[72]Habermas confines the first volume of his famous book *The Theory of Communicative Action* to "Reason and the Rationalization of Society."

[73]See also S. Parvez Manzoor, "Damning History But Saving the Text," *Inquiry* (December 1989): 66.