Fazlur Rahman's Influence on Contemporary Islamic Thought

Abstract

This article examines the influence of Fazlur Rahman, one of the most widely quoted scholars among contemporary Muslim modernists, on contemporary Islamic thought. It explores how Rahman's ideas about revelation and the interpretation of the Qurʾān have influenced some contemporary Muslim scholars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Arash Naraqi, Abdullah Saeed, Nurcholish Madjid, Farid Esack and Amina Wadud, and thus has given rise – whether directly or indirectly – to such schools of thought as Islamic liberation theology and feminist exegesis of the Qurʾān. The article also provides a critical evaluation the thought of Fazlur Rahman, and examines how its shortcomings have been rectified by his followers.

Key words: Fazlur Rahman, revelation, Qurʾānic hermeneutics, feminist exegesis, liberation theology, contextualist scholars

The Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman (d.1988) is one of the most influential and widely quoted scholars among contemporary Muslim modernists. His contributions to the field of Islamic Studies include works on Islamic theology, philosophy, ethics and law. In several of his articles and books, Rahman criticized traditional approaches to interpreting the Qurʾān developed by Muslim scholars in the course of Islamic history. He initiated a new hermeneutical approach to interpreting the Qurʾān and a critical study of the Sunnah which inspired many scholars and intellectuals in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

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The majority of studies on Fazlur Rahman's works have focused on his approach to interpreting the Qurʾān[1] and little has been written about his influence on the generation of Muslim scholars that followed him. Only a few scholars have acknowledged the influence of his works and their contribution to the field of Islamic Studies. Frederick Mathewson Denny states, "Wherever I have traveled in the world … I have never met a Muslim scholar or other specialist on Islam who has not heard of Fazlur Rahman or who is neutral about his contributions to the making sense of life in Islamic ways."[2] Denny points to the strong influence that Rahman's thought has had in countries or regions as diverse as North America, Egypt, Jordan, the West Bank, the Peninsula, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Europe.[3] Along similar lines, Abdullah Saeed states that Rahman's ideas have been highly influential in Turkey and Indonesia.[4] Rotraud Wielandt argues that Rahman "became the major source of inspiration for a number of Turkish scholars, known as the 'School of Ankara'."[5] Among the most prominent representatives of this group of scholars, Wielandt points to Mehmet Paçacı (b.1959) and Ömer Özsoy (b.1963).[6] Further, Safet Bektovic has briefly examined the influence of Rahman's ideas on such Indonesian scholars as Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid.[7] Sukidi considers the possibility that Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd has been influenced by Rahman's "double movement" theory when making "a case for the hermeneutic study of the Qurʾān with a humanistic orientation."[8] Finally, Ohlander[9] and Hidayatollah[10] have briefly examined the impact of Rahman's ideas on the rise of feminist exegetes such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas.

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[1] For some studies on Fazlur Rahman see Kenneth Cragg, *The Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qurʾan* (London: George Allen & Unwin Cragg, 1985), 91-108; R. Kevin Jacques, "Fazlur Rahman: Prophecy, the Qurʾan, and Islamic Reform," *Studies in Contemporary Islam* 4 (2002), 63-83; Abdullah Saeed, "Fazlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-Legal Content of the Quran," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 37-66, Massimo Campanini, *The Qurʾan: Modern Muslim Interpretations*, trans. Caroline Higgitt (London: Routledge, 2011), 77-82; Katajun Amirpur, *New Thinking in Islam: The Jihad for Democracy, Freedom and Women's Rights*, trans. Eric Ormsby (London: Gingko Library, 2015), 66-87; Katharina Volker, "Two Accounts of Qurʾānic Revelation," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 26 (2015), 273-278. Safet Bektovic, "Towards a neo-modernist Islam: Fazlur Rahman and the rethinking Islamic tradition and modernity," *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 70 (2016), 160-178.

[2] Frederick Mathewson Denny, "Fazlur Rahman: Muslim Intellectual," *Muslim World* 79 (1989): 101.

[3] Denny, "Fazlur Rahman: Muslim Intellectual," 101.

[4] Saeed, "Fazlur Rahman," 39.

[5] Rotraud Wielandt, "Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought from the Late Nineteenth Century to Present Times," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 739.

[6] Wielandt, "Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought," 740.

[7] Bektovic, "Towards a neo-modernist Islam," 172-173.

[8] Sukidi "Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Quest for a Humanistic Hermeneutics of the Qurʾān," *Die Welt des Islams* 49 (2009), 211.

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Despite these contributions, no comprehensive study on the influence of Fazlur Rahman's ideas on the next generation of Muslim scholars after his death has appeared yet. To address this lacuna, this article aims to outline Rahman's legacy, examining the extent to which his ideas have contributed in some important respects to a re-thinking of the methods of Qurʾānic interpretation followed by scholars of Islamic Studies. As such, the main questions that this article seeks to address are: To what extent have Rahman's ideas inspired Muslim scholars in interpreting the Qurʾān? To what extent have scholars during the past three decades attempted to re-think, or to address the main shortcomings of, Rahman's ideas about the interpretation of the Qurʾān? Instead of exploring the impacts of Rahman's ideas on the rise of new social or theological thinking in some Muslim-majority countries such as Turkey, Indonesia and Iran, this article explores Rahman's influence on some individual Muslim scholars, such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Arash Naraqi, Abdullah Saeed and Nurcholis Madjid, and on some lines of scholarly thought that emerged during the past few decades, such as feminist exegesis of the Qurʾān and Islamic liberation theology. It should be noted from the very outset that when exploring the influence of Rahman on the aforementioned scholars or schools of thought, this article will not analyze the complete oeuvre of these scholars, but only consider salient elements of their work insofar as they reflect Rahman's ideas about revelation and his approach to interpreting the Qurʾān. In other words, it is not claimed in this article that these scholars' projects are totally influenced by Rahman, but rather that certain features of these projects reflect Rahman's influence.

Fazlur Rahman: A short biography

Born in British India in 1919, Fazlur Rahman completed his doctoral studies at the University of Oxford, writing his thesis on the medieval Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina under the supervision Hamilton A. R. Gibb and Simon van den Bergh. After completing his studies, Rahman taught at the University of Durham, and then joined the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Montreal. In 1961, he was invited by the then president of the Pakistan, Ayub Khan, to undertake a series of studies in the area of Islamic Studies. Consequently, he became the director of the Central Islamic Research Council from 1962 to 1968.[11] Some of the ideas that Rahman

[9] Erik Ohlander, "Modern Qurʾanic Hermeneutics," *Religion Compass* 3 (2009), 630-631.
[10] Aysha Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qurʾan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 87-90.

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developed during these years – especially his understanding of revelation and the Prophet's role in it, as well as his interpretation of the *miʿrāj* as a spiritual event, and his proposals for new methods of Qurʾānic interpretation – were considered heretical by some conservative religious scholars of Pakistan, to the point that the journal *al-Bayyināt* described him as a *munkir Qur'an* (denier in the Qurʾān).[12] Faced with public agitation and threats to his life, including posters announcing a price on his head, Rahman was forced to leave Pakistan. He accepted an offer from the University of California, and later went on to work at the University of Chicago as an appointed professor of Islamic thought, where he stayed until the end of his life.

Rahman's ideas about revelation and Qurʾānic hermeneutics

Fazlur Rahman rejects the traditional account of revelation, which holds that the Prophet merely received the Qurʾān, and played no part in shaping its content. Instead, he suggests that Muhammad's personality, his experiences, decisions, feelings and reflections, played a significant role in the formation of the content of revelation. According to Rahman, the Qurʾān is of transcendent origin, since it was revealed by God, but its content is also related to the personality of the Prophet Muhammad and his reactions to the circumstances that he and his community confronted in the era of revelation.[13] It would be irrational, Rahman thinks, to suppose that the Qurʾān was revealed "without involving … the activity of the Prophet as the central background-activity which included [his] policy, commands, decisions etc."[14] In the past, Rahman emphasizes, Muslim scholars and Qurʾānic commentators did not have the intellectual tools to grasp the connection between "the verbal character of the revelation on the one hand, and its intimate connection with the work and religious personality of the Prophet on the other."[15] For Rahman, the Islamic revelation has a twofold (divine and human) nature and the Qurʾān is considered to be God's Word and the Prophet's word simultaneously: "The Qurʾān is

[11] Farid Panjwani, "Fazlur Rahman and the Search for Authentic Islamic Education: A Critical Appreciation," *Curriculum Inquiry* 42 (2012), 34-35.
[12] Fazlur Rahman, "Some Islamic Issues in the Ayyub Khan Era," in Essays on Islamic Civilization: Presented to Niyazi Berkes, ed. D. P. Little (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 300.
[13] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 33.
[14] Fazlur Rahman, "Concepts Sunnah, Ijtihad and Ijmā in the Early Period," *Islamic Studies* 1 (1962), 10.
[15] Rahman, *Islam*, 31.

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entirely the Word of God insofar as it is infallible and absolutely free from falsehood, but, insofar as it comes to the Prophet's heart and then his tongue, it was entirely his word".[16]

There are two key ideas associated with Rahman's hermeneutical approach to the Qurʾān. First, the revelation of the Qurʾān took place in a concrete historical situation and reflected the circumstances of the seventh-century Arabian society and the first audiences of the Prophet. Indeed, the Qurʾān is "God's response through Muhammad's mind … to a historic situation".[17] This factor, Rahman emphasizes, has been "drastically restricted by the Islamic orthodoxy in a real understanding of the Qurʾān".[18] For Rahman, any examination of the meaning of the Qurʾān should follow a historical-critical approach. Central to such an approach is the idea that the Qurʾān's "concerns, interests and guidance were directly connected with and organically related to the linguistic, cultural, political, economic and religious life" of the Arabs of the seventh-century, to whom the text was initially revealed.[19] Each of the Qurʾānic pronouncements on social, political and moral matters therefore had a background rooted in the "flesh and blood of history".[20] Understanding the Qurʾān requires one to acquire knowledge about its proper context which includes "the struggle of the Prophet and the background of that struggle."[21]

The second key idea in Rahman's approach to the interpretation of the Qurʾān is that the text has an ethical foundation: "the basic *élan* of the Qurʾān is moral."[22] The Prophet, whose personality played a key role in shaping the worldview of the Qurʾān, aimed to constitute social justice and moral values in his society.[23] Rahman argued that there was a general failure of Islamic thought in the course of history to identify the underlying unity of the Qurʾān's message, which has to do with themes of ethics and justice.[24] Indeed, Muslim scholars failed to produce a coherent ethical system out of the Qurʾān itself: "a Qurʾānic ethics was never worked out by Muslims."[25]

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[16] Rahman, "Some Islamic Issues in the Ayyub Khan Era," 299.
[17] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 8.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Saeed, "Fazlur Rahman," 47.
[20] Fazlur Rahman, "Islam: Legacy and Contemporary Challenge," in *Islam in the Contemporary World,* ed. Cyriac K. Pullapilly (Notre Dame: Cross Road Books, 1980), 409.
[21] Fazlur Rahman, "Interpreting the Qurʾān," *Inquiry* 3 (1986), 46.
[22] Rahman, *Islam*, 33.
[23] Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 15.
[24] Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 3.
[25] Fazlur Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam," in *Ethics in Islam: Ninth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Biennial Conference* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1985), 12.

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According to Rahman, it is the Qurʾān's focus on questions of ethics and justice that give the text a certain unity and the Qurʾān must be approached in a way that this "unity will emerge in its fullness."[26]

Therefore, central to Rahman's hermeneutic approach is the idea that the Qurʾān has to be read as a unity, not in an atomistic way. The Qurʾān is often interpreted following an "atomistic approach" by many Muslim scholars who are unable "to understand the underlying unity of the Qurʾān, coupled with a practical insistence upon fixing on the words of various verses in isolation."[27] The Qurʾān does not include "a jumble of isolated or mutually contradictory ideas," Rahman argues.[28] Therefore, "to select certain verses from the Qurʾān to project a partial and subjective point of view … necessarily does violence to the Qurʾān itself and results in extremely dangerous abstractions".[29]

The implication of Rahman's hermeneutical approach is twofold. First, it entails that the Qurʾān should not be approached as a legal manuscript made up of specific rules and literal injunctions: "The Qurʾān is primarily a book of religious and moral principles and exhortations, and is not a legal document".[30] For Rahman, in the Qurʾān, "general legislation forms a very tiny part of Islamic teaching."[31] This shows that Rahman invoked a challenge to those classical Muslim jurists and contemporary Muslim scholars who placed great importance on the Qurʾān's legal precepts: "the Qurʾān is not a ... legal document that Muslim lawyers have made it to be"[32] and "does not give many general principles: for the most part it gives solutions to and rulings upon specific and concrete historical issues."[33]

The second implication of Rahman's hermeneutics is that those verses of the Qurʾān dealing with legal matters must be approached and understood as fulfilling a moral purpose. The Qurʾān contains some legal enunciations, but their applications have to be first examined within the broader historical context in which the Prophet lived, and then examined in light of the moral ideal that stands behind them. For Rahman, ethics is superior to "specific theology" or any

[26] Fazlur Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qurʾan* (Chicago, Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), 15.
[27] Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 2-3.
[28] Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam," 13.
[29] Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qurʾan*, 15.
[30] Rahman, *Islam*, 37.
[31] Rahman, "Concepts Sunnah, Ijtihad and Ijmā in the Early Period," 10-11.
[32] Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam," 8.
[33] Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 20.

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particular legal Qurʾānic precept: "after ethics comes law, and that law must satisfy the demands of the Qurʾān as a unitary teaching".[34] Rahman refers to this approach as the "double movement theory". The first movement includes an examination of the immediate setting of revelation. This enables interpreters of the Qurʾān to understand Qurʾānic verses, especially those related to socio-legal matters, in light of the historical context and cultural milieu within which they were revealed, and thus grasp the original intention behind them. These original intentions form the basis of the general or universal principles or messages of the Qurʾān. In the second movement, the general or universal principle or values achieved in the first movement should be used as a basis for formulating laws related to the contemporary situation.[35]

Fazlur Rahman's influence

Abdolkarim Soroush: a humanistic approach to the Qurʾān

Fazlur Rahman played an important role in the formation of a trend of scholarship among Muslim scholars which has been identified as a "humanistic approach to the Qurʾān".[36] One of the representatives of this school of thinking is the Iranian scholar Abdolkarim Soroush. In a fashion reminiscent of Rahman's approach, Soroush attempts to historicize the notion of revelation by emphasizing that the revelation was the product of Muhammad's human experiences, and is intimately related to his personality. Soroush himself has referred to Rahman's works in his lectures and interviews, and seems to have been aware of Rahman's ideas even in his early academic career.[37]

Like Rahman, Soroush shows a deep appreciation of the Prophet's personality, viewing Muhammad as much more than a passive channel for conveying God's message. Unlike the traditional Islamic theories of revelation, which do not normally deal with revelation as part of a larger discussion of Muhammad's personality, Soroush places the Prophet's personality at the

[34] Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam," 12.
[35] Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 5-6, 20.
[36] For an overview of this line of thinking among see Ali Akbar, "Towards a humanistic approach to the Quran: new direction in contemporary Islamic thought," *Culture and Religion* 2018, 1-22.
[37] For example see Abdolkarim Soroush, "Mosāḥebeh Daryoosh Sajjadi ba Doktor Soroush" [Interview of Dr. Soroush with Daryush Sajjadi], 2005, accessed 25 February 2019, <http://www.drsoroush.com/Persian/Interviews/P-INT-13841218-HomaTV.html>; Abdolkarim Soroush, "Ṣuratī bar bī-Ṣuratī" [Forming the Formless], 2005, accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YI--tefKok>; Abdolkarim Soroush, "Revisiting Violence in Islam," 2012, accessed 25 February, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0qyeCSOLu4> .

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very center of the revelation, and argues that he played an active role in shaping the content of revelation: "The Prophet's personality is the core; it is everything that God has granted to the Muslim community. Religion is woven through and through with this personality."[38] The Prophet's personality was "both the receptacle and the generator, both the subject and the object of his revelatory experiences."[39] As the Prophet's personality grew, Soroush argues, so his revelatory experiences expanded.[40] Like Rahman, who emphasizes the importance of "the actual life of the Prophet and the environment in which he moved" in shaping the content of revelation,[41] Soroush argues that the Qurʾān is the product of the Prophet's spiritual and social experiences. The Qurʾān has a dialogical nature in the sense that many of its verses reflect the needs of the nascent Muslim community as well as the Prophet's responses to questions posed to him by his community.[42] This is the method by which Soroush attempts to emphasize that the Qurʾān has not only a divine nature, but also a human aspect; and this approach is reminiscent of Rahman's idea that the "Qurʾān is … pure Divine Word, but of course, it is equally intimately related to the inmost personality of the Prophet Muhammad whose relationship to it cannot be mechanically conceived like that of a record."[43]

In Fazlur Rahman's theory of revelation, the agent of revelation is not held to be an angel, as traditionally understood, but rather what Rahman describes as the "Spirit". The Spirit was not an external agent in relation to the Prophet, and did not have a physical nature, but rather was a faculty or an agency that developed inside the Prophet's mind, meaning that it was "spiritual and internal" to Muhammad.[44] Rahman stated that "the popular traditional accounts of the utter externality of the agency of Revelation cannot be accepted as correct."[45] In keeping with Rahman's theory of revelation, Soroush considers the angel of revelation to be a part of the Prophet, not a physical and external being vis-à-vis the Prophet. Specifically, Soroush argues that the angel of revelation should be viewed as a part of the Prophet's intellect, meaning that when

[38] Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, trans. Nilou Mobasser (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 16.
[39] Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 11-12.
[40] Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 12
[41] Rahman, "Concepts Sunnah, Ijtihad and Ijmā in the Early Period," 10.
[42] Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 17, 328.
[43] Rahman, *Islam*, 33.
[44] Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qurʾan*, 97.
[45] Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qurʾan*, 100.

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Gabriel "speaks", it is actually Muhammad's higher self "speaking" to his lower self.[46] For Soroush, "the angel's arrival, the delivery of revelation and the like are events that occur within the Prophet's being".[47] Like Rahman, who argues that "the standard orthodox accounts of revelation give a mechanical and externalistic picture of the relationship between Muhammad and the Qurʾān – Gabriel coming and delivering God's messages to him almost like a postman delivering letters",[48] Soroush criticizes the traditional theory of revelation insofar as it merely "sees an angel constantly flitting back and forth between God and the Prophet like a winged messenger" – a model that "posits a speaker-loudspeaker relationship between God and the Prophet" and "reduces to zero the relevance and involvement of the Prophet's heart and mind in revelation."[49]

The likening of revelation to poetry (or mysticism) in Soroush's writings is by and large similar to Rahman's view. Rahman argues that, although the ultimate origin of revelation "must be traced and referred to a source" beyond the mind of the Prophet, revelation is "psychologically similar and forms ascending degrees of the same phenomena of creative inspiration."[50] For Rahman, "There exists … an organic relationship between feelings, ideas and words" in both divine revelation and in poetic inspirations.[51] Like Rahman, Soroush places revelation at the same level as other human experiences in terms of how the actual process takes place, although he considers revelation a special form of experience essentially rooted in the divine. Soroush argues that mystics, poets and prophets share similar experiences only insofar as the psychological process of revelation is concerned. Their experiences, that is, are different in terms of their ultimate sources, and thus Soroush concludes that the revelatory experience of the prophet is superior to that of poets and mystics: "revelation is higher poetry".[52]

Arash Naraqi: discourse of homosexuality

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[46] Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 293.
[47] Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 332.
[48] Rahman, "Some Islamic Issues in the Ayyub Khan Era," 299.
[49] Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 329.
[50] Fazlur Rahman, "Divine Revelation and the Prophet", *Hamdard Islamicus* 1 (1978), 114.
[51] Rahman, *Islam*, 33.
[52] Abdolkarim Soroush, "The Word of Muhammad: An Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush by Michel Hoebin," 2007, accessed 25 February 2019, <http://www.drSoroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-The%20Word%20of%20Mohammad.html>.

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Another Iranian scholar living in exile who has been influenced by Fazlur Rahman is Arash Naraqi. Naraqi is one of the few Muslim scholars who has questioned the prohibition of same-sex sexual acts, based on a new reading of the Qurʾānic verses related to homosexuality. Naraqi begins his argument by stating that the Qurʾān does not explicitly prescribe punishments for the acts of male (*liwāt*) or female (*sihāq*) homosexuality. He argues that the Qurʾānic verses concerning the condemnation of same-sex sexual acts, especially those verses in which the people of Lot are denounced (such as Q 7:80-81; Q 26:165-166; Q 27:54-55; Q 29:28-29), are ambiguous and contested, and thus open to reinterpretation.[53] Naraqi interprets the Qurʾānic narrative of Lot in a way different to most classical interpreters. According to him, the acts of Lot's people for which they were punished included their rejection of the prophet and infidelity (*kufr*) and they were not punished only for their sexual acts.[54]

Naraqi also follows the contextualizing approach developed by Rahman to support his idea that homosexuality should not be condemned in today's context. Even if an interpreter believes that the Qurʾānic narrative of Lot supports the condemnation of homosexuality, Naraqi argues, he/she should recognize that the Qurʾān cannot be fully understood apart from the historical and cultural context in which it emerged. Naraqi argues that the Qurʾānic verses, and in general the ideas of pre-modern Muslim commentators, about same-sex sexual relationships are related to their particular social and historical context. Leaning on Rahman's double-movement theory, Naraqi states that revelatory discourse (*goftemān-e waḥyānī*) is essentially a message between a sender (God) and a receiver (humanity).[55] In order for the receiver to appropriately understand the message, the sender should take into consideration the cultural context or the knowledge of immediate addressees of revelation. Today's interpreters, Naraqi argues, should understand "the main purpose of the text or the Qurʾānic discourse" (*payām-e aslī-e matn yā goftemān Qurʾānī*) in such a way that today's addressees can understand "revelatory experience" (*tajrobeh-e waḥyānī*) in light of the contemporary world context and its concerns.[56] Using this approach, Naraqi argues that the purpose of sexual activity in pre-modern eras was procreation. It was in this context that homosexuality was condemned as a transgression against God's will. During the

[53] Arash Naraqi, "Islam va masʾaleh-e hamjens-gerāei," [Islam and the question of homosexuality], 2014, PDF version is available at <http://arashnaraghi.org/wp/?p=577>, 59.
[54] Naraqi, "Islam va masʾaleh-e hamjens-gerāei," 44-54.
[55] Naraqi, "Islam va masʾaleh-e hamjens-gerāei," 55.
[56] Naraqi, "Islam va masʾaleh-e hamjens-gerāei," 56.

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era of revelation, and in pre-modern times generally, homosexuality stood against the very purpose of creation. Naraqi writes:

> The verses related to homosexuality [in the Qurʾān] represent the specific historical conditions in the pre-modern world. During the pre-modern era the average life expectancy was short and the mortality rate was high. Further, the physical strength of humans was the most important factor in economic production and military functions. [Having] a large number of children represented a family's strength and power. It was in this context that pre-modern societies recognized procreation as an ethical value … Any sexual relation that did not lead to childbirth was considered unethical.[57]

Naraqi states that the precepts found in the Qurʾān related to same-sex relations represent the ethical norms and values that were prevalent in the era of revelation. In today's context, in which procreation does not necessarily represent an ethical value, the Qurʾānic provisions about homosexuality can go under substantial revision. In the same way that the precepts of the Qurʾān concerning slavery and women's rights can be reinterpreted in the light of contemporary concerns, the verses of the Qurʾān that discuss homosexuality in one way or another – even if they explicitly condemn same-sex sexual acts – can be reinterpreted in this way too. Accordingly, Naraqi concludes that nothing would be compromised in Islamic theology if Muslims believed that the condemnation of homosexuality and the classical Islamic precepts about same-sex sexual relations were deemed irrelevant or outdated in the contemporary context.[58] In this way Naraqi expands Fazlur Rahman's ideas about gender equality to same-sex relationships.

Naraqi uses another idea to argue that homosexuality should not be condemned in the contemporary context. Citing Rahman's idea that Muslim modernists should "tend to give primacy to the demand of justice,"[59] Naraqi argues that it is unjust in today's context to discriminate against a particular group of people within society because of their sexual orientation. Naraqi argues that the main function of the Qurʾān is to promote justice in society, and accordingly he employs a liberation theology approach in his interpretation of the Qurʾānic

[57] Naraqi, "Islam va masʾaleh-e hamjens-gerāei," 58.
[58] Naraqi, "Islam va masʾaleh-e hamjens-gerāei," 58.
[59] Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qurʾan*, 48; Naraqi, "Islam va masʾaleh-e hamjens-gerāei," 56.

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verses related to sexual and gender minorities. An interpreter, Naraqi argues, should strive for justice in solidarity not only with the poor and the oppressed, but also with gender minorities.[60] For Naraqi, "when an interpreter reaches the conclusion that the dominant understanding or interpretation of Islamic sources concerning a particular issue is inconsistent with [the current understanding of justice], he/she can reinterpret it in a way that a consistency [between them] is established".[61] Indeed, as our context and social realities shift, so too should our interpretation of the Qurʾān. An interpreter should bring about social change in order to dismantle the status quo if it is considered unjust. In the present case, this concerns the condemnation of homosexuals.

Whether or not Naraqi's argument is valid is beyond the scope of this essay. What is significant, at least for the purpose of this essay, is that Naraqi used Rahman's ideas to argue that the theme of gender justice, from the Qurʾānic perspective, should be developed in a way that nobody experiences discrimination based on his/her sexual orientation. Although Rahman never applied his approach to the discourse of homosexuality, Naraqi did so.

Abdullah Saeed and Nurcholish Madjid: discourse of contextualization

Abdullah Saeed is another Muslim scholar who advocates a contextualizing approach to interpreting the Qurʾān such as that developed by Fazalur Rahman. As Saeed himself acknowledges in one of his latest books *Reading the Qurʾān in the Twenty-First Century*, "For the most part, I rely on the ideas and commentary provided by Fazlur Rahman in his *Major Themes of the Qurʾān*."[62] The question of context is an important feature of Saeed's Qurʾānic exegesis. Like Rahman who states that Muslims should undertake an exhaustive study of the seventh-century Arabian society, including its politics, economics, culture and social norms and values, Saeed argues that "the existing norms, values and institutions of pre-Islamic Arabia" should be studied by interpreters of the Qurʾān, since they are largely "mirrored or reflected in, but not always necessarily endorsed by, the Qurʾān."[63]

[60] Naraqi, "Islam va masʾaleh-e hamjens-gerāei," 42.
[61] Naraqi, "Islam va masʾaleh-e hamjens-gerāei," 37.
[62] Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-first Century: A Contextualist Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 94.
[63] Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-first Century*, 44, 94; Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qurʾan: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 117.

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Like Rahman's thesis, the hermeneutical task of distinguishing between the eternal principles and historically-bound particulars contained in the Qurʾān lies at the heart of Saeed's writings. The immutable precepts of the Qurʾān include its "obligatory" and "fundamental" values. The former concerns matters of faith (such as belief in God, divine unity, Judgment Day and the Hereafter), and those related to devotional practices (such as prayer, fasting and pilgrimage).[64] According to Saeed, those Qurʾānic texts that discuss theological concerns such as God and the afterlife are not "context-dependent or culturally specific."[65] Such texts "can be immediately read, understood, and applied within a whole range of different contexts in different times, places, and circumstances. Believers can easily relate to them regardless of their specific contexts."[66] This echoes Rahman's idea that "for the theological or metaphysical statements of the Qurʾān, the specific revelational background is not necessary, as it is for its social-legal pronouncement."[67] The "fundamental" values too which are fixed and immutable include those related to "basic human values", such as the defense of life, family and property.[68]

There are, however, some passages in the Qurʾān that respond to specific situations that the nascent Muslim community confronted during the era of revelation, and thus are mutable and cannot be applied in all times and places. These texts, which Saeed refers to as "ethico-legal" passages, "include those that relate to legal matters such as marriage and divorce or inheritance as well as those that refer to the roles of men and women in society, or slaves and slavery, or the status of non-Muslims in Muslim societies."[69]

In a fashion reminiscent of Rahman's double movement theory, Saeed suggests that interpreters of the Qurʾān should carefully explore the original context of the Qurʾān, or what he terms "macro context 1", and then attempt to relate the interpretation of certain themes of the Qurʾān, especially its "ethico-legal" passages, to the contemporary context, or what he terms "macro context 2". The interpreter should be aware of these two macro contexts, and should compare them "to determine the values, norms, and ideas that are specific to each context and to identify

[64] Saeed, Abdullah, *Interpreting the Qurʾan*, 130.
[65] Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-first Century*, 6.
[66] Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-first Century*, 6
[67] Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 154.
[68] Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-first Century*, 132-133; Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-first Century*, 65-68.
[69] Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-first Century*, 6-7.

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any similarities or differences between" them (Saeed 2014: 106).[70] In this process, as explained above, the interpreter identifies the messages "that appear to be specific to macro context 1" and "the ways in which the message can be applied to macro context 2". Like Rahman, who argues that "each legal or quasi-legal pronouncement [of the Qurʾān] is accompanied by a *ratio legis* explaining why a law is being enunciated",[71] Saeed argues that in moving from macro context 1 to macro context 2, the interpreter should be aware of the fact that "the *ratio legis* of the legal pronouncement of the text" remains fixed, and thus concludes that "there may have been a socio-historical background and context that warranted [a specific legislation]; when the situation changes … the laws has to be rethought anew".[72]

Another scholar whose contextualist project was inspired by Rahman was Nurcholish Madjid, an Indonesian scholar "who went on to become a leading Indonesian intellectual and played a major role in broadening Islamic studies and developing Islamic liberalism and democracy in Indonesia".[73] Unlike other scholars whose ideas have been explored in this article so far, Nurcholish worked directly with Rahman for a few years. As his biographers note, Norcholish went to the University of Chicago for a postgraduate degree in 1978, and although he initially worked with Leonard Binder on a project in the area of political science, he then switched to an Islamic Studies programme, working under Rahman.[74]

Nurcholish's thesis regarding the interpretation of the Qurʾān is highly similar to that of Rahman. Inspired by the latter, Nurcholish developed a contextual approach to interpreting the Qurʾān and its socio-legal passages based on their specific social and historical contexts. Influenced by Rahman's idea about *ratio legis*, Nurcholish argued that "the application of a law is determined by the reason for which it was prescribed. If this reason changes, then the application of the law changes."[75] Indeed, the legal precepts of the Qurʾān cannot be fully understood in isolation from

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[70] Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-first Century*, 106.
[71] Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qurʾan*, 48.
[72] Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-first Century*, 106.
[73] Abdullah Saeed, "Reading the Qurʾān," in *A Companion to the Muslim World*, ed. Amyn B. Sajoo (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 75.
[74] Greg Braton, "Indonesia's Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid as intellectual Ulama: The meeting of Islamic traditionalism and modernism in neo-modernist thought," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8 (1997), 333.
[75] For a comprehensive study of Nurcholis's thesis see Jones, Anthony, Saeed Abdullah 2004 "Nurcholish Madjid and the interpretation of the Qurʾān," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 83.

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the purposes for which they were revealed. Nurcholish maintains that Qurʾānic rulings should be applied in the present context only on the basis of their *ʿilal al-ḥukm* (the efficient causes of the ruling). Therefore, like Rahman, Nurcholish rejected the implementation of the traditional *fiqh* in today's world: "*fiqh* has lost its relevance to the present mode of living. Its complete renovation, however, such that it might become suitable for modern life, would require a comprehensive knowledge of modern life in all its aspects."[76]

Discourse of liberation theology

The main aim of the discourse of Islamic liberation theology is to interpret the Qurʾān from the perspective of the poor, oppressed and marginalized groups and communities in society.[77] Accordingly, the notion of socio-economic justice is central to Islamic liberation theology, and the Qurʾān is often treated by the proponents of this tendency in a way that concepts such as fairness and justice are highlighted. The emergence of Islamic liberation theology among some Muslim scholars has been inspired in some important respects by their engagement with the pioneers of liberation theology in the West, such as G. Gutiérrez, C. Torres and L. Boeff, to name a few.[78] However, Fazlur Rahman himself played a significant role in the emergence of a discourse of Islamic liberation theology. As already noted, Rahman emphasizes that the concept of social justice is central in the Qurʾān and Muhammad's prophetic mission: "A central aim of the Qurʾān is to establish a viable social order on earth that will be just".[79] Chronologically, the concept of social justice is highlighted in the Qurʾān, even before the Qurʾān's emphasis on final judgment.[80] The Qurʾān focuses on egalitarian social order and severely condemns "the economic disequilibrium and social inequalities prevalent in the contemporary commercial Meccan society".[81] Rahman argues that the importance of social justice in Muhammad's mission is evident from the attitude of his opponents in Mecca. The Meccans were threatened by the message of Islam not only because of its insistence on monotheism, but also because of

[76] Nurcholish Madjid, "The Necessity of Renewing Islamic Thought and Reinvigorating Religious Understanding," in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 294.
[77] See Adis Duderija, *The Imperatives of Progressive Islam* (London: Routledge, 2017), 75-76.
[78] Duderija, *The Imperatives of Progressive Islam*, 75-76
[79] Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qurʾan*, 37.
[80] Rahman, *Islam*, 15.
[81] Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qurʾan*, 38.

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Mohammad's emphasis on social justice through his condemnation of usury and his call for *zakāt*. They were threatened by Islam's message that wealth should be shared equally, and thus feared losing sources of their income.[82]

Most of the scholars whose ideas have been explored so far have indicated in their writings that justice is a crucial part of the Qurʾānic message. As discussed, Naraqi employs Rahman's idea about the importance of social justice in the Qurʾān to challenge the dominant view about the Qurʾānic verses related to sexual and gender minorities. Inspired by Rahman, Saeed argues that the fundamental social message of the Qurʾān includes "the moral imperatives of fairness and justice, and its concern for the marginalized, the weak, and the vulnerable."[83] Along similar lines, and reflecting the same influence of Rahman, Nurcholish argues that the Qurʾān is a text which is fundamentally concerned with social justice and the public good: "The principal teachings of Islam [include] social justice and the care and protection of the weak, the poor, and the oppressed, as contained in many passages of the Qurʾān."[84]

The South African Muslim scholar Farid Esack (b.1957) is another proponent of the liberation theology. Inspired by pioneers of liberation theology in the West[85] as well as some Muslim scholars, such as Fazlur Rahman, Esack develops an Islamic theory of liberation based on his Qurʾānic hermeneutics. Esack himself has acknowledged that Fazlur Rahman has engaged in reading the Qurʾān from the viewpoint of "liberative praxis."[86] In his *Qurʾān, Liberation and Pluralism*, Esack states that his interest in Fazlur Rahman began when he studied at the *madrasah* in Karachi.[87] Esack's idea about the importance of context in the interpretation of the Qurʾān is close to Rahman's. Central to Esack's liberation theology is the idea that the Qurʾān is a book that aims to bring about justice among human beings: "The Qurʾān offers itself as an inspiration and guide for comprehensive insurrection against the status quo. It, furthermore, asks to be read through the eyes of a commitment to the destruction of oppression and aggression and

[82] Fazlur Rahman, "Islam's Origin and Ideals," in *Islamic Identity and the Struggle for Justice*, ed. Nimat Hafez Barazangi, M. Raquibuz Zaman and Omar Afzal (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 12; Rahman, *Islam*, 15.
[83] Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-first Century*, 180.
[84] Madjid, "The Necessity of Renewing Islamic Thought and Reinvigorating Religious Understanding," 287.
[85] For this influence see Shadaab Rahemtulla, *Quran of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25-26.
[86] Farid Esack, *Qurʾān, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: OneWorld Publication, 2002), 11.
[87] Esack, *Qurʾān, Liberation and Pluralism*, 64.

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the establishment of justice."[88] Like Rahman, Esack argues that the Qurʾān's fundamental message is found in its call for the creation of a new society based on socio-economic justice. Esack expands Fazlur Rahman's idea that the Prophet's mission was oriented towards implementing justice in society, to the extent that he coined the term "prophetic solidarity" to refer to the Qurʾānic message that the faithful should challenge an unjust system, and engage with those marginalized and oppressed communities of the world who are confronted with injustice.[89]

Discourse of gender equality

Women's interpretations of the Qurʾān are a relatively recent trend, since Qurʾānic exegesis has been largely dominated by men throughout the history of Islam. As Aisha Geissinger has noted, in the history of commentary on the Qurʾān "the possibility that any woman could be regarded as having the ability to interpret the Qurʾān" was excluded, and this ruled out giving much "legitimacy to any interpretations attributed to a woman."[90] In a context in which women rarely had access to higher education, the corpuses of interpretation generated by women during the pre-modern eras remained limited to a few works.[91] This male-centered hermeneutics has shifted during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to a reading of the Qurʾān by female scholars that affirms egalitarian and non-patriarchal visions of gender. One may specifically point to the exegetical discourse that has been shaped by a number of female Muslim scholars such as Amina Wadud (b.1952) and Asma Barlas (b.1950). Their discourse is marked by a questioning of patriarchal or misogynistic readings of the Qurʾān in which certain Qurʾānic legislations, such as those related to polygamy or unequal distribution of inheritance, have undergone substantial revision. Fazlur Rahman played an important role in shaping non-patriarchal interpretations of the Qurʾān – especially ones that came into being during the late twentieth and early-twenty first centuries.

[88] Esack, *Qurʾān, Liberation and Pluralism*, 106.
[89] Esack, *Qurʾān, Liberation and Pluralism*, 104.
[90] Aisha Geissinger, *Gender and Muslim Constructions of Exegetical Authority: A Rereading of the Classical Genre of Qurʾān Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 275.
[91] It is often argued that some of the Prophet's wives, such as Aisha and Umma Salama engaged in the task of interpreting the Qurʾān.

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In her *Qurʾān and Woman*, Wadud states that "I attempt to use [in this book] the method of Qurʾānic interpretation proposed by Fazlur Rahman."[92] Leaning on Rahman's ideas, Wadud criticizes the use of an atomistic methodology in the traditional *tafsīr*, and advocates a hermeneutic that emphasizes textual unity and an overarching Qurʾānic weltanschauung. Like Rahman, Wadud argues that "traditional Qurʾānic exegesis is atomistic."[93] For Wadud, "the atomistic approach that characterizes traditional exegesis does not sufficiently explain or exemplify the extent and impact of total Qurʾānic coherence."[94] Wadud's hermeneutic is marked by a desire to uncover the underlying spirit of the text as embodied in such principles as "justice, equity, harmony, moral responsibility, spiritual awareness and development."[95] The Qurʾān, including the passages that concern women or women's issues, should be read holistically in light of these major principles. Therefore, interpreters should "understand the principles intended by the particulars" since "principles are eternal and can be applied in various social contexts."[96] Like Rahman, Wadud argues that the Qurʾān is a text whose goal is to guide humanity with moral values, and thus it is not primarily book that prescribes laws for every human action.[97] Further, using methods of historical criticism similar to those employed by Rahman, Wadud argues that interpreters of the Qurʾān should discover the broader social, political, economic and cultural milieu in which the text was revealed.[98]

Rahman's hermeneutical principles are also emphasized by Asma Barlas. For Barlas, exegetes should discern the Qurʾān's general principles, which are applicable to all times and places, from its particulars, which are historically bounded and are only specific to certain circumstances.[99] This can be achieved by undertaking a holistic approach – not an "atomistic" one which downplays the internal consistency of the text. The Qurʾān should be treated "holistically" and "as a unity".[100] In her writings, Barlas emphasizes that the Qurʾān was revealed in a specific historical context, and its language, too, is shaped by this inescapable context: "there is a

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[92] Amina Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4-5.
[93] Amina Wadud, "Quran, Gender and Interpretive Possibilities," *Hawwa* 2 (2004), 327.
[94] Wadud, "Quran, Gender and Interpretive Possibilities," 331.
[95] Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman*, 3.
[96] Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman*, 9.
[97] Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman*, 29, 33-34.
[98] Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman*, 62-63.
[99] Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 60.
[100] Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 17.

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coherence between the [Qurʾān's] contents and contexts."[101] Barlas argues that the Qurʾān "occurred in the light of history" and its penal provisions are responses to "the social conditions that were characteristics of the Arabian tribes fourteen centuries ago."[102] Therefore, the interpreter should "read behind the text" (that is, "to reconstruct the historical context from which the text emerged"), and also "read in front of the text" (that is, "to re-contextualize the text in light of present needs."[103] This echoes Rahman's double movement theory, to which Barlas herself acknowledges her debt.[104] Accordingly, Barlas concludes that although interpreters should recognize "the historical contexts and specificity of the Qurʾān's teachings", they should not assume that "the *moral purpose* of the Qurʾān is limited to Arabic society", or that they cannot derive universal principles such as justice from it.[105]

Using the above-mentioned hermeneutical approaches, both Wadud and Barlas make a case against patriarchal readings of the Qurʾān. As discussed, central to Wadud's and Barlas's hermeneutics is the idea that the historical context of Arabian society in the seventh century shaped the pronouncements of the Qurʾān. Both Wadud and Barlas often follow this hermeneutic approach in their writings to argue that many verses of the Qurʾān related to women's status should be reevaluated in light of the contemporary circumstances if the original context has changed.[106] For example, Wadud and Barlas argue that the Qurʾān's espousal of polygamy (Q 4:3) is closely connected to a specific historical circumstance in which warfare had led to the emergence of orphans in the nascent Muslim community. The Qurʾān allowed polygamy in this context to protect orphans. Indeed, the Qurʾān was responding through this verse to a specific historical situation, and thus polygamy is not applicable for all times.[107] The approach of Wadud and Barlas in interpreting this verse also echoes Rahman's idea that "one must understand the import or meaning of a given statement by studying the historical situation or problem to which it was the answer."[108] In another example, both Wadud and Barlas use methods of historical contextualization to interpret the Qurʾānic verse (Q 4:34) that "Men are the guardians

[101] Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 58.
[102] Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 59.
[103] Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 62, 200-203.
[104] Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 24.
[105] Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 59.
[106] Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 51, 205
[107] Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman*, 83; Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 190-191.
[108] Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 6.

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(*qawwāmūn*) of women because of the advantage God has granted some of them over others." According to Wadud[109] and Barlas[110], the verse was revealed in a context in which the husband played the main role as the family breadwinner. In the contemporary context, in which both men and women are economically productive, male guardianship is no longer necessary.

Rahman's idea: analysis and criticism

This section includes the present author's analysis of Rahman's ideas about revelation, methods of interpreting the Qurʾān, and the socio-political implications of his re-examination of traditional Qurʾānic hermeneutics. I also examine whether any of the shortcomings of Rahman's ideas have been rectified by his students, followers, or other scholars who have been in some way influenced by his thinking.

Rahman on revelation

Rahman's study of philosophy raised a number of important questions for him about revelation and the nature of Qurʾān which gradually led him to depart from the traditional discourses in this area. As Rahman himself acknowledged, "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."[111] However, his approach towards Islamic philosophy was ambivalent. On one hand, Rahman defended philosophers' reason-based faith, and took inspiration from certain philosophical doctrines when developing his ideas about revelation and the nature of prophecy. He appreciated many medieval Muslim philosophers' idea that the prophets possessed a strong imaginative faculty which enabled them to transform religious intellectual truths, including images and visions which they received in the process of revelation, into verbal modes that are immediately accessible. Rahman's theory of revelation is rooted in this idea.[112] Like the medieval Muslim philosophers especially al-Fārābi and Ibn Sīnā, Rahman believes that the Prophet's mind should be in a receptive state, and that he must improve its potential powers to become the recipient of revelation. Indeed, for Rahman and the aforementioned philosophers, the

[109] Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman*, 70-71
[110] Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 186.
[111] Fazlur Rahman, "My Belief-in-Action," in *The Courage of Conviction*, ed. Phillip L. Berman (Santa Barbara: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1985), 154-155.
[112] For an exploration of these ideas in Rahman's work see: Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 36-45.

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encounter between God and His Prophet required human preparation.[113] In addition, like al-Fārābi and Ibn Sīnā, Rahman also considers revelation to involve an emanation of knowledge from God.[114] Another viewpoint that these philosophers and Rahman have in common has to do with the active participation or involvement of the prophet's human faculties and efforts in the process of gaining knowledge or prophetic revelations.[115] Indeed, they all believe that the Prophet was not a passive recipient of revelation, but had an active role in the process.

Despite his admiration for Islamic philosophy and his debt to the ideas of Muslim philosophers such as al-Fārābi and Ibn Sīnā with regards to revelation and prophecy, Rahman castigated Muslim philosophers for the creation of "a perilous situation" in their "overall judgment on the nature of religion and its implications for the Sharia."[116] The medieval Muslim philosophical system, as Rahman indicates, reduced religion "to a kind of spiritual mockery".[117] Although Rahman defended a humanistic approach to revelation and the interpretation of the Qurʾān, in such a way that he maintained that the Qurʾān is both divine and human in its character, nevertheless, he criticized the humanistic approaches of such philosophers as al-Fārābi and Ibn Sīnā to explaining the nature of revelation. As Rahman asserts, in the medieval Islamic philosophical system, Revelation is reduced to a merely intellectual truth; and this caused philosophers to neglect the ethical principles highlighted in the Qurʾān itself. Rahman even states that Ibn Sīnā's approach to revelation "seems to me to deprive him of all means to interpret the Koran by the Koran itself".[118] Accordingly, "Muslim philosophers [in general] were headed in the wrong direction" and allowed the penetration of Greek thought into the Islamic world in such a way that its integrity diminished.[119] Therefore, although Rahman heavily drew on medieval

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[113] Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qurʾan*, 91; Fazlur Rahman, "Muhammad and the Qurʾān," in *Commitment and Commemoration: Jews, Christians and Muslims in Dialogue*, ed. Andre LaCocque (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1994), 11. For similar ideas among philosophers see C. A. Qadir, *Philosophy and Science in the Islamic World* (London: Routledge, 1990), 221.
[114] Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qurʾan*, 98, 100. For the philosophers' views about this issue see: Muhsin Mahdi, a*l-Farabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 153-156.
[115] For these philosophers, prophecy is an office that the Prophet acquired through his faculty of intellect and his power of imagination. Accordingly, the Prophet's contribution to revelation includes the involvement of his faculty of imagination and intellect within the process of revelation.
[116] Rahman, *Islam*, 120.
[117] Rahman, *Islam*, 120.
[118] Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 45.
[119] Cited in Megan Brankley Abbas, "Between Western Academia and Pakistan: Fazlur Rahman the fight for fusionism", *Modern Asian Studies* 51 (2017), 744.

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Muslim philosophers' understanding of revelation to develop his theory of revelation, he consistently attacked them for their views about the nature of the Qurʾān and prophecy.

The importance of pretext in reading the text

Some scholars of modern Islamic thought argue that Rahman has been influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer's (d.2002) hermeneutic theory,[120] while others believe that his interpretive method resonates more with the tenets of Emilio Betti's (d.1968) "Objectivity School" than those of Gadamer's "Subjectivity School".[121] For Gadamer, readers of a given text are preconditioned by their socio-political and cultural milieus which create a "horizon" of understanding, and thus no interpretation is void of fore-understanding.[122] Gadamer argues that the starting point of an interpretation of a given text is the interpreter's preconceptions, and thus interpretation does not take place in a vacuum and without preconceived perceptions. The interpretation given by an interpreter is not necessarily one that reflects the author's original intention, but is rather an expression of a particular significance that the text has for the interpreter in the light of his historical circumstances.[123] Being a captive within the hermeneutic circle, an interpreter can never escape his subjectivism, and thus is unable to extrapolate the author's intention. Betti's objectivist hermeneutic, however, is based on the idea that one should seek to achieve the stable meaning of the text, capturing the original intent of its author. Betti does not ignore the fact that any interpreter may understand the text from his/her own perspective, but he believes that every text has a determinate meaning that is retrievable using appropriate canons, and which is not entirely dependent on the interpreter's subjectivity and context. Betti emphasizes the autonomous meaning of the text and proposes a theory that ascribes to it an "ideal objectivity."[124]

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[120] See Earle H. Waugh, "The Legacies of Fazlur Rahman for Islam in America," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 16 (1999), 31-32. Tamara Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Feminism," in *The Shaping of An American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahamn*, ed. Earle H. Waugh, Frederick M. Denny (Atlanta: Scholars Press for the University of South Florida, 1998), 126.
[121] Ebrahim Moosa, 2000 "Introduction," in *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2000), 19; Yusuf Rahman, "The Qurʾān in Egypt: Nasr Abu Zayd's Literary Approach," in *Coming to the Terms with the Qurʾān: A Volume in Honor of Professor Issa Boullata*, ed. Khaleel Mohammed, Andrew Rippin (North Haledon: Islamic Publications International, no date), 251.
[122] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum Books, 1975), 296.
[123] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283.
[124] Emilio Betti, "Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the Geisteswissenschaften," in *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, ed. Josef Bleicher (London: Routledge, 1990), 58-85.

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Rahman admits that the Qurʾān can be interpreted differently in various historical settings, but does not acknowledge the role that the subjectivity of an interpreter may play in the process of Qurʾānic interpretation. In fact, in Rahman's hermeneutics, little attention is given to the fact that an interpreter inescapably brings a *pretext* to his or her understanding of a text – one that is conditioned by class, gender, religious orientation and ethnicity, to mention few factors – and that this contextual baggage constitutes an inevitable element of interpretation. Rahman highlights the "principle of totality" in such a way that all tendencies to relativize the understanding of the text to one's own point of view are suppressed. That is, for Rahman, the primary intent of the Qurʾān remains intact and can be reached objectively, regardless of the subjectivity of its interpreter. Indeed, reflecting Betti's objective hermeneutics, Rahman does not shed light on how one's subjectivity plays a significant role in one's interpretation of the Qurʾān.

Many of those scholars who have been influenced by Rahman have made important contributions to rethink this aspect of Rahman's ideas about the interpretation of the Qurʾān. Saeed, for example, argues that we should acknowledge the inevitable influence of an interpreter's subjectivity in the process interpretation. The relation between the text, the message, the interpreter, and the cultural context in which the task of interpretation is being undertaken, contribute to the process of producing meaning. Saeed affirms that "because the text is a social phenomenon functioning within a given society, the meaning of the text depends also on the expectations and conditions of that society."[125] For him, "each interpreter always brings into interpretation his or her own experiences, ideas, beliefs, values, and presuppositions, and these will have a significant influence on the interpretation."[126] In other words, Saeed acknowledges that one's subjectivity plays an important role in producing an interpretation.

Like Saeed, Soroush argues that every interpretation of a text reflects the interpreter's epistemic understanding of the world and his/her preconceptions and prior knowledge. The task of interpretation does not take place with an empty mind.[127] For Soroush, even the great *mufassir* in the course of Islamic history brought certain preconceived ideas into their interpretation of the

[125] Saeed, *Interpreting the Qurʾan*, 109.
[126] Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-first Century*, 94.
[127] Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qabd va Basṭ-e Teʿorīk-e Sharīʿat* [*The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Sharīʿat*] (Tehran: Sirat Publication, 1995), 270.

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Qurʾān.[128] Along similar lines, Esack, referring to the concept of the hermeneutic circle, confirms that "our engagement with the Qurʾān takes place within the confines of this prison; we cannot extricate ourselves from and place ourselves above language, culture and tradition."[129] For their part, scholars such as Wadud and Barlas who have been influenced by Rahman have occasionally acknowledged in their writings that interpretation is a human exercise that is limited by the contextual baggage of the interpreter, and so inevitably reflects the pre-assumptions and worldview of the interpreter, including his or her race, gender, class background, religious orientation and some other factors.[130] Wadud states that "every 'reading' reflects, in part, the intentions of the text, as well as the 'prior text' of the one who makes the 'reading'."[131]

Rahman on Qurʾānic ethics

As already stated, for Rahman, the Qurʾān should be read in a way that its moral purposes and objectives are highlighted. The basic message of the Qurʾān is found in its emphasis on "socioeconomic justice and essential human egalitarianism."[132] Rahman criticized medieval Muslim philosophers such as al-Fārābi and Ibn Sīnā for their failure to identify the Qurʾān as a unity and as a text whose fundamental message is morality and justice. As such, ethical themes in the Islamic world, as Rahman asserts, are not worked out on the basis of what the Qurʾān itself teaches, but "were adopted from outside sources" and then "expressed mostly in Islamic terminology."[133]

Rahman does not seem to accept the independence of morality from religion, nor does he believe in the derivation of ethical norms from non-Qurʾānic sources. Morality and religion are closely intertwined in Rahman's thesis in a way that Rahman does not see the possibility of morality without Holy Scripture. For Rahman, jurisprudential maxims should be evaluated in every historical era based on an ethical perspective, but this ethical perspective should generally be

[128] For example, Soroush suggests that ʿAllameh Tabātabāi's defense of the philosophical concept of casualty and his philosophical orientation played a role in his interpretive method. See: Soroush, *Qabz va Baṣṭ-e Teʿorīk-e Sharīʿat*, 359
[129] Esack, *Qurʾān, Liberation and Pluralism*, 76.
[130] Amina Wadud, 2000 "Alternative Qurʾānic interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women," in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press), 11; Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 118.
[131] Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman*, 1.
[132] Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 19.
[133] Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 3.

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derived from a religious standpoint. Doesn't this suggest that there is no other way of determining moral right and wrong except through understanding revelation? Along these lines, Rahman found the secular worldview as a threat to Islamic moral values. Secularism, for Rahman, "destroys the sanctity and universality (transcendence) of all moral values" and "is necessarily atheistic".[134] As Safet Bektovic has argued, Rahman "was concerned with formulating distinctively Islamic-Qurʾānic ethics, and did it probably because he thought that such ethics were missing in Islam … Nevertheless, it seems that he did not take as much account of the relationship between Islamic ethics, secular ethics and universal ethics."[135]

The implications of Rahman's hermeneutic in political arena

For Rahman, democracy – or a representative form of government – is necessary for Muslims in today's context.[136] He criticizes the Islamist scholar ʿAbul Aʿla Mawdudi (d.1979) who rejects democracy and equates it with *shirk*.[137] Although Rahman states that "the Islamic concept of *shūra-ijmāʿ* is not quite compatible with a multi-party system as it is practiced in modern democracies,"[138] the weight of his argument manifested in his works tends toward equating democracy with *shūrā*, since he considers "the principle of democracy as embodied as the Qurʾanic *shura*".[139] Rahman himself states that his argument is in line with the views of those scholars who "have contended that the only valid Muslim rule is through shūrā, which in the world of today means a representative form of government."[140] Rahman equates *shūrā* with democracy and maintains the corresponding argument that "all human rights, universally recognized, are automatically vouchsafed and guaranteed by a [Muslim] Government based on *shura*."[141] This implies that he considers *shūrā* as a sufficient basis for establishing a democratic structure in today's context.

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[134] Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 15.
[135] Bektovic, "Towards a neo-modernist Islam," 172.
[136] Fazlur Rahman, "The Islamic Concept of State," in *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, ed. John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 264.
[137] Rahman, "The Islamic Concept of State," 264
[138] Rahman, "The Islamic Concept of State," 262.
[139] Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and Political Action: Politics in the Service of Religion," in *Cities of Gods: Faith, Politics and Pluralism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Nigel Biggar, Jamie S. Scott, William Schweiker (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 157.
[140] Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam," 11.
[141] Rahman, "The Islamic Concept of State," 265.

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Rahman's main reason for the necessity of the implementation of democratic norms in today's context derives mainly from the Qurʾānic injunction that Muslims should conduct their affairs through the principle of *shūrā*.[142] In Rahman's political view, the ultimate basis for democracy should be taken from the Qurʾān. His method does not leave enough room for acknowledging the importance of an extra-Qurʾānic grounding of democracy and does not take as much account of the significance of democracy beyond its religious justifications. In the same way that Rahman does not acknowledge the independence of morality from religion, he does not exclude the possibility of deriving modern democratic norms for governing today's society from the Qurʾānic injunctions of *shūrā*. As such, Rahman implicitly suggests that traditional Islamic teachings, or a reinterpretation of these teachings, could be sufficient to formulate laws for governing societies in today's context.[143]

Rahman's argument for equating democracy with *shūra* is not totally consistent with his proposal that the Qurʾān is a response through the Prophet's mind to the socio-ethical problems of seventh-century Arabia, and that the Qurʾānic themes dealing with socio-political matters should be approached within the constraints of the context of the Qurʾān's revelation and its "epistemic scheme".[144] Since the revelation occurred within a specific historical context and within the limits of the prophet's worldview and that of his contemporaries – well before the development of modern notions of democracy – we cannot simply equate the latter with a concept that was prevalent in seventh-century Arabia, namely the institution of *shūrā*. The broader socio-historical context of the Arabian society and the worldview of the immediate addressees of the Qurʾān did not allow for the rise of democratic norms in the modern sense of the word. *Shūrā*, as a pre-Islamic institution, had its own relevance for the nascent Islamic community, and was formulated at a time when many of today's problems and issues regarding governance did not exist. Equating democracy with *shūrā*, therefore, essentially divorces revelation from the prevailing epistemic framework within and through which it emerged, and thus results in a way of viewing revelation as an event that stands outside the historical or the

[142] Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam," 6.
[143] Kathrina Volker has also drawn the same conclusion. According to her, what is deduced from Rahman's understanding of the Qurʾanic term *shūrā* is that "*shūrā* implies consultation between all parts of society" (Volker Qurʾan and Reform: Rahman, Arkoun, Abū Zayd. PhD diss., University of Otago, 2009, 131) and that *shūrā* is "a sufficient basis for a democratic structure" (Volker, Qurʾan and Reform, 179).
[144] The term "epistemic scheme" is used by Dahlen in *Islamic Law, Epistemology and Modernity: Legal Philosophy in Contemporary Iran*. ed. Shahrough Akhavi (New York: Routledge, 2003), 64-84.

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contextual framework of its emergence – an idea that stands in tension with Rahman's contextualist approach.

In sum, although Rahman recognizes the necessity of reforming social policies in Islamic countries in the modern period, and advocates democracy as an appropriate form of governance, he does not apply his hermeneutic approach in the context of advancing such political arguments. In addition, his avowal of democracy is not based on an extra-religious justification; instead, he attempts to find purely theological justifications for his arguments in support of democracy.[145]

Rahman's arguments concerning these political matters have not been developed in the post-Islamist period.[146] Some of Rahman's students, such as Nurcholish Madjid[147], as well as some scholars who have been influenced by him, such as Abdolkarim Soroush, have reconsidered Rahman's arguments as they apply to the political realm, and have acknowledged the importance of some aspects of the discourse of democracy-beyond-religion. They do not attempt to reinterpret the Qurʾān and classical Islamic sources to present a democratic version of government based on religion. They have instead built a non-religious point of departure for a model of governance. For example, Soroush argues:

> [I make] no attempt to place the entire weight of the conceptual edifice of democracy upon the frail shoulders of such (intrareligious) precepts as consultation [*shūra*], consensus of the faithful [*ijmāʿ*] and oath of loyalty to a ruler [*beyʿat*]. Rather, the discourse on religious government should commence with a discussion of human rights, justice and restriction of power [which are] all extra-religious issues.[148]

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[145] See also Ali Akbar, *Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Qurʾānic Hermeneutics: An Analysis of Four Discourses* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 53-55.

[146] Post-Islamism is a discourse that emerged during the twenty-first century among some Muslim scholars. It acknowledges secular exigencies and favors a civil and nonreligious state, while it does not disregard the active role that religion may play in the public sphere (for some discussions about discourse of post-Islamism see Asef Bayat, "The Making of Post-Islamist Iran," in *Post-Islamism: The Changing Face of Political Islam*, ed. Asef Bayat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Naser Ghobadzadeh, *Religious secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Ali Akbar, "The Political Discourses of three Contemporary Muslim Scholars: Secular, Nonsecular, or Pseudosecular?" *Digest of Middle East Studies* 25 (2016), 393-408; Yadullah Shahibzadeh, *Islamism and Post-Islamism in Iran: An Intellectual History* (Oslo: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[147] For Nurcholish's argument see: Bektovic, "Towards a neo-modernist Islam," 172.

[148] Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, trans. Mahmud Sadri, Ahmad Sadri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 132.

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Soroush criticizes those Muslims who attempt to defend democracy on the basis of Qurʾānic concepts as consultation (*shūra*), consensus (*ijmāʿ*), and the oath of loyalty to a ruler (*beyʿat*). In particular, he criticizes Fazlur Rahman's ideas: "I do not agree with Fazlur Rahman and some other Arab authors that we can use some inter-religious principles such as *beyʿat* and *shūra* to build a modern democracy."[149] According to Soroush, democracy and human rights, in their contemporary forms, stand "outside the domain of religion".[150] To support his argument, Soroush argues that people in the modern period pursue rights, not just duties and obligations.[151] There is a crucial difference, therefore, between pre-modern and modern societies with respect to their epistemological paradigms. Soroush suggests that values and institutions like democracy and human rights are the end products of modernity, and could not have emerged in pre-modern societies, including among the Prophet's community.[152] Building on this argument, Soroush avoids projecting present norms into the past, making a sharp distinction between *shūra* and democracy.

Whither justice?

As already noted, Rahman and his followers – especially those scholars who promote principles such as equal sexual rights and gender equality, as well as a theology of liberation based on reinterpretation of the Qurʾān, such as Naraqi, Esack and Wadud – argue that justice is a central theme of the Qurʾān, and that all Qurʾānic rulings should be interpreted in light of this theme. What all these scholars simply take it for granted is that the Qurʾān does not necessarily endorse our contemporary understandings of justice. If the Qurʾān as a text reflects the norms and standards of the era of revelation, as indicated by Rahman and re-affirmed by those scholars who have been influenced by him, why should we believe that its position on justice is necessarily compatible with, or the only possible position that might apply in, another historical context such as ours? In other words, as a text that appeared at specific time in a specific social and cultural setting, doesn't the Qurʾān take a particular approach to discussing justice that reflects its particular context? At a more fundamental level, the following questions arise: If justice is a

[149] Soroush, "Mosāḥebeh Daryoosh Sajjadi ba Doktor Soroush".
[150] Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, 128.
[151] Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, 56.
[152] See Abdolkarim Soroush, "Elal-e nākāmī-e tarīkhī-e mosalmānān: bakhsh-e dovom" [Reasons of Historical Failure of Muslims: second part], *Ayeen* 4 (2006), 45-47; Soroush, Abdolkarim "Language of Rights and Language of Obligations: An Islamic Perspective", 2016, accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YI--tefKok>.

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criterion against which the Qurʾān's socio-legal passages should be interpreted, who should determine whether a precept is considered just? What are the criteria for an act to be considered just according to the Qurʾānic worldview? None of the scholars whose ideas have been explored in this essay provide a comprehensive theory about Qurʾānic ethics or Qurʾānic justice, or in other words, about the main criteria that determine the justness or fairness of an act, from the Qurʾānic perspective.

The Qurʾān does not necessarily offer a theory of justice as indicated by our contemporary norms and values. Building on my argument in the last section about the relation between democracy and *shūra*, theories related to gender equality and the rights of homosexuals are relatively new, having by and large come into existence only in our contemporary era. If we take it for granted that the Qurʾān endorses absolute equality between sexes and supports specific forms of sexual relationships, such as homosexuality (as Naraqi argues), we are "imposing" today's sense of justice on the Qurʾān. Indeed, it would be anachronistic, in an epistemological sense, to apply the modern understanding of justice to the Qurʾān, which came into being in a specific historical context and within the constraints of the episteme of the era of revelation. As Hidayatullah noted, "no amount of interpretation can make the text definitely cohere with our contemporary sense of justice; claims to the contrary most often rely on anachronisms and textual manipulations."[153]

In sum, contextualist scholars who emphasize the importance of justice in any approach to the Qurʾān should be cautious in "translating" concepts from macro context 1 (the original context in which the Qurʾān emerged) to macro context 2 (our contemporary socio-political or economic context), in the way that the "Qurʾānic justice" is not defined merely on the basis of our current view of justice. Instead of engaging with the Qurʾān in an apologetic manner that simply aims to make the Qurʾān compatible with certain contemporary norms which came into being in a totally different context, contextualists should acknowledge that the messages of the Qurʾān may not fully align with today's calls for justice and equality. Indeed, they should avoid projecting our current/dominant views, which have been shaped by the specific conditions of our era, into the past. In addition, contextualist scholars are required to present a comprehensive theory of "Qurʾānic justice" that involves formulating certain objective criteria according to which an act or a social norm may be considered fair and just, based on the Qurʾānic worldview.

[153] Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qurʾan*, 153.

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Concluding Remarks

This article has argued that Fazlur Rahman's ideas about revelation and the Qurʾān played a significant role in the emergence of some scholarly discourses among Muslim scholars, including those related to humanistic accounts of revelation, Islamic liberation theology, sexual rights, and gender equality. Rahman may have held no illusions about the incalculable consequences that his ideas concerning the interpretation of the Qurʾān might have. For example, he did not write about the rights of homosexuals, and probably did not imagine that his ideas about revelation or gender issues would lead to a new line of thinking among some Muslim scholars. Indeed, Rahman's theories have had significant impact in the area of Qurʾānic studies, inspiring analyses that Rahman himself might not have anticipated, or which go beyond his original intentions.

Rahman's contributions are valuable in reformulating traditional theories of revelation and in identifying the human aspects of the Qurʾān. His ideas, however, are not free of weaknesses. This essay has analyzed aspects of Rahman's thoughts about the Islamic philosophical system, his lack of acknowledgement of the importance of pretext in reading a text, Qurʾānic ethics, and the application of his hermeneutics to issues in the political arena. The question emerges as to how Rahman would have responded to the criticisms of his ideas presented in this article. This question must be left open here, but it suggests in what direction future discussions of Rahman's legacy might be taken.

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