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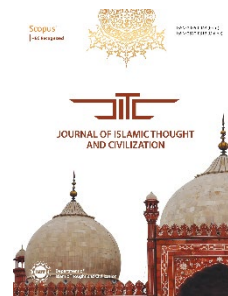
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Islamic Intellectualism versus Modernity: Attempts to Formulate Coherent Counter Narrative

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Abstract

Islamic intellectualism is an unfailing source of revealed wisdom for addressing all the issues that may keep arising till the judgment day. History has preserved works of several exceptional individuals who formulated effective answers in the light of this knowledge to the challenges of their times. In this age, modernity and its pernicious impacts on different aspects of human life pose a new challenge which has drawn undivided attention of scholars. Hence, they come up with various proposals to deal with it in an emphatic manner. It is, therefore, necessary for scholars to reevaluate the works of such influential intellectuals in order to enable themselves to address the new challenges. The current study incorporated the matchless contribution made by Jamal al-Din Afghani, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, and Dr. Fazlur Rahman to the struggle against unabated onslaught on the faith and its foundations, civilization, and cultural development by western modernity. Afghani was the first to identify the problem and deliver a forceful and logical response by uncovering the pernicious effects of modernity. Dr. Iqbal improved upon Afghani's contribution and strove to revive the dynamic spirit of Islamic thought, while Dr. Fazlur Rahman completed their mission by moulding their ideas into an all-inclusive synthetic system. The discourse set off by the trilogy of their ideas constitutes an effective response to modernity which may also prove to be a blueprint for formulating viable responses to any future challenges to the true spirit of Islam.

Keywords: colonialism, epistemicide, Islamic Intellectualism, modernity, orientalism

Introduction

With the fall of the Ottoman caliphate and gradual disintegration of the empire which, in its heyday, straddled almost the entire Middle East, Central Asia, and a number of African and European countries; Islam came face to face with the challenge of modernity. Over the time, it also proved to be more insidious than the threats Islam and Muslim community faced and finally surmounted over the centuries since its inception. However, this new challenge was singular in that for the first time in its fourteen centuries career, Islam was completely subjugated by European powers, with the exception of a brief prelude in which Tartars ravaged Muslim lands for decades before they

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themselves were conquered by the conquered.¹ However, unlike Tartars, who were at a primitive stage of culture and civilization, the western colonial powers were imbued with a sense of superiority in all sectors of civilization, that is, military, political, social, racial, and religious. They refused to accept any influence of their otherwise culturally-rich subjects, whose civilisation conquered hearts and minds wherever its standard bearers went as conquerors, reformers, and saints. It instead left a deep and disturbing impact on Muslim society as a whole which had lost its erstwhile superiority in all components of civilization, that is, ethics, military, sciences, philosophy, and art, thanks to the pernicious decadence and moral and intellectual decrepitude that had set in several centuries before western colonial powers set their sights on Muslim lands.

After imposing political hegemony over their Muslim subjects, the western colonial powers now turned the attention to their heritage and launched scathing attacks on their beliefs with the help of Christian missionaries who worked among illiterate masses to turn them away from their religion or at least weaken their faith in it. Additionally, a battery of orientalist who, aided by members of Muslim intelligentsia produced by a purpose-made colonial education system, carried out epistemicide of the subjugated people. This act was carried out by discrediting indigenous heritage, that is, written and oral, cultural and religious history, and philosophy and science on the basis of so-called modern scientific paradigms.

Under the vicious campaign of epistemicide, the colonial regimes took measures that gradually led to the weakening of Muslim communities' bond with their religion and the distinct, unique, and self-confident civilisation it had nurtured. Though, they did not succeed fully in their designs, they weakened Islam's intellectual foundations by sowing doubts in minds in the name of modernity and steering majority of Muslim intelligentsia away from the true fundamentals of Islam. They also casted them (Muslim communities) into the realm of acute self-depreciation and low self-esteem where they questioned everything local and Islamic and accepted everything blindly that came from the west. One may witness similar attitude replicating itself in all colonised nations, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, after they came under the onslaught of modernity.

The initial reaction to colonization was first marked by shock and awe, followed by a reactionary, however, mostly suicidal armed resistance by the remnants of old order and religious leadership which most often failed before their militarily and culturally stronger foe. The back to back defeats on battleground culminated in a defensive and apologetic attitude born of acute pessimism at the failure to grasp the reasons that inexorably led the Muslim nations who were supposed to be vicegerents of God on earth to complete and seemingly irreversible subjugation.

The paralyzing pessimism among colonized nations strengthened further by a cleverly woven myth of white man's supremacy and invincibility developed first crack in the wake of Russian

¹Firas Al Khateeb, *Lost Islamic History: Reclaiming Muslim Civilisation from the Past* (London: Hurst and Company, 2014), 67; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (London: Routledge, 2016), 92, 153, 209. The authors invent the term 'epistemicide' for describing murder of knowledge by colonial regimes. He says in the introduction of his book: "Unequal exchanges among cultures have always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinated culture, hence the death of the social groups that possessed it. In the most extreme cases, such as that of European expansion, epistemicide was one of the conditions of genocide. The loss of epistemological confidence that currently afflicts modern science has facilitated the identification of the scope and gravity of the epistemicides perpetrated by hegemonic Eurocentric modernity."

imperial forces' defeat² at the hands of Japan (1904-05). The rise of revisionist school³ in the west provided a prelude of retrospection to Muslim intelligentsia and they finally shook themselves free of the mental yoke with the help of modernist Muslim scholars. They made them realize if they were to live with honour, dignity, and mutual respect among the comity of nations, they would have to shun the apologetic attitude and rediscover Islam in its pure and pristine form after removing hard layers of Magian crust and historical creations that had stratified over the divine message since medieval age.

Thus, began the pan-Islamic⁴ revivalist movement which spanned over most part of the 19th century and inspired and spawned several freedom movements in the colonised Muslim lands. By the middle of the 20th century, almost all Muslim countries had obtained freedom from colonial powers one after the other as a result of long and hard fought, mostly political and intellectual struggles inspired by modern Muslim thinkers, such as Jamal al-Din Afghani (1838-1897), Muhammad Abduhu (1849-1905), and Dr Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938). Iqbal's embryonic ideas of revival and reform were later perfected [sic] by his capable heir Dr. Fazlur Rahman.

Islam has manifested its ability unlike other religions in human history, to rise after each temporary fall triggered by now established natural causes of the rise and fall of nations. However, after each fall, extraordinary individuals for instance, thinkers, scholars, political, and religious reformers rose to the occasion and singlehandedly salvaged the crumbling edifice of Islam. Moreover, they also helped it stand firmly back on its foundations by thwarting the challenges of their times and infusing new hope.

These individuals help to reinterpret the faith and its prime objectives for the generation of their time after intensive and extensive revision, redefinition, and reformulation of the fundamentals of faith. Quite naturally, their efforts are directed more to the problems at hand to the exclusion of other equally significant, however, seemingly irrelevant (to their times) issues. Hence, one may notice this difference more poignantly in the overall thrust of their responses to *prima facie* similar issues.

The three scholars' views are unique in their strict adherence to the true spirit of Qur'ān and *Sunnah* unlike the beliefs of many so-called apologetics, *neicherics*,⁵ and *ahl al-Qur'ān*. They are also referred to as modernists who have strayed away from the fountainheads of the faith in their zeal

²John M. Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe, 3rd ed. from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York, London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010), 719, 720.

³The term revisionism originally refers to Eduard Bernstein's effort in the late 19th-century to revise Marxist doctrine. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/revisionism-Marxism>) It is "an approach to writing history that involves the reinterpretation of historical events through the lens of more modern views, theories, or philosophical perspectives. A historical revisionist may revisit a widely held historical viewpoint with new evidence or information that is contrary to the mainstream or commonly held interpretation of what happened." (<https://study.com/learn/lesson/meta-disciplines-revisionists-traditionalists-post-revisionists.html>)

⁴Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Western Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din Afghani* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1983), 26. The authors say "pan-Islam was a movement in many ways analogous to nationalism, uniting different classes and bringing conservatives and reformers together in order to defend the homeland. The original ideologists of pan-Islam were reformist Young Ottomans, and Afghani was to a large degree carrying forth and expanding on their ideas and methods."

⁵Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (born Oct. 17, 1817, Delhi—died March 27, 1898, Aligarh, India) and his followers were referred to as 'neicherics' for their emphasis on making Islam subservient to modern theories of natural and social sciences. Hence, they denied existence of ghosts, angels, nature of revelations and miracles which could not be "proven" at the touchstone of science.

to make Islam compatible with the ever-changing theories of science and philosophy. The independence of thought and personal courage together with sound academic credentials make the three scholars capable to rediscover the true *élan* of Islam which had turned its adherents into world leaders in all areas of civilization within less than a century. It still has the potential to help Muslims repeat that magnificent history. The scholars developed that inner light, the deep insight led by intuition which made them manifest and grasp the meanings and concepts in the Qur'ān and *Seerah* which even eluded many of their peers and predecessors.

Iqbal alludes to this hard-earned mental and spiritual faculty in an Urdu couplet in the following words:

“mashām-e-tez se miltā hai sahrā meñ nishāñ us kā
zan o taḥmīñ se haath aatā nahīñ āhū-e-tātār”⁶

“Only its strong smell can give a clue to its existence in a desert, (otherwise) conjectures and guesswork are no help in finding the Tartar deer.”

The progression of their thought, considered innovative by majority of conservative *ulama*, first found expression in Afghani's groundbreaking monologues, articles, speeches, and treatises on political, social, and moral revival of Muslims and came to full fruition in Iqbal's embryonic idea of reform and concept of “spiritual democracy,”⁷ which Dr Rahman developed into one of his major theses of “one God one humanity”⁸ with comprehensive reform program built upon tradition as its touchstone. Furthermore, Tariq Ramadan's agenda of radical reform⁹ founded upon intensive and extensive revision of *usul al fiqh* (fundamental principles of Islamic jurisprudence) - dictated by the needs and compulsions of modernity and complete break with the tradition - to make the reform not only transformative but also anticipative of future challenges. Contrary to the general view about the scholars' ideas – which has admittedly found little acceptance among conservative circles but has many takers in western academic circles for their affinity with modernity – an in-depth perusal and comprehension of their theses brings out the fact that their apparently groundbreaking ideas carry Qur'ānic sanction and have precedents in the history of development of Islamic thought.

2. Research Framework and Methodology

The current study employed qualitative research with descriptive and interpretive methods to elucidate the multi-layered meanings in historical texts and understand the underlying concepts. It used techniques of content analysis and library research to analyze the data and interpret its meaning, since the researcher relies heavily on documents as the main sources of information. The complex thought processes of the scholars under review may only be found in the form of published material. It is indeed a bibliographical research as it gathers and handles information mostly from published materials. The arguments presented in the study are so constructed that they examine the ideas and their premises on the basis of a comprehensive analysis of data which have been reduced to separate concepts according to the research theme and objectives to mould it into a coherent narrative. Furthermore, in order to strengthen the analysis, this study also makes use of the historical research

⁶Dr Muhammad, Iqbal, *Baal-e-Jibreel* [Gabriel's Wing] (Lahore: Taj Company Limited, 1935), 57.

⁷Dr Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1996), 142.

⁸Dr Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 12. See also by the same author, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 138; and Philip L. Berman, *The Courage of Conviction* (New York: Mead and Company, 1985), 156.

⁹Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 122.

methods to scrutinize closely the secondary sources, which were available in the library, and uncover the ideas of the past that have undoubtedly influenced the present.

3. Literature Review-cum-Critical Analysis

3.1. Jamal al-Din Afghani

The first response in political-cum-intellectual realm to the pervasive and pernicious challenge of modernity came from Jamal al-Din Afghani¹⁰ whose revolutionary, instructive, reformatory, and transformative ideas helped Muslim elite and masses regain their lost confidence in their heritage and rekindled hope for freedom from colonial yoke. Afghani inspired many luminaries and great minds in the Muslim world, liberated them from the deceitful ideas of modernity, and turned them into tireless crusaders against imperialism and all its manifestations.

Afghani was undoubtedly a genuine thinker and a political activist par excellence. He worked on a grand program to reawaken the *ummah* by making it self-conscious of its erstwhile position of leading political and cultural power in the world through a consistent struggle for revival and reform in academic and political realm, though he had contributed more to the latter. Western scholars devoted their energies to prove Afghani a worthless pawn,¹¹ a schemer, and saboteur par excellence in the Caliph Sultan Abdul Hamid's (1842-1918) great plan of pan-Islam. However, his chequered life and sacrifices for the self-avowed anti-colonial cause portray him as a devoted activist who was single-mindedly pursuing his goal of uniting his people under one banner, gathering their resources, and directing them against their common enemy, the colonial powers who had subjugated almost all Muslim lands by the end of the 19th century.

His principal critic Nikki Keddie points out what she or any other critic perceives as contradictions in his writings to prove he was a duplicitous man who posed as a traditional alim for masses and pretended to be an enlightened academic before members of the elite and his educated readers. She builds the premise mostly upon contents of two of his lectures delivered in India and Egypt. In these lectures, he invoked nationalism and declared one's love for the mother tongue and the motherland as more powerful than religion. However, if one thoroughly reads all the written material by Afghani and juxtaposes it with the kind of life he led, one is forced to believe if Afghani was not a genuine intellectual-activist he was not a sham leader, either. A man who devotes his entire life to a cause and makes the entire world his enemy in the process can never be an ordinary soul. In fact, if one assesses the pattern of criticism on Afghani, one finds that most western academics focus their energies to prove Afghani as fake, his life a failure, and his achievements worthless in the same way as they treated all anti-colonisation leaders who strived to free their people from the yoke of slavery. The work on Emir Abdel Qader (1808-1883), Medhi of Sudan (1844-1885), and Syed Ahmed Shaheed (1786-1831)¹² carry the same stamp and constitutes a case in point by showing

¹⁰Nikki Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Western Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din Afghani* (California: University of California Press, 1983), 3-4.

¹¹Ibid., 26.

¹²Emir Abdel Qadir (1808-1883) was a military and religious leader who founded the Algerian state and led the Algerians in their 19th-century struggle against French domination (1840-46). Al-Mahdī, original name Muḥammad Aḥmad ibn al-Sayyid 'Abd Allāh, (1844-1885), creator of a vast Islamic state extending from the Red Sea to Central Africa and founder of a movement that culminated in the establishment of a theocratic state in the Sudan (January 26, 1885). Syed Ahmad Shaheed Bareilvi (born 1786, Rai Bareli, died 1831) led a jihād movement for the revival of Islam in its pure form. He waged armed jihād against Sikh regime and set up an Islamic government in the then North West Frontier Province for a brief period before he fell to machinations of his friends and foes.

glaring similarities in some western scholars' approach to 'discredit' the freedom fighters in the name of objective and critical analysis.

Ellie Kedouri¹³ also joined Keddie in calling Afghani an irreligious if not outright atheist, a rabble-raiser and, misadventurer who achieved little through change and revolution. However, to majority of Muslim scholars, such as Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Rashid Rida (1865-1935), Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917-1996), and masses, Afghani was a relentless and gallant freedom fighter who devoted every moment of his life to the cause and was always ready to pay the price even at the cost of his life. They believe like an able physician, who uses all the remedies and antidotes at his disposal to save a patient in his death throes after being stung by a deadly snake Afghani appropriated all the commonalities on the basis of which he can forge unity and provoke all the strong emotions which may work as fuel to further the cause and ultimately save the community from its imminent death.

If seen from this point of view, they say, the apparent contradictions in his writings become intelligible and easily fall into place. His exhortation to Indian students during his lecture in Calcutta, India (1882)¹⁴ was to learn to take pride in their ancient civilisation, mother tongue, and motherland. His call for feeling proud to be heirs to thousands of years old civilisation of Egypt and his advice to Christians and Jews, living in the midst of Muslims to contribute to the struggle for the freedom of their land alongside their Muslim brethren, were all actuated by his singular and fervent desire to free Muslim lands and rather all colonized nations from colonization. He insinuated the need for revival and reform to rid the community of the malaise that had afflicted its body and mind and led it into subjugation. However, he did not stress the point, lest it caused rifts within the community as his primary concern was freedom from western imperialism.

They answered Keddie and Kedouri's allegations of dissimulation, duplicitousness, and double-speak, leveled against Afghani that what appeared to his western critics as hypocrisy was in fact Afghani's sincere attempt to marshal all the available resources and array them against the enemy on the battlefield like a gifted and able commander to ensure victory by any means. As he believed, the first and foremost task for a freedom activist was to saw off mental chains of subjugated people by restoring their confidence in themselves, teaching them to take pride in their heritage, and snatch back their true identity from the colonial masters. Afghani invoked everything and anything that could have helped achieve his purpose. Hence, his exhortation to Hindus, Egyptians, Christians, and Jews was to first learn to be proud of themselves and then devote their energies to the cause of freedom.

While addressing Muslim masses, he employed the same strategy. The social, moral, and intellectual weaknesses and decrepitude were pointed out to them that were sapping their energies and keeping them perpetually enchained. In his periodical *Al-Urwatul Wuthqa* (the strong rope) he employed modern art of propaganda to the fullest. It jolted Muslims' consciences and helped spread his message of revival, reform, and freedom rapidly across the Islamic world. He was hence, the first true activist of Muslim ecumenism and a reformer who laid stress to learn from the west all the knowledge and the skills necessary for formulating an effective response to modernity in all its forms.

Despite their diametrically different views about Afghani, both his western critics and eastern hagiographers concurred that Afghani was a scholar par excellence. Moreover, he was well versed in eastern philosophy and armed with essential and functional knowledge of western philosophy. He passionately advocated study of philosophy which was hitherto shunned by conservative *ulama* of

¹³Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1966).

¹⁴Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Western Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din Afghani*, 60.

both *Shia* and *Ahl al-Sunnah* denominations, to be able to truly think, reflect, and ponder over the divine message and its ultimate objective with carrying out necessary reform while remaining faithful to tradition. His call for reform and pan-Islam found many takers among Muslim intelligentsia around the world and sowed seeds of liberty and change in many hearts, which soon sprouted saplings and grew into fully fledged freedom struggles over the succeeding years.

3.2. Dr Muhammad Iqbal

Dr. Iqbal (1877-1938) in the subcontinent like Mufti Abduh and Rashid Rida in Egypt, besides many others in the Muslim world, responded to Afghani's call and formulated an emphatic though embryonic response to western intellectual challenges to Islam. His major work *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* mainly outlines a broad but unfinished program of reform¹⁵ aimed at infusing, to borrow his own phraseology, movement into the static body of Islamic intellectualism, and pointed out the general principles on which further work could be done.

Dr. Iqbal was perhaps the first scholar after Afghani to have stressed the need for reform in Islamic jurisprudence. He stood for general reform in all sectors of the society and raised serious questions over efficacy and applicability of the Sharia-based legal injunctions in colonial and industrial age. He argued that they were formulated in answer to specific problems of their age and addressed a particular milieu, times and climes, which were completely different from modern age, its complexities, and compulsions. Dr. Iqbal pointed out the problem and tried to convince intelligentsia about the authenticity of and the need to actualize his proposals. He succeeded to a large extent to win them over to his cause. However, he failed to make conservative *ulama* agree with him.

He was finally forced to backtrack¹⁶ on many of his audacious proposals amid increasingly scathing criticism of his ideas by orthodoxy. Iqbal hence, sounds clear headed, ethereal, and almost prophetic in his poetry as he presents his theories in rhyming verses. On the contrary, he appears less self-assured and at times incoherent and inconclusive as he tries to explain and defend his proposed reforms in a disputation. For instance, he fails to take a firm position on the role or lack of tradition in his proposed reforms¹⁷ and his thesis on the "reconstruction of religious thought in Islam".

Iqbal's critics accuse him of relying too much on ever shifting modern scientific theories and discoveries in the fields of philosophy, psychology, physics, and other branches of social and natural sciences while defending constant and immutable verities of faith. Hence, his line of arguments gives an apologetic color to his thesis and weakens his case for the need for reforms in Islam.

3.3. Dr. Fazlur Rahman

Dr. Rahman (1919-1988) was Iqbal's true heir who succeeded to formulate the comprehensive reform program that Iqbal had also attempted but failed to complete. He resumed the work on reform where Dr. Iqbal had left it by clearly defining the broader contours and finer details of this program along with the viable course of action to infuse it into the flesh and blood of history in his major works *Islam and Major Themes of the Qur'an*. Thus, he proves to be a capable heir to Iqbal and his predecessors, Afghani and Shah Wali Allah (1703-1763), for he was indeed a non-totalising synthesizer who left nothing to the imagination of his reader and exegete to explain and annotate his

¹⁵Dr Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 131-142.

¹⁶Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 120.

¹⁷Ghulam Shabbir, Saleem Nawaz, Amara Hanif, Muhammad Imran Raza Tahavi, Faisal Iqbal, "Dr. Fazlur Rahman's Discourse On Islamic Intellectualism, Knowledge and Education," *Webology* 19, Issue 2 (2022): 9317.

thoughts. In fact, his writing that employs simple and clear diction is so compact that it leaves no crevice and no gap to be filled by its reader.

He formulated an unapologetic, independent, and genuinely Islamic response to western academic challenges and represented Islam as it truly is, not what its critics portray it to be. In contrast with Dr. Iqbal, Dr. Rahman's ideas about reform are crystal clear. He remains firmly faithful to tradition and proposes what he calls his double-movement theory. This theory advocates to extract general principles¹⁸ along with *ratio legis* (rationale) from a particular Sharia injunction in order to make new laws or reform the extant ones to address today's ever evolving conditions.

Dr. Rahman fought on three fronts, that is, conservative *ulama*, apologetics, and orientalists, simultaneously giving emphatic, unapologetic response to orientalists. He also pointed out flaws in Muslim scholarship and presented a balanced and proportionate synthesis of different strands of thoughts while keeping his originality intact in the Qur'anic spirit spelled out in (39:18) "...who listen [closely] to all that is said, and follow the best of it: [for] it is they whom God has graced with His guidance, and it is they who are [truly] endowed with insight!" However, unlike apologetics and orthodox *ulama*, this three-pronged war did not keep him too preoccupied to rediscover Islam in its pristine and unadulterated form, free from any stain of compromised scholarship of medieval ages or rigged and distorted intellectualism¹⁹ of orientalists.

In a nutshell, Dr. Rahman's thesis is centered round the establishment of a just and moral order on earth, founded on the principle of "One God, One Humanity."²⁰ He contends that the entire mission of Muhammad (*SAW*), as it unfolded in Meccan and Medinan periods, was geared towards this final goal. All other stages in this mission, that is, peaceful invitation to faith to passive resistance in Mecca, journey to Taif, migration to Abyssinia and Medina, armed resistance and aggressive politics in Medina, letters to the heads of Byzantine and Persian empires were milestones on the path to this ultimate destination. This objective was perhaps so grand that it could not have been achieved during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (*SAW*). Like an expert gardener, Muhammad (*SAW*) developed a beautiful garden out of the available grass, vegetation, and trees by arranging them in a particular design on a given piece of land. The Prophet (*SAW*) then sowed seeds after preparing the land for various other plants and trees which were destined to complement the beauty of the garden several decades and centuries after His (*SAW*) life. Similarly, the Prophet (*SAW*) made the groundwork for the grand idea of "One God One Humanity" in His lifetime and passed the trust to *ummah* in order to keep working to seek its fulfilment till the day of the judgment. Moreover, many historical constraints, mental, and political unpreparedness of Muslim community at that time also came in the way of implementing this grand idea.

Dr. Rahman, in contrast with the ideas of his predecessors and peers among Muslim scholars and orientalists, lays emphasis on politics and *jihād*²¹ as two pivots of Islam. He shows Qur'ān and *Seerah* as one continuous and complete narrative without gaps and disparate incidents galvanised towards its ultimate climax, that is, the establishment of a global moral order.

Contrary to him, Tariq Ramadan, a specialist in Islamic jurisprudence whose thoughts are not the principal focus of this study, calls for radical reform in his book by the same title *Radical Reform*. Trained as he is in traditional Islamic sciences, he is also qualified for daring to propose radical reforms in the Islamic jurisprudence in order to formulate effective and relevant responses to the

¹⁸Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 48.

¹⁹Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003), 151, 253, 306, 315, 326, 344.

²⁰Al-e-Imran 3:64.

²¹Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 63, 64.

challenges of modernity and post-modernity. Moreover, he also enabled the faith and the faithful to live in western milieu with relative harmony and peace of mind, freed from the feeling of guilt over failure to conform to prohibitively high Islamic ideals as formulated by traditional *ulama*. His emphatic advocacy for radical reforms makes him stand apart from his peers and predecessors. However, his equal reliance on Sufi ideas to justify second-rate existence of Muslim citizens in western countries is indeed regressive and runs counter to his thesis for radical reforms. Ramadan appears to be well on path to the ultimate destination to which his predecessors, Afghani, Iqbal, and Dr. Rahman have been pointing all along. Though, he seems to have digressed noticeably away from his path in the finer detail and explanation of his term “radical reform.”²²

Unlike Dr. Rahman, who does not advocate complete break with the tradition and lays stress on extracting rationale from Sharia values and commands and then legislates for today’s problems in the light of that rationale and tradition Ramadan is ready to jettison the two – which are pivots of Dr. Rahman’s reform program and instead argues for radical reform, which necessitates complete break with the tradition. He raises serious questions over the instrument of *Ijtihād* as it has been applied in the past as well as in the present age after its thorough examination and concludes that the fault behind alleged irrelevance and ineffectiveness of *Ijtihād* lies in reality in its very methodology, not the instrument itself.

Building upon this premise, he calls for a complete revamp of the *usul al fiqh* and higher objectives of Sharia as understood by earlier generations, the four established schools, and acclaimed *mujtahids* and *mujaddids* throughout centuries of intellectual history. He argues for raising anew edifice of Islamic jurisprudence in the light of the new principles formulated with the help of experts of all relevant fields of study that can address ever deepening complexities of today’s life.

Prima facie, Ramadan’s views are akin to those of *ahl al-Qur’ān*, for whom the Holy book is the only ultimate source of guidance for man. *Sunnah* serves only as history for situating the divine word but an unprejudiced perusal of his ideas makes his readers appreciate genuineness of his thought and sets him apart from ahl al-Quran because Ramadan does not advocate in clear terms complete break with the tradition despite the fact that his program of radical reform and the very use of the term suggest otherwise.

Here lies the stark dichotomy in his thesis as his agenda of radical reform is at variance with his claims for faithfulness to tradition. His thoughts demonstrate a deep imprint of Dr. Iqbal, especially his position on *Ijtihād*, though he struggles in vain to make his program of radical reform compatible with his own major thesis. In many instances, Ramadan appears to be more firmly rooted in tradition than Dr. Iqbal and Dr. Rahman although, Dr. Rahman, is in fact, more articulate and self-assured than his predecessors and peers.

3.4. Orthodoxy’s Response to Modernity and Modernists

The orthodoxy, loosely comprising conservative *ulama* of major schools of thought with a seminary education, refused to accept the very existence of modernity as a potent threat to or as having some kind of transformative influence on Muslim community. Hence, they failed to grasp it and its inexorable influence on society as a challenge. Naturally, they could not perceive the fine line separating modernity from westernisation, which itself was a manifestation of modernity with an overlay of western culture. Consequently, even the most moderate among the orthodoxy looked askance at the ideas of modernist Muslim scholars and condescendingly called them misguided souls in need of reformation. While, the radicals saw them as nothing less than “agents playing in the hands of their western masters”.

²²Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 122.

This state of denial created two streams of thought, that is, escapist and idealist among followers of two major schools of thought among *Ahlu Sunna*. Most of the Sufi groups who already espoused determinist ideas developed an escapist attitude. They either completely kowtowed to modernity, producing major stock of Muslim liberals and secularists, or accepted it as a necessary evil that the *ummah* was fated to contend with till the Day of Judgment.

The orthodox Muslims on the other hand developed an idealist tendency and began to believe that the panacea for all ills afflicting the *ummah* today lies in complete return to and wholesale adoption of the pure teachings of Islam as they were acted out by the Prophet (*SAW*) and His immediate companions mostly over the first century after the proclamation of prophecy. Both the responses had their pros and cons, however, they proved mostly ineffective and futile *vis-a-vis* modernity and failed to convince their opponents as well as followers of the relevance and normativity of Islam as the leaders of orthodoxy and Sufism saw it, in the modern age.

Since the current study focused on Islamic intellectual responses to modernity, the authors confined themselves to the discussion on the contribution of leading modernist scholars and purposely dealt the orthodoxy's response with brevity as it constitutes subject of an entire thesis or at least a separate paper.

3.5. The Cumulative Impact of the Modernist Scholars

The cumulative impact of the three scholars, together with the work of orientalists and the subsequent discourse had generated, their opinions led to the kind of intensive-productive debates, which Muhammad Asad perceived as inevitable explanation of the famous tradition اختلاف امتي رحمة.²³ The ongoing debate which grew more intense and gathered greater steam post 9/11 in the long run, proved beneficial for the religion that claims to be all-encompassing, all-inclusive and universal.

This process of productive exchange of ideas, which is taking place on a larger scale in the west, is relatively small scale in Muslim majority countries for obvious reasons. The authors believe that modernity or post-modernity would receive the most befitting response from the former exponents of these ideas who are converting to Islam at an astonishingly rapid pace. A survey of recent studies on Islam by western scholars or western converts to Islam suggests that their defense of Islam and response to modernity and other ideological challenges is more sound, effective, and relevant than the similar work being churned out by traditional *ulama* in the Muslim world. This process is reminiscent of the way Islam grappled with its first challenge from rationalists when one of the leading lights of Mutazillite, Abul Hasan al-Ashari (873-936 AD)²⁴ converted to orthodox Islam and defended the faith with weapons the rationalists used against the verities of faith.

It, in fact, constitutes an interesting area of study to compare the work by the two classes of scholars and locate their points of disagreement and concurrence. It would surely be an interesting discovery. The orthodoxy made little difference between modernist Muslim scholars and orientalists and made little effort to appreciate their work not to speak of benefiting from their contribution. However, the moderate among them are trying to reach out to modernists in order to understand their position and premises and employ them to find answers to the questions of the new age characterized by astounding discoveries and inventions in all fields of knowledge that completely changed man's outlook on life. According to Dr. Rahman, it is inevitable to form a platform where experts of all

²³Abdur Rahman bin Abi Bakr Al Suyuti, *Tadreebur Rawi fi Sharh e Taqreebil Nawawi*, (Riyadh: Darul Isama, 2003), 167.

²⁴Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (London: Basingstoke, Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1970), 430-431.

relevant fields of study with basic knowledge of religion and *ulama* exerted their full potential to find answers to new and emerging questions.

4. Conclusion

The contemporary debate in literature on modern reformers failed to provide justice to Afghani's groundbreaking work on reforms, Iqbal's embryonic and unfinished outline on reform, and Dr. Rahman's comprehensive and non-totalising work. Little work has been done so far, particularly in the west, to assess the impact of the three scholars. This work focused on the evolution of religious thought in Islam in the context of modernity and the extent to which they helped to shape the ongoing discourse on Islam with reference to Islamophobia and attempts in some western and non-western states to curb Muslim minorities which are reminiscent of the ruthless campaign of persecution of Muslims at the hands of Christian rulers after the fall of Granada towards the end of 15th century.²⁵

The longstanding western encounters and interactions with Islam in its own lands and in Muslim countries particularly post-9/11 generated an energetic debate on Islam. This debate sometimes appears to digress into toxic propaganda by western scholars and its equally reactionary response by Muslims. It largely contributed to open up many new vistas of thought and discovering hitherto unexplored aspects of Islam, helping the modern scholars and *ulama* to come closer and understand their respective positions. The ongoing discourse ultimately brings out commonalities in the three monotheistic religions of the world and help their adherents to agree to a common formula of mutual peace and universal brotherhood.

The three scholars' work becomes more significant when compared with contemporary research on the subject by their western counterparts, most of which is Eurocentric and atomistic because it takes Islam piecemeal, focusing largely on its teachings about armed jihad and minimising the religion's role as a factor for global peace and its potential for establishing a global moral order. It would help Muslim minorities in the west to cope with ramifications of a wide and pervasive propagation of a distorted version of religion and suggest ways and means to bring out the quintessential spirit of Islam by cleansing it of the many layers of allegations and cultural accretions stratified over its true teachings in the course of centuries. The historical creations, cultural importations, and accretions formed a hard crust over the original elan of Islam, that is, Qurān and *Sunnah* and one must break through and remove this crust to reach the genuine, pure, and pristine teachings of the faith.

4.1. Recommendations

The authors recommend further research on similar lines, focusing more to understand the true élan and spirit of the Quran with the help of modernist and traditional approaches. The authors also recommend to unravel the true *raison detre* of divine injunctions to enable legists to apply God's message to today's conditions and identify mostly involuntary distortions, diversions, and accretions in Qur'ānic exegesis that have crept in over the centuries.

This study advises students of Islamic theology and Abrahamic religions to draw extensively on the modern work and research being conducted in the light of theories of social science, historical, and sociological methods. It equally attempts to carry out in-depth study of traditional research methods applied by the seminary-educated *ulama* to be able to produce the kind of synthetic literature on Islam which is relevant and equally acceptable in western milieu as well as in traditional Muslim majority societies.

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²⁵Ibid., 551-556.

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