

## **Fazlur Rahman: Biographical Introduction**

An intellectual giant, a man of many languages with a remarkable memory, a philosopher who was at the heart of creative Islamic thinking in Pakistan for six years; and yet Fazlur Rahman received little praise amongst Muslims in his lifetime, he was driven from the country of his birth and taught the last twenty years of his life in exile with most of his students being non-Muslims.

### **Enter the man**

Fazlur Rahman was born on 21 September 1919 in Seraisaleh in undivided India. Seraisaleh is in the Hazara district of what is today Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. His father exercised the first great influence on his life. He was an Islamic scholar (*alim*), trained in the school of Deoband. Fazlur Rahman remembered:

Unlike most traditional scholars of that time, who regarded modern education as a poison both to faith and morality, my father was convinced that Islam had to face modernity both as a challenge and an opportunity. I have shared this belief with my father to this very day.<sup>1</sup>

His father became Fazlur Rahman's first teacher. He completed the memorisation of the Qur'an by his tenth birthday and then commenced the standard course of Islamic studies in the Subcontinent (*Dars-i-Nizami*). This required mastery of Arabic and Persian, both in spoken and literary forms, followed by logic, philosophy, theology (*kalam*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Hadith and Qur'anic commentary (*tafsir*). An able student, Fazlur Rahman completed this course by the time that he was old enough to go up to university.

In 1933, when Fazlur Rahman was fourteen years of age, his family moved to Lahore, where his father took a post as mosque imam. In Lahore, he was sent to a modern college to prepare for entry to the University of the Punjab. Here he received his BA in Arabic in 1940 and his MA in 1942. He then began research for his PhD. His linguistic ability was apparent by this time as he now commanded his local language from Hazara, plus Urdu, Arabic, Persian, English, French and German. His German was good enough to translate works of Islamic scholarship into English. Later he would go on to master Latin and Greek; still later he learnt sufficient Turkish to read academic works and some Indonesian.

In 1946, Fazlur Rahman won a scholarship to go to Oxford University to prepare a doctoral thesis under the renowned European scholars S. van den Bergh and H.A.R. Gibb. He caused a stir on arrival by wearing traditional *shalwar/kameez* and having a beard. His field of study was to be Greek philosophy, especially in the Neoplatonic school of Ibn Sina. It was at this time that he learnt Greek, which gives us an insight into his prodigious memory. One of his own doctoral students thirty years later recalls Fazlur Rahman arriving at a seminar on Aristotle in the original Greek but having forgotten his text. He was able to recite the Greek passage under consideration from

memory without error! Fazlur Rahman received his Oxford DPhil in 1949 with a thesis on Ibn Sina's psychology of prophethood.

Arabic and Greek philosophy had dominated the academic career of Fazlur Rahman during his university life. This brought about something of a crisis of faith. He described it in this way:

After I went to England... a conflict between my modern and traditional educations was activated. From the later forties to the mid-fifties I experienced an acute skepticism brought about by the study of philosophy. It shattered my traditional beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

After leaving Oxford, Fazlur Rahman took a post at Durham University to teach Persian literature and Islamic philosophy (1950-1958). During this time, he worked through his "life crisis" by writing three books. First, he wrote *Prophecy in Islam*, in which he analysed the dispute between the Muslim philosophers and classical theologians about the nature of revelation. He admired the intellectual sophistication of the philosophers but concluded that "their God remained a bloodless principle... lacking both power and compassion."<sup>3</sup> He saw however in the theologians that "the God of religion was a full-blooded, living reality who responded to prayers, guided men individually and collectively, and intervened in history."<sup>4</sup>

Convinced that the philosophers were headed in the wrong direction, he saw that he had to re-evaluate his understanding of Islam. He had studied the basic course of Islamic studies under his father's direction but found that this was intellectually unsatisfactory and so took up a profound study of the Qur'an itself and the biographies of Muhammad (*sira*). This led him to a working principle that a doctrine is genuinely Islamic to the extent that it flows from the total teaching of the Qur'an and Sunna. His re-evaluation of Islamic theology at this time led him to the second book that was written whilst at Durham, *Islam*, which was his attempt to present the religion in a way that was accessible and satisfactory to a modern intellect. This was intended as a basic introductory text for undergraduates and was used as such in many western universities.

The third book that he prepared at Durham was a critical edition of the Persian text of some of the letters of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624). In this way Fazlur Rahman worked through his relationship with some of the mystical dimensions of Islam. Although these three books were written during these years, they were not published until later: *Prophecy in Islam* in 1958, *Islam* in 1966 and the Sirhindi text in 1968.

The great North American scholar of Islam, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who had served in India before Partition and written about Subcontinent Islam, had established a new centre for Islamic studies at McGill University in Canada. His vision was for a centre in which Muslim and non-Muslim scholars would co-operate in the study of Islam in an open and collaborative way. He had attracted many influential scholars to join him there including Syed Naquib al-Attas from Malaysia, Toshihiko Izutso from Japan,

Charles Adams and Ismail al-Faruqi from Palestine. Cantwell Smith invited Fazlur Rahman to join them from 1958 to 1961; here Fazlur Rahman revelled in the quality of intellectual debate that was possible in such company.

### **Called to work in Pakistan**

From the time of its creation in 1947, the question of the true nature of Pakistan has been debated and remains unresolved. Was it to be “a homeland for the Muslims of India” where they could develop their own identity in security apart from the Hindu-dominated newly created Republic of India, or was it to be “an Islamic state” in which Islam became the guiding influence in the creation of that society? It is important to remember that Pakistan at this time was made up of two parts: West Pakistan (modern-day Pakistan) comprised the provinces of Sind, Punjab, Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province, and East Pakistan (since the War of Independence in 1971, Bangladesh) comprising part of historic Bengal. The tension is apparent when we consider that these two parts were separated by a thousand miles and differed hugely in culture, language, literature and temperament: they were united solely by having Muslim-majority populations. The question therefore was: Was Islam a sufficiently strong binding factor to keep the two parts united?

By 1958 Pakistan was in a chaotic state, with much political intrigue, an economic crisis and para-military groups on the streets. In the light of this, the President called for martial law and appointed General Ayub Khan to be the Chief Martial Law Administrator with a brief to create order and reform the institutions of the country. The changes included land reform and bringing many of the traditional religious institutions under government control, which brought opposition from the Islamic scholars (*ulama*). This raised the critical question as to who was to be the guardian of the Islamic nature of the country. To respond to this need, Ayub Khan established an Advisory Council on Islamic Ideology to ensure that Islamic principles were observed and implemented in a way that was conducive to the development of the country. This body effectively circumvented the role that the *ulama* held to be theirs. In addition, Ayub Khan set up the Islamic Research Institute (later the Central Institute of Islamic Research: CIIR), as a kind of Islamic “think tank” with the brief to examine critical questions of policy in the light of Islamic principles and bring forward solutions that could be implemented by the government.

The range of issues submitted to the CIIR went right to the heart of the Islamic identity of the country. They included the revision of family law to give women access to divorce, to limit the practice of polygamy, and to reconsider the question of inheritance. In the field of economics, examples of the issues were: the permissibility of taking loans at interest from international bodies to fund the much needed development of the country and the administration both of Islamic trusts (*waqf*) and the income from historic shrines. Politically a methodology was needed to build a basic democratic structure founded on grassroots representation. All these issues put the government of Ayub Khan on a collision course with the *ulama*, who regarded these as institutions and principles that they should control.

In 1961, President (as he now was) Ayub Khan personally invited Fazlur Rahman to come to Pakistan to join the CIIR (Director from 1962-1968). Fazlur Rahman began to address the issues that the government referred to the CIIR through the vehicle of its journal *Islamic Studies*. This increased the antagonism of the *ulama* as they did not regard him as an expert on Qur'an, Hadith or jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and thus claimed that he was not qualified to offer opinions in these areas. Fazlur Rahman's position was to say that anyone who was an *alim*, such as a graduate of *Dars-i-Nizami*, who had a thorough grasp of Arabic and a highly developed intellect, such as himself, possessed the necessary requirements to work in all these disciplines. The political and military élite of Pakistan were all schooled in English; in some cases, like Ayub Khan himself, their command of this language far exceeded their command of Urdu. As this was the audience that Fazlur Rahman needed to address, he wrote all his articles (with one exception) in English, which further sidelined the *ulama* as few commanded that language.

The articles written by Fazlur Rahman during this period and published in *Islamic Studies* show best the range of topics on which he conducted original research to apply them to the development of Pakistan: "Concepts of Sunnah, Ijtihad and Ijma in the early period", "Sunnah and Hadith", "The post-formative developments in Islam", "Social change and the early Sunnah", "Riba and Interest", "The concept of *hadd* in Islamic law", "The impact of modernity on Islam", "The status of the individual in Islam", "The Qur'anic concept of God, the universe and Man", "Some reflections on the reconstruction of Muslim society in Pakistan", "Implementation of the Islamic concept of the state in the Pakistani milieu", "The Qur'anic solution to Pakistan's educational problem", "Currents of religious thought in Pakistan", and "Economic principles of Islam".<sup>5</sup>

The work of Fazlur Rahman during this period sharpened the antagonism between him and the *ulama*. As he was closely associated with Ayub Khan, any attack on one was also an attack on the other. During these years, Fazlur Rahman's book *Islam* was published simultaneously in Britain and America in 1966. Few of the *ulama* would have been able to read it, but those who opposed his work saw in certain statements contained in it a golden chance to organise opposition to him, which eventually resulted in his downfall. Hostilities increased in 1967 when the first two chapters of the book were translated into Urdu and circulated in the CIIR Urdu-language monthly. The opposition was orchestrated by the Jamaat-i Islami of Maududi, which contained people who could read the book and then translate short extracts from it into Urdu to galvanise the opposition. These Urdu extracts were copied on flyers and widely distributed amongst the masses to provoke a hostile reaction.

The critical phrase that brought about Fazlur Rahman's downfall was, "the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad."<sup>6</sup> The *ulama* immediately began a campaign against him, in which he was labelled as a disbeliever in the Qur'an (*munkir-i-Qur'an*). By May 1968, the matter was raised in the National Assembly and anti-government newspapers were

carrying daily comment about it. Whilst the controversy raged, Fazlur Rahman had to take time out of the public arena with “heart trouble”. He was asked to write an article clarifying his position, which was ultimately published as *Divine revelations and the Holy Prophet* in the two national English-language newspapers on 25 August 1968. The only Urdu-language coverage given to it was in the pro-government newspaper. There were popular demonstrations against Fazlur Rahman in several Pakistani provinces, east and west, and in Lahore wall posters proclaimed “a price on his head”. On 1 September 1968, the government Law Minister gave a press conference giving him support but opposition grew until there were general strikes in several towns across the Punjab and the government feared that Lahore would similarly erupt on Friday 6<sup>th</sup> September. To pre-empt this, Fazlur Rahman resigned with immediate effect on 5<sup>th</sup> September. He noted that attacks on the book had been used as a way of trying to bring down the government.

His resignation did not end the climate of hostility towards Fazlur Rahman, so he and his family left Pakistan in the last quarter of 1968. The government of Ayub Khan fell in March 1969.

### **The last two decades**

Almost immediately after his departure from Pakistan, Fazlur Rahman was appointed as Professor of Islamic Thought in the University of Chicago, where he remained until his death in 1988. The bulk of his time in Chicago was devoted to further research and writing combined with working with graduate students. During these two decades, his influence was confined mainly to non-Muslim specialists in Islamic studies but he also received a number of Muslim students from Indonesia, Malaysia and Turkey. A good proportion of a generation of lecturers in Islamic studies in North America owe their training in the discipline to Fazlur Rahman and many of his Muslim students from other countries have gone off to be influential leaders and scholars in their own right. He kept up an interest in developments in Pakistan and wrote occasional articles on themes touching that country. He visited Turkey and was impressed by the serious level of intellectual thought there amongst Islamic scholars, who he held had the potential to make an important contribution to modern Islamic thought. In 1985, he was invited by the government of Indonesia to make a prolonged visit and advise them on the future structure of their education provision.

Fazlur Rahman wrote on a wide range of topics during this period. His amazing memory was sharp to the end. Scholars who visited him in his basement study at home commented that it was a simple bare room in which he sat on a cushion with a low desk and wrote, citing works from memory; research students were then assigned to look up the references from the books thus cited. In addition to numerous articles, four major monographs stem from this period: *Philosophy of Mulla Sadra Shirazi* (1976), *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (1980), *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an intellectual tradition* (1982) and *Revival and Reform in Islam: A study of Islamic Fundamentalism* (edited posthumously and published in 2000).

To the end, he advised students to contribute to, as well as take from, the life of America and saw that Islam had something important to give to the West. Similarly, he treated with respect the methods and insights of non-Muslim scholars of Islam, whilst often disagreeing with their conclusions. As time passes, Muslims living in the West and in countries such as Turkey and Indonesia pay more attention to his writings and the circle of appreciation grows.

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<sup>1</sup> Personal statement, *Courage of Conviction: Prominent contemporaries discuss their beliefs and how they put them into action*, Phillip L. Berman (ed), Santa Barbara: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1985, p. 154

<sup>2</sup> Berman, p. 154-155

<sup>3</sup> Berman, p. 155

<sup>4</sup> Berman, p. 155

<sup>5</sup> See *Islamic Studies* numbers during the period 1962-1969.

<sup>6</sup> *Islam*, p. 31