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ROOTS OF ISLAMIC NEO-FUNDAMENTALISM-A CRITICAL STUDY OF FAZLUR RAHMAN'S ARTICLE

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Abstract. This study provides a critical appreciation of Fazlur Rahman's Roots of Islamic Neo-fundamentalism. The concern of this paper is to highlight the major trends which emerged in the history of Islam. The need is to re-examine the roots of neo-fundamentalism that how Muslims reach at this stage where now they are globally recognized as "terrorist or extremist". Through this critical study answers of the following questions will be examined: how Muslims could retain their status according to the Holy Quran? How Muslim Ummah could cope with the global modernization? What are the internal factors which welcome the external factors to affect badly? The findings strengthen the view that adhering to Quranic text along with the modern scientific needs Muslims can achieve a better successful image.

Key Words: Fundamentalism, Revivalism, Modernist Approach, Neo-fundamentalism, Spirit of Islam.

Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) one of the renowned Muslim thinkers of 20th Century is famous for setting a modern Muslim trend. He got traditional Islamic knowledge from his father. Being the director of the Central Institute of Islamic Research he also served on the Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology-a strong policy making body. He left Canada in order to work for the revival of political and social reforms in the country. The top positions provided him with opportunity to take up a close look into the running government. He worked hard to deeply examine the multifaceted political and intellectual difficulties effecting society and religion in Pakistan. He was very clear towards his mission which was the mission of truth and he put his great efforts to discourage the role of politics in the reforms. But unfortunately he got caught in the trap of the opposition which accused the director of the Islamic Institute in order to politically destabilize the government of General Ayub Khan. He says: "At the level of intellectual discussion, I did not, and do not believe in compromises extraneously motivated, such as is the case with many intellectuals in Pakistan." (Rahman 2000, 14)

Wilfred Cantwell Smith has beautifully sketched the personality of Fazlur Rahman in these words: "He was a person of integrity; a religious man with a brilliant mind using it as part of his religion. He was a moral person; a serious Muslim motivated by deep concern for his culture and his people." (Rahman 2000, 15)

This paper is a review of Fazlur Rahman's scholarly paper *Roots of Islamic Neo-Fundamentalism*. Keeping in view the contemporary situation of the Muslims it was of major concern to Fazlur Rahman and the other reformists to find out how Islam as a religious, social, political, economical and cultural legacy could meet up the modern changing world? Before heading towards the answers and solutions it is necessary to provide the root causes of Islamic fundamentalism in the view of the author. Fazlur Rahman holds that contemporary image of the Islamic fundamentalism possess mainly two root causes; destruction of Muslim world religiously, morally, socially, politically and economically and the western hegemony. He endeavors to draw the attention towards the important point that moral rather than religious factors have been involved in the history of revival and reform in Islam. He emphasizes on this point because he wants to clean away the misconception that Muslims fight for the sake of religion. From this we can easily unfold that moral factors certainly depend on some ideology so both are closely

related to each other. For example the incident of Karbala apparently is based on religious conflicts but it also had a moral impulse in its roots. Moral values were meant to implement on the ground of religion. To merely rule was not the purpose of Muslim rulers rather they were intended to save their Islamic values on moral grounds. The oppressors destroyed the Muslim's moral system and unfortunately Muslim leaders did not perform their duty well and did not prepare people to tackle the collision of outer forces with their social and moral values. For author reforms have nothing to do with the Islamic dogmas, the need of reform is directly connected with the moral factors which are related with practical life. Therefore, it has been rightly said that in Islam there is no orthodoxy but orthopraxy-correct practice.

Keeping in view the correct meaning of reform Fazlur Rahman criticizes the early reforms brought by different well known people in the history. As example he refers back to the two trends- *Reformism* and *Revivalism*. It was 18th century when Reformism also known as Intellectual movement started by al- Ghazali and revivalism also known as movement of activism by Ibn-e-Taymiyah. Fazlur Rahman says that unfortunately there was no room for the movement of intellectualism and movement of activism was adopted by the Muslim world. The survival of society is in intellectualism while activism was base of neo-fundamentalism.

Interestingly it is important to mention that one factor is common to both the intellectual and activist movements and that factor is 'Obedience to God'. This obedience to God must be for the sake of God and not for some other means i.e. to go to paradise and avoid hell. This major factor is the base of 'Islamic Positivism' which leads towards spirituality. While in contrast to Islamic positivism we see the completely opposite approach of 'Logical Positivism' which is based on rejection of metaphysics, religion, God and life after here. In this approach moral values were based on empirical foundations. The Islamic positivism was a positive shift in the later reform movements. It played an important role to reunite Muslims once again on moral grounds. But the reformers like Activists from all over the Muslim Ummah just verbally maintain the significance of the phrase 'Obedience to God' and not through actions, furthermore they stressed to adhere to the original Islam. In that situation in order to keep Islam in its original state the attention was deliberately being fixed on Quran and *Sunnah*.

One of the major reasons of decline of Muslims is that they had closed the door of *Ijtihad*. At this stage in order to meet up the contemporary situations the reformists asserted on the concept of *ijtihad*. To meet the challenges of era and time on the basis of religion and to solve them on the basis of religion is known as *ijtihad*. The purpose of *ijtihad* is to connect reason with the Islamic roots. Again from different Muslim states there arises the problem of not implementing *ijtihad* for various purposes. As the author has quoted the example of India where the fall down of a political power confronted them with a new situation for which *jihad* was implemented instead of *ijtihad*. This was again a miserable situation of Muslim states portraying an image of narrow Islamic vision. Those reformists were actually interested in eliminating the exaggerated sufi practices of the medieval times, in doing so they inexorably took a negative step towards the intellectual and developmental factors as well. Resultantly, the Madrassah system became stagnant and they over-simplified the curriculum as a reaction and they famished themselves both intellectually and developmentally. It is important to note that Fazlur Rahman was not an educationist in the sense of making education policies rather he has taken great interest in the “Islamic Education” so that Muslims could cope up with modern knowledge keeping in layer the foundation of Islam.¹ This leads towards the demolition of the true spirit of *ijtihad*.

Where these early revivalists failed to develop an intellectual approach, the more advanced lands of Muslim community like Egypt, Turkey and subcontinent produced remarkable modernists in 18th and 19th century. These include Syed Jamal ud din Afghani², Sir Syed Ahmed Khan³, Muhammad Abduh⁴ who laid the foundation of a new

¹ See (Panjwani, 2012)

² He was a political activist and Islamic ideologist in the Muslim world during the late 19th century.

³ He was an Anglo-Indian, Muslim philosopher, pragmatist, and social activist of nineteenth century.

⁴ Muhammad 'Abduh was an Egyptian Islamic jurist, religious scholar and liberal reformer, regarded as one of the key founding figures of Islamic Modernism.

thought in Islamic history. They opened new horizons to understand the modern world with the roots of Islam and paved the way for maintaining a positive link between the modern thought and Quran and *Sunnah*. The movement by these outstanding intellectuals is known as revivalist movement. The basic principle given by these thinkers is to face new challenges through *ijtihad* keeping the basic principles of Quran and *Sunnah* in the foundation.

The issues which remain unresolved in the fundamentalists' movement were beautifully dealt by modernists. Modernists emphasize on the rationality and philosophy. For them it was impossible to survive with the modern world without the reconciliation of modern thought and Islam. Modernists hold that there is a need of both aspects-spirit of Islam and modern approach. Lapidus (1997) maintained in his article *Islamic Revival and Modernity* that "the internal struggle within Muslim societies to define the correct beliefs and practices of Muslims came to be closely tied to the "modernization" processes, the global political and economic transformation, of that era"⁵ Fazlur Rahman briefly explains the methodology opted by modernists and appreciated their efforts to promote the study of sciences. They defended their position from the Quran as it is the book which invites to think, to reproduce and to rationalize things. They maintained that the reason of progress of West particularly in the field of science is that they adopted the method of reasoning. They rebelled against tyrannical rule of church and use their mind in the way of progress and prosperity. Modernists make Western critics realize that the reason of the backwardness of Muslims was due to leaving behind the Quranic invitation of thinking and reflecting. It was the wider implementation of rational thinking that differentiates modernists from fundamentalists, as fundamentalists also used reason but for the very narrow perspective. Due to this narrow approach fundamentalists counted the study of philosophy as the greater sin. Modernists on the other hand opened the ways to study science and philosophy and paved the way to unite reason and faith.

Another great effort of modernists was in the social sector through their intellectual approach. There were so many social, moral, political and economical factors which were lagging behind in the early

⁵ See (Lapidus 1997, 449)

revivalists' period. Modernists changed the pattern of literal understanding of Quran and introduced the method of proper understanding of the spirit and objectives of Quranic teachings. In all the above mentioned institutions modernists presented a liberal view and promoted the vision of change in the medieval trends.

Keeping in view the Islamic Shura system, modernists demanded to change the kingship system in the political field and suggested the constitutional system of democratic government in which rulers are selected by the mutual consent of people. Similarly, in the field of education they realized the need of scientific study along with traditional religious study. They lay stress that if it will not be adopted it will lead towards the backwardness of Muslims. This educational dichotomy produced the people of two different extremes who could hardly communicate to each other. In the present time this dichotomy leads towards neo-fundamentalism.

Regarding women's right modernists hold that Islam has not only improved the status of women rather it has also given her equal rights with men. Women are not only meant to restrict to one corner; they can actively participate in the society. Fazlur Rahman says that the inequality seen between man and women has its roots in the customs rather than religion. The economic side was not dealt in the way modernists should do. The author maintains that economic justice and monotheism these were the pivotal issues since 1950s and 1960s, where the issue of monotheism was well remembered on the same time economic justice was put into the void. However, says Fazlur Rahman that Khomeini⁶ and Qadhafi⁷ had revived it to the centre of Islamic Ideology.

After examining the overall thesis of modernists, Fazlur Rahman appreciates them for the implementation of intellectual approach, then critically examining them he gives two draw backs of the modernists.

⁶ Imam Khomeini was an Iranian religious leader and politician, and leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution which saw the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran.

⁷ Muammar Qadhafi was a Libyan Revolutionary and Politician.

1. They selected just few key points from Quran and discuss them with modernity. They put effort but that could not develop a comprehensive understanding.
2. Many modernists showed an terrifying inclination towards the apologetics on crucial matters, for example on the issue of Western criticism that Islam spread on the basis of sword, Fazlur Rahman holds that Islam spread on positive grounds.

Due to these two weaknesses and the modernist's emphasis on the Western social customs along with modern democracy, education and science they were considered not loyal with the true spirit of Islam which ultimately resulted in the rejection of modernism. The excessive liberal culture and norms of the West were threats for the Muslims who raised objection on the modernists and condemned their approach. Especially the family system of West had nothing to give, therefore they refuted modernism completely. Here it is noteworthy to mention that Fazlur Rahman says that as modernism was representative of Islamic liberalism and their approach was rather individualistic therefore they could not get that popularity as fundamentalism achieved. But as most of the Western thinkers did, this should not be taken as a criterion that this movement was inherently weak. On the other hand the objection of Western writers that Islamic modernism was produced by the external phenomenon by the impact of West is completely wrong and biased approach according to Fazlur Rahman.

In 1930s there emerge a group of people highly influenced by the Western approach and they appreciate the communist system. West claimed to stand for human values and rights apparently but flouted Muslims consistently in order to weaken their power and strengths.

After describing the background and principles of all movements and their climax and decline Fazlur Rahman now compares the four groups. These are as under:

1. The traditionalists/fundamentalists/orthodox/conservatives
2. The modernists
3. The secularists
4. Neo-fundamentalists (the group emerging in 1930s)

Traditionalists/fundamentalists/orthodox/conservatives

They are firmly rooted in a tradition. They impose their views on others as they consider themselves as the spokesperson of tradition. For a traditionalist Quran has only that literal meaning which his tradition has determined. He could not look outside that particular circle. He does not convince of new changes as he is not interested with the true spirit and objectives of Quran. Due to this stagnant approach early pre-modernist fundamentalist and neo-fundamentalist revolted against them.

One important difference is that fundamentalists/conservatives are adherent to basic Islamic traditions, while as neo-fundamentalists are postmodernists and they have much influence of modernism so we can say they are also a sort of richer modern version of fundamentalists. This is the reason of calling it neo-fundamentalism according to Fazlur Rahman. He defines neo-fundamentalism as:

An Islamic bid to discover the original meaning of the Islamic message without historic deviations and distortions and without being encumbered by the intervening tradition, this bid being meant not only for the benefit of the Islamic community but as a challenge to the world and to the West in particular (Rahman 1981, 33)

Fundamentalists were literate, educated and attached with the basics of religion. Neo-fundamentalists neither support the traditions nor promote the intellectual and spiritual domination of West. Unfortunately their position is more miserable than fundamentalists and the reason for this misery is that neo-fundamentalism arises as a reactionary movement to the modernism. Although they talk about *ijtihad* but as there foundation is on the reaction therefore they could never act intellectually.

Fundamentalists although were dissatisfied with the prevailing situation but they were deeply rooted in tradition, keeping aside the issue of being stagnant, the richness and the intellectual capability of that tradition itself cannot be challenged. When some of the fundamentalists revolted they were aware of what they want to do but on the other hand neo-fundamentalists had little knowledge of the tradition so they were ignorant of what basically a tradition is. According to Fazlur Rahman among the fundamentalists no one except Ayatollah Khomeini could be considered a well trained *alim* in the traditional sense. He designates neo-fundamentalism as the function of the layman. Many modernists were also layman with the exception of the few who were truly religious

scholars. Criticizing neo-fundamentalism Fazlur Rahman writes a beautiful sentence: "Neo-fundamentalism, on the other hand, seems to think it has a divine mission to shut down Islamic intellectual life" (Rahman 1981, 34)

He concludes his article by arising following questions:

1. "Do Muslims become more effective or constructive by becoming psychologically so entangled with the West that they seem to be paralyzed when it comes to reconstructing their own societies on Islamic lines?"
2. "What kind of man does Quran aim at producing?" (Rahman 1981, 35)

By raising these questions the author is basically drawing the attention of Muslims towards the solutions that they can revive their status as they were once in the history. The need is to follow properly the basic tenets of Islam in their practices so that Muslims could regain an outstanding position in the world. Muslim should try to understand the fact that what kind of human God wanted to have through His teachings. As

"While "men of goodwill"⁴¹ have argued that the "moderate Islam" of the majority of Muslims has no connection with terrorism or jihadists" (Turner 2007, 415)

Conclusion

The present situation of Muslim world particularly the Muslims of Pakistan is a clear-cut bad repute regarding Islam and its teachings. The reasons which are vivid can be listed as follows: to avoid the practices of basic teachings of Islam, to close the door of interpretation resulting to portray an orthodox image of Islam, if some revivalist tried to meet up the modern world they went to extreme as a reaction, the problem of the misinterpretations of the Quranic text, two extremes in the education system resulting to Madrassah system-devoid of scientific knowledge and the system based on modern Curricula, problem of influence of rigid sectarian approach, inability to understand the actual spirit of Islam, activist attitude towards the religious matters, failure to stop the promotion of foreign culture which contradicts with Islamic teachings, collapse of economy due to poor and dishonest strategies of government, perfidious and untrue leaders chosen through unfair means, lack of infrastructure, hesitation to accept positive change, adherence to those customs which have no relation with the teachings of Quran and *Sunnah*,

and last but not the least, duplicitous attitude of society in every field are the reason which have eroded the roots of Islam from society in general and individual in particular.

Bruce B. Lawrence in his review essay presents the suggestion of Esposito as: “He advises Muslims to resist the hijacking of Islam by extremists, urging ‘self-sacrifice and decades of commitment by many devout and talented followers of the Straight Path of Islam’ (Lawrence 2008, 88)

In a nut shell, in order to meet the international standards Muslims should first of all lay the foundation of their true Islamic teachings and then on the spirit of those teachings they should move forward in the new modern arena. Modernity should be taken as to decode Quranic teachings regarding new challenges of the world. Being stagnant and stick to the old traditions and being completely out of the circle of true spirit of Islam, both the extremes can never lead towards the solution. The concept of nationalism should be understood in its true sense so that unity of Muslim Ummah could be achievable. As Ghulam Shabbir quotes Iqbal balanced view regarding nationalism:

Nationalism in the sense of love of one’s country, and ever readiness for its honor is a part of Muslim’s faith. It comes into conflict with Islam only when it begins to play a role of political concept and claims to be a principle of human solidarity demanding that Islam should be recede to background of a mere private opinion and cease to be a living factor in the national life. (Shabbir 2012, 11-12)

Along with the scientific and modern knowledge, religious knowledge should also be considered mandatory so that a new reconstructed vision of Muslim could present the real face of Islam before the Western world. This is the only way through which a negative connotation of the word ‘fundamentalism’ which has now reached to the word ‘terrorism or extremism’ could be transformed into positive one.

پیرانِ کلیسا ہوں کہ شیخانِ حرم ہوں
نے جدتِ گفتار ہے نے جدتِ کردار

سب اپنے بنائے سوتے زنداں میں ہیں مجھوس
خاور کے ثوابت ہوں کہ افرنگ کے تیار

دنیا کو ہے اس مہدی برحق کی ضرورت
جو جس کی نگہ زلزلہ عالم افکار

ہیں اہل سیاست کے وہی کہ نہ خم و پیچ
شاعر اسی افلاسِ تخیل میں گرفتار

(Iqbal 1990, 557/57)

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