

**On Justice in Islām:
A Brief Survey and Reflections based
on the Writings of Fazlur Rahman
(1911–1988)**

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Abstract

In recent years, the idea of “justice” alongside many other great ideas has undergone shifts in meaning due to a philosophical programme that was set in motion centuries earlier and has by now consolidated its influence in the Muslim world. In the second half of the 20th century, an influential Muslim thinker, Fazlur Rahman (1911–1988), was one of the major figures that contributed to the ongoing debate on the understanding and realisation of justice in the modern world from the Islamic perspective. By applying the conceptual analysis, this article shall examine how Fazlur Rahman understood, employed, and deployed the idea of “justice” in various contexts. This article shall also examine its sources and practical implications, as well as situate his position vis-à-vis that of other scholars in the Islamic tradition.

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Keywords

Islām, justice, leadership, governance, modernity, Fazlur Rahman.

Introduction

In the past century, the understanding of the meaning of “justice” and what it constitutes in the Muslim world has been greatly dominated by modern knowledge framework with different conceptual schemes from that which is projected by Islām, which restricts, limits or reduces its meaning to merely the socio-political and legal domains.¹ According to the eminent Western moral philosopher of the 20th century, Alasdair MacIntyre, the ideas of justice available in the modern world are likened to a pile of ruins and historical fragments that can make no coherent sense.² Politicians, reformers, administrators, appeal in a haphazard way to items in this deposit. Philosophers and social theorists toil away trying to make sense of it. The ruins are not even the ruins of one building, but the disordered remains of various ethical conceptions. These were, in their time, coherent: they belonged to various traditions. But as the West now have no coherent conceptions, and because they are trying to solve their social problems with those fragmentary ideas, they are trapped in an endlessly inconclusive and conflicting arguments about questions of justice.³ From the Islamic viewpoint, the

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1. See Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Conception of Justice* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), W.N Seymour, *Why Justice Fails* (New York: William Morrow Co., 1973), John Rawls, *Theory of Justice* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), and Michael Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).
 2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 5.
 3. Mortimer J. Adler, *Six Great Ideas* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1981).

restriction of “key terms” in the Islamic conceptual vocabulary has caused confusion in the minds of present-day Muslims leading to a gradual de-islamisation or secularisation of the mind. One of these key terms is “justice” (*‘adl*) which has been restricted to a dual party relation situation or between society and state.⁴

The concept of justice or *‘adl* in Qur’anic vocabulary occupies a very significant position in the worldview of Islām. In the intellectual tradition of Islām, the concept of *‘adl*, first and foremost, is considered as one of the Names of God.⁵ It was subsequently discussed under the domains of ethics (*‘ilm akhlāq*) in the intellectual tradition of Islam particularly upon contact with the Greek philosophical tradition. The *falāsīfah*, namely al-Farābī and Ibn Sīnā, were perhaps the earliest scholars to systematise the concept in a discipline, appropriating the Aristotelian framework of ethics.⁶ Later, the likes of al-Ghazzālī and al-Rāzī developed the concept further within the ambit of Ash‘arite theological framework.⁷ But all in all, these scholars understood *‘adl* as the complete virtue (*fadīlah*) to the highest degree because it is the complete exercise of virtue.⁸ While linguistically, according to the authoritative lexicons of the Arabic language, the word *‘adl* is an abstract noun, derived from the verb *‘adālah*, which means: “to straighten or to sit straight, to amend or modify, to depart or deflect from one

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4. See Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978), 76.
 5. See al-Ghazālī’s *Al-Maqsad Al-Asnā fī Sharh Asmā’ Allāh Al-Husnā* (The Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God) translation with notes by David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 92–96.
 6. See for instance, al-Farābī’s *Mabādi’ Ara’ Ahl Madīnat al-Fadīlah*, [Arabic/English texts], trans. Richard Walzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
 7. See for instance, Sabri Orman, “Al-Ghazālī on Justice and Social Justice,” *Turkish Journal of Islamic Economics* 5, no. 2 (2018): 1–68.
 8. Fazlur Rahman, however, contends that none of the scholars actually developed ethics squarely based on the Qur’ān.

(wrong) path to the other (right) one, to be equal or equivalent, to equalise, to balance or counter-balance, to weigh, or to be in a state of equilibrium.”⁹

It has been pointed out by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas that it is a Divine command to act with justice as a collective and individual entity.¹⁰ But earlier in the 20th century, Fazlur Rahman was one of the few Muslim scholars who had raised awareness of the notion of justice in Islām in the contemporary context. Although Rahman had not defined what he understood by justice in Islām nor did he deliberate on it systematically as part of the science of ethics (which he had hoped to work on after the *Major Themes of the Quran* before his demise in 1988),¹¹ his works state many issues about how he understood the concept of justice. In *Major Themes*,¹² although the term “justice” as listed in the index refers to only two passages, there were other passages and discussions that were strongly connected to the concept of justice (*‘adl*) as will be deliberated in this article. This discussion on justice will be divided into two: the theoretical level and the practical level.

This article seeks to trace the origins of Fazlur Rahman’s ideas, analyses his usage of the term, as well as his coherence and consistency in applying the term, and situates his interpretation in the intellectual tradition of Islām, particularly that in relation with the *falāsifah* and *taṣawwūf* tradition based

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9. Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, (London: Williams & Norgate, 1863), s.v. “a-d-l.”
 10. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *On Justice and the Nature of Man* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2015).
 11. It was alluded by his students, Nurcholish Madjid and Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, that Fazlur Rahman had hoped to produce a comprehensive work on the Qur’anic ethics before his demise. See “Fazlur Rahman dan Rekonstruksi Etika al-Quran” (*Fazlur Rahman and the Reconstruction of Qur’anic Ethics*), *Islamika* 2 (October–December 1993): 25; Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, “Personal Anecdotes on a Great Scholar Teacher and Friend,” *Journal of Islamic Research* 4, 2 (October 1990): 254.
 12. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Quran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

on his published articles¹³ and books.¹⁴ Specifically, the article attempts to answer the following questions: 1) how does Fazlur Rahman understand the concept of justice in Islām and what is the background for his interpretations?; 2) how does Fazlur Rahman apply the concept of justice in present-day context?; and 3) how does his conception of justice differ from other scholars in the Islamic tradition?

As Fazlur Rahman's theological and philosophical positions at times are deemed to have departed from the consensus of Sunni scholastic tradition, this article shall adopt the approach of isolating the elements that are considered erroneous in the corpus of Rahman such as his positions on Sunni theology and *taṣawwūf*, based on the point of departure of the metaphysical framework of Islām (or the worldview of Islām) as espoused and agreed upon by authoritative theologians (*mutakallimūn*), metaphysicians (*ahl taṣawwūf*) and philosophers (*ahl hukama'*) as reformulated in our contemporary age by al-Attas in his book, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*.¹⁵ It must be noted however, that the writings of Fazlur Rahman are of worth as they are not restricted to purely academic or theoretical considerations but rather, they are reflective of his practical experience. This was because he was directly involved in policy-formulations and institutional building during his service for the government of Pakistan under President Ayyub Khan through the Central Institute of Islamic Research in Karachi between 1961–1968; subsequently for President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a personal capacity, and the government

13. "Islamization of Knowledge: A Response," "The Quranic Solution of Pakistan's Educational Problems," "Riba and Interest," "Islam and Social Justice," *Pakistan Forum* 1, no.1 (1970); "Islam and Economic Justice," *Economist Report XIV*, no. 34 (1974); 1st. Chapter: "Islam's Origin and Ideals," *Islamic Identity and the Struggle for Justice*, 11.

14. Mainly from his *Major Themes*.

15. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: A Fundamental Exposition to the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation [ISTAC], 1995).

of Indonesia during his professorship at the University of Chicago, USA.¹⁶

Justice in the Universe

It is necessary to begin by briefly examining Fazlur Rahman's conception of God and its relationship with his conception of justice, since he made it clear in several places in his works of the necessity of bringing in the "total mental picture" or "*weltanschauung*" in contemporary Islamic discourse. Among the salient features of Rahman's conception of God are the power of God and its close relation with the notion of *qadr* (measuring); that God has created laws by which nature works or orderliness of the universe; contingency of everything in the Eyes of God; and that God has stressed in His revelation on establishing justice. Rahman went as far as to argue that, "In the Qur'an, monotheism (*tawhīd*) and social justice are two sides of the same coin and the two organically involve each other."¹⁷

However, there is evidence that Rahman's conception of God might have been influenced by the Aristotelian-Avicennian framework as per his remark, "God's concept is functional", i.e. God is needed not for what He is but, perhaps, for what He does. It is exactly in this spirit that Aristotle compared God to a general of the army. For the general (in Aristotle's concept) is not a soldier among other soldiers—just as God is not an extra-fact among facts—but represents "order", i.e. the fundamental

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16. On his contributions to practical matters, refer to his "Some Reflections on the Reconstruction of Muslim Society in Pakistan," *Islamic Studies* 6, no. 2 (1967): 103–20; "A Report of Professor Fazlur Rahman's Visit to Pakistan in Summer 1975 in Relation to the Islamic Education Project of the University of Chicago" (1975), Annexure A: "Suggestions for the PPP Election Manifesto (1976) on the Subject of Islam"; Annexure B: "A Note on the Task before the Ministry of Religious Affairs." Ford Foundation Grant #74–141.
 17. Fazlur Rahman, "Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice," *Pakistan Economist* XIV, no. 34 (1974).

function of holding the army together.”¹⁸ As for how Rahman differs from the Mu‘tazilite and Ash‘arite conceptions of God requires further study which is beyond the scope of this article.

With regard to the notion of the universe, Fazlur Rahman interpreted it in the metaphysical sense wherein there is a certain order or cosmos (or a harmonious condition when things are in their proper place) that is contingent upon God, and correctly restated its corresponding concept in the worldview of Islām—i.e., *‘alam* as *āyātullāh* (Signs of God).¹⁹ For Rahman, the Qur’ān encourages three types of knowledge that will assist in interpreting his Signs: 1) the study of history (which includes study of geography), 2) the study of the physical universe, and 3) the study of man, psychology or the inner world (*al-anfus*).²⁰

For Rahman, to do justice to the universe as Signs of God and knowledge derived from it meant to undertake the study of positive sciences in order to “subjugate” or “harness” nature for the amelioration of the common lot of man. He added, however, that Muslims had not done justice to the positive and rational sciences since the medieval period as the *madrasa* system excluded such sciences as being “non-sharia sciences.”²¹ This particular point in this author’s view is a valid criticism of his on the modern day Muslims with regard to the state of injustice towards knowledge and is worth quoting at length:

Specialization is necessary for progress in each field of knowledge but, unless the results of specialist knowledge continue to be integrated by great

18. Idem, “The Quranic Concept of God, the Universe and Man,” *Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (1967): 1–19, citing Aristotle 1947, 2: 167.

19. Idem, *Major Themes of the Quran*, 68.

20. Idem, “The Qur’anic Solution of Pakistan’s Educational Problems,” *Islamic Studies* 1, no. 4 (December 1967); as per the Qur’anic verse: “... *fi al-‘afāq wa fi al-anfusihim*.” *Fuṣṣilat* (41): 53

21. Idem, “Islam and the Problem of Economic Justice,” 22.

minds to produce an overall picture of life and the universe, mankind suffers incalculable damage. In our time, specialization in sciences and technology and a disproportionate concentration in these fields to the exclusion of higher values which would give science and technology a purposeful orientation, has resulted in men of drastically myopic vision creating an unrest and a vacuity of mind whose harmful consequences have only just begun to appear.²²

Justice in Human Nature

According to Fazlur Rahman, although the modern world has seen increasing sophistication, the genuine fundamental weakness for modern man is a confused understanding on the nature and reality of man and human nature.²³ He also mentioned in his earlier work, *Islam*, of the predicament that Western man experienced in the 20th century in light of the major world events then:

One may also say that in the post-World War II era intellectual creativity has receded in the West itself, which is now almost blindly engaged in creating ‘instruments’ of a civilization which has neither goals nor much of a content. This technological explosion is, in a sense, a riposte to an earlier intellectual explosion, the period extending over several centuries that was characterized by perhaps the most brilliant and sustained intellectual creativity man has ever experienced. Unfortunately, it was also characterized by an aimless emptiness, in which man as a whole, man as a concrete entity in an existential situation presenting certain dire and concrete problems, was lost sight of. Neither that intellectualism nor this technology addresses man

22. Ibid., 23.

23. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 161.

in his concrete wholeness, including his moral or human dimension.²⁴

Thus, according to Rahman, many leaders today are like, to use an analogy, a doctor who only treats the external symptoms of a patient and neglects or is ignorant of the true cause of the internal illness suffered. As a result, according to Rahman, "...many of the new generation are in fact growing into animals".²⁵

In explicating the nature of man as an individual in Islām, Fazlur Rahman appeared to be familiar with the more intricate discussions on the nature of man and psychology of the human soul in the intellectual tradition of Islām,²⁶ yet he did not delve into such discussions at length in his later works such as the *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (e.g. discussions on the divisions of the soul and its various faculties were absent). He did however, like many scholars of the *tasawwūf* tradition, restate the centrality of the notion of *fitrah* (which he translated as the primordial nature) in dealing with basic human weakness and attaining virtue. He also held that—like the representative of Islamic thought in history—all evils, injustices, harms that one does to someone else *is in reality* an act of injustice towards one's self (*zulm al-nafs*).²⁷ Citing the various instances in the

24. Idem, *Islam*, 264.

25. Idem, *Islam and Modernity*, 159.

26. See for instance his *Avicenna's Psychology* (Oxford, 1952; repr. Westport, Conn., 1981) and *Prophecy in Islam—Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (repr. Chicago, 1979).

27. "Self-injustice" (*zulm al-nafs*—all Arab philologists assure us that *zulm* in Arabic originally meant "to put something out of its proper place," so that all wrong of any kind is injustice, i.e., an injustice against the agent himself) is, therefore, a very common term in the Qur'an, with its clear idea that all injustice is basically reflexive. After recounting all the waywardness and wrongdoings of bygone generations as well as of individuals, the Qur'an usually says, "We did them no injustice [in destroying them], on the contrary, they did injustice to themselves" (*al-Baqarah* (2): 231; *al-Alāq* (65): 1; *al-Naml* (27): 44; *al-Qasas* (28): 16; *al-Baqarah* (2): 54; *al-A'raf* (7): 23; *al-Baqarah* (2): 57; *Al-Imrān* (3): 117; *al-A'raf* (7): 160, 177; etc.); (*Major Themes*, 25). See also Fazlur Rahman, "The Status of Individual in Islam," *Islamic Studies* 5, no. 4 (December 1966): 320.

Qurʾān where God explains it as such, the interpretation is consistent with how authoritative scholars in the Islamic tradition interpret *ʿadl* in the Qurʾanic context. This indicates that Rahman understood it in its authentic meaning in Islām, which is as “a condition of a thing in a proper place.”²⁸

In his *Autobiographical Note*, Rahman also expressed the need for humanity to become a “human cosmos” rather than a “chaos”, which are key terms referring to “justice” and “injustice” in the philosophical tradition of the Greeks in the domain of psychology as science of the soul and whose corresponding concepts in Islām are also employed by the Muslim philosophers in the past (*falāsifah* and ahl *hukamaʿ*). Thus, Rahman would most likely concur with al-Attas’s position on the perennial philosophical question: “Can one be unjust to one’s self?”—and consequently, the majority of scholars in the intellectual tradition of Islām—that one can indeed be unjust to one’s self for justice in Islām begins and ends with the self. The remedy for an injustice towards the self, according to Rahman, begins with genuine repentance (*tawbah*)—for God’s succour is crucial in becoming a good person in Islām. Hence, to be good and just to one’s self means to follow one’s nature (*fitrah*) and Rahman connected this with the meaning of the Primordial Covenant that the souls of men sealed with God.²⁹

Another key term that Rahman linked to the nature of man and justice is *taqwā*, which he referred to as “a kind of inner light, a spiritual spark which man must light within himself. Without this, he will fail to distinguish between right and wrong, seeming and real, immediate and lasting.”³⁰ For Rahman, *taqwā* results in the “fully integrated and whole personality of man” and it is required “to protect oneself

28. See for instance, *Hujwiri’s Kitāb Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*. Abridged translation by Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Luzac & Co., 1911), 387.

29. *Al-Aṣṣāf* (7): 172–173.

30. Rahman, *Major Themes*, 127.

against the harmful or evil consequences of one's conduct.” This can be interpreted in other words, as a man who is just to himself. It is to be noted also that Rahman cited the great luminary of the *taṣawwūf* tradition, Jalāluddīn al-Rūmī, in his discussions concerning human nature to perhaps emphasise the point of doing justice to the self: “If you wish to witness Resurrection, become it! for this is the condition of witnessing anything!”³¹

Justice in Education

As early as 1967, during his Directorship of the Central Institute of Islamic Research in Pakistan, Fazlur Rahman highlighted the intimate link between education and justice in his article titled “The Quranic Solution of Pakistan's Educational Problems” when he stated that the Qur'ān called for man to pursue knowledge for salutary ends both for the individual and the society, and thus it was the first responsibility of educators to attune the minds of their pupils “on sound moral lines.”³² This, Fazlur Rahman attributed to a faulty education system and he cited Qureshi's remarks which echo his own opinion on Pakistan's education system:

...[the secular education system is] the continuation of a faulty, aimless, and diseased system of education that has bred no social virtues, no depth of feeling, no sense of responsibility—nothing except selfishness, corruption and cowardly lack of initiative and courage... [as for leaders of traditional education] neglected modern knowledge to an extent that there is no scope left for dialogue... such education cannot help the growth of religious consciousness.³³

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31. Cited by Rahman, *Major Themes*, 120. I have yet been able to trace its exact location in the *Mathnawī* at the time of writing.
 32. Fazlur Rahman, “The Quranic Solution of Pakistan's Educational Problems,” *Islamic Studies* 6, no. 4 (December 1967).
 33. Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, *Education in Pakistan* (Karachi: Ma'aref, 1975).

In order to produce a just individual or leader who will in turn be able to realise justice in society or in Rahman's terms "a moral social order," the precondition that was emphasised by Rahman was the education of man that allowed him to overcome his petty or shortsighted outlook and a narrow vision of life by broadening the horizon of his thinking, thus freeing the self from selfishness and greed. It is against this backdrop that Rahman called for an educational reform in Muslim societies in order to achieve justice in the individual and collective life:

Educational reform is the only approach for a long-term solution of the current problems of the Muslim societies—mental dichotomy and unintegrated collective and individual life, resulting in confusion in all fields of human endeavor and frustration and crises that paralyze life.³⁴

Fazlur Rahman was of the opinion that the aspect that needed to be given the utmost priority was the attitude and "intellectual stand" of the adult and educated Muslims today which had to be informed and guided by the Qur'anic *Weltanschauung*, which is the basis for attitudinal and character refinement of an individual:

...effort to inculcate an Islamic character in young students is not likely to succeed if the higher fields of learning remain completely secular, that is, unpurposeful with regard to their effect on the future of mankind.³⁵

This formulation seems to echo the position held by past Muslim philosophers who subscribed to the psychology of the human soul (*ʿilm nafs*) that the theoretical faculty of the

34. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd. ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979).

35. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 133.

intellect needs to be cultivated vis-à-vis the practical faculty. Without this conceptual point of departure, the individual will not be able to govern his self effectively because in reality, it is the knowledge as the attribute of the soul which determines the quality of one's actions (*ʿamal*).

Socio-Economic Justice

It is evident through his writings that Fazlur Rahman understood the spirit of modern economic thinking of his time when he remarked, “The attempt to regard a human being as a purely economic entity is, in fact a bitter satire on human nature... However, without the establishment of socio-economic justice, it is inconceivable that the individuals of a society or the society as a whole can develop.”³⁶ Thus, Rahman stressed that there were two basic factors that distinguished Islamic teaching from that of other monotheists: 1. Qur’anic teaching of monotheism was organically linked to the idea of economic justice (monotheism and socio-economic justice are two sides of the same coin);³⁷ 2. The deep sense of the gravity of the situation expressed in the idea of judgment.³⁸

Therefore to Rahman, the first step towards attaining socio-economic justice is by recognising and acknowledging that it is central in the religion of Islām, making it an individual and communal obligation of the Muslims—without which, worshipping God (*ʿibādah*) is meaningless and sheer hypocrisy

36. Fazlur Rahman, “Economic Principles of Islam,” *Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (March 1969): 1–8.

37. “The Qur’ān thus seems to declare: one God—one humanity, and the two i.e., monotheism and socio-economic welfare, appear as two sides of the same coin.”

38. “There are essentially three inter-related themes in *Sūrah al-Inshirāh* (94) verses 1–3: that God is one, that the dire socio-economic disparities obtaining in the commercial Meccan society are a fundamental evil, and that man is both individually and collectively (i.e., as a social organisation), answerable and under a divine law of judgement in history.”

(*nifāq*).³⁹ Thus, in his interpretation of the Qur’ān, Rahman deduced that one of the central messages of the Qur’ān is on the establishment of socio-economic justice or an ethical social order and this implies that it is an individual and communal obligation of the Muslim community to realise.⁴⁰ He argued further, that to denounce the social and economic injustice from the beginning of the history of Islam had been the concern of the Qur’an for it was the most difficult of social ills to remedy and was at the heart of social discord.

This narrative or line of reasoning finds some semblance with al-Attas’s exposition on the notion of “*dīn*” (which Rahman did not highlight) in his treatise, *Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality*,⁴¹ where he argues that the idea of religion in Islām (*dīn*) reflects the idea of commerce and trade (*al-tijārah*) as encapsulated in its related terms in the Holy Qur’ān such as “*da’in*” (being in debt), “*raj’*” (gain), “*khusr*” (loss), “*yuqridu*” (loan), which implies that man is himself the subject as well as the object of his trade with God. Al-Attas describes further,

He is his own capital, and his loss and gain depend upon his own sense of responsibility and exercise of freedom. He carries out the trust of buying and selling, of *bay’ah*, and bartering: *ishtarah*, and it is his

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39. “...two basic factors distinguish the Islamic teaching from that of other monotheists. One is that in the Quranic teaching, this monotheism was organically linked to the idea of economic justice. Indeed, so intense is this idea of economic justice and welfare of the common man that its importance is not less than that of monotheism or one God and His worship. The Qur’an even goes so far as to state that in the absence of seeking the general welfare of man, worship of God—even one God—is not only meaningless but sheer hypocrisy.” (See *Sūrah al-Mā’ūn* (107)).
40. “There is no doubt that the Qur’ān wanted Muslims to establish a political order on earth for the sake of creating an egalitarian and just moral-social order.” (*Major Themes*, 62).
41. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1976).

self that he buys or sells or barter; and depending upon his own inclination towards the exercise of his will and deeds his trade will either prosper: *rabiha'l-tijarah*, or suffer loss: *mā rabiha'l-tijarah*.⁴²

In this regard, Fazlur Rahman saw the necessity and obligation to earn and create wealth in its proper sense (*al-māl*) in view of eliminating poverty and ultimately, establishing social justice within the Islamic framework.⁴³ For Rahman, as in the case with the *ahl taṣawwūf*⁴⁴ and Sunni theologians in the past,⁴⁵ to earn and create wealth in the interest of the society is an individual obligation (*farḍ 'ayn*) for Muslims.⁴⁶ Thus, for man to be just in the society entails earning and pursuing wealth for its higher ends. Failure to do so is injustice to one's self for even prayers became hypocritical (*al-Mā'ūn* (107): 1–7)). This is because: 1. not all wealth earned by the believer is rightfully the earner's (*al-Ma'ārīj* (70): 25, and *al-Dhāriyāt* (51): 19); 2. the believer should not spend as he wishes, for in the words of Rahman, “they could not become islands of plenty in a sea of poverty” (*al-Balad* (90): 6); and 3. the believer should spend in the cause of Allah rather than invest in usury (*ribā*). He summed up the place of wealth in relation to justice in Islām as follows: “Wealth is good and necessary in order to

42. Ibid., 17–18.

43. “The creation of wealth and elimination of poverty is, therefore, a supreme Islamic imperative for man. This is because, so long as man is poor—under-nourished, without proper clothing, shelter, and education—he cannot be expected to play the role of a proper human being in society.” Rahman, “Islam and Problem of Economic Justice,” 22.

44. See for instance Ibn Abi Dunya's *Islāh al-Māl* (*The Restoration of Wealth*), trans. Adi Setia (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2016).

45. See for instance al-Ghazzali's *Adab al-Kasb wal-Ma'ash* (*Proprieties of Earning and Living*), trans. Adi Setia (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2013).

46. “The Qur'ān certainly envisages the individual's right—indeed, obligation—to earn and create wealth, but this right exists and is finally sanctioned in the interests of the society as a whole.”

create a just, healthy and progressive social order but it cannot become the sole purpose of life.”⁴⁷

The key principle of distributive justice in Islām according to Fazlur Rahman is based on the Qur’ānic verse, “...wealth should not circulate only among the rich” (*al-Hashr* (59): 7), which he argued was the general economic policy of the Qur’ān.⁴⁸ The mechanism that this principle is to be executed is through *zakat*. Rahman believed that *zakat* played a key role in establishing socio-economic justice as it was a “principle of interference in the private wealth in the interest of the general welfare of society” to prevent a disproportionate distribution of wealth in society, which was the source of injustice at the societal level.

By extension, the opposite of socio-economic justice is encapsulated in the concept of *ribā*, which he defined as “an exorbitant increment whereby the capital sum is doubled several-fold, against a fixed extension of the term of payment of the debt”, and thus, from his point of view, it was not the same as ‘interest’ as being practised in the modern-day economic and banking system.⁴⁹ Rather, what is closer to the spirit of *ribā* in modern times and morally more destructive to him are landlordism, feudalism, profiteering and hoarding—what he regarded as the concealed *ribā*. Following this argument, a just economic system for Rahman is one that is based on *sadāqah*—being the opposite of *ribā*—that is, based on cooperation and mutual consideration in which bank interest will necessarily be eliminated once the social order envisaged by the Qur’ān is realised:

47. The next piece of writing by Fazlur Rahman after the *Major Themes of the Quran* that delves into the question of justice at length is his article, “Islam and Economic Justice”. In this paper, Rahman outlines certain major doctrines, policies, decisions and patterns of conduct advocated by the Qur’an, the Sunnah, the Caliphal authorities, and the *Fuqahā*’ in view of eliciting the principles and basic orientation for producing socio-economic justice in Islam.

48. Rahman, *Major Themes*, 41.

49. See his “Riba and Interest,” *Economic Doctrines of Islam*, 1st. ed., vol. 1 (Lahore: Islamic Publication, 1974).

The system of economy which the Qur'ān requires us to establish, being based on the spirit of cooperation, the further nourishment and development of this spirit in the right manner and the reconstruction of society in accordance therewith would make bank-interest and the present banking system quite superfluous which is just what the spirit of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah requires of us.⁵⁰

Therefore, it seemed clear to Rahman that before there can be socio-economic justice (which he envisioned as the “Islamic Welfare Cooperative Commonwealth”), at the individual level, man must develop the prerequisite of *taqwā*.⁵¹ Thus, when Rahman delved into the question of justice in relation to man and society, it was not merely imposing an alien concept on the Qur'anic or Islamic teachings, but rather, one that was inherent in the teachings of Islām.

As for the socio-political level, the realisation of justice for Rahman is established by strengthening the basic family unit and the larger Muslim community wherein these two entities give priority to the needy over themselves, which is, the result of *taqwā*.⁵² “...Muslims instead of looking at other communities and peoples and jumping to conclusions by drawing wrong analogies therefrom, must first look to Islām and their own selves and attempt to put their own house in order.”⁵³

This follows the classical Muslim philosophers' classification whereby ethics is the precursor to economics (household management or *tadbīr al-manzīl*) and politics (state management or *tadbīr al-madīnah*).⁵⁴ In relation to this, Rahman

50. Ibid., 41.

51. Idem, *Major Themes*, 120.

52. Ibid., “Man in Society,” 42.

53. Fazlur Rahman, “The Principle of Shura and the Role of the Umma in Islam,” *The American Journal of Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1984): 1.

54. See for instance, Ibn Sina's *Kūtib al-Shifā'* (*The Metaphysics of the Healing*) (Utah: Brigham Young University, 2005); and Nasir al-Dīn al-Tūsī's *Kūtib al-Akhlāq* (*The Nasirean Ethics*) (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964).

suggested that governance of the units must involve the institution of *shūrā* (mutual consultation) to decide on matters. But in the context of national governance, this does not mean he rejected the Western democratic systems. Rather, following Muhammad Iqbal, he considered it was the substance of the Western democratic systems which was in error. In other words, “it is not their democratic forms and processes where they are in error, but in their orientations and value systems.”⁵⁵ Rahman was aware, however, that as the Ummah was charged with a certain moral task, this could only be realised provided the individuals within the *Ummah* possessed the Islamic vision of life which in contemporary times have been lost:

...although the Muslim community is explicitly charged with performing certain tasks and certain goals, Muslim masses, by and large, are said to be ignorant of these tasks and goals and, because of their lack of proper awareness of the meaning of Islam, have become assimilated to the condition of non-Muslim societies. I wish to remind ourselves once again that if the Muslim Community at large has permanently and hopelessly lost the Islamic vision of life, then we must admit that the Umma Muslima does not exist... If however, there is hope, as the present writer firmly believes to be the case, that the situation can be redeemed by making the community fully aware of the meaning of Islam, then surely, the first task that devolves upon the Muslim intellectuals and leaders is to attend to the business of the reconstruction of the Umma and its reconstitution in an Islamically meaningful way. This task can neither be avoided nor delayed except on pain of utterly defeating Islam.⁵⁶

55. Rahman, “The Principle of Shura,” 8.

56. *Ibid.*, 9.

Justice in World Politics: Case of Palestine

In 20th century world politics, the issue of Palestine which had caught the attention of Rahman, has been widely regarded as one of the great moral issues in the world as it is causing a great deal of human suffering, instability, and chaos in the Middle East until today. It has increasingly been regarded as an act of aggression and injustice on the part of Israel as noted by the majority of Muslim thought leaders, and people of various faiths. This political injustice and atrocities committed against the Palestinian people in the past 70 years have naturally caused grave repercussions leading to violent reactions and the rise of extremism in Muslim societies. According to Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud:

The half a century of displacement from their homeland and the constant humiliation and suffering will naturally elicit a deep-seated resentment and anger within the psyche of these generations, not only against the direct perpetrators, but also their allies.⁵⁷

It was in this context that towards the end of his career, in 1981, Rahman delivered a speech at the Center for Judaic Studies of the University of Connecticut, titled, “Islam’s Attitude towards Judaism,” which was subsequently published. In the presentation, after deliberating on the theological stand of Islām supported with historical proofs of Muslims’ just attitude towards the Jews and Judaism, Rahman deliberated at length on the injustice of the circumstances involving Zionist Jews and the Palestine affair. In the lecture, Rahman could have easily limited his presentation to the theological and historical aspects, but he decided to take that opportunity to make a

57. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, “Containing Muslim Extremism and Radicalism,” *SARI: Jurnal Alam dan Tamadun Melayu* 28, no. 1 (2010): 241–252.

public statement on the contemporary issue of Palestine and Israel, thereby risking his own personal safety and professional future.

In order to fully appreciate Rahman's arguments on what should be the just position towards this issue, it is necessary to understand his two fundamental premises. Firstly, that the original idea of a "homeland for the Jews" is one originated from the West, not the Oriental Jews:

It must be fully borne in mind that it was the Western, as distinct from the Oriental, Jew who was interested in settling somewhere. This point is so fundamental that without it no one can understand the nature of the genesis of Israel. It is true that when this state was created, many Oriental Jews emigrated to it—for example from Yemen—but the point here made is that Yemeni Jews did not agitate or struggle for a homeland of their own. The whole drama of the creation of Israel lies in the West and is to be wholly explained by developments in the West, in the religious-theological spheres as well as in the political arena.⁵⁸

Secondly, that the genesis and founding of the Israel state are based on dubious grounds:

For the Arabs and the entire Muslim world, however, the very basis of Israel is wrong: it was created in sin and aggression, and that origin has determined its character. Those who think that further aggression—Jewish settlements on the territory occupied in 1967, annexation of Jerusalem, bombing of the Iraqi nuclear installation, massacre of innocent people in the Lebanon, etc.—will cause the Arabs and Muslims to forget Israel's genesis, are only deluding themselves. A super-power may be

58. Fazlur Rahman, "Islam's Attitude toward Judaism," *The Muslim World* 72, no.1 (1982): 1, 9–10.

able to crush another government, it has no means to crush a whole people; if Vietnam did not teach this lesson, then the entire sacrifice made there—in terms of precious lives, money, energy, and above all, a humiliating defeat—has been in vain.⁵⁹

Therefore, it can be deduced that Rahman considered it a moral obligation for world leaders especially from the Western and Muslim world to arrive at a just and humane solution to the situation without neglecting some of the salient historical facts that have contributed to the state of injustice to the affairs concerning Palestine today:

One must certainly search for a just and humane solution both for millions of Palestinians in exile from their own homes and their lands and for about three million-odd Jews now settled in places vacated by Palestinians. But for the Arabs any solution worthy of the name must take due notice of the aggression inherent in Israel's very being and should attempt to nullify it. Any Westerner who imagines that the aggression can simply be forgotten is still captured by a wishful thinking that is further bolstered by still more dangerous feelings of power. The use of power on the side of aggression never succeeded in bringing about a "solution"; certainly, in modern times it has never succeeded and, indeed, boomerangs with redoubled force.⁶⁰

Perhaps, it is due to his deep concerns on the fate of his brethren in Palestine and elsewhere in the world that he remarked in his "Autobiographical Note," that the moral trust from the viewpoint of Islām, "...cannot be discharged by isolated good individuals... but the task of assisting God falls upon humanity as a whole."⁶¹

59. Ibid., 12.

60. Ibid., 13.

61. "An Autobiographical Note," *Journal of Islamic Research* 4, no. 4 (October 1990): 229.

Conclusion

In Fazlur Rahman's conception of justice, the significance of socio-economic and political justice is a matter of moral imperative and prime importance, and it is not divorced from the realisation of justice within the individual self as implied in his discussions on human nature.⁶² He stressed much, for example, on the Qur'anic injunctions and Prophetic mission in Makkah which were designed towards addressing the socio-economic injustice as well as the existential crisis of man.

It is evident that Fazlur Rahman neither conceived justice within the framework of a dichotomous speculative theory, nor did he conceive it as attributed to a vague and ambiguous Nature, or to the State, a product of man's reason and freedom of choice that interferes with the workings of nature. In this regard, Rahman had laid down the grounds for a coherent interpretation of justice in Islām in contemporary idiom. However, absent from Rahman's elaboration on justice is the notion of "proper place" in the hierarchy of beings or gradation of existence (*marātib al-wujūd*) despite being apparently acquainted with the works of Ibn Sīnā, Mulla Ṣadrā and the higher *Sūfīs*, which is an essential component in the conception of justice of past Muslim thinkers as well as the contemporary ones such as al-Attas.⁶³ Also, not elaborated at length by Rahman is the semantic relationship of justice (*ʿadl*) in Islām in relation to other key terms such as religion (*dīn*), right action (*adāb*), virtues (*faḍīlah*) and happiness (*al-saʿādah*).

62. Rahman, "Islam and Economic Justice."

63. It was drawn to our attention that the idea of *marātib al-wujūd* has been expounded by Abdul Karim Jili (d. 1424) in his *Marātib al-Wujūd wa Haqīqāt al-Kull Mawjūd*, ed. ʿAsim I. Al-Zarqāwī (Beirut: Dār Al-Kutub Al-ʿAlmiyyah li Al-Nashr, 2008).

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