

## Varieties of the Muslim Response-II

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### Revivalist Islam

In the first quarter of the 20th century, an interpretation of Islam began to be articulated that was distinct from both the conservative Islam of the traditional *Ulama* and from the apologetic rationalism of the early modernists. This new interpretation made certain modifications in the earlier interpretations, merged elements from the two diverging interpretations, and made astute original contributions to give birth to a new intellectual trend in Muslim society. The revivalist trend in Islamic thought modified the concepts of religious puritanism as it was articulated by the traditional *Ulama* as well as the apologetic rationalism of the early modernists and fused the modified versions together. For the revivalists, religious puritanism meant that the Qur'an and *Sunnah* were to be the sole determinants of Islamic belief and practice, but they rejected the notion that the classical interpretations of these religious sources was binding upon the Muslims. The apologetic rationalism of the early modernists was modified in the sense that the revivalists did not attempt to prove that everything mentioned in the Qur'an could be accounted for by Newtonian physics. Instead, the focus of the revivalist apologetics concentrated on proving that, historically speaking, Islam had produced a far more just and equitable society than anything produced by the West, and that in modern times a society based on Islamic principles would be far superior to any existing Western society. In this regard the revivalists reflected the modernism of Sayyid Amir Ali and not that of Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan.

The original contribution made by the revivalists was characterizing Islam as a *Deen* (a complete way of life) and not just a religion (a collection of dogma and ritual limited to a person's private

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life). The mere fact that such a characterization had to be formulated by the Muslims is in itself evidence that Islam had come into contact with modernity. The assertion that the public and private spheres are somehow independent of each other and can be subject to differing ethical criteria is a distinctly modern categorization. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, with the advent of modernity the role of religion had become limited to regulating the moral/ethical sphere of an individual's life in the West, with no role to play in the collective affairs of society. A similar process of religion's retreat from the public sphere was well underway in the Muslim world long before the arrival of the colonizers; indeed, the arrival of the Europeans had merely exacerbated the trend. The revivalist recognized this fact and it is to their credit that they made it a focal point of their efforts to reverse it. The revivalists emphatically insisted that Islam could not be limited to the merely "religious" realm but that it is an all-embracing, comprehensive system of life that also deals with politics, economics, and the collective social life — failure to recognize this fact meant that one had a truncated vision of Islam.

Before we discuss the revivalist interpretation of Islam in detail, it must be mentioned that revivalist Islam emerged in a radically different socio-political environment than the one which their conservative and early modernist predecessors faced. The predecessors functioned in an environment where the Muslims were in no position to directly challenge the political domination of the West, a fact that the Muslims recognized reluctantly. The birth of revivalist Islam, on the other hand, coincided with the emergence of various independence movements in the Muslim world, thus signaling a newfound confidence on the part of the Muslims. The independence movements invariably appealed to religious sentiments of the people for sparking the feelings of nationalism. In the Islamic context it was inevitable that nationalism be closely identified with religious sentiment. The only other alternative, the tribal/ethnic approach, could not provide a wide enough base in many Muslim societies to effectively challenge Western domination.

The birth of revivalist Islam also coincided with the emergence of a new social group in Muslim society, the urban middle class. It is from this social stratum that most of the leading exponents of revivalist Islam emerged and to which revivalist Islam most readily appealed. From its very beginning, revivalist Islam has not been able to move into the countryside and win the allegiance of the rural peasants, this segment's loyalty rests with the traditional/conservative interpretation of Islam. At the same time, revivalist Islam has been shunned by the social and

political elite of Muslim society — their interests have been most directly linked with the West. The elite has been openly hostile to revivalist Islam since it first emerged. The middle class provided the ground in which revivalist Islam first took root and, with the passage of time, this segment of the population has continued to be its primary source of strength. It is important to keep revivalist Islam's links with the independence movements and the middle class in mind because this link reflects both its strengths and weaknesses.

The revivalist discourse asserts that Islam is an all-embracing system of law and ethics that governs all aspects of human life. They make this assertion based on a more comprehensive definition of *ibadah* than that offered by the conservatives and early modernist. It had come to be almost unanimously accepted by the Muslims that as long as one prayed five times a day, fasted in Ramadan, paid the Zakah, and performed the *Hajj* that person had fulfilled all the obligations that Islam required of him/her — he or she had performed all the *ibadah*. This understanding of *ibadah* was promulgated, implicitly and explicitly, by both the conservatives and the early modernists. The revivalists argued that “Islam” could not be confined to merely the ritual religious practices that are obligatory on the Muslims; for them, the term *ibadah* goes beyond the religious obligations that are expressed in the five pillars of Islam.

The revivalists take the meaning of *ibadah* to be more comprehensive and inclusive than their predecessors. They define this term in the following words: “*Ibadah* is to obey the Divine Law in one's life, at all times and in all conditions. And to free oneself from obligation to any law which contradicts the Divine Law.”<sup>10</sup> The implicit assumption in this definition is that the Divine Law is so comprehensive that it contains injunctions that cover all aspects of an individual's life, “...at all times and in all conditions.” For the revivalists, religious obligations expressed in the five pillars of Islam are merely the initial steps that discipline the individual so that he or she is able to perform *ibadah* in the true sense of the word — to remain faithful to the Divine Law in all aspects of one's life. The revivalists share the fundamental concepts of traditional Islam with conservative *Ulama*. However, for the revivalists, these fundamental concepts of tradition are to be interpreted in a manner that gives them new meaning — both in depth and in breadth — when compared with the interpretation of the same tradition by the *Ulama*. This “re-interpretation” of tradition by the revivalists is a direct response to Islam's encounter with modernity. Referring to revivalist Islam as “Islamic resurgence,” a contemporary scholar on modern Muslim

thought notes:

One can see Islamic resurgence... as neo-traditional Islamism, which, in many ways, has felt the impact of the West and has been compelled to forge a kind of an intellectual and political synthesis in order to respond to the formidable challenge of the West. This is perhaps what differentiates it from other traditionalist and conservative tendencies in the modern [Muslim] world that did not take the Western threat seriously. In other words, Islamic resurgence is not a strident assertion of old values in a condensed and purified form, but is a reaction to an aggressive Western and capitalist modernity.<sup>11</sup>

The revivalists' definition of *ibadah* rejects a fundamental principle of modernist thought — the public/private or individual/collective dichotomy. This dichotomy is based on the proposition that it is not only possible but also desirable that the public affairs of the individual be governed by one set of (“secular”) ethics and principles and his private affairs are governed by another set of (“religious”) ethics and principles. The revivalists do not argue that there is no distinction between the public and the private sphere, but that both spheres have to be regulated according to a uniform ethical code. In light of the revivalists' definition of *ibadah*, not only does the public/private dichotomy become irrelevant but the sacred/secular distinction also becomes nonsensical. It logically follows that the revivalists do not see any problem in insisting that Islamic (or “religious”) principles have to be the determining factors in the individual's private life as well as the collective socioeconomic affairs of society at large.

A by-product of this definition of *ibadah* is the one phenomenon that has become the hallmark of revivalists Islam, viz., political activism. In their political activism the revivalists break away from the political quietism of their conservative and early modernist predecessors. The political quietism of the predecessors was partially a result of their definition of Islam and *ibadah* as well as other facts on the ground. The early modernists quite consciously preached a doctrine of political quietism, arguing that any activism would not be viewed favorably by the Western powers and would therefore produce results detrimental to the interests of the Muslim community. The conservatives, for their part, had become accustomed to political quietism long before the encounter with the modern West and they were content to continue serving the

specifically “religious” needs of the Muslims. Both of these groups also realized that the Muslims were in no position to challenge the political and military supremacy of the Western powers. The emergence of revivalist Islam coincided with the advent of factors that were conducive to political activism, and in some cases even demanded such activism. At the same time, the revivalists had articulated a vision of Islam and a definition of *ibadah* that made political activism a part of a believer’s life.

In a state based on “secular” principles the believer is limited to observing the Divine dictates in his or her private affairs only and, as a result, his or her *ibadah* remain deficient. If the true meaning of *ibadah* is to obey the Divine Law in all conditions and at all times, it naturally follows that this can only be possible in a state that is committed to the implementation of the Divine Law. Consequently, it becomes imperative that the believers pool their resources and organize a party that is committed to bringing a political entity into existence that is the embodiment of Divine Law. According to the revivalists, striving for the establishment of a state based on Divine Law is the ultimate *ibadah* — all of the other religious obligations (expressed in the pillars of Islam) discipline and enables the believer to strive towards this goal. Speaking of the necessity to engage in a struggle for the establishment of such a state, Sayyid Abul A‘la Maududi notes, “...this is the fundamental obligation of *Deen*, and in my opinion this is the fundamental message of the Holy Book, and [engaging in this struggle] has been the way of all the Prophets.”<sup>12</sup> Speaking on the same subject, Hasan Al-Banna says: “The vision of Islam to which the Al-Ikhwan are committed considers politics to be a part of it. The Prophet has rated the concept of ‘Rule’ to be an integral component of Islam and in our books of *fiqh*, ‘Rule’ is declared to be a primary fundamental...”<sup>13</sup>

At this juncture, we must exercise some caution and not make the mistake of attributing the political activism of revivalist Islam solely to the socio-political circumstances in which it emerged. The emergence of this trend towards political activism also resulted from the evolution of the thought process of the individual revivalists who initially articulated this vision of Islam. It would be fitting to describe the development of this thought process in the revivalists’ own words. On the occasion of the founding of Jama‘at-e-Islami in August 1941, Sayyid Abul A‘la Maududi described the evolution of his personal thought in these words:

In the beginning I was an adherent of traditional and conservative Islam. Then I studied Islam to

understand it and came to believe in its teachings as a matter of faith. After that I embarked on a mission to express the teachings of Islam in the form of a mass movement. The whole purpose behind this enterprise was to ensure that Islam does not become relegated to merely our individual personal lives and that it is established so as to govern our collective public life also.<sup>14</sup>

This self-understanding is explicitly aware of the fact that the revivalists' conceptual framework expands on the traditional understanding of the conservative *Ulama*. Besides enunciating a comprehensive and all-embracing definition of *ibadah* and advocating political activism, revivalist Islam also advocated an end to religious sectarianism resulting from *fiqhi* disputes. The revivalists attempt to overcome *this* problem by arguing that only those religious practices that are enjoined by the Qur'an and Sunnah are obligatory on the Muslims, and that none of the various interpretations regarding their exact method of performance are binding in themselves. These different interpretations are the result of different methods that were adopted by the scholars of classical Islam to interpret the primary sources of Islam, the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. Because such interpretation had been worked out after the life of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), differences in these interpretations are to be expected and accepted. Any insistence that these interpretations are also binding upon the Muslims — the viewpoint of the traditional *Ulama* — is unacceptable. The revivalists note that *fiqhi* differences of opinions existed among the Prophet's Companions (RAA) as well as the generations immediately following them, and at no point did these differences become the cause of religious sectarianism. But the conservative *Ulama* placed such emphasis on varying *fiqhi* positions that difference of opinion regarding these had become a primary source of division among the Muslims. For the revivalists, this division could be easily overcome by acknowledging the fact that there is room for different *fiqhi* interpretations, and that none of these interpretations is absolutely binding. The hostility and antipathy of the traditional *Ulama* towards the revivalists is largely results from this stance of the revivalists on the issue of *fiqh*.

### The Contemporary Modernists

**TABLE 2.3: The Islamic Revivalist Response to Modernity**

Jam'at-e-Islami .....	India/Pakistan
Ikhwan-ul-Muslimoon .....	Egypt

group, into one category. In spite of the difference in their thought, however, enough common ground exists in order to place them in one category, as discussed later. The modernists are individual Muslim thinkers who reject the revivalist interpretation of Islam because, in their view, it lacks sufficient intellectual sophistication. Two aspects of modernist thought set it apart from revivalist Islam: a first hand, in-depth knowledge of the Western intellectual tradition, and an attempt to integrate Islamic thought with compatible elements from Western thought. Contemporary Islamic modernism is, in fact, based on the same premises as the early modernism of Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan. These premises include: a) the ascendancy of the modern West is a result of its superior intellectual constructs, b) if the Muslims are to rejuvenate their society they have to integrate these constructs into their thought processes, and c) this much-needed integration is being hindered principally by a faulty definition of "Islam."

Although the basic premises of early modernist and contemporary modernist thought are the same, contemporary modernists thought is proving to be more effective because its approach is more sophisticated than that of its predecessor. The early attempts unfold as crude endeavors at apologetic assimilation of Islamic thought with 19th century Newtonian and Victorian concepts. The early modernists attempted to force existing Islamic concepts into existing Western categories, in order to make the Islamic concepts compatible with the latter, and in the process they did not hesitate from distorting the Islamic concepts beyond recognition. On the other hand, the apologetic aspect is absent in the works of the contemporary modernists, thus making their attempts appear much more credible. The focus of their attempts is to formulate various methods and procedures from within the Islamic tradition that will permit them to negate those Islamic concepts that are considered to be incompatible with modern thought. This approach negates the necessity of having to make each and every Islamic concept appear modern (which the early modernists attempted to do), because an "Islamic" justification can be produced for discarding such a concept all together.

In order to fully appreciate the dynamics of modernist thought, we have to be aware of the varying positions of the conservatives, revivalists, and the modernists regarding the institution of *ijtihad*. The main points of contention between the revivalists and the conservatives are differing opinions regarding the definition of *ibadah* and differing opinions relating to the possibility of disagreement on *fiqhi* issues. The revivalists' definition of *ibadah* is far more comprehensive than that of

the conservatives, and the revivalists maintain that disagreement on *fiqhi* issues is permissible in Islam while the conservatives reject this possibility. In the conservative-revivalist debate the topic of *ijtihad* does not figure to be a prominent issue, but in the conservative-modernist debate it is *the* major issue. The conservatives categorically state that the possibility as well as the necessity of *ijtihad* no longer exists. The scholars of classical Islam have done all the *ijtihad* that was permissible and necessary, consequently no one is authorized to engage in its practice today. The modernists emphatically disagree. They trace the root cause of Muslim decline to this particular position of the conservatives regarding *ijtihad*. The various interpretations of Islamic law became codified about 900 years ago and due to a number of circumstances these interpretations came to be accepted as the final word on the issue. The modernists argue that it is precisely because Islamic law, and by association Islamic thought, is caught in this time warp that the Muslims cannot adequately confront the problems of modernity. For the modernists, not only is *ijtihad* permissible today, it is a most pressing need.

What does *ijtihad* mean? The word is found in an authentic *hadith* narrated by Imam Bukhari (RA) and Imam Muslim (RA). The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) appointed Mu'adh bin Jabal (RAA) to be a governor in Yemen. Before dispatching him to his destination, the Prophet (SAW) questioned Mu'adh (RAA) regarding the source of his legal judgements. Mu'adh (RAA) told the Prophet (SAW) that he would turn to Qur'anic dictates to decide legal matters. If he did not find an explicit ruling on the matter in the Qur'an he would refer to the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (SAW). If he failed to find an explicit ruling there also, then he would use his own mental effort — he would do *ijtihad*. The Prophet (SAW) approved this hierarchy of sources by stating: "What the messenger of Allah's Messenger (SAW) has spoken has pleased the Messenger of Allah."<sup>15</sup> It is obvious that as one moves away in time and space from the Prophetic community in Madinah, one will be faced with novel situations and problems for which there are no explicit injunctions in the Qur'an or the *Sunnah* — thus making *ijtihad* imperative. In this context, *ijtihad* means the attempt to formulate a legal opinion regarding a situation which there is no explicit injunction in the Qur'an or *Sunnah*.

Looking at the work of the contemporary modernists, however, it becomes clear that their definition of *ijtihad* is quite different. It is defined by one modernist as:

...the effort to understand the meaning of a relevant text or precedent in the past, containing a rule, and



to alter that rule by extending or restricting or otherwise modifying it in such a manner that a new situation can be subsumed under it by a new solution.<sup>16</sup>

In the definition of *ijtihad* derived from the aforementioned *hadith*, it is implicit that no alteration of existing rules in the Qur'an and *Sunnah* is permissible. In other words, *ijtihad* is to be invoked only when these two sources do not contain an explicit injunction that relates to a novel situation that has emerged. But in the hands (more appropriately in the mind) of the modernists, *ijtihad* becomes a license to engage in wholesale enterprise to alter existing rules found in "...a relevant text" (i.e., the Qur'an) or "precedent in the past" (i.e., the *Sunnah*). The rule can be altered by "...extending or restricting or otherwise modifying" the existing rule in order that the "new situation can be subsumed under it." For the modernist, *ijtihad* becomes an exercise in the "re-interpretation" of injunctions contained in the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. In this definition, the possibility that existing injunctions can be "reinterpreted" out of existence remains a distinct possibility. This is in stark contrast to the established definition of *ijtihad* which is limited to the "interpretation" of existing injunctions contained in the two primary sources in order to derive legal rulings regarding novel situations. This novel definition and application of the term *ijtihad* is the common point on which all modernist thought converges. Each individual thinker charts a different course to arrive at this point, which accounts for the diversity of modernist thought, but each eventually reaches the point mentioned above, thus providing the defining characteristic of contemporary Islamic modernism. It is worth repeating the observation regarding the evolution of Islamic modernism: whereas the early modernists attempted to change the basic concepts of Islamic thought in order to make it compatible with Western thought, the contemporary modernists attempt to do away with those concepts of Islamic thought that are deemed incompatible with modernity, thus making Islamic thought and modern thought compatible.

We will look at the thought of a leading modernist, Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), regarding the necessity of *ijtihad* and its goals in relation to revivalist and conservative thought. Fazlur Rahman agrees with the revivalists that Muslim society has been in a process of decline for many centuries, and is in dire need of rejuvenation. But he differs from them regarding the causes of this decline. The revivalists argue that the essential challenge facing the Muslim world is the process of secularization. They argue that the re-invigoration of Islamic societies can only take place when modern politics, economics, education, and

social relations are re-infused with Islamic principles — in short, when the concepts of *Deen* and *ibadah* are understood and applied in their all-embracing comprehensiveness. The main goal of the revivalists has been to arrest the process of secularization and de-Islamization in Muslim societies. Their underlying assumption is that the same “Islam” that empowered the early Islamic community is capable of empowering modern Islamic societies. The failure to conceptualize and practice Islam as the early Muslims did is the primary cause of the backwardness of Muslim societies.

In contrast to the prognosis and remedy offered by the revivalists for the malaise afflicting Muslim society, Fazlur Rahman argues that the cause of this malaise is rooted in the intellectual legacy of Islam. For him, the revival of modern Islamic societies requires far more than merely adopting various Islamic concepts, institutions, and behaviors and abandoning various Western concepts, institutions, and behaviors. He criticizes the position of the revivalists in the following words:

To insist on a literal implementation of the Quran, shutting one’s eyes to the social change that has occurred and that is palpably occurring before our eyes, is tantamount to deliberately defeating its moral-social purposes and objective.<sup>17</sup>

According to Fazlur Rahman, the very roots of Islamic methodology have to be re-examined in light of the present condition and historical experience. In essence, the method used by Muslims to determine what is “Islamic” and what is “un-Islamic” itself has to be scrutinized. He argues that the malaise afflicting modern Muslim societies is rooted in a faulty Islamic methodology, not in the process of secularization. He insists:

If the Muslim’s [i.e., the Revivalists’] loud and persistent talk about the viability of Islam as a system of doctrine and practice in the world of today is genuine... then it seems clear that they must once again start at the intellectual level. They must candidly and without inhibition discuss what Islam wants them to do today.<sup>18</sup>

Fazlur Rahman contends that the decline of the Muslim world did not begin with Western penetration in the 17th-18th centuries, but with the intellectual ossification that took place in the aftermath of the collapse of the Abbasid dynasty in the 13th century.<sup>19</sup> This fact is obvious considering the quantity and quality of original scholarship

produced by the Muslims after the collapse of the Abbasids. The ability of the Europeans to penetrate the Muslim world was the most dramatic evidence of internal decline of Muslim society, not its cause. After the fall of the Abbasids, one may even say a century or so before, the "...the preservation of the empire became the primary concern of Muslim institutions rather than the principles on which it was founded."

According to Fazlur Rahman, the *Ulama* played a critical role in the process of relegating the Islamic principles to this secondary status in favor of political expediency. They failed to articulate a comprehensive Islamic world-view, which in turn made Islamic principles vulnerable to the vagaries of power politics.<sup>20</sup> The co-option of Islamic principles and institutions by the imperial state created an intellectual climate in which rationalism and *ijtihad* were superseded by the principles of social necessity and public interest in the formulation of Islamic law:

While taking advantage of and appealing to the principles of "social necessity" and "public interest" that the Muslim jurists themselves had enunciated for the convenience of administration... Muslim rulers at the same time freely resorted to promulgating state made law that was neither Islamic nor yet secular.<sup>21</sup>

This state of affairs inevitably led to intellectual ossification and the replacement of scholarship based on original thought by one based on commentaries and super-commentaries. As early as the 11th century, certain *Ulama* were already arguing for an end to *ijtihad*, and basing the Islamic method solely of *taqlid* (blind imitation of predecessors). By the beginning of the 14th century, the Islamic methodology had become firmly based on the principles of precedence and consensus, while rationalism and *ijtihad* were totally disregarded. Because culture and tradition were to be the deciding determinants in this new hierarchy, there was no need to turn to the Qur'an; consequently, the Qur'an became a holy book to be praised for its eloquent style and inimitable grammatical aspects. Fazlur Rahman notes: "And so it came to pass that a vibrant and revolutionary religious document like the Qur'an was buried under the debris of grammar and rhetoric."<sup>22</sup> And at this point a chasm developed between the Muslims and the *elan* of the Qur'an, a chasm that remains open even today. According to Fazlur Rahman, the process of decline in the Muslim world cannot be arrested until an Islamic methodology is developed that is able to bridge this gap between the Muslims and the Qur'an.

Fazlur Rahman proposes a new methodology that strives to draw a clear distinction between “historical Islam” and “normative Islam.”<sup>23</sup> This distinction has to be drawn both in regards to Islamic principles and Islamic institutions. He states that the phenomenon of Qur’anic revelation unfolded “...in, although not merely for, a given historical context.” Muslims must recognize the essential feature in the revelation that is meant not only for the specific context in which it was revealed but is intended by Allah to “...outflow through and beyond that given context of history.” This can be accomplished by undertaking a comprehensive study of the Qur’an to firmly establish the general principles and the required objectives elucidated therein. This comprehensive study would aim to recapture the *elan* of the Qur’an. Thereafter the *Asbab Al-Nuzul* (the historical circumstances surrounding a specific revelation) should be used to examine specific pronouncements, to ensure that the pronouncement is in keeping with the *elan* of the Qur’an. This will allow for the resurrection of the original thrust of the Islamic message, free from the accumulated debris of tradition, precedent, and culture of the past millenium.

In addition to this, Muslims have to become aware of the historical transformation of important Islamic institutions. Only when they are able to determine the impact of various socio-political trends upon their legal, intellectual, and political institutions will they be able to distinguish the “historically accidental from the essentially Islamic”<sup>24</sup> manifestations of Islamic teachings. This comprehensive study of the Qur’an and various Islamic institutions would go a long way in clearing up the endemic confusion amongst the Muslims regarding differences between the general/universal Islamic principles and their specific/historical application in the past. According to Fazlur Rahman, the inability to distinguish between the two is at the root of the problems facing modern Islam. In too many cases the Muslims have failed to realize the specific/historical application of universal Islamic principles, and taken the application itself to be of binding import.

Fazlur Rahman goes on to argue that stopping at this point would be useless; a detailed study of the problems afflicting the Muslim societies should be undertaken. Then the general principles garnered from the study of the Qur’an would be applied to the particular problems faced by modern Muslim societies in order to come up with a satisfactory solution. Fazlur Rahman summarizes his methodology in the following words:

In building any genuine and viable Islamic set of laws and insitutions, there has to be a twofold

movement: First, one must move from the concrete case treatments of the Qur'an — taking the necessary and relevant social conditions of that time into account — to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. Second, from this general level there must be a movement back to specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant conditions now obtaining.<sup>25</sup>

The implications of Fazlur Rahman's proposed methodology are clear — the specific legal injunctions in the Qur'an that do not conform with the *elan* of the Qur'an were meant only for the historical period in which the Qur'an was revealed but are no longer binding in the modern setting. This principle of negating the validity of specific Qur'anic injunctions under the pretext of giving precedence to the *elan* of the Qur'an allows virtually unlimited freedom to do away with any specific Qur'anic injunction. The relationship between this freedom and making Islamic thought conform to modern thought becomes clear as well. A concrete example illustrates this point well. In the modern capitalist economy, the concept of interest is more sacred than the most sacred of cows. As the fore-going discussion on the role of capitalism as being one of the fundamental articles of faith of modernity showed, one cannot even imagine a modern capitalist economy in the absence of a banking system based on interest. At the same time the Qur'anic prohibition against interest is stated in absolute and blunt terms. Among all the sins that a human being can commit, the sin of engaging in a business transaction involving interest is the only one that invites a declaration of war from Allah (SWT) and His Prophet (SAW). This is illustrated by the following *ayaat* of the Qur'an (according to some traditions to be the last words revealed to the Prophet):

O you who believe! Observe your duty to Allah, and give up what remains from *riba* [or interest] if you are true believers. And if you do not, then be warned of war [against you] from Allah and His messenger.... (Al-Baqarah 2:278-9)

The absolute prohibition of interest in the Qur'an creates a great deal of problems and confusion for Muslim societies that are being integrated into the global market. In effect, the Qur'anic prohibition puts the Muslims at a distinct disadvantage in the global marketplace. Using Fazlur Rahman's proposed methodology, however, the prohibition of interest can be easily nullified. It can be argued that the *elan* of the

Qur'an aims to establish a just socio-economic order in society, and the prohibition of interest is a specific injunction that facilitated the attempts of the early Muslim community to move in this direction. The concept of interest was an obstacle to the establishment of a just socio-economic order in the specific historical circumstances in which the Qur'anic injunctions were revealed. But in the modern context, Fazlur Rahman would argue, interest is not an obstacle to the establishment of a just socio-economic order and its permissibility does not contradict the elan of the Qur'an. Consequently, invalidating the prohibition on interest is perfectly "Islamic." (The assertion that interest is not an obstacle to a just socio-economic order is made by the propagandists of modern capitalism, the philosophical and historical validity of which is highly dubious.)

In the context of the present discussion, it is not our aim to critique the intellectual sophistry of and the nihilism inherent in modernist Islamic thought. It only needs to be noted that the modernists attempt to formulate various theories and methodologies that will allow them to abrogate those aspects of Islamic law/thought which are not compatible with modern thought. Even though the approach of no two modernists is alike, the final results of their endeavor are virtually indistinguishable. This attempt to abrogate those aspects of Islamic thought that are incompatible with modernity is the most recent of the responses articulated by the Muslims in response to their encounter with the modern West.

### **Summary**

Islam's encounter with the modern West has produced a number of responses from the Muslims during the past 150 years. These responses have been articulated and expressed by a great variety of individuals and groups. When this great variety is analyzed from a bird's eye view, four distinct categories emerge; the isolationist approach, the early modernist approach, revivalist Islam, and contemporary modernism.

*The Isolationist Approach:* An absolute unwillingness to interact with the modern West. The modern West is considered to be the birthplace of atheism, anarchy, and disbelief. Any individual who is exposed to Western ideas, institutions, and even individuals risks being infected by the virus of disbelief. Based in the institutions of traditional Islamic scholarship, the proponents of this approach wielded immense influence during the initial period of Islam's encounter with modernity.

*The Early Modernists:* An attempt to positively interact with the

modern West. The modern West is considered to be a place of enlightenment, progress and prosperity, it is the ideal to which the Muslims must aspire. The Muslims have to integrate modern ideas into their thought processes, and modern science into their educational programs if they are to overcome their backwardness. And this should not be difficult because there is nothing in Islam that contradicts modern ideas and science. This view emerged in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the present century.

*Revivalist Islam:* An attempt to reform Islam from within so that it is better able to respond to the Western challenge. Islam is defined as a *Deen* (as opposed to a “religion”) whose injunctions have to be implemented in all aspects of the individual and collective life. Islam contains within it the resources to produce a modern society that is socially more moral, politically more just, and economically more equitable than any modern Western society. Striving to establish such a society is the ultimate meaning of *ibadah* (and a must for all Muslims) — all other *ibadaat* prepare the believer to engage in this struggle.

*Contemporary Modernism:* An attempt to annul those Islamic practices and obligations that are deemed incompatible with modern thought and institutions. The goal of all modernists is to construct various intellectual tools and methods that can be used to abrogate those practices and injunctions which are not compatible with modernity. Implicit in this approach is the view that there is a great deal of confusion regarding the normatively binding and the historically accidental teachings of Islam and that until this confusion is cleared up Muslims will not be able to engage with modernity constructively.

1. Abul A'la Maududi, quoted by Muhammad Sarwar in *Maulana Maududi ki Tehreek-e-Islami* (Lahore: Sind Sagar Academy, 1956) p.178-9.
2. Abu-Rabi, I., *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996) p.44.
3. Maududi quoted by Sarwar, op. cit., p.182.
4. Hasan Al-Banna quoted by Sarwar, op. cit., p.184.
5. Maududi quoted by Sarwar, op. cit., p.169.
6. Quoted by Mohammed Hashim Kamali in *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge, England: The Islamic Texts Society, 1991) p.218-19.
7. Rahman, Fazlur., *Islam and Modernity* p.8.
8. Ibid, p.19.
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