

Interpreting the Tradition: The Modernist Argument and the Sources of Islam

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Abstract

Islamic modernism contends that Muslims should revise their conventional understanding of the requirements of their religion in light of fresh interpretations of authoritative texts. This paper argues that modernism has much more radical implications than we might otherwise think. This becomes clear once you distinguish between the arguments that social scientists make about the requirements of a religion from the arguments that participants in a religion should accept. I illustrate my views by criticizing the somewhat conservative position of one prominent Islamic modernist, Fazlur Rahman.

Introduction¹

Muslims have long been attracted to the idea of revitalizing their community by reforming their practices so that they better express some conception of “pure” or “true” Islam. One often hears, for example, that usury was outlawed in early Islam, so if we want our own practices to be properly *Muslim*, we should abandon the practice of earning and paying interest on debts. What makes arguments like these interesting is that they are not simple appeals for Muslims to do something because it would be right or just or otherwise virtuous to do so. Instead, these arguments assert that insofar as we are committed to being *Muslim* and sustaining *Islamic* practices, we should make certain changes. The claim is that the community is somehow mistaken in thinking that its current practices are properly Muslim, when in fact these practices fol-

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low from some misunderstanding of Islam. I will call this special class of arguments *modernist arguments*. I choose this name for them because it seems to me that as an intellectual movement, modernism is generally characterized by the thought that contemporary practice has lost touch with the essence of a tradition and that we must consciously make an effort to return to the sources in order to re-authenticate our practices.

There are many reasons for the enduring popularity of the modernist argument. But my objective here is not to explore the historical or sociological factors which sustain its widespread appeal. Instead, I want to examine its philosophical structure. I will argue that the modernist argument is ultimately aimed at Muslims and not historians of Islam, and that the ultimate grounds of the modernist argument are therefore rooted in a conception of *epistemology* and *divine authority* rather than sociological facts about what Muslims believe. Many proponents of the modernist argument do not realize the importance of this distinction between the potential audiences for their arguments and consequently fail to make a convincing case for their views. I will try to make this point clear by first outlining the structure of the modernist argument more carefully. Then I will introduce two philosophical concepts which I will use in analyzing it. Unfortunately, since this part of the paper is somewhat abstract, the importance of these ideas may not be clear until I actually apply them. Having introduced these philosophical concepts, I will use them to draw the central distinction for this paper: the distinction between arguments aimed at Muslims and arguments aimed at historians of Islam. Once I have drawn this distinction, I will illustrate its importance by criticizing certain aspects of the argument which Fazlur Rahman offers in *Islam and Modernity* for reforming contemporary Islamic practice.

So let's begin by looking more carefully at the structure of the modernist argument. Typically, the argument comes in three steps. (1) First, the modernist argues that some part of our Islamic heritage has some special authority over the requirements of the religion. (2) Next, the modernist argues that our contemporary practices are not consistent with the requirements as they are set out in these privileged sources. (3) Finally, the modernist concludes that we must reform our current practices so that they better conform to the "true" Islam as expressed in these sources. To illustrate the argument, I have considered the following dialogue.

"The social and political practices established by Muhammad at Madinah represent the ideal Islamic community," the modernist may say, "so if we want to live consistently with Islam, we must examine the model given in these prac-

tices and emulate it." But then we may ask the modernist why he thinks our practices are corrupt in some way. Why should we doubt that our way of life is consistent with this model? He might respond by saying, "Look, our contemporary practices are shaped by many different cultures and each of these has interpreted our fundamental Islamic practices in a different way. Since the practices handed down to us from our parents and grandparents are the product of so many different influences haphazardly sewn together, they represent a poor and distorted understanding of these original practices." "So what is to be done?" We will ask. And the modernist will say, "what we have to do is return to these original practices, interpreting them afresh for ourselves, free from the distortions introduced by previous generations." This will then provide the modernist with the basis for an argument in favor of some particular reforms to contemporary practice.

Social Practices and Interpretive Manuals

Hopefully we have a firmer understanding of the structure of the modernist argument before us, so now let us turn to the two philosophical concepts which I will use to analyze it. Again, this part of my presentation will be somewhat abstract and its relevance may only become clear later on. The first of the philosophical ideas I want to appeal to is the concept of a *social practice*. I take it that we share a basic intuition that a religion like Islam belongs to a class of human activities which we call "social practices." Many other activities fall into this class as well. Among them we can count games, rituals, political and economic institutions, and legal systems. Now these may seem like disparate activities, but they share an important feature for my purposes. In all of these activities, there is a way of conforming to the practice and various ways of failing to conform to it. If you take voting as an example of a social practice, then, in particular social circumstances, there is a way of casting a vote (perhaps by dropping a ballot in a box) and there are ways of failing to cast a vote (by not dropping a ballot in the box). You could not claim to have voted in an election just because you *thought* of voting for one or another candidate, for instance. There are definite actions which constitute casting your vote and you must at least *argue* that you have done these things if you are to defend the idea that you have voted at all.

We can analyze a social practice in terms of a system of rules. By examining the behavior which participants accept as conduct that conforms to their practice, we can map out a system of rules for what counts as conforming to the practice and what does not. Take the case of a game like chess, for example. In

the course of playing a game of chess, a player may move her rook diagonally instead of along straight lines by mistake. When she does, her opponent will point this out to her as a mistake. He may say, for instance, "That's not a valid move." He means to point out to her that the move she made does not conform to the requirements of the game. Valid moves for rooks are only moves along straight lines, not along diagonals. In the usual case, both players in a game will be able to distinguish valid chess moves from invalid ones. By examining the cases in which players recognize moves as valid or invalid, we can map out a system of rules which accounts for the way they distinguish between the two. We might reasonably take these rules to be the rules of their game. Now the same type of analysis can apply in the case of a religious practice like Islam. Muslims also distinguish between conduct which conforms to Islam and conduct which does not. So, for example, Muslims take fasting in Ramadan to conform with the requirements of their practice, while not fasting in Ramadan does not. Even those who do not fast in Ramadan will accept that you could not claim to have conformed to Islamic practice without at least *arguing* that you kept the fast. Now by examining how Muslims distinguish between conduct which conforms to their practice and conduct which fails to conform to it, we can map out a system of rules for their religious practice.

This brings me to the second important concept in my analysis, which is the idea of an *interpretive method*. Religions are social practices, so there is a distinction to be drawn between conduct which conforms to the requirements of the practice and conduct which does not. We can capture this distinction, as I have suggested, in terms of a system of rules. But now the question arises, "How are we to know what the rules of a social practice are?" For any social practice, how are we to know what rules distinguish conduct which conforms to the practice from conduct which fails to do so? I will not try to answer this question here, but I introduce the notion of an *interpretive method* to refer to any proposed answer to this question. We can think of an interpretive method as an instruction manual containing a complete set of instructions for determining what the rules of a practice are. A very simple interpretive manual may tell us, for example, that if we want to know what the rules of chess are, we should look at a wide sample of chess players and determine what rules they follow in distinguishing valid moves from invalid ones.

To understand the concept of an interpretive manual better, we need to look more closely at its structure. Any interpretive manual must respond to two general issues. First, any useful interpretive manual will have to tell us *where*

we are supposed to look for the rules of a practice. A very simple manual may tell us that we should look to the behavior of participants in a game in order to determine what its rules are. In this case, we may say that the behavior of participants is the *source* for a description of its rules. We would say this because when we are asked what our evidence is for asserting that some particular description of the rules is correct, we will cite facts about the behavior of participants as supporting evidence. We will say that “*x* is a rule of the practice because participants behave in a certain way, namely they act as if conduct that violates *x* has failed to conform to their practice.”² For this reason, the behavior of participants is the “source” for our description of the rules. The second issue which an interpretive manual must address is *how* we are supposed to find the rules of the practice in the body of evidence provided in the sources. To take the example of a very simple interpretive manual again, we may imagine that after it sets out the behavior of participants as the source for a rule-description, it will tell us how to analyze this evidence. How will we recognize the rules of the game in the behavior of participants? The manual may tell us, for example, that the correct rule-description will be the one which would account for all of the different types of conduct which players accept as meeting the requirements of their practice. So according to this manual, we analyze the behavioral evidence by determining which system of rules could tell us what players will accept as valid moves in their game. This is just one example of how a manual might tell us what relation a rule-description must bear to the evidence in order for us to legitimately assert that the evidence supports the description.

In general, then, we can understand the structure of an interpretive manual in terms of the answers which it gives to two questions: First, what are the sources for the rules of the practice? And second, what relation does the correct rule-description bear to these sources?

We now have the two basic analytical concepts before us. To summarize, the more basic idea was that of a *social practice*, which is a rule-governed social activity. Islam is one such social practice among others. In determining what the rules of a practice are, we must employ one or another *interpretive method* which is analogous to an instruction manual for interpretation. Any useful manual will tell us what the relevant evidence for a description of the rules of a practice is. Then it will tell us how to understand the evidence, which is to say that it will tell us what relation a rule-description must bear to the evidence in order for us to legitimately assert that the evidence supports this description

of the rules. With this framework, we can now turn to the modernist argument once more.

Interpretive Manuals and the Modernist Argument

Recall that the modernist argument proposes reforms by arguing first that some part of the Islamic heritage possesses a special authority over the rules of the religion, second that our current practices are not consistent with the rules so understood, and third that we must revise our practices by reinterpreting these privileged sources of our heritage. Now in light of the framework that I have outlined, we should understand the modernist argument as making a claim about the *correct interpretive manual* for Islam. After all, the first claim that the modernist makes is that some part of our heritage is a privileged source for the requirements of the religion. The modernist thinks that if you want to act consistently with the religion, you must revise contemporary practice so that it will be consistent with the rules expressed in some privileged part of the heritage. This effectively is a claim about *where* we are to look for the rules of our religion, which is the first issue that an interpretive manual must address. For this reason, we should take the modernist to be making a claim about the correct interpretive manual for Islamic practice.

To illustrate this view of the modernist argument, let's consider Fazlur Rahman's book, *Islam and Modernity*. Rahman's book is partly polemical and partly constructive. In the polemical chapters, he considers a number of past reform movements and criticizes them. He makes two major criticisms which will be relevant for my purposes. First, he asserts that fundamentalists and modernizing reformers both lacked an explicit methodology for interpreting the Qur'an and therefore these movements failed to take the Qur'an as the foundation for their reforms.³ Since they did not have a consistent methodology, they were not essentially guided and restrained by the Qur'an. Instead, they could appeal to the text using different interpretive methods depending on which method would allow them to claim that the Qur'an supported their doctrinal position on a particular issue. Second, he argues that both the fundamentalists and the modernizing reformers were caught up in reacting to the ideas and technology of the West in piecemeal fashion rather than developing an independent and autonomous policy of engagement rooted in the Qur'an.⁴ This second point echoes the first one, since in both cases we find Rahman criticizing the reformers for reasoning on a case by case basis instead of making a consistent appeal to the Qur'an to defend their views. For my purposes, it is important to see that both of these arguments criticize the reformers for

not grounding their arguments for reform in the *privileged sources* of Islam, which for Rahman consist basically of the Qur'an but may include parts of the Sunnah as well. In this way, the more polemical chapters of the book present a critique of past reform movements which relies on a claim about what the privileged sources of Islam are. Now in the constructive chapters of the book, Rahman explicitly advocates the view that the Qur'an is a privileged source for the rules of Islamic practice and he also defends a particular method of interpreting the Qur'an. So in both the polemical and constructive chapters of the book, he depends on some conception of the primary authoritative sources for the religion. As I see it, then, Rahman must defend the claim that the correct interpretive manual for the rules of Islamic practice takes the Qur'an and parts of the Sunnah as privileged sources for the religion. Which is to say that he must defend a claim about the correct interpretive manual for Islam.

The Key Distinction

We must now draw an important distinction between two different audiences for the modernist's arguments. As I suggested earlier, this is a key distinction with which not all modernists come to terms. Interpretive manuals come in two distinct kinds. One kind of interpretive manual is made for participants in a social practice. This is a manual which participants might use in trying to obey the rules of their practice. For example, Muslims need to know where to look for the rules of Islam and how to understand these rules if they are going to follow them. So the *practical* interpretive manual for Islam will be addressed to Muslims and is meant to help them conform with Islamic practice. The other kind of interpretive manual is not made for participants in a social practice but is made for historians and social scientists studying it. These observers also need a method for determining what the rules of a practice are in order to understand and explain the activities of Muslims. But their manual is a *theoretical* one since it is not aimed at helping participants conform with the practice, but is aimed at explaining and understanding their activities.

The importance of this distinction between practical manuals addressed to participants and theoretical manuals addressed to historians and social scientists is not simply that these manuals may contain different instructions, although this is likely to be true; the really important thing to focus on here is that the *reasons* that would convince a rational person to adopt an interpretive manual are different depending on whether one is a participant in the practice or an observer of it.

Consider the point of view of a participant first. Suppose that I am an otherwise rational Muslim choosing between a manual which takes the Qur'an to be the privileged source for the rules of Islam and another manual which takes both the Qur'an and the Sunnah as authoritative sources for these rules. What arguments might favor one way of determining the rules of the practice over another? Let's assume that the Divine Will is the moral authority which stands behind the particular requirements of Islam. This is to say that when I consider what reason I have to follow the requirements of Islam, I take obeying the Divine Will to be my central concern. If so, then someone may argue that I should adopt a manual which only considers the Qur'an as a source and not the Sunnah in the following way. Someone might argue that the Sunnah is the product of a chain of historical transmission, each link of which presents the possibility of distorting the facts. The root of our concern with the Sunnah is that we think that the Divine Will is manifested in it through the example set by Muhammad, but since the Sunnah is the product of a long chain of transmission, we have reason to believe that the Divine Will cannot be clearly retrieved from this evidence. The long chains of transmission are likely to distort the Divine Will. In light of this fact, we have good reason to take the Qur'an as the primary source for the religion and not the Sunnah, because the Qur'an is not subject to a similarly corruptive chain of transmission. This is an example of an argument aimed at a *participant* in a practice in favor of some interpretive manual. An argument aimed at a Muslim will argue that the choice of evidence and methods in some manual is the best way of determining what the Divine Will commands. We may say that from the participant's point of view, an interpretive manual is a *tool* which is meant to help him in achieving his underlying goal of living consistently with the commands of the Divine Will.

Now in the case of a social scientist or historian, reference to the Divine Will does *not* play a role in bringing us to accept one manual rather than another. To see this, suppose for the moment that I am an otherwise rational *social scientist* trying to explain and understand the activity of Muslims. I know that Muslims will generally act on their own beliefs about which sources in their tradition are sound and which methods they should use to interpret these sources. Since Muslims act on their own beliefs, my best strategy for understanding and explaining their activities would be to adopt an interpretive manual which reflects *their* beliefs about Islam rather than a manual which reflects my own beliefs about it. Continuing this line of thought, suppose for the moment that I face the choice between an interpretive manual which takes

just the Qur'an as a source for the practice and a manual that takes both the Qur'an and the Sunnah as sources for the practice. If someone points out to me that the Divine Will is more clearly expressed in the Qur'an rather than the Sunnah, I may take this as something good to know, maybe even something which I take to be true. But *as a scientist*, it is not relevant to my choice of manuals. For even if the Divine Will were best expressed in the Qur'an rather than the Sunnah, so long as most Muslims were unaware of this fact, it would play no part in my explanation of their activity. My reasons for adopting one or another manual have to do with what Muslims themselves believe and how they understand their religion, and these reasons have nothing to do with my own beliefs about the Divine Will.

Rahman on Privileging the Qur'an

Stated starkly in this way, this distinction may seem relatively clear. However, in the course of presenting their arguments, modernists sometimes fail to see the full importance of this distinction. Again I will use Rahman to illustrate my point. As a modernist, Rahman must defend a view about the correct interpretive method. Rahman is quite explicit that this is one of his goals—more explicit than many other modernists. More importantly, he is also quite explicit that he intends to advocate an interpretive method for *participants* in a social practice and not for historians.

[T]he method of Qur'anic hermeneutics I am talking about is concerned with an understanding of its message that will enable those who have faith in it and want to live by its guidance—both in their individual and collective lives—to do so coherently and meaningfully.⁵

Given that Rahman is advocating an interpretive manual for his fellow Muslims, we would expect him to present arguments which contend that his method of interpretation is the most sensible approach to identifying the contents of the Divine Will. His arguments should try to show Muslims that the Qur'an is the best source of evidence about the Divine Will, so he might argue, for example, that other possible sources for the religion have defects which the Qur'an does not. An argument like this one would move a rational participant in Islamic practice to accept one manual rather than another, so we would expect to find Rahman citing epistemological considerations in support of his view. However, his argument takes a strikingly different turn.

The reader will...be struck by my preoccupation with the correct method of interpreting the Qur'an and may well wonder at first sight why this

question should stand at the center of Islamic intellectualism. The *answer* is that the Qur'an, for Muslims, is the divine word literally revealed to the Prophet Muhammad...in a sense in which probably no other religious document is *held* to be so.⁶ (my emphasis)

Rahman is engaged in the project of proposing and defending a practical interpretive method aimed at Muslims and not social scientists. He is speaking here as a participant in Islamic practice, as an Islamic intellectual trying to orient himself in the enterprise which he calls "Islamic intellectualism." As a participant in this enterprise, Rahman tries to tell us why he will take the Qur'an as the primary source for Islamic practice. The reasoning he offers in this passage is that he takes the Qur'an to be central to the project because Muslims as a group *believe* that the Qur'an is a manifestation of the Divine Will. But as I have already argued, the fact that other Muslims believe that the Qur'an is a revelation, it cannot provide a rational Muslim with a reason to adopt an interpretive manual that gives special prominence to it.

Rahman goes on to buttress his concern with the Qur'an by emphasizing the important role that the Qur'an has played in Islamic history.

[T]he Qur'anic revelation and the prophetic career of Muhammad lasted for just over twenty-two years, during which period all kinds of decisions on policy in peace and in war, on legal and moral issues in private and public life were made in the face of actual situations; thus the Qur'an had from the time of its revelation a practical and political application; it was not a *mere* devotional or pietistic text.... This naturally encouraged the Muslim jurists and intellectuals to look upon the Qur'an (and the model of the Prophet) as a unique repository of answers to all sorts of questions. That this approach succeeded in practice further strengthened the original belief of Muslims in the efficacy of the revelation in providing true answers to virtually all situations.⁷

But again, an appeal to the beliefs of other Muslims cannot show participants in Islamic practice why they should adopt an interpretive manual which focuses primarily on the Qur'an. Muslims today, may generally be convinced of "the efficacy of the revelation in providing true answers to virtually all situations," in fact, Muslims of past generations may have been convinced of this as well. But unless Rahman is going to argue that the revelation actually provides these answers, Muslims today cannot take the mere fact that other Muslims believed—and continue to believe—that it does as a reason for following the rules contained in it.

I would like to reinforce what I take to be Rahman's error here by using an analogy to illustrate my point. Suppose that a rational individual is considering whether or not he should take some drug which will supposedly reduce his risk of getting cancer. Now the fact that he believes that this drug prevents cancer is no reason for him to take it. What matters to him is that the drug actually prevents cancer. It is this fact which gives him a reason to take the drug, not his belief in its efficacy. So to convince the rational person to take the drug, we would have to cite evidence which shows that the drug *prevents cancer*, not evidence which shows that he *believes* that it prevents cancer. For example, we would show him evidence like medical tests and clinical trials, but not some psychological report about his own beliefs.⁸ Similarly, Muslims may *believe* that the Qur'an represents the Divine Will, but this is not important for a rational participant in Islamic practice. What matters to the rational Muslim is whether the Qur'an *actually* possesses the property of representing the Divine Will. To convince the rational Muslim to adopt an interpretive manual which takes the Qur'an as the primary source for the practice, we must present arguments which at least *attempt* to convince us that the Qur'an possesses the property of representing the Divine Will.⁹ So in Rahman's case as well, he cannot simply cite the beliefs of Muslims in defense of his position, he must argue that the Qur'an actually possesses the correct property.

Rahman Against the Other Sources

Up until now, I have criticized Rahman's arguments in favor of privileging the Qur'an as a source for the rules of Islamic practice. I will now turn to consider some of his arguments against including other parts of the heritage among the sources.

Rahman seriously considers only one other source for the practice, namely the interpretations of the Qur'an developed by commentators in the tradition. Unlike his arguments for taking the Qur'an to be a privileged source, Rahman's arguments here are not based on arguments aimed primarily at social scientists. Instead, Rahman offers considerations that might convince a participant in Islamic practice that he should adopt a manual which would exclude these commentators from the sources. In his introduction, he notes that

(besides language, grammar, style, etc.) a study of the views of Muslims—most particularly those of the earliest generations—will be helpful [to the interpretive project]. But these views must occupy a secondary place to the objective materials [i.e. those that supply information

regarding the socio-historical circumstances of a Qur'anic revelation,] since historical interpretations of the Qur'an, although they will be of help, are also to be judged by the understanding gained from the Qur'an itself.¹⁰

So Rahman excludes the interpretations of the commentators from the authoritative sources for the religion and his grounds for this exclusion seem to be that historical interpretations of the Qur'an are "to be judged by the understanding gained from the Qur'an itself." I take this to mean that we should judge these early interpreters for how well they interpret the Qur'an instead of looking to them as independent sources for the religion. But it is not at all clear to me why this must be so. Just because someone interprets another source of the religion does not mean that they cannot *also* be an authoritative source for it themselves. Consider, for example, that many people hold that the Sunnah is an interpretation of the Qur'an in practice. But this does not mean that the Sunnah should automatically be judged in terms of how well it accords with our own understanding of the Qur'an. Instead, the Sunnah is seen as both an interpretation of the Qur'an and an authoritative source for the religion. The Sunnah is what we might call an *authoritative interpretation* of the Qur'an. According to the commonly held view about the Sunnah, any account of the rules of Islamic practice has to fit with both the Qur'an and the Sunnah, each of which has independent standing as a source for the religion. Rahman would be mistaken, then, if he were to take the fact that the commentators were *interpreting* the Qur'an as a reason for Muslims to consider their work as authoritative only insofar as it accurately represents the Qur'an as we now understand it. This commentary may both interpret the Qur'an and be among the authoritative sources for the religion.

In all fairness, Rahman actually defends his exclusion of the commentators by appealing to the weakness of their interpretive methods rather than the simple fact that they were interpreting the text. He argues first that "little attempt has ever been made to understand the Qur'an as a unity."¹¹ According to Rahman, a holistic reconstruction of the principles contained in specific Qur'anic injunctions is the correct method for interpreting its requirements,¹² so he believes that the commentators have not used the correct methods in developing their interpretations. Furthermore, he asserts that "with the passage of time and the rise, growth, and hardening of different points of view and pre-conceived notions, subjective interpretations have multiplied."¹³ So it seems that Rahman thinks Muslim intellectuals have become increasingly accustomed to using these misguided interpretive methods to understand the

sources and that their customary assumptions about what these sources set out as requirements of the religion are colored by this. Thus the tradition is marred by “subjective interpretations” rooted in poor interpretive methods. These problems with the traditional body of interpretation are meant to give us a reason to think that we cannot include the traditional commentators among the authoritative sources for the religion. Unfortunately, Rahman’s arguments here seem to me to just beg the question. The fact that the commentators used poor interpretive methods only gives us a reason to exclude their views *once we have accepted* the claim that they are not among the authoritative sources for the religion. For when they are not themselves among the sources of the religion, their authority is wholly *derived* from the Qur’an and we have reason to conform with the requirements they describe only to the extent that these correctly represent the dictates of the Qur’an as we understand it. But if we take them to be among the authoritative sources of the religion from the start, then we have no reason to worry about their interpretive methods, just as those who believe that the Sunnah is an authoritative interpretation of the Qur’an have no reason to contest the interpretive methods which Muhammad may have used in understanding it. Rather we may hold that any justified rule-description for Islamic practice would have to conform with both the Qur’an and the interpretations of whichever commentators we take to be authoritative—including Muhammad himself. So we see that Rahman’s stated arguments for excluding the established body of interpretation really boil down to an implicit appeal to the intuition that these are *interpretations* and that we should therefore see them as deriving their authority from the Qur’anic text. But as I have argued, the mere fact that these interpreters were interpreting the Qur’an is no reason to see their authority as wholly derivative. We may see them as authoritative interpreters of the Qur’an, whose interpretations provide independent evidence which any rule-description must fit.

Conclusion

To sum up my main argument, I contend that there is an important distinction that we must recognize between interpretive manuals aimed at participants in a religious practice and interpretive manuals aimed at historians and social scientists studying it. This distinction is important because very different arguments will convince a rational person to adopt a manual depending on whether he is a participant or a social scientist. For a participant, arguments must ultimately appeal to the nature of the authority that gives him a reason to follow the rules of a practice, but for a social scientist, arguments must ulti-

mately appeal to his explanatory interests in the practice. So different arguments will convince rational people to adopt interpretive manuals depending on whether they are aimed at participants in the practice or observers of it.

This distinction between participants and observers places certain demands on Islamic modernists. The modernist cannot offer just any kind of argument in favor of his preferred interpretive manual. Since the modernist aims at convincing participants in Islamic practice to adopt a particular manual, he cannot simply appeal to sociological facts about what Muslims believe to support his views. So, for example, the modernist cannot privilege particular sources in the tradition by appealing to the fact that Muslims generally believe that these sources possess this status. Instead, he has to argue that these sources are sound; he must argue that participants in Islam can achieve their underlying goal of obeying the Divine Will if they follow the rules found in these sources than if they followed the rules contained in any other ones. I illustrated this point by showing that Fazlur Rahman's modernist argument in *Islam and Modernity* makes the mistake of appealing to sociological considerations in defense of privileging the Qur'an among the sources when he should have presented substantive considerations instead.

Now by way of conclusion, I would like to point out that Rahman does not always make this mistake. Notably, he presents the *right* kind of considerations when he argues that we should exclude the interpretations of the traditional commentators from the sources of the religion. Of course, his arguments have serious problems and I have tried to point these out, but at least these are the right kind of arguments. Good arguments like these, e.g. arguments that claim that some sources are better epistemic guides to the Divine Will than others, *would* convince a rational Muslim to adopt an interpretive manual. So even if these arguments are flawed, it seems to me that Rahman succeeds at least in showing us what a sound argument for the correct interpretive manual might look like. More generally, we might say that he provides us with a model for how we might discuss foundational issues in the interpretation of Islamic religious obligation.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered on April 10, 1999 at McGill University (Montreal, Canada). I would like to thank the organizers of the "Islam and the Challenge of the Next Millennium" conference and the Institute for Islamic Studies. Special thanks to Bethany Hoffman for reading earlier drafts of this article.

2. This is not to say that all participant behavior counts as evidence for a rule-description. An attitude like this one would obviously be misguided, since the set of rules that accounted for everything that the players did would not be an account of the rules of their game. We can see this clearly when we consider that players often break the rules of their

game. When they do this regularly, a description of their behavior will not match up with a description of the rules of the game. Consider how ludicrous it would be to claim that the legal rule for speeding on US highways is just how fast Americans happen to drive. In contrast to this, what I imagine counts as evidence in the "simple interpretive manual" is the *mistake-behavior* of the participants in a practice. A rule-description must account for what participants recognize and react to as mistakes. It is this narrower class of behavior which I take here to count as evidence for a rule-description, not the complete body of participant behavior.

3. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 142.

4. *Ibid.*, 136.

5. *Ibid.*, 4.

6. *Ibid.*, 1-2.

7. *Ibid.*, 2.

8. His beliefs would only be important and relevant if he had some reason to think that they reflect the important underlying facts. So for example, if he knows that his *belief* that the drug prevents cancer is highly correlated with the *fact* that it prevents cancer, his beliefs may give him reason to take the drug. But even here, the source of his reason to take the drug is the underlying fact about its potency and the only reason that his beliefs are relevant is that they are good indicators of this underlying fact.

9. Someone may wonder whether I have set too high a standard for the modernist. After all, as one questioner at the conference asked, "How could we ever provide a Muslim with conclusive evidence that God exists?" And the implication is that if we cannot give rational grounds for this belief then we cannot convince a rational Muslim to adopt any interpretive manual, because there would be no grounds for thinking that there is a Divine Will for him to obey. This is an important objection and I should clarify the response that I gave to it at the conference.

I agree that we cannot give compelling rational grounds for believing that God exists. But this does not imply that rationality has no part to play in the argument over interpretive manuals. For although we cannot rationally demonstrate that God exists, we can certainly show that *were* he to exist, some parts of the heritage would be better sources for identifying his commands than others. The modernist must argue that his interpretive manual employs sources which are more likely to represent the Divine Will than the sources of any competing manual. Similarly, he should argue that his manual employs better, more sensible methods of analyzing this evidence. So although we cannot provide rational proof that the Divine Will exists, we can certainly provide rational arguments to show that one guide is better than another one, assuming that such a Will exists. All I ask of the modernist is that he show us that his manual is better than the competition.

10. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 6.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 5-6, 20.

13. *Ibid.*, 6-7.