

Islamic Intellectualism: Rahman, Gadamer, and the Hermeneutics of the Qur'ān

Norman K. Swazo

Abstract

The Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman disagreed with the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer on elements of philosophical hermeneutics as they bear upon interpretation of texts – in this case, the interpretation of the Qur'ān. Rahman proposed a “double-movement” theory of Qur'ānic interpretation through which he hoped for the revival and reform of Islamic intellectualism in its encounter with Western modernity, but also with difference from Islamic orthodoxy's conceptualization of *ijtihād*. In this paper, I examine Rahman's concerns as they relate to Gadamer's general approach to understanding history and textual interpretation. Rahman argued that if Gadamer's thesis concerning the fore-structure¹ of human understanding is correct, then Rahman's theory has no meaning at all. I conclude that there is reason to see Rahman's theory as consistent with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, albeit with some modification given Rahman's focus on psychologism and objectivity as part of his approach to Qur'ānic interpretation.

It is the tyranny of hidden prejudices
that makes us deaf to what speaks to
us in tradition.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

Norman K. Swazo, Ph.D., M.H.S.A., Professor of Philosophy and Biomedical Ethics, College of Science and General Studies, Alfaisal University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

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Introduction: Objectivism and Hermeneutics

At the conclusion of his introductory book on Islamic philosophy, philosopher Oliver Leaman remarked on “the lack of radicalism” in Islamic Qur’ān commentary, as compared to re-examinations that continue in Jewish and Christian scholarship.² By “radical,” Leaman has in mind someone such as a Spinoza, who “rocked the intellectual world of Bible criticism in the seventeenth century when he suggested that the Hebrew of the Bible was so far from us today that we often have significant difficulties understanding what the text means.”³ Leaman believes contemporary Islam experiences something of a “medieval gloom,” such that a proper understanding of the Islamic sources requires an enlightenment similar to that represented by the Spinoza critique.

At least one significant Islamic thinker of the twentieth century hoped for as much, but in a way that would achieve revival and reform of both Islamic faith and understanding. In his *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, the Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988) argued for what he construed to be “the correct method of interpreting the Qur’an,” for this is what is central to any meaningful concept of Islamic intellectualism that is critical of its sources.⁴ Rahman is concerned with questions of method and hermeneutics, which he believes problematic in the way in which the Qur’ān was used during the medieval period of Islamic history. This is a problem carried forward into Islam’s encounter with Western modernity, in particular in what might be considered how Islamic orthodoxy responded defensively to “intellectual constructs” – for example, “Ibn Sinā’s philosophy or Ibn ‘Arabī’s mysticism – considered by some as alien to the sacred text itself. At issue here is the validity of such intellectual constructs in light of the primary authority of the Qur’ān itself. Rahman maintains that responses by scholars such as al-Ghāzālī or Ibn Taymiyah, for example, were critical of a “basic discrepancy.” Consequently, “Islamic intellectualism has remained truncated.”⁵

Rahman describes the scene of intellectual contestation:

This piecemeal, ad hoc, and often quite extrinsic treatment of the Qur’an has not ceased in modern times; indeed, in some respects it has worsened. The pressures exerted by modern ideas and forces of social change, together with the colonial interregnum in Muslim lands, has brought about a situation in which the adoption of certain key modern Western ideas and institutions is resolutely defended by some Muslims and often justified through the Qur’an, the wholesale rejection of modernity is vehemently

advocated by others, and the production of “apologetic” literature that substitutes self-glorification for reform is virtually endless.⁶

Given that this contestation still pervades the heritage of Islamic intellectualism, Rahman believes it imperative we account for or reconstruct a critical hermeneutics of the Qur’ān. What is significant here is that this imperative for Rahman is decidedly ethical, or to use a word he appropriates from al-Shatibi, “religiomoral”⁷ – precisely because a proper approach to the Qur’ān must be one that appreciates the integration of law, political philosophy, and ethics in the text of the Qur’ān, as Ebrahim Moosa remarked in his introduction to Rahman’s posthumously published *Revival and Reform in Islam*. Urgent in the encounter of Islam and Western modernity, then, is the constitution of a moral response from the primary source of Islam, the Qur’ān, *without the guidance of the commentators*. This encounter presents a challenging imperative for contemporary Islamic intellectuals insofar as they, too, are called upon to undertake an integrated yet critical hermeneutics of the Qur’ān.

Rahman sought a method “exclusively concerned with the cognitive aspect of the revelation.” Such a statement requires us to be clear on both what Rahman understands by “revelation” and what counts as “the cognitive aspect” of this revelation. Moosa provides some preliminary guidance in commenting that Rahman construed revelation as “a unique form of cognition in the form of idea-words that are part of a creative divine act.”⁸ Rahman’s radical departure from the theological tradition, as expressed in its medieval conceptual framework, is undertaken with one question: if one accounts for orthodox Islamic dogma, according to which the revelation that is the Qur’ān is wholly other yet intimately connected to the man Moḥammad (ṢAAS) as the religious personality sine qua non, then one must ask how one logically asserts truthfully that “the Qur’an is entirely the word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad.”⁹

It is this relation of the extra-ordinary to the ordinary, in the relation of the Qur’ān *as revelation* (and thus transcendental) and the prophet *as human*, that raises the question of the moral standing of the Qur’ān – that is, the values that are expressed therein as “religiomoral” values.¹⁰ Values have “practical impact,” says Rahman, and this impact transcends the historicity of time and place in which they may be articulated. This is an important hermeneutic claim insofar as one is thereby called to assess the objectivity of any postulated religiomoral value. It is a hermeneutic claim among others by means of which Rahman intends to challenge the critique of objectivity that is represented by the philosophical hermeneutics

developed by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose work moves beyond the historicist tradition and that of classical biblical hermeneutics represented, for example, by the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher.

If we are to make sense of Rahman's critique of Gadamer's views, we must first of all understand that Gadamer's concern with objectivity or objectivism reflects his familiarity with Immanuel Kant's disclosure of the finitude of human knowledge, Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and the latter's elucidation of the phenomenon of consciousness (*Bewußtsein*), and Heidegger's subsequent fundamental ontology. For Husserl, the "transcendental ego" is the ground on the basis of which all meaning is to be had, hence his concern with consciousness. Heidegger shifted the focus from the being of consciousness to the more fundamental question of Being (*Sein*) and the fundamental structures of human existence (*Dasein*). It is in the phenomenological assessment of consciousness that Gadamer's own position links to the question being raised by Rahman about the relation of the extraordinary to the ordinary in Islamic dogma. In his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer referred to Husserl's fifth "Logical Investigation," in which Husserl identifies consciousness not as an object but as an "essential coordination" of "consciousness in experience" and "the inner perception of it."¹¹ Through this investigation, Husserl provided a means of overcoming objectivism – "insofar as the meaning of words could no longer be confused with the actual psychic content of consciousness – e.g., the associative images that a word evokes."¹²

Gadamer accepts Husserl's emphasis on consciousness in the sense of a *co-ordination* rather than as an *object* for a subject investigating one's mere inner perception, including here the psychic content of images that one may associate with words and that are evoked by words as a way of clarifying their meaning. Meaning is a consequent of more than mere psychic content; and thus, meaning would have to be more than the associative images that a word evokes, including here words that are characterized as religiomoral. Indeed, Gadamer accounts for what Husserl called the "protentional" and "retentional" aspects of experience – that is, the claim that every experience has implicit horizons of meaning of what comes before and what comes after a given experience.¹³ This is what Gadamer means by "fusion of horizons" as a component of all human understanding and clarification of meaning. The point for Gadamer here is to get beyond the subject-object dichotomy experienced in modern epistemology, and the ontology that results from it. "What Husserl means ... is that we cannot conceive subjectivity as the opposite of objectivity, because this concept of subjectivity would itself be conceived in objective terms."¹⁴

Thus, any discussion within a hermeneutics of Islamic dogma, such as the conceptual distinction between the extraordinary/transcendental revelation and the psychic reception of that revelation in an ordinary human mind, would have to give an account of this relation between subjectivity and objectivity – without conceiving the pair as opposites, and without conceiving either component of the dichotomy in objective terms. Such an ordinary human mind would likewise experience a fusion of horizons, and only through this fusion would this human mind achieve understanding and clarification of meaning. So, would it be for Muḥammad in the understanding and clarification of the meaning(s) of the revelation he transmits.

Gadamer, of course, eventually asserted his distance from Husserl's transcendental phenomenology as he worked out his philosophical hermeneutics under the influence of Martin Heidegger and the latter's engagement of Western ontology and theology in their unity: "Husserl's critique of the objectivism of all earlier philosophies was a methodological extension of modern tendencies, and he regarded it as such."¹⁵ Going beyond objectivist tendencies in modern philosophy, Gadamer was instructed by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as well as the "fundamental ontology" of Heidegger, whose clarification of "understanding" (*Verstehen*) opens the way to a hermeneutics beyond that of the modernist subjectivist/objectivist dichotomy.

In his "Introduction" to Rahman's *Revival and Reform in Islam*, E. Moosa comments that, "Fazlur Rahman accepted the Kantian notion that knowledge is not a passive mirror of reality; its objects are determined by the way we comprehend them."¹⁶ Then, following Emilio Betti (*Die Hermeneutik*) in contrast to Gadamer, Rahman accepted the notion of "spiritual values" that "represent an ideal objectivity that unerringly follows its own lawfulness." In this respect, however, Rahman shifts his path away from Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* established the finitude of human knowledge, a finitude reinforced by Heidegger's attempt at fundamental ontology and accepted by Gadamer in his philosophical hermeneutics. On the one hand, Rahman accepts a constructivist view of historical understanding, consistent with the Kantian critique; but then he seemingly contradicts this view by believing a reproduction of authorial intent accessible to contemporary Islamic understanding when otherwise a constructivist view entails only what Gadamer's hermeneutics allows – namely, a *productive* understanding that involves a fusion of horizons within which prejudice unavoidably but positively contributes methodologically to all truth claims. In this case, reliqiomoral values cannot be merely *discovered*; they have their status historically according to the epistemological limits of practical reason wherein apodictic certainty is denied. It is one

thing to assert a religiomoral value to be ideal; it is quite another to engage it as something like a guiding, regulative principle of practical reason having the status of an absolute. This assumes a power of consciousness (*Bewusstseins*) that is not borne out by the Kantian critique of either pure reason or practical reason, and thus, a power of human consciousness not borne out by the Heideggerian and Gadamerian critiques of epistemological reason seeking objectivity in the domain of normative life.

Commenting on the meaning of understanding consequent to what he encounters in Heidegger's thought, Gadamer wrote: "a person who 'understands' a text (or even a law) has not only projected himself understandingly toward a meaning – in the effort of understanding – but the accomplished understanding constitutes a state of new intellectual freedom. It implies the general possibility of interpreting, of seeing connections, of drawing conclusions, which constitutes being well versed in textual interpretation."¹⁷ Let us consider the key statement here and its implication for understanding of the Islamic dogma: any reasonable human understanding of the Qur'ānic revelation as issued by an ordinary mind is an *accomplished* understanding. That is, this mind accomplishes what is already available to it – the general possibility of interpreting, first and foremost, then of seeing connections of ideas, and of drawing conclusions, such that this ordinary mind can then be said to be well versed in textual interpretation.

Being in this way well versed in textual interpretation is a sign of a new intellectual freedom that necessarily goes beyond the text at hand – if you will, that goes beyond the *textus receptus*, including here the Qur'ān conceived as received text. In short, even one such as Muḥammad would manifest this "new" intellectual freedom. But, for Gadamer, *this new intellectual freedom is not a freedom that somehow captures an objective experience* – "even if the intention of the knower is simply to read 'what is there' and to discover from his sources 'how it really was'."¹⁸ Gadamer is clear that Heidegger's phenomenological clarification of the historical and temporal structures of human existence imply "no particular historical ideal of existence. Hence with regard to any theological statement about man and his existence in faith it claims an a priori, neutral validity."¹⁹ Bearing in mind that there is no particular historical ideal of existence implied by the historical and temporal structures of human existence (assuming here the validity of the Heideggerian critique of objectivist ontology), any theological statement asserted in the historical context of Islam would likewise have to be examined critically for any claim of objectivity – that is, of any claim of being able to discover from the Islamic source "how it really was" at such an historical time for such and such a mind engaging a revealed

truth. Here, too, we have a new intellectual freedom that manifests a fusion of horizons in the interpretive act, thus also in the acts of exposition and disputation that contribute to theological understanding. A new intellectual freedom is thereby a sign of a productive, not re-productive, understanding.

Rahman is no doubt critical of such remarks. As he says, “In modern hermeneutical theory, the ‘objectivity school’ has insisted that one must first of all ascertain the meaning intended by the mind that authored the object of study.”²⁰ Thus, Rahman writes, “certainly, in the case of the Qur’an, the objective situation is a *sine qua non* for understanding, particularly since, in view of its absolute normativity for Muslims, it is literally God’s response through Muḥammad’s mind (this latter factor has been radically underplayed by the Islamic orthodoxy) to a historic situation (a factor likewise drastically restricted by the Islamic orthodoxy in a real understanding of the Qur’an).”²¹ In this passage, it is clear Rahman believes in both the possibility and the necessity of an objective understanding, without which the text of the Qur’ān could not have an absolute normativity – that is, could not disclose religiomoral values that have an absolute normativity for Muslims. At the same time, Rahman recognizes the historicity of the person Muḥammad whose mind is likewise historically situated, and this historicity must be taken into account in making sense of an extraordinary event that this revelation is understood to be. Rahman is clear in his claim that contemporary efforts to make sense of the Qur’ān can have access to “the objective situation” that is this revelation to this prophet. This type of claim, Rahman concedes, is what Gadamer criticizes as “psychologism” – an interpretive move according to which one can speak of “the being of ideas in the author’s mind,” and “trace back ideas to the original mind in order to understand them as a true unity.” Thus, the question here is whether this interpretive move which Rahman accepts makes sense for interpretive success. That is, can one speak of “the being of ideas” in the mind of one such as Muḥammad, then trace these ideas derivatively to an original mind (what in the Latin medieval and scholastic tradition is designated “the *intellectus originarius*”), such that one can then claim to understand the ideas truly as a manifest unity of the extraordinary and the ordinary in an historical situation. From the perspective of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, this move does not make sense, hence the critique of psychologism in its objectivist aspiration for understanding of the Qur’ānic revelation.

Rahman, however, argues that his effort to understand the objective situation of this revelation is not mere psychologism: “I have contended that the invisible context of ideas is not just mental but environmental as well....”²² He elaborates on his sense of ideas: “while their occurrence is

in a mind, their *intentio* or meaning is ‘referred’ outside the mind.”²³ Thus, in the setting of the Islamic revelation, while the *occurrence* of ideas is in the mind of Muḥammad, the *meaning* of these ideas is necessarily referred outside his mind to the original intellect that is the source of these ideas. Rahman then notes Gadamer’s objection to this view: “Gadamer maintains his phenomenological doctrine according to which all experience of understanding presupposes a preconditioning of the experiencing subject and therefore, without due acknowledgment of this fact being predetermined (which is the essence of Gadamer’s entire hermeneutical theory), any attempt to understand anything is doomed to unscientific vitiating.”²⁴ In short, the experience of understanding that is attributed to Muḥammad would likewise presuppose a preconditioning of his mind as “the experiencing subject.” Rahman is aware of Gadamer’s basic thesis that all acts of understanding are preconditioned by a fore-understanding – each such act of understanding has its prejudices, sometimes tacit, but which must be kept explicit – all which prejudices are positive as “the effective history” within which understanding has meaning. “Thus there is no question of any ‘objective’ understanding of anything at all.”²⁵ Necessarily, this would include religious-moral understanding, and thus would include that issues as textual interpretation of the Qur’ānic revelation with a view to religiously derived moral values. Rahman does not accept this Gadamerian methodological limitation on his effort to access what he believes to be accessible to the human understanding, namely, the objective situation of the Qur’ān. Thus, he writes further, and against Gadamer:

Even when we become aware of this predetermination – that is, develop an ‘effective-historical consciousness’ as distinguished from ordinary ‘historical consciousness’ – the former is so limited that it cannot overcome this preconditioning. It is, of course, clear that this doctrine is radically opposed to what I have contended above by way of the hermeneutics of the Qur’an. If Gadamer’s thesis is correct, then the double-movement theory I have put forward has no meaning at all.²⁶

Let me structure the relevant argument Rahman is posing. It is deductive in form, with an opening conditional proposition: *if* Gadamer’s thesis is correct, *then* the double-movement theory Rahman puts forward has no meaning at all. At question here is whether one may reasonably affirm the antecedent, arguing thereby that *Gadamer’s thesis is correct* – in which case, we would deduce that indeed Rahman’s double-movement theory has no meaning at all, and in which case any claim of access to the objective situation of the Qur’ānic revelation is itself meaningless

as an hermeneutic move. Alternatively, one may argue that the double-movement theory has meaning such as Rahman intends, in which case one would deny the antecedent – that is, *Gadamer's thesis is not correct*.

However, I suggest these may not be our only logical options here. The truth of Rahman's proposition depends on whether his understanding of Gadamer's position is correct – that is, it may be in error. Similarly, it may be that Gadamer is correct and that Rahman's theory is compatible, or in some sense consistent with Gadamer's position. This remains to be decided. Here I wish to engage these questions by reviewing what both writers have to say on the main point of disputation, beginning with Rahman's double-movement theory. Then I will turn to examine Gadamer's concept of "effective history" more closely as it may bear upon Rahman's quest. My point here is not to be exhaustive in my engagement of either Rahman's works or the theological and philosophical scholarship that may relate to the topic I engage here. The matter of difference in hermeneutic approach between Rahman and Gadamer is thematically interesting for scholars in both recent European philosophy and Islamic studies, although the theme is not addressed specifically by students of Rahman, and certainly less likely to be engaged in the case of Gadamer scholars who work only within the Western tradition.

Rahman's Double-movement Theory

Rahman's theory involves a process of interpretation in double movement: "from the present situation to Qur'anic times, then back to the present." This statement in and of itself is not problematic; it is reasonable to try to understand the past, even as one must make sense of the present in the light of what one learns from the past. This is a matter of our consciousness of history, our historical consciousness. But, for one such as Gadamer, the question is how one construes this idea of historical consciousness and, more important, how this differs from what is a *historically-effective* consciousness. I shall postpone for the moment the elucidation of this difference to be engaged in the next section, while I review the parameters of Rahman's theory in brief.

For now, let us note that the problem of analysis begins with the opening declaration – that is, with what is *posited*, with what someone such as Rahman asserts the Qur'ān *to be*. Students of the Qur'ān clearly and unavoidably locate the disclosure and production of this text as an event occurring in history. It is a text and more than text, given its environmental significance, which Rahman finds essential to an objectively correct Qur'ānic understanding. For Rahman, "The Qur'an is the divine response, through the Prophet's mind, to the moral-social situation of the Prophet's Arabia,

particularly to the problems of commercial Meccan society of his day.”²⁷
 There are several epistemological presuppositions operative in this remark:

1. that one “objectively” *knows* the Qur’ān to be the divine word, notwithstanding its status as a text subject to human interpretation, including the interpretation that issues from the man, Muḥammad;
2. that this divine word is delivered through the Prophet’s mind, such that one *knows* the ideas operative therein, and so thereby has access to the *intentio* of an “author” – that is, the human author that Muḥammad is as “messenger”;
3. that this text is indeed *objectively known* as Allāh’s (SWT) response to an historically identifiable and identified moral-social situation;
4. that in particular one can have *objective historical knowledge* of the moral-social situation of Arabia and Meccan society for the period between 710 and 732 AC; such that
5. one can somehow *know* all of this and, by implication, find this knowledge instructive for our contemporary understanding and interpretation of the Qur’ān; and, furthermore, such that insofar
6. as the Qur’ān remains in principle a regulative guide in our appropriation of religiomoral values, this knowledge can reasonably inform our own individual and collective response to the moral-social situation of our present.

This set of epistemological presuppositions is surely daunting as a demand upon our hermeneutic method on the basis of which we might disclose the truth of the Qur’ān objectively.

That said, it is important to note Rahman’s intellectually formative dependence on al-Shatibi with respect to what are articulated as “the higher objectives” of the Islamic dogma: al-Shatibi himself aligned with Al-Ghāzālī’s approach to *ijtihād* (the latter undertaken in terms of the *maqāṣid al shari’ah*, thus necessarily purposive and contextual rather than literalist). It is in the light of the work of these two authors that Rahman believes in the concept of a “perfect understanding” of the purposes of the law as given in the sacred sources. It is important to disclose this interpretive context as explicit prejudice, although clearly this is not the place for a detailed assessment of either al-Shatibi’s or al-Ghazalī’s approaches to *ijtihād*. It is sufficient for the moment that tacit prejudices be made explicit, with the

understanding here that such prejudice is positive, hence positive as well for the interpretive bases of Rahman's double-movement theory.

As a matter of historical commentary, there is nothing fatally problematic with Rahman's claim that, "The Qur'an ... for the most part consists of moral, religious, and social pronouncements that respond to specific problems confronted in concrete historical situations."²⁸ Islamic jurisprudence – that is, all that issues as *usul al fiqh*, attests to the legitimacy of such a claim. What issues as a prophetic message is generally understood to do such, insofar as religious belief in Islam incorporates the idea of a prophet who mediates between God and a people, and whose mediation is delivered in his own exposition of this revelation, hence the authority of the Sunnah. Such is Muḥammad's self-understanding, that of his companions, and that of those who have accepted his message within the monotheist frame of the revelation that is represented by the received text of the Qur'ān. We can accept this as a matter of an historical assessment of declared belief, even as does Rahman. Accepting this, Rahman then goes on to describe the interpretive task further. In what he has to say here, we must bear in mind his disagreement with Gadamer's critique of psychologism and what this entails for any claim to access to an objective situation. Rahman writes:

First, one must understand the import or meaning of a given statement by studying the historical situation or problem to which it was the answer. Of course, before coming to the study of specific texts in the light of specific situations, a general study of the macrosituation in terms of society, religion, customs, and institutions, indeed, of a life as a whole in Arabia on the eve of Islam and particularly in and around Mecca – not excluding the Perso-Byzantine Wars – will have to be made.... The second step is to generalize those specific answers and enunciate them as statements of general moral-social objectives that can be "distilled" from specific texts in light of the sociohistorical background and the often-stated *rationes legis*.²⁹

Rahman insists the former is to be accomplished while accepting as an unarguable claim that the "teaching" of the Qur'ān "has no inner contradiction' but coheres as a whole." All of the above mentioned "macrosituation" constitutes a set of "objective materials" to assist us in understanding the Qur'ān, despite the multiplication of "subjective interpretations."³⁰ Thus, it seems we have here a conjunction of objective materials accessible as objective, yet a set of materials that inevitably and unavoidably engenders multiple subjective interpretations as to their significance. For Rahman, this is the "first movement" in his

double-movement theory – that is, interpretation is a movement “from the specifics of the Qur’ān to the eliciting and systematizing of its general principles, values, and long-range objectives.” It is noteworthy that Rahman speaks here of general, not universal, principles, in which case, both their derivation and their application have no apodicticity, but only inductive validity at best. But this announces a conundrum: if there is no apodicticity for either the derivation or the application of these general principles, then Rahman’s insistence on the absolute normativity of the Qur’ān loses its logical force. What is general is not universal; and what is not universal lacks absolute normativity in the sense Rahman intends the Qur’ān to have in any declaration of religious-moral values, be these values those of the historical past or those that would have impact in the present as regulative ideals.

Rahman expects that the foregoing analytical approach is to yield an historical consciousness of the moral-social situation in which the Qur’ān is delivered. But, Rahman believes historical consciousness must be gained not merely to understand the past, but also to inform the present. Thus, he speaks of a “second movement” in interpretation:

[The] second is to be from this general view to the specific view that is to be formulated and realized *now*. That is, the general has to be embodied in the present concrete sociohistorical context. This once again requires the careful study of the present situation and the analysis of its various component elements so we can assess the current situation and change the present to whatever extent necessary, and so we can determine priorities afresh in order to implement the Qur’anic values afresh. To the extent that we achieve both moments of this double movement successfully, the Qur’an’s imperatives will become alive and effective once again.³¹

If and when this double-movement is completed, Rahman claims, then we recognize the accomplishment of several tasks: “the first task is primarily the work of the historian, in the performance of the second the instrumentality of the social scientist is obviously indispensable, but the actual ‘effective orientation’ and ‘ethical engineering’ are the work of the ethicist.”³²

With this double-movement theory thus summarized, Rahman offers yet another argument about one consequence of the second movement: “if the results of understanding fail in application now, then either there has been a failure to assess the present situation correctly or a failure in understanding the Qur’an.”³³ This is thereby a triple failure of (1) sociohistorical analysis, (2) textual interpretation, and (3) ethical engineering – all three of which are deemed necessary to a successful revival and reform in Islam’s encounter with Western modernity. Such

failures would represent failures to access the objective situation that one must encounter in sociohistorical analysis, textual interpretation, and ethical engineering in the sense of identifying and appropriating religious-moral values. Rahman justifies this claim in the following argument:

For it is not possible that something that could be and actually was realized in the specific texture of the past, cannot, allowing for the difference in the specifics of the present situation, be realized in the present context – where ‘allowing for the difference in the specifics of the present situation’ includes both changing the rules of the past in conformity with the altered situation of the present (provided this changing does not violate the general principles and values derived from the past) and changing the present situation, where necessary, so it is brought into conformity with these general principles and values.³⁴

One immediately notes here a hermeneutic limitation imposed by Rahman in any interpretive engagement of the Qur’ān: any change of rules must not violate the general principles and values derived from the past. This hermeneutic limitation already has its own epistemological prejudices about how and why such general principles count as regulative ideals for the past and for the present. The whole of this process is what is generally understood as *ijtihād* in Islamic studies and Islamic jurisprudence more specifically. Bearing in mind the influence of both al-Shatibi and al-Ghāzālī on his understanding, Rahman defines *ijtihād* thus: “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.”³⁵

Rahman’s definition thus stated is unproblematic. It is, for example, consistent with what a contemporary student of Islamic jurisprudence such as M. H. Kamali expounds about contemporary *usul al-fiqh* (understood here as “the methodology of the law”) and, more specifically, the contested question about whether and when a closing of the gates of *ijtihād* occurred within the tradition of Islamic jurisprudence: “The alleged closure of the door of *ijtihād* is one of the factors which is held accountable for the gap that has developed between the law and its sources on the one hand and the changing conditions of society on the other.”³⁶ The ethical engineering task, for Rahman, is to pursue new solutions consistent with the current moral-social situation. Or, as Kamali puts it: “The quest for better solutions and more refined alternatives lies at the very heart of *ijtihād*, which must, according to the classical formulations of *usul al-fiqh*, never be allowed to discontinue.”³⁷ With *ijtihād*, as Rahman understands, we have a

given *text* to engage, a given *precedent* from a prior analysis, a *rule* applied, an *extension*, *restriction*, or *modification* of that rule, a *subsuming* of the new situation under that revised rule – and thereby the issuance of a new solution (judgment, *fatwā*) for a concrete moral-social situation.

In short, we have “rules of interpretation” being followed, including during any appeal to the authority of the foremost text, the Qur’ān: “Knowledge of the rules of interpretation is essential to the proper understanding of a legal text,” says Kamali. “Unless the text of the Qur’an or the *Sunnah* is correctly understood, no rules can be deduced from it, especially in cases where the text in question is not self-evident.”³⁸ What Kamali identifies here – and what Rahman unavoidably identifies here – is a methodological commitment that is itself the central prejudice or conceptual framework according to which the double movement is to occur. Kamali, for example, clarifies some of this methodological prejudice when he writes, “Hence rules by which one is to distinguish a speculative text from the definitive, the manifest (*zahir*) from the explicit (*nass*), the general (*‘aam*) from the specific (*khaas*), the literal (*haqiqi*) from the metaphorical (*majazi*), etc., and how to understand the implications (*dalalat*) of a given text are among the subjects which warrant attention in the study of *usul al-fiqh*.”³⁹ All of this, too, Rahman inevitably accepts as part and parcel of his own methodological prejudice (again, prejudice understood here positively). The task of the jurist (thus, also that of the “ethical engineer,” in Rahman’s sense) is to avoid *mis*-understanding, to achieve *correct* understanding. However, all of this is impossible, however, without *a prior methodological commitment*, that is, what is already given as *rules of interpretation* – in this case, what is received historically as the *usul al-fiqh*, even when the fact of the closing of the doors of *ijtihād* is accepted in the sense that an Islamic believer commits uncritically to the claim that there is no longer possible an “independent” *mujtahid* (that is, independent of the authority of the four *mahdhabs*, speaking here of Sunni Islam). Rahman believes we can achieve such correct understanding, specifically of the Qur’ān. His double-movement theory is offered as a method by which to advance contemporary *ijtihād* and, thus, achieve those truths that are relevant to the present as the outcome of ethical engineering of a religious-moral situation.

Gadamer and “Effective History”

As a first note of distinction in contrast to Rahman, following what he learned from the work of Heidegger, Gadamer stated quite clearly in *Truth and Method*: “The concept of understanding is no longer a methodologi-

cal concept.”⁴⁰ Instead, “Understanding is the original characteristic of the being of human life itself.” Indeed, Heidegger “revealed the projective character of all understanding and conceived the act of understanding itself as the movement of transcendence, of moving beyond the existent.” Gadamer refers here to Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* (the human way to be), an analysis that puts in place a fundamental ontology distinct from the Husserlian phenomenological clarification of consciousness – and from the modern rationalist-empiricist contestations about essence (*essentia*) and existence (*existentia*) in the case of the human way to be. Following (but also modifying somewhat) what he finds in Heidegger’s analysis, Gadamer writes: “Our question ... is how hermeneutics, once freed from the ontological obstructions of the scientific concept of objectivity, can do justice to the historicity of understanding.”⁴¹ As noted in my opening remarks, the historicity of understanding is involved in the act of understanding a text or a law precisely because of the projective character of human understanding. It is this projective character of all human understanding that follows from the Heideggerian clarification of *Dasein* – in contrast to the modernist ontologies and their associated epistemologies – and which (presumably) Rahman fails to consider in his dispute with Gadamer.

Gadamer clarifies the idea of projection, thus:

For Heidegger too historical knowledge is not a projection in the sense of a plan, the extrapolation of aims of the will, an ordering of things according to the wishes, prejudices, or promptings of the powerful; rather, it remains something adapted to the object, a *mesuratio ad rem*. Yet this thing is not a *factum brutum*, not something merely at hand, something that can simply be established and measured, but it itself has the same mode of being as *Dasein* [human being-there].⁴²

Gadamer, following Heidegger, distinguishes between the human way to be as historical being and that of a thing, the mode of being of which is “being present-at-hand” (*Vorhandenheit*, that is, the way a tree is) – a distinction cited here fully to highlight what is problematic in Rahman’s apparently contradictory appropriation of Kant without achieving the critical distance rendered by Heidegger’s critique of modernist ontology:

[That] we study history only insofar as we are ourselves ‘historical’ means that the historicity of human *Dasein* in its expectancy and its forgetting is the condition of our being able to re-present the past.... ‘Belonging’ is a condition of the original meaning of historical interest.... [B]elonging to traditions belongs just as originally and essentially to the historical finitude of *Dasein* as does its projectedness towards future possibilities of itself.... [There] is no understanding or

interpretation in which the totality of this existential structure does not function, even if the intention of the knower is simply to read ‘what is there’ and to discover from his sources ‘how it really was’.⁴³

The distinction being made here is important if we are to make sense of religious understanding, whether that religious understanding be Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. Understanding a text, a law, etc., must be apprehended in terms of a *universal existential structure* in which tradition and projection are both unavoidably present to a human act of interpretation – this act not to be restricted narrowly to the supposed a priori authority of this or that *method of interpretation*. That is, even one such as Rahman would have to acknowledge an existential structure of human existence despite holding a hermeneutic prejudice of method such as the double-movement approach to Islamic understanding. Further, neither this structure nor such a posited method delivers to us an ideal of human existence, including whatever one may seek to clarify or promote as an ideal of religious existence having absolute normativity. This point underscores the importance of examining carefully what it is any contemporary Islamic intellectualism wishes to engender through both revival and reform of the so-called Islamic tradition, a tradition that is itself unavoidably plurivocal in its representation of the past and its stipulations about the normativity of that past in the present.

Rahman is concerned that we understand first and foremost the significance of the Qur’ān. His double-movement theory presents the method. Were we in the presence of a live dialogue between Gadamer and Rahman, we would have one such as Rahman be given to understand

1. that “A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting.” So would be Rahman in his effort to understand,
2. “He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text.” Thus, one claiming an understanding of the text of the Qur’ān taken as a whole projects meaning for it when some initial meaning emerges in one’s encounter with the text (a surah, an *āyah*) of the Qur’ān; and so it would be for Rahman.
3. “Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning.” Thus, the initial meaning declared by one such as Rahman emerges only because he is reading the text of the Qur’ān with particular expectations he already holds in regard to a meaning he projects in advance.

4. "Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there."⁴⁴

Thus would Gadamer instruct Rahman as to the disclosure of the prejudice of his "fore-projection" inevitably present in the methodology of the double-movement he intends in his engagement of the Qur'ān, thus to elucidate its "significance."

This abbreviated description of this process as Gadamer explains it can be elaborated, of course. For example, Gadamer adds:

The process that Heidegger describes is that every revision of the fore-projection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning; rival projects can emerge side by side until it becomes clearer what the unity of meaning is; interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation. A person who is trying to understand is exposed to distraction from fore-meanings that are not borne out by the things themselves. Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed "by the things" themselves, is the constant task of understanding. The only "objectivity" here is the confirmation of a fore-meaning in its being worked out.⁴⁵

Let us pause to reflect on this passage. From Heidegger and Gadamer, we learn of a process of interpretation that yields a constantly changing unity of meaning – for example, what might be sought in speaking of the unity of the meaning present in the text that is the Qur'ān. We begin with our fore-conceptions – ideas, attitudes, concepts, definitions, interests, assumptions, presuppositions, methods, ideological appeals, opinions, truth claims of various sort, and so on – all of which prejudice our effort at making sense of some object of concern, such as the text of the Qur'ān. Such prejudice is something positive, as Gadamer would have us see, not something negative and deficient. Some of these prejudices are explicit, some tacit, but there is no understanding without prejudice. So would it be with Rahman's effort to understand the Qur'ān whether in part (some initial meaning) or the entire. The prejudices manifest or hide our expectations in the engagement of the text, the basis of any act initiating and finding meaning. It is this presence of disclosure (what is manifest) and concealment (what is tacit) that explains rival projects, hence the rival interpretive acts about partial or whole meaning of the Qur'ān in any given historical situation. The process of making sense of the text is iterative, and thus in its constancy, it is undergoing revision, including revision of the fore-conceptions by which one continues to be guided in the quest for unitary understanding. This is in-

evitable even for what Rahman intends as his double-movement and what is accomplished thereby as the “significance” of the Qur’ān in the present.

What matters for Gadamer (following Heidegger), however, is that this quest for meaning be guided by *the thing itself* rather than by arbitrary fore-meanings. Here we would have to clarify what of the Qur’ān counts as “the thing itself” in contrast to an interpreter’s fore-meanings present as prejudice: “Thus it is quite right for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning already available to him, but rather explicitly to examine the legitimacy – i.e., the origin and validity – of the fore-meanings dwelling within him.”⁴⁶ One taking up, for example, the double-movement theory such as Rahman presents it as a method of interpretation, would have to examine explicitly both the origin and the validity of the fore-meanings operative in the act of interpretation already structured by this method. Thereby, prejudices are made explicit rather than kept tacit. We seek understanding but are ever subject to the possibility of misunderstanding – especially, as Gadamer points out, when our fore-meanings “go entirely unnoticed.” Hence the importance of the opinion (taken here in the sense of *doxa* rather than *episteme*) of the other who similarly seeks to achieve understanding: “If they give rise to misunderstandings, how can our misunderstandings of a text be perceived at all if there is nothing to contradict them? How can a text be protected against misunderstanding from the start?”⁴⁷ In a partial answer, Gadamer advises: “The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.” Such is the truth that emanates from the thing itself, for example, in securing truth from the Qur’ān. One truth such as Rahman engaging the text of the Qur’ān would have to let this text assert its own truth against the multiplicity of fore-meanings he brings to that encounter, including the fore-meaning that is structured by his double-movement approach to the text. Unavoidably, consistent with the title of Gadamer’s work, we bring to the encounter of the religious text, in this case the Qur’ān, both truth and method – with “the truth” itself governed by “the method,” but which method must itself be subject to the vigilance of one making his prejudices explicit so as to discern the ongoing iteration of understanding achieved (accomplished as a “productive” and not “re-productive” understanding) in relation to “mis-understanding.”

If one seeks “enlightenment” such as philosopher Leaman desires in the case of surpassing a yet-medieval Islam, then the question is whether one seeks something analogous to the modern European Enlightenment’s polemic with dogmatic biblical authority – in this case, the dogma of Islamic

orthodoxy that likewise concerns Rahman. In the case of biblical criticism one has a critique that begins with accepting the possibility of error: “It is not altogether easy to realize that what is written down can be untrue.”⁴⁸ As Gadamer said, “In general the Enlightenment tends to accept no authority and to decide everything before the judgment seat of reason. Thus the written tradition of Scripture, like any other historical document, can claim no absolute validity.” The question here is whether one can say the same when it comes to evaluating the authority and validity of the Qur’ān, given Rahman’s insistence on the absolute normativity of the text in its issuance of religious values. “Insofar as finitude . . . dominates not only our humanity but also our historical consciousness,” the question is whether this finitude is to be accepted even in making sense of the Qur’ān.⁴⁹ One of the Enlightenment prejudices, says Gadamer, is its own “fundamental presupposition,” namely, “that methodologically disciplined use of reason can safeguard us from all error.”⁵⁰ In terms of post-Enlightenment critique, Rahman would have to acknowledge that even in the case of Islamic understanding, we cannot have a methodologically assured safeguard against all error.

Between Rahman and Gadamer

Rahman is concerned to access the meaning of the Qur’ān as a unity. That unitary understanding, once achieved, has its consciousness of (1) a historical tradition, (2) an analysis of contemporary social issues, which challenge the authority of that tradition, that is, what today counts as “Islamic orthodoxy,” and thus, (3) an emergent ethics that engineers an appropriate contemporary response to this encounter of tradition and modernity. Leaman, as I noted at the outset, bemoans the absence of a Spinoza in the case of a critique of Islamic tradition. But, as Gadamer advises, hermeneutics “need not lead to the radical critique of religion that we found, for example, in Spinoza.”⁵¹ Thus, presumably there can be revival and reform of Islam without radical critique. Rahman acknowledges the presence of Islamic orthodoxy, the very word manifesting a claim of authority in this tradition of faith, understanding, and practice. And, surely, such orthodoxy can have its legitimacy insofar as the *fact* of prejudice does not in and of itself count as *false* prejudice, and thus does not entail a lack of authority in a transmitted tradition (that is, false authority).

Gadamer is clear that authority properly construed does not entail blind obedience from among those who are adherents of a faith. Indeed, within Islamic orthodoxy, there has always been a warning against blind obedience (*taqlīd*). To say there is such a thing as Islamic ortho-

doxy is to say there is a kind of knowledge accessible by some and made available to others – “the knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence – i.e., it has priority over one’s own.”⁵² This acknowledgement is not equivalent to the “subjection and abdication of reason.” Rather, as Gadamer observes, “The fact is that in tradition there is always an element of freedom and of history itself.”⁵³ It is this combination of history and freedom that links the positive feature of prejudice and projection to the prospect of renovation of a tradition, given the presence of a “new” intellectual freedom that issues in every fusion of horizons.

Rahman disapproves of Gadamer’s critique of the objectivity school. But, Gadamer is careful about how we are to understand objectivism in the human sciences, including therefore how one may move hermeneutically to interpret an authoritative text, such as the Qur’ān. He argues that we relate to the past as historical beings “always situated within traditions.” Precisely because we are always situated, therefore, we cannot and do not (except by error of reasoning) construe tradition “as something other, something alien.” In short, our engagement of tradition through “research in the human sciences” (as Gadamer puts it) cannot defensively occur as though it were an “objectifying process.” So would it be for one situated in the tradition(s) of Islamic understanding. Thus, it is because of his affinity with, rather than because of a conceptual antithesis to, Islam that one such as Rahman can reasonably speak of both revival (an act of preservation of what is received) and of reform (an act of production beyond what is received) of Islamic intellectualism.

Gadamer therefore rightly asks:

Hence in regard to the dominant epistemological methodologism we must ask: has the rise of historical consciousness really divorced our scholarship from this natural relation to the past? Does understanding in the human sciences understand itself correctly when it relegates the whole of its own historicity to the position of prejudices from which we must free ourselves?⁵⁴

One who understands this cannot reasonably be a proponent of epistemological methodologism – that is, claiming objective historical knowledge that is methodologically pure in the sense of being free of all prejudice (the latter almost always understood negatively, as a manifest deficiency of method). All traditions are *living* traditions, which is to say that they continue in their historical efficacy consistent with the positive status of unconcealed prejudice: “The effect (*Wirkung*) of a living tradition and

the effect of historical study must constitute a unity of effect, the analysis of which would reveal only a texture of reciprocal effects.”⁵⁵ Gadamer speaks of this in the context of natural science, which is in turn relevant to how one is to construe the human sciences, including historical studies.⁵⁶

Let us consider what Gadamer means here in light of a critical set of remarks Rahman advances against the principle of effective history. Referencing historical developments or transitions in the tradition of Christian understanding and comparing to the Islamic tradition, Rahman writes: “It is obvious that there have been changes in human traditions, sometimes radical. In Christianity, the effective history of a fifth-century Augustine, a thirteenth century Aquinas, and a sixteenth century Luther could not have been quite the same.”⁵⁷ Surely this observation would not be disputed by Gadamer, in which case it is not a relevant criticism. The point for Gadamer is that, from the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, each such historical personality – Augustine, Aquinas, Luther – is part of a living tradition; and, as such, each contributes to both conservation and reform of that tradition that is the Christian dogma or orthodoxy. If each individual – Augustine, Aquinas, Luther – contributes to an “advance” in Christian understanding of its sacred sources and the relation of that understanding to Christian faith, how that advance belongs to the moment in history in which it took place is interesting as a matter of historical analysis. But beyond that secondary interest, what is one to say?

Rahman, however, continues his critique: “but what is even more important than that is that the conscious thought product of those men brought vast and vital changes into the subsequent effective history.”⁵⁸ Here again, Gadamer would not dispute the point. Each such individual has his own psychology, his own consciousness, including his own historical consciousness insofar as he is a member of a tradition and has his own engagement with that tradition. Each such individual has a productive, not reproductive, understanding of his tradition. Neither of these individuals is situated in relation to his tradition as one accepting blind obedience in the face of what he receives from what is given as the authority (thus orthodoxy) of that tradition. But, that “conscious thought” that each brings to his own intellectualism is not some objective experience dictating an irreformable pronouncement in the historical movement of that tradition, such that Luther permanently displaces Aquinas or Aquinas permanently displaces Augustine in the quest for truth in Christian understanding. Each thinker has his operative (positive) prejudices, his fore-structure of understanding, that allows him to engage his forebears and to work out his own contribution to this living tradition. There is no elimination of

prejudice and no objective (in the sense of absolute infallible) understanding in what either author delivers into history as his effective work – that is, work that produces historical effect whether in his own day or subsequently insofar as that work is appropriated by later generations.

Rahman's comparison with Islamic thinkers is likewise unproblematic: "So is the case with a tenth-century al-Ash'arī, an eleventh-century al-Ghazālī, and a fourteenth century Ibn Taymiya: Islamic tradition was never the same again after the conscious activity of each and all of them."⁵⁹ It is, of course, correct to say that Islamic tradition was never the same again consequent to the influence or historical effect of one or all of these thinkers. The problem here is that Rahman continues to emphasize the particularity of their cognitive activity – their "conscious" thought – as if it were somehow a wholly objective cognition: "Every critique or modification of a tradition involves a consciousness of what is being criticized or rejected and hence, to that extent, self-awareness." Surely, Gadamer would not deny the point. What is at issue here is how one is to construe this consciousness that is manifest as self-awareness. Despite the work of a thinker contributing to our historical understanding, in the sense that it enhances, modifies, or restricts what has been delivered over into our prior historical understanding, Gadamer argues: "we would do well not to regard historical consciousness as something radically new – as it seems at first – but as a new element in what has always constituted the human relation to the past."⁶⁰ Likewise, it would be the same for the contributions of the Islamic thinkers that Rahman identifies. Gadamer clarifies this:

We accept the fact that the subject presents different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints. We accept the fact that these aspects do not simply cancel one another out as research proceeds, but are like mutually exclusive conditions that exist by themselves and combine only in us. Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. Only in the multifariousness of such voices does it exist: this constitutes the nature of the tradition in which we want to share and have a part. Modern historical research is not only research, but the handing down of tradition. We do not see it only in terms of progress and verified results; in it we have, as it were, a new experience of history whenever the past resounds in a new voice.⁶¹

Applied to Rahman's concerns with Islamic tradition, I would have to say that the subject of Qur'ānic interpretation presents different aspects of itself at different times (for example, in the time of a tenth-century al-Ash'arī, an eleventh-century al-Ghazālī, and a fourteenth cen-

ture Ibn Taymiya) and, thus, from different standpoints such as each of these thinkers presents. These are, in the present, the variety of voices in which the echo of the past of Islamic tradition is heard. It is through these thinkers that this tradition is transmitted, handed down – even as one may understand that that transmittal includes some enhancement, restriction, or modification of what one understood before. The past of the tradition resounds in these voices, despite each thinker’s self-awareness in his engagement with his tradition, his living tradition.

Rahman objects by holding that

all conscious responses to the past involve two moments that must be distinguished. One is the objective ascertaining that past —which Gadamer does not allow), which is possible in principle provided the requisite evidence is available; the other is the response itself, which necessarily involves values and which is determined (not predetermined) by my present situation, of which effective history is a part but of which my conscious effort and self-aware activity also constitute an important part. For Gadamer these two moments are utterly inseparable and indistinguishable.⁶²

I submit that the foregoing criticism involves a fallacy of accent, as well as a failure to distinguish what is understood in concept from what is apprehended in reality. Rahman continues to emphasize the concept of individual consciousness, and while doing so, he believes in an individual’s objective cognition (“possible in principle”) *provided the evidence is available*. For him, it is this objective cognition that can, or should, yield an objective understanding of the Qur’ān and so enable a revival and reform Islamic tradition for the sake of an Islamic intellectualism effective in the present moral-social situation. In question here, however, is what counts as *admissible* (if available) evidence, and here Rahman discloses his epistemological methodologism, which does not withstand the Gadamerian critique I have surveyed here.

In the case of historical research, all reasonably admissible evidence has its limited authority only in the context of the governing research paradigm, the methodological frame of the investigation, the hypotheses posited in relation to inductive or abductive reasoning, the interrogative stance of the investigator, the expectations forecast in the light of the hypothesis and the guiding question, and so on. All of this is part and parcel of an explicit or tacit fore-structure of understanding that the historian or investigator brings to his or her interrogation of the past. What is thereby given has its *historical finitude* and its *methodological limitation* – what is gained in understanding – is never a comprehension of the subject matter wherein one attains an apodictic certainty. Gadamer does not deny that a thinker –

even one self-aware and pursuing a reform agenda vis-à-vis tradition—inclines his or her conscious effort to historical research. He grants that such effort and self-aware activity are important parts of the ongoing act of understanding that is ever an interaction with a living tradition. What Gadamer does not allow is the claim of objective cognition such as Rahman insists would be accessible even to him. That very claim is itself an instance of the prejudice of epistemological methodologism that began in early European modernity (for example, Descartes) and continued into late modernity.

Rahman's quest for objective Qur'ānic understanding is part of his own self-awareness, with its own operative prejudices (tacit or explicit) and fore-structure in that quest for understanding. He is himself moved to appropriate certain ideas from his reading of Kant. His source, and thus part of his methodological prejudice, is not merely the text of the Qur'ān but also that of late modern philosophy. He writes: "Just as in Kantian terms no ideal knowledge is possible without the regulative ideas of reason (like first cause), so in Qur'anic terms no real morality is possible without the regulative ideas of God and the Last Judgment."⁶³ In saying as much, Rahman discloses a component of his own fore-structure of understanding in his hermeneutic approach to the text of the Qur'ān. He construes the idea of God as a regulative idea, and he links the possibility of moral knowledge to this regulative idea. Yet, the Qur'ān does not in and of itself present the being of God in such a "philosophical" conceptual frame; this frame is already part and parcel of Kant's engagement with epistemological commitments of both modern British empiricism and continental rationalism. Rahman construes both "regulative ideas" – the idea of God and the idea of a Last Judgment – as ideas having moral function: "they exist for religiomoral experience and cannot be mere intellectual postulates to be 'believed in'."⁶⁴ Here Rahman makes a distinction in which a Kantian concept of "intellectual postulate" is appropriated and contrasted to what Rahman understands "religiomoral experience" to be. He continues: "the substantive or 'constitutive' – as Kantian phraseology would have it – teaching of the Prophet and the Qur'an is undoubtedly for action in this world, since it provides guidance for man concerning his behavior on earth in relation to other men."⁶⁵ Again, one is moved to ask: what authorizes this appropriation of Kantian concepts such that one can speak at all of "regulative ideas" in the Qur'ān, or speak of a "constitutive" teaching from the Prophet or the text of the Qur'ān as such? This is not so much argued and warranted by Rahman; it is only appropriated uncritically and then applied as he seeks his own agenda of reform in contemporary Qur'ānic interpretation. But, then, granted as much, we have here not a re-productive understanding of

Islamic doctrine; instead we have a productive understanding that involves the conceptual prejudices adopted from Kantian critique of pure reason and practical reason. This is a manifestation of Rahman's own new intellectual freedom that characterizes his place in contemporary Islamic intellectualism – that is, the fusion of horizons that discloses his own intellectual accomplishment, while situated within the Islamic tradition(s) he seeks to reform.

Rahman reveals another feature of his methodological commitment that conflicts with his strong assertion of the importance of historical consciousness in the reading of the Qur'ān: “even though the Qur'an seldom refers to actual events and situations and almost never mentions names, it would be inaccurate to characterize it as an esoteric document, for it is eminently possible to accurately determine the rationales behind its statements, comments, and injunctions.”⁶⁶ Rahman believes this determination of historical analysis to be essential to making sense of the normative intent of the Qur'ān, whether the text be “literal” or “figurative” in a given moment of intellectual encounter: “To insist on a *literal* implementation of the rules of the Qur'ān, shutting one's eyes to the social change that has occurred and that is so palpably occurring before our eyes, is tantamount to deliberately defeating its moral-social purposes and objectives.”⁶⁷ For Rahman, one can have deductive truth in our reading of the Qur'ān, insofar as from the text there is to be deduced a set of “general principles” (*usul kulliya*) designed to govern human conduct: “If we look at the Qur'an, it does not in fact give many general principles: for the most part it gives solutions to and rulings upon specific and concrete historical issues; but ... it provides, either explicitly or implicitly, the rationales behind these solutions and rulings, from which one *can deduce general principles*. In fact, this is the only sure way to obtain the real truth about the Qur'anic teaching.”⁶⁸ Rahman concludes: “*In building any genuine and viable Islamic set of laws and institutions, 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 social conditions now obtaining.*”⁶⁹

Although Gadamer was not himself studied in Islamic jurisprudence or issues relating to law and morality in Qur'anic interpretation, it is highly unlikely Gadamer would disagree with what Rahman says here as a matter of *interpretive process*. In fact, it is entirely likely Gadamer would acknowledge precisely what Rahman has put forward here as consistent with the basics of his philosophical hermeneutics, even if in modified form because

of the specific conceptual apparatus involved in Qur'ānic interpretation. The movements Rahman identifies are already acknowledged in classical and contemporary *ijtihād*, even as the closing of the gates of *ijtihād* is asserted such that there can be no independent or absolute *mujtahid* after that closing. But, as already noted, the very commitment to this historical claim of closure to the gates of *ijtihād* is itself part of a hermeneutic commitment one either accepts or rejects, while situated within that tradition. Further, Rahman's reference to a Maliki scholar such as al-Shatibi in the conception of general principles is itself a sign of an element in Rahman's fore-structure of Qur'ānic understanding, even as Rahman's appropriation of the Kantian concept of the regulative idea is part of that fore-understanding. Rahman's interest in religiomoral values is itself a consequence of his reading of al-Shatibi and, thus, an element of positive prejudice in his encounter with the text that is the Qur'ān. But, this is far from having the evidence of historical analysis that somehow or other achieves the objective understanding Rahman seeks through his double-movement theory.

In short, his method and his double-movement theory are hardly novel or radical from the perspective of Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics – though they may be from that of contemporary *ijtihād*, such is performed by Islamic orthodoxy. What has been taken as radical, however, has been Rahman's insistence that one can have access to the Qur'ān in the sense of access to the mind of God, insofar as the Qur'ān is (for him) God's response to a sociomoral situation that is itself the occasion of the revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*). Because the Qur'ān is disclosed through “the mind of Muḥammad,” Rahman argued, the process of *ijtihād* may yield to us an original authorial intention; and understanding this intention thereby yields religiomoral knowledge essential to moral action in the present. For him, “the really effective procedure” would be “to erect a system of universal ethical values on the basis of an analysis of the moral objectives of the Qur'an.”⁷⁰ This is to be achieved, he hoped, “through developing a systematic ethical system derived from the Qur'ānic values, which are either there explicitly or could be extracted from its *rationes leges*.” In advocating as much, Rahman sought to counter the dominant place of reasoning from analogy (*qiyās*) in contemporary *ijtihād*; this reasoning compares to casuistry in the Western tradition of moral analysis, the latter methodological perspective rejecting the universalist and absolutist claims of prominent moral theories. The result of unsystematic and ad hoc application of this legal principle, says Rahman, “is that today Muslims wishing to derive workable Islamic law from the Qur'an have to make a fresh start by working out a genuine ethical value-system from the

Qur'an.⁷¹ While the latter quest for a Qur'ānic ethics is ever meritorious, the quest for access to objective authorial intention (whether of the mind of God or the mind of Muḥammad) is ever contested in any application of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics – even as it was contested by Islamic orthodoxy in its understanding of revelation. Quite simply, there is never really a fresh start for one situated in a tradition of understanding.

Conclusion

Writing on “the message of Fazlur Rahman,” M. Yahya Birt commented that Rahman defended historicism, understood as “the practice of deducing from first principles truths about how people are obliged to organize themselves socially and politically.”⁷² Rahman's focus was on the Qur'ān, in contrast to the Sunnah and whatever is available at any given time as the *ijmā'* (consensus) of the scholars. One may, of course, defensibly assert the primacy of the Qur'ān in its normative authority, as Rahman does, and indeed as does Islamic orthodoxy. For the latter, however, the Sunnah is included as a principal source in the process of *ijtihād*, even as Hadith studies distinguish the genuine from the unauthentic hadith and so concede the primacy of the Qur'ān even when the Sunnah is included in interpretive acts. As Birt remarks, “Most of the Hadith corpus is, in fact, the Sunna-*ijtiḥād* of the first generations which after a serious struggle received the sanction of *ijma'*, or the adherence of the majority of the Community.”⁷³ The point is that throughout there has been and continues to be a process of *ijtihād*, present even in what is delivered as the *ijmā'* of the first generations. This interpretive process remains an engagement with a living tradition and is disclosed as such despite the presence of a methodological debate about how *ijtihād* is to occur. Clearly, Rahman's focus on the Qur'ān as a living source of ethics entails its own interpretive process. That is to say, it is one thing to speak of the *presence* of the Qur'ān as the *revelation* it is taken to be, and another to speak of the Qur'ān as an object of religious *knowledge* encountered and engaged by one whose ontological status as subject transforms the Qur'ān into something having *objectivity*. Rahman's epistemological methodologism advances such a transformation of the Qur'ān. Thereby, he diminishes the presence of the Qur'ān as living tradition and source of ethics that cannot but speak historically. One who speaks historically accomplishes a fusion of horizons of understanding the past and the present, thus to disclose a living understanding into the present and transmit it into the future.

I have noted that some contemporary writers such as Leaman bemoan the lack of a Spinoza in the Islamic intellectualism of the present. Spinoza's ap-

proach to biblical interpretation resonates to a degree in Rahman's approach to Qur'ānic interpretation. Gadamer himself commented on Spinoza's approach:

In Chapter 7 of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* Spinoza elaborates his method of interpreting Scripture by analogy to the interpretation of nature: we have to derive the meaning (mens) of the authors from historical data... [Everything] important can be understood if only we understand the mind of the author 'historically' – i.e., overcome our prejudices and think of nothing but what the author could have had in mind.⁷⁴

In part, this is what centrally motivates Rahman, hence his attention to the psychology of interpretation (the conclusions of which would invariably be only inductive in their logical strength). In this regard, his approach is similar to that of Schleiermacher (biblical hermeneutics). Gadamer wrote:

Hermeneutics includes grammatical and psychological interpretation. But Schleiermacher's particular contribution is psychological interpretation. It is ultimately a divinatory process, a placing of oneself within the whole framework of the author, an apprehension of the 'inner origin' of the composition of a work, a re-creation of the creative act. Thus understanding is a reproduction of an original production....⁷⁵

Rahman, in his own way, seeks a reproduction of the original production that is the Qur'ān – and this is his interpretive quest. His double-movement theory, however, is itself evidence of the fact that interpretation – including Qur'ānic interpretation – is always productive of understanding rather than merely reproductive of authorial intention; and its productivity is always finite given the finitude of the interpreter's historical consciousness. It is this productive understanding that enables all engagement with moral values, whether for revival or reform of a tradition, and this includes the tradition of Islam. We can today still accept Rahman's double-movement theory as consistent with – rather than diametrically opposed to – Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, so long as one is prepared to diminish the import of psychological interpretation and acknowledge the operative authority of positive prejudice even in Rahman's approach to Qur'ānic interpretation. In this way, what Gadamer clarifies as the fusion of horizons of understanding is achieved in any contemporary Qur'ānic interpretation. Despite its assertion of epistemological methodologism, such is the function of the hermeneutical circle, which is present in Rahman's double-movement theory. Beyond this methodologism, Gadamer would have us acknowledge: “*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present*

are constantly mediated.”⁷⁶ Whether one speaks of the revival or reform of Islamic tradition, past and present are constantly mediated, even by Rahman as he participates in this tradition as a proponent of Islamic intellectualism.

Endnotes

1. Fore-structure (*Vorstruktur*) includes intentionality, inherited meaning, presuppositions expressed in concepts and practices that make up the individual human’s life world.
2. Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), 207.
3. Ibid.
4. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1.
5. Ibid., 4.
6. Ibid.
7. “Religiomoral” as used by al-Shatibi refers to those moral values that guide human conduct insofar as they derive from the Islamic source texts.
8. Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study in Islamic Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 14–15.
9. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 31.
10. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 5.
11. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1979), 236.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 237.
14. Ibid., 241.
15. Ibid., 247.
16. Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, 8.
17. Ibid., 251.
18. Ibid., 252.
19. Ibid., 252–53.
20. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 8.
21. Ibid., 8.
22. Ibid., 9.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 5.
28. Ibid.
29. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 6.
30. Ibid., 7.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 8.
36. M. H. Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2005).
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 3.
40. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 250.
41. Ibid. 268.
42. Ibid., 251–52.
43. Ibid., 252.
44. Ibid., 269.
45. Ibid., 271.
46. Ibid., 270.
47. Ibid., 271.
48. Ibid., 274.
49. Ibid., 277.
50. Ibid., 279.
51. Ibid.
52. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281.
53. Ibid., 282.
54. Ibid., 283; italics added.
55. Ibid., 284
56. Ibid.
57. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 10.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 284.
61. Ibid., 285.
62. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 10.
63. Ibid., 14.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 19.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid., 20.
69. Ibid., italics in text quoted.
70. Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, p. 61.
71. Ibid.
72. M. Yahya Birt, “The Message of Fazlur Rahman,” www.freerepublic.com/focus/fr/531762/posts.
73. Ibid.
74. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 181.
75. Ibid, 186.
76. Ibid., 291, italics in text quoted.