# Challenges of modernity to Islam in 20<sup>th</sup> Century; an appraisal of South Asian Muslim reformists/ responses

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**Abstract:** - Modernity and all its essentials have been activating Muslim intellectuals to respond to these new situations since 19<sup>th</sup> century. In return, Muslims addressed these challenges with diverse solutions or alternatives. Among these responses, efforts of interpreting these new situations to examine in the light of Quran and Sunnah and maximizing their benefits to Muslims' need is highly encouraged such as Jamal-ud-din Afghani and Allama Muhammad Iqbal did. Across the Muslim world, one can find different approaches to modernity but most of them agreed to align new theories with principles of Quran and Sunnah. Their revivalist approaches can be criticized and assessed with arguments. Thus this process of acceptance, rejection and synthesis will help Muslim world to address the challenges of modern era in more appropriate way. This study is aimed to explore the works of Muslim scholars in modernizing Islamic thoughts in 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this purpose, researcher selected two Muslim Scholars from the Modern era; Dr. Fazlur Rehman and Mawlana Wahiduddin Khan. They, originally, belonged to South Asia but their perspectives have influenced Muslims from Asia to Europe and thus this study will unfold more dimensions to discuss their solutions according to their own situations and circumstances.

Key Words: Revivalism, Modern Islamic Thought, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, Neo-Modernism, Dr. Fazlur Rahman

# I. INTRODUCTION

There is a substantiated and rational necessity to present a survey of the ideas of key Muslim reformist thinkers within the broader context of revivalist ideals in the Islamic history of last century and a half. Their views regarding crucial issues of modernity such as democracy, basic human rights, pluralism, gender and minority rights and freedom of expression must be explained in pragmatic way to Muslim societies. This discussion will ultimately identify the similarities among the ideas of these revivalists and those differences which are consequent of particular situations and concerns. In this manner, a comparative analysis can also be provided for assessment of responses available to the challenges of modernity.

# **Challenge of modernity to Islam:**

Muslim societies have been facing significant challenges since the end of nineteenth century in the wave of modernity. Many significant developments have occurred including nationalism, secularism, urbanization, industrialization, mass migration and information technology. These have affected Muslim societies with unprecedented changes which have very little similarity to the pre-modernism. An example of this can be taken from Cairo whose population rose rapidly between 1900 and 1980 from 6 million to eight million and now it has reached over fifteen million. Moreover, urban dwelling has increased from 10% to almost 50%. But these circumstances and most of new changes brought by modernism have not been welcomed by Muslims. Instead, sometimes these were called 'foreign' to Islamic world. Muslim intellectuals and thinkers have to do work intensively to find any relationship between revelation and reason. (Taji-Farouki & Nafi, 2004, pp. 2-3).

All these changes and new situations pose challenging questions to traditional Islamic thought and intellectuals. It demands responses to modernity and its key notions ranging from nationalism to gender rights and individual situations. It is not easy to bring forward a meaningful way between traditions and new realities.

#### **Response to modernity:**

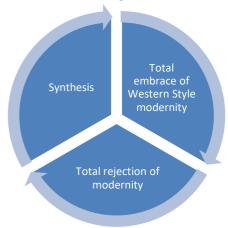
As far as the responses to modern challenges are concerned, an examination of responses rendered by the Muslim thinkers to the modernity since 19th century unfolds some certain significant features of these reformist replies. Primarily, it must be remembered that Muslims faced challenges of modernity as a

result of imperialism when European imperial powers defeated Muslim armies and expended into their lands (Ali, S. R., 2020). In this way, Muslims encountered with modernity and imperialism at the same time. It is the reason that the Muslim responses to modernity have been very much similar to those of non-European and late-modernized European nations. These responses were fundamentally defensive in nature and character. These societies intended to get help of these modern realities namely scientific advances, industrial and military power in order to resist imperial power(Hunter, 2009b, p. 10). This resistance to imperial power did not allow many Muslims to embrace the hidden benefits of modernity for their own revitalizing and reawakening. Resistance to imperialism and modernity went parallel so this foreign domination and modernity both were considered threat to cultures, morals and identity of these effected societies especially Muslims. So overall, Modern Islamic thought is largely responsive and constructive (Ali S. R. et al., 2021).

#### **Diversity in responses:**

It must be remembered that Muslims' response did not remain same to modern phenomenon. It was depending on their certain geopolitical, social, and political conditions that individual Muslims or societies reacted to this challenge in different manners. Muslims' first response was to attempt to modernize their military on the lines of European powers. In this way, the Ottoman Empire established first military schools; (naval engineering school,1773; military engineering,1793; and military science—1834)(Hunter, 2009b, pp. 13-14).

However, Muslims' responses to the modernity can be categorized into three types mentioned below.



The first reaction was total embrace and acceptance of western style modernity. This response was adopted by those scholars who were educated in the western educational institutions. For example, Iranian secular modern Muslim thinker, Mirza Malkum khan openly supported the western modern ideas. The second reaction was to reject these western modern thoughts in totality by uneducated masses who believed that Islamic revival could occur only when its values and rules must be observed by Muslims in all aspects (Khan, S.D., et at., 2019).

The third one has been the synthesis. The advocates of this reaction believed that Islam is not hindrance in scientific development. They tried to restore the rational and scientific spirit of Islam and they interpreted the basic tenets of Islam in a way that was more supportive to the current needs and circumstances (Hunter, 2009b, p. 14).

# Main goals and standards of reformist and renewal thinkers in 19th century

Despite all difference of opinions and views on particular reforms, all reformers have always been working on these goals and essentials for the interpretation of Islamic sources for nineteenth century:

- 1. Return to basic and primary sources of Islam; Quran and Sunnah. This point has been central pillar for the ideas of reformists.
- 2. Restore faith and morality of Muslims.
- 3. Political, economic and intellectual reawakening of Muslim World.
- 4. Defend Islam against internal and external enemies.
- 5. Ensure Islam's relevance to the lives of Muslims in all the circumstances. (Hunter, 2009a, p. 5)

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# New approaches in Muslim Reformist Movements-Origin and themes

By the late 1980s, a new breed of Islamic intellectuals developed. They presented a different type of reformist Islam from earlier understandings of 1960s and 1970s. This type of revivalism had its roots in the reformist movements of the nineteenth century. Rationalism, historical, and contextual approach to the interpretation of Islamic sources were the main features of this reformist movement. They tried to reconcile Muslims' needs in modern era with new ethical standards of human rights. It was aimed to reconcile reason and spirituality, religion and freedom. This approach helped to develop a kind of modernity anchored in Muslims' spiritual heritage while embracing all the redeeming aspirations of Western modernity. It also opened the aspects of interaction with other cultures and civilizations and hoped to a world where the sense of dialogue and patience rather than violence and dominance prevails (Hunter, 2009b, p. 20).

In addition to that, major themes of the Muslim reformist approach can be further categorized into four basic themes; (a) a deep and permanent belief in Islam as a faith and as a system of belief; (b) democratic heterogeneity or Islam's relativity with democracy and human rights; (c) inter-faith Dialogue; and (d) the phenomenon of modernity (Parray, p. 3).

# South Asian Perspectives by modern Muslim revivalists in 20th Century:

South Asian Muslim intellectuals have been playing great role to the development of reformation of modern Islamic thoughts since 19th century. They have presented numerous ideas and methodologies to tackle the challenges of modernity. Among them, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Allama Muhammad Iqbal have facilitated reformist approaches to spread worldwide (Hassan, 2014, p. 181). Moreover, their thoughts still instigate other Muslim revivalist scholars from Malaysia to Turkey.

This region has been contributing in modern Islamic thought immensely in 20th century. It happened due to many challenges, internal or external conflicts which were faced by the people of South Asia. On the one hand, they were struggling against the colonial power of Britain. This Imperial power posed many challenges in the form of orientalism, democratic electoral system, industrial advancement and culture superiority. On the other hand, the Muslims in South Asia had to find the ways to coexist with other religious communities specially Hindus(Okawa, 2019, p. 110). In this state of affairs, many Muslim intellectuals have put new theories and approaches to response the challenges of Modern era.

In addition to that, the contributions of these South Asian reformist writers are recognized by Muslim and Western scholars. They all come to an understanding that the development of modernist thoughts in this region was a significant event with across-the-board magnitudes despite the fact that these intellectuals embrace diverse views about the nature of the influences that caused this important development (Hunter, 2009b, p. 159).

This study is aimed to highlight the thoughts and approaches of two significant and influential modern reformist thinkers of the 20th century. Their new perspectives on understanding Islam in modern era will be dealt in totality. Emphasis is given on studying their major approaches and methodology adopted for their conclusions. Two eminent Muslim scholars, Dr. Fazlur Rahman and Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, have been selected for understanding how they faced challenges of modernity and their responses as well.

## Dr. Fazlu Rehman: A Neo-Modernist

Dr. Fazlur Rahman was one of the most significant and prominent Muslim revivalist scholars of the twentieth century. He was born in present day Pakistan's Hazara district in 1919. He got his traditional Islamic education from his father, Maulana Shahab-ud-Din who was a scholar of Islamic law. Then he started secular studies at Punjab University, Lahore and at Oxford. He has been teaching at the University

of Durham and at McGill University. Moreover, he returned to Pakistan and served as adviser to President Ayub Khan (1958-1969) and directed the Islamic Research Institute also.

Unfortunately, he got involved into a controversy when a part of the Urdu translation of his book named 'Islam' was published in the Institute's research journal Fikr-o-Nazar in 1968 on the issue of interpretation of revealed words of Quran and the words in book form. This led to the countrywide protests launched by the *Ulema*. Due to these strikes, Government of Pakistan was forced to ask Dr. Fazlur Rahman to leave the country immediately.

However, from 1969 to 1988 he taught at the University of Chicago, where he was promoted on the position of the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor. He died in 1988 (Hunter, 2009b, p. 170).

#### A Neo-Modernist Muslim Thinker:

As far as the acknowledgment of Dr. Fazlur Rahman by the intellectuals of Islamic thought was concerned, he was considered a thinker whose ideas were characterized as neo-modernist. It is referred to a thought process that has both modern and traditional standards. He was one of those modernists whose response did not fall into the response category of total rejection or total embrace of western modernism. He did not reject the totality of advances and thoughts brought by modernism to the Islamic world. Similarly, he did not ignore the traditional Islamic thought all together. He was who looked for making his thoughts in line with Islamic principles. His intellectual standing gave hope for the future of Islam as he always promoted the discourse originated from the Quran and the Sunnah (Fathonah, 2019, p. 367). Hence, he can stand as thinker of neo-modernism as well as associated with roots of main pillars of Islamic theology.

## Reformist approaches of Dr. Fazlur Rahman and methodologies adopted for:

As a neo-modernist thinker, ha also raised the slogan of 'Back to Quran and Sunnah. He presented diverse revivalist ideas on the new situations and challenges. An overview of his approaches will strengthen the notion of synthesis combined with modernity and traditional standards.

First of all, the Islamic education theory of Dr. Fazlur Rahman gets more highlight than others. So what is the basis of his reformist approach regarding education? He developed his reformist theories about education and other concerns on the ground of his in depth study of Islamic classical era. In order to find solution of the problems of modern life, he involved in the analysis of development of Islamic education revolution which began from the rule of Abbasid family. He was of the view that the Islamic education enforced during this classical period practiced the method of writing and reading. Moreover, the most common execution was to memorize Qur'an and Sunnah by heart. He added that logic, law, grammar and other disciplines were also emphasized at the time of the Abbasids by some caliphs such as Harun al-Rashid and al-Ma'mun in their palace. Through his study of the classics of Islam, he presented his theory on educational reforms. He believed that the revival of Islamic education system can only be possible by receiving modern secular education but it must be integrated with Islamic concepts of Quran and Sunnah (Fathonah, 2019, p. 369). This idea combined dual roots for a model educational reforms which have characteristics of both secular and Islamic knowledge.

On the issue of traditional Islamic education taught in Madrassas, he also criticized traditional Ulama. In his book 'Islam' (1966), he targeted self-imposed isolated madrasa education system which he believed inappropriate and irrelevant for modern times. According to him, this system adopted a self-imposed isolation from 'rational' disciplines of knowledge like natural sciences, medicine and philosophy. He argued that the Ulama had developed their religious sciences into self-sufficient disciplines to protect themselves from external influences of other groups such as Mu'tazilahs and Shi'a sect. But now these Ulama had imprisoned themselves into walls built by them for protection and they had become isolated. Abbas (2017) commented that Dr. Fazlur Rahman, undoubtedly, presented an embellished discourse on Madrassa education and its 'isolated' aspect. Thus, he adopted the necessity of secular education by accepting this western discourse that Islamic Civilization was in decline state on one hand. In addition to that, he attacked isolationism of the traditional Ulama anf their Madrassa system (Abbas, 2017, pp. 745-746).

#### **Controlled Democracy:**

Another distinctive aspect of the responses of Dr. Fazlur Rahman to modernity is his approach towards the notion of democracy especially its implementation in Muslim communities in South Asia and other regions. He advocated the idea of controlled centralized democracy in under developed countries including all the Muslim countries. He recognized the idea that governments must be formulated on general will through representation system of democratic electoral system. He believed that it is not right to put the label of 'un-Islamic' on modern democratic system. However, he was of the opinion that most of the people in Muslim countries and underdeveloped countries were illiterate so it was not easy to enforce democratic system with its full potential under such circumstances. Furthermore, he argued that underdeveloped countries needed speedy industrial development, centralized plans and development of common infrastructure facilities so it was essential to form a strong centralized government controlled by 'strong men' in controlled democracy for such countries. On the same time, he stressed on the need of

cultivating the spirit of democracy gradually (Hunter, 2009b, p. 172). Therefore, it is important to consider the situations and ground realities before implementing and adopting modern ideas. He supported the idea of democracy in the light of historical facts and principles of Quran and Sunnah but with certain limitations keeping in view the circumstances. That very interpretation has influenced other Muslim societies in the world to response modern government system.

## Voice for Women Rights in Modern Era:

Moreover, he argued on the status and importance of women and their rights with more progressive approach than most of the other Muslim intellectuals. With the help of notion 'go back to Quran', he emphasized that Quran acknowledged the full personhood of a woman. He recalled the importance rendered by Quran to the issues related to women such as equality of men and women, inheritance, polygamy, their sexual satisfaction, divorce, female infanticide and their status as witness. It highlighted the role and nature of this gender in society. It also went to the credit of Dr. Fazlur Rahman who formulated the Muslim Family law Ordinance (1961) of Pakistan. According to the reforms initiated by him, certain restrictions were imposed on polygamous marriages. It also contained a procedure for divorce and process of marriage registration (Hassan, 2014, pp. 195-196). However, his reforms on women rights faced severe criticism by the Ulama but it was not yet replaced in Pakistan. Despite this, his approach helped to re-study and re-evaluate the Islamic injunctions on the roles of men and women and possibility of more rights and safety in the wave of modern times.

#### Maulana Wahiduddin Khan:

A modest religious scholar and prolific write, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan was also among the prominent reformists of 20th century. He was acknowledged worldwide for his writings and ideas on different current and sensitive issues. He was founder of the Al-Risala Movement. He was also chief-in-editor of the monthly magazine al-Risala. His written works consisted of more than a hundred books and numerous articles. His books were originally written in Urdu but many of them had been translated into Hindi, Urdu, English and some other languages of the Muslim world such as Turkish and Malay (Irfan A Omar, 2008, p. 672). With this academic career and his revivalist approaches, his movement had attracted many Muslims of south Asia, Far-East Asia and Europe in Modern era.

#### Reformist Movement of Maulana Khan: key factors and ideas

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan started to introduce his ideas to the Muslim world in 1955. Before 1947, he was inspired by values of Gandhi and began to be known as the Nationalist Maulana. Through publishing his books from 1955 onwards, He presented his new approach towards Islam. He promoted the ideas of peace, coexistence and non-violence. In 1970, he established Islamic Centre in New Delhi. He got more attention of the world when in 1992 he conducted a Peace March after the Babri Mosque incident to promote harmony and coexistence between Hindus and Muslims (Okawa, 2019, p. 109).

In order to explore the basic aspects of the religious thinking of Maulana Khan, it is important to understand two significant events in the life of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan. These two incidents played major role in the development of his ideas. He left two influential Islamic organizations of the South Asia. First was a political Islamic party named Jamaat-e-Islami founded by Maulana Maududi in 1941 and the second one was a conservative Islamic organization known as Tabligee Jama'at(Okawa, 2019, pp. 109-110). He left Jamaat-e-Islami in 1962. According to him, the political interpretation of Islam by Maulana Maududi, the founder of Jamaat Islami, had been the major cause of conflict across the world (Khan, 2015, p. 4).

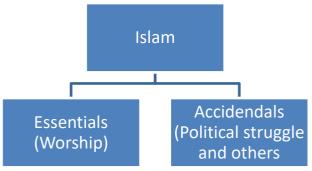
He criticized this interpretation and explained in detail the causes of his withdrawal from Jamaat in book named Tabeer Ki Galti. He believed that political interpretation of Islam by Maududi was the reaction to western imperialism. For him, this approach and political ideology was not favorable for Muslims living in India. Therefore, he suggested the way of coexistence for Muslims in Hindus (Okawa, 2019, p. 109).

After withdrawal from Jamaat-e-Islami, he moved to join Tablighee Jama'at but he left it also in 1975. This religious organization was established in 1927 and have been well known as conservative revivalist organization all the he agreed Vidya Mission authority but he adopted another way forever revolution since the Islam put two major demands the first one is related to the soul of Islam and the second is created by circumstances. For Maulana Khan, Tablighee Jamaat seemed to lack second view point of Islam that was adjustment to the modern era (Okawa, 2019, pp. 110-111). After leaving these two influential Islamic organisations, he presented his own understanding of Islam through his books and more significantly his monthly magazine named Al-Risala. It was launched in 1976 in Urdu. This journal was entirely consisted of his own articles so it has great importance in order to understand ideas of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan(Anjum & Wani, 2017, p. 389)

### Understanding of Islam as religion (Din-e-Islam):

The approach of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan about Islam as religion was based on idea that Islam is the name of Divine Oneness and to invite humans to acknowledge the Oneness of Allah is central activity of Islam. Apart from this, all the activities including political and social struggles are considered secondary

part of Islam. Moreover, all the activities in Islam can be categorized into two parts; the essential and the accidental activities. The essential activities consist of worships (Ibadaat) and calling others to Ibadaat (Da'wah). On the flip side, the accidental activities cover the secondary portions such as political struggle, cultural exploration and social integration. According to Maulana Khan, the secondary part of Islam cannot replace the former and this was the very reason he believed that Jamaat-e-Islami and its founder Maulana Maududi had misinterpreted central meaning of Islam and called it interpretation error to associate Islam with only political struggle (Irfan Anis Omar, 2001, pp. 2-3). Thus he presented Islam as a totality. It is complete religion (al-Din al-Kamil) and code of life. This very concept can be presented in this diagram.



#### **His philosophy of Peace and Reconciliation:**

A very important distinctive aspect of Maulana Khan's ideological framework is his approach of reconciliation and conflict resolution in Islam. According to him, the golden age of Islam and expansion of Islamic civilization were largely the result of peaceful means by which Islam spread in the past. He ignored all the political motives behind the expansion of Muslim Empire. He was of the view that Islam was enforced in different communities of the world since there was a spiritual gap in the lives of these people. Therefore, many Muslim scholars in India and abroad accused him of ignoring historical facts. They believed that Maulana presented only a selective view of the past and he did not emphasize on the victories, conflicts and violence. Instead, he worked to highlight the peaceful advances and contributions of Islamic history. In this way, one of the objectives of Maulana Khan was to enhance interreligious harmony among the different communities of India and this theology of peaceful coexistence was promoted by him across the world (Irfan Anis Omar, 2001, pp. 3-5).

#### II. FINDINGS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS:

An overview of the basic approaches of revivalism especially presented by Dr. Fazlur Rahman and Maulana Wahiduddin Khan leads to the following findings;

- 1. Both addressed the modernity and its challenges without total ignoring the Quran and Sunnah. Some approaches can be accepted or rejected or criticized with arguments but they did their own effort (*ljtihad*) to provide new understanding regarding new situations and theories.
- 2. Dr. Fazlur Rahman emphasized more than Maulana Khan on the examination of historical and fundamental facts to solve new issues. On the other hand, Maulana's evaluation of history is selective and thus he tried to find ways for coexistence and peace in India. Therefore, he was rightly said 'Nationalist Maulana.'
- 3. Both agreed to adopt modern ideas with essential changes required to benefit local Muslim Communities. Dr. Fazlur Rahman presented the idea of controlled democracy in Pakistan. On the other hand, Maulana Khan supported secularism for Indian people. Therefore, it was justified to call her 'Nationalist Maulana'.

Demarcation of the discussion suggests that all the efforts on the name of revivalism, modernism and reformism by the Muslim intellectuals across the world must be discussed and then accepted, rejected or adopted with amendments through arguments. Although, some revivalist approaches addressed local circumstances keeping in view the ease of local Muslims but these perspectives help others to deduct ways and line of arguments for their own situation. Thus it would help to propose new solutions for all issues of modern era.

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