

Rahman, Fazlur. *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009.

Major Themes of the Quran by Fazlur Rahman addresses many of the key tenets of Islam as taught in the Quran, but not in the Hadiths, from the perspective of a Muslim apologist writing in the 1970s. Rahman (1919-1988) was trained at Oxford and became a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago.

Rahman begins his treatise by describing how the Quran views God. Though he disavows logical proofs of God's existence, stating that if you cannot find God, you will never prove Him, Rahman uses ontology to demonstrate why the reader should accept God.¹ Rahman's god is great, just and merciful but he does not love. He creates, preserves, guides and judges, but does not yearn for his people.

Rahman states that the Quran does not teach the mind-body dualism of Christianity or Hinduism, apparently not really understanding that while Christianity refers to body and spirit, each part is completely united in a whole person. Gnosticism, not Christianity, contains the "radical mind-body dualism" that he objects to.² Crucially the Quran rejects original sin, redemption and atonement, even voluntary, believing that each person is responsible for their own sins and thus denying the sacrifice of Christ.³ He disparages Sufism as pantheistic. According to Rahman, the Quran sees man not as weak and foolish (like a sheep) but as smart and strong, albeit unstable. He notes that the Quran also rejects intercession to God on others' behalf.

¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009), 68.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

³ *Ibid.*, 31.

The author's statement, that one of the main goals of the Quran is to make a viable social order on earth, is absolutely true,⁴ and therein lies a major problem for Islam struggling to cope with the modern world. It is not only a religion; it is a social order, based on equality and rights including life, religion, property, and human dignity.⁵ The state is charged with maintaining these rights. He states that political Islam, not religious Islam, was spread by the sword; a distinction with little difference. Rahman notes that in the Quran there is no salvation, merely success or failure in establishing the Islamic world order.⁶

According to the Quran as interpreted by Rahman, man is chosen by God for greatness based on his good works; not by unconditional election.⁷ Man's primary misunderstanding with regard to the universe is not recognizing the presence of God in the workings of nature, an opinion heartily affirmed throughout the Bible.⁸ Rahman takes the absence of another world religion after Islam as evidence for the veracity of Islam, a logical leap. He goes to lengths to prove that Islam is not simply borrowed Judaism, and paints a picture of the virtues of Mohammad sharply at odds with the historical evidence. Rahman calls him the most successful person in history at managing idealism and realism, evidence that he is writing a hagiography rather than an objective look at an important book. He mentions a "Holy Spirit" which inspired the Quran but struggles to identify what it is; clearly not God because that would be polytheism but also more than merely an angel.⁹

⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁹ Ibid., 96.

Rahman is at his best when describing history and culture. His statement that Meccans rejected Christianity and Judaism because they wanted to do better is insightful.¹⁰ While many stories from Hebrew Scriptures are in the Quran, though heavily amended, very little from Christianity is found there. Even here, though, Rahman justifies the violent acts of the Prophet, including war, assassination, and even massacre, by his desire to conquer Mecca as the pilgrimage site.¹¹

Overall, I found Rahman's book less interesting than Hodgson's or Ruthven's. It is worth a read because it is so influential. As reflected in this work, some Quranic principles could be taught in church without a whiff of heresy. However his understanding of Christianity is limited and his adoration of Muhammad is untempered by history. Rahman, a Pakistani living in the West, writes a sanitized version of Islam intended to please a modern secular audience. It is a valuable part of any English-language library on Islam, but caveat lector, let the reader beware.

¹⁰ Ibid., 134.

¹¹ Ibid., 146.