



## Hadith-Sunnah Distinction and Islamic Science Reconstruction: Fazlur Rahman's Innovative Approach

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**Abstract.** This research explains Fazlur Rahman's innovative approach to delineating the distinction between Hadith and Sunnah and its implications for the reconstruction of Islamic science. Rahman identified historical ambiguities in the usage of Hadith and Sunnah within Islamic scholarship, advocating for a clearer differentiation between textual records (Hadith) and the practical applications (Sunnah) of Prophet Muhammad's teachings. By employing qualitative analysis of primary texts authored by Rahman and supplemented by secondary literature, this study examines Rahman's nuanced perspectives on these concepts. It critically assesses Rahman's contributions, emphasizing his endeavor to harmonize traditional Islamic teachings with contemporary scientific paradigms. Rahman's scholarly approach not only enriches the understanding of Islamic sciences but also underscores the vital integration of Islamic principles with modern knowledge frameworks. His intellectual legacy stands as a crucial link between traditional Islamic scholarship and contemporary critical inquiry, advocating for a nuanced approach that addresses the multifaceted challenges confronting Muslim societies today.

**Keyword:** Fazlur Rahman; Islamic Science; Hadith; Sunnah.

**Abstrak.** Penelitian ini menjelaskan pendekatan inovatif Fazlur Rahman dalam menggambarkan perbedaan antara Hadis dan Sunnah serta implikasinya terhadap rekonstruksi ilmu pengetahuan Islam. Rahman mengidentifikasi ambiguitas historis dalam penggunaan Hadis dan Sunnah dalam kesarjanaan Islam, mengadvokasi pembedaan yang lebih jelas antara catatan tekstual (Hadis) dan aplikasi praktis (Sunnah) ajaran Nabi Muhammad. Dengan menggunakan analisis kualitatif terhadap teks-teks primer yang ditulis oleh Rahman dan dilengkapi dengan literatur sekunder, penelitian ini mengkaji perspektif Rahman yang bernuansa pada konsep-konsep ini. Studi ini secara kritis menilai kontribusi Rahman, menekankan upayanya untuk menyelaraskan ajaran-ajaran Islam tradisional dengan paradigma ilmiah kontemporer. Pendekatan ilmiah Rahman tidak hanya memperkaya pemahaman ilmu-ilmu keislaman, tetapi juga menggarisbawahi pentingnya integrasi prinsip-prinsip Islam dengan

*kerangka kerja pengetahuan modern. Warisan intelektualnya menjadi penghubung penting antara keserjanaan Islam tradisional dan penyelidikan kritis kontemporer, mengadvokasi pendekatan bernuansa yang membahas berbagai tantangan yang dihadapi masyarakat Muslim saat ini.*

**Kata kunci:** *Fazlur Rahman; Sains Islam; Hadis; Sunnah.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the Islamic tradition, the Hadith and Sunnah play a central role in shaping religious practice and Islamic law. Hadith refers to the record of the sayings, actions, and approbations of the Prophet Muhammad, while Sunnah includes the practices and teachings that can be drawn from his life (Anjani, 2023: 531). However, throughout Islamic history, there has been significant disagreement on how these two concepts are distinguished and how they should be applied in the development of Islamic science. In this context, the work of Fazlur Rahman, a leading Islamic thinker of the 20th century, stands out for its innovative approach to the distinction between Hadith and Sunnah.

Fazlur Rahman saw that the distinction between Hadith and Sunnah was not always clear in the Islamic scholarly tradition, and sometimes the two were used interchangeably (Rhamadanty & Fauzi, 2023: 138). However, he offers an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the two, describing the Hadith as the source of early Islamic literature containing moral and legal teachings, while the Sunnah describes the practice derived from those teachings in the daily life of the Prophet Muhammad (Nurlaila & Zulheldi, 2023: 47).

Previous research by Luthfiyah & Na'imah (2023) examined Fazlur Rahman's thoughts on the integration of Islamic Religious Education and science in the era of Society 5.0. It was found that Rahman emphasized the importance of overcoming the dichotomy between religion and science for a comprehensive understanding. This concept is relevant in the era of rapidly developing technology and science, helping to create a more inclusive and holistic education.

The research by Khatami and Dina (2024) examines Fazlur Rahman's thoughts on modernizing Islamic education and its relevance to contemporary Islamic education. Using a literature study, the research found that Rahman highlighted issues such as misalignment of educational goals, dichotomy in the education system, low quality of students, lack of qualified

educators, and limited books. Rahman emphasized the need for integrated and creative education to improve the quality of Islamic education.

Another research by Khotimah and Laisa (2024) examines Fazlur Rahman's thoughts on the modernisation of Islamic education, which combines classical Islamic science with modern science. Rahman suggests adopting modern secular education enriched by Islamic values, emphasizing the importance of demanding knowledge, eradicating educational dualism, updating methods, and including social sciences and philosophy in the Islamic education curriculum.

This research uses a qualitative method with a focus on library research, which relies on books by Fazlur Rahman as the main reference to understand the Hadith-Sunnah distinction and the reconstruction of Islamic science, as well as relevant secondary literature. Through content analysis, this research examines Fazlur Rahman's thoughts by collecting primary and secondary data, which is then selected, organized, and focused on important aspects through the data reduction stage. The final stage involves drawing conclusions based on in-depth analyses of the data that has been collected, resulting in accurate and informative conclusions about the Hadith-Sunnah distinction and the reconstruction of Islamic science.

This research adopts a qualitative method, specifically focusing on library research (Bloor & Wood, 2006: 58). The primary aim is to explore and analyze Fazlur Rahman's perspectives on the Hadith-Sunnah distinction and the reconstruction of Islamic science. The methodology involves an extensive review of Rahman's own writings as the primary source material, supplemented by relevant secondary literature that provides additional context and interpretation. Using content analysis, the research systematically gathers both primary and secondary data, which are then carefully curated through a process of data reduction. This involves selecting, organizing, and concentrating on the most pertinent aspects of Rahman's thought. The data reduction stage ensures that the focus remains on the critical elements that contribute to a deeper understanding of the subject matter. The final stage of the research entails drawing conclusions through an in-depth analysis of the curated data, adhering to the analytical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 10). This thorough and systematic approach ensures that the conclusions

drawn are both accurate and informative, providing a comprehensive understanding of Rahman's contributions to Islamic scholarship.

The history of hadith in Islam has had a dramatic journey, including falsifications and the view that the traditions in a particular book are fixed and do not need to be reinterpreted. This view inhibited *ijtihad* and fuelled the stagnation of Islamic thought. In this regard, Rahman came up with a different approach in formulating the concepts of *sunnah* and *hadith*, as a critique of conservative views and as a rebuttal to orientalists who regarded the Prophetic traditions as having no historical roots and being the creation of second and third century scholars (Kurdi et al., 2010: 331).

This research offers a fresh perspective on integrating Islamic religious education and modern science through Fazlur Rahman's unique insights. Unlike previous studies, it specifically focuses on Rahman's approach to reconstructing Islamic science, particularly through the lens of the Hadith-Sunnah distinction. While prior research highlighted Rahman's emphasis on overcoming the dichotomy between religion and science, this study delves deeper into his strategies for integration. By shedding light on Rahman's innovative methods, it provides practical insights for improving contemporary Islamic education, potentially influencing curriculum development and educational policies.

This research aims to explore Rahman's thoughts on the difference between Hadith and Sunnah and how the reconstruction of Islamic science according to Fazlur Rahman. By analyzing Fazlur Rahman's views, a deeper understanding of how the Islamic tradition can develop in a modern context and how the scientific paradigm can be revitalized to meet the demands of the times can be obtained. In addition, this research is also expected to make a meaningful contribution to modern understanding of the importance of integrating Islamic teachings with relevant and contemporary scientific paradigms.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Biography of Fazlur Rahman**

Fazlur Rahman, an Islamic intellectual, was born in British India in 1919. During his lifetime, Rahman served as the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor of Islamic Thought in the Department of

Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, since 1969. One of the highest honors he received was the Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal in Islamic Studies in 1983, in recognition of his contributions in the fields of religion, philosophy, and Islamic law. Rahman passed away on July 26, 1988, due to complications of heart surgery. He was 68 years old (F. Rahman, 2017: x, 2009: ii).

Rahman began his education at Punjab University in Lahore, where he obtained an M.A. in Arabic in 1942. After that, he worked as a researcher at the university for three years. Amid the precarious political situation leading up to the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, Rahman left British India in 1946 to continue his studies in the UK. In 1949, he earned a D.Phil from Oxford University for his dissertation on the 11th century physician and philosopher Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna.

Through his academic work, Rahman not only developed contemporary Islamic thought, but also contributed to the understanding of Islam in a modern context. His critique of traditional understandings of Islam and his attempts to present an Islam that is relevant to the times have made him recognised as one of the leading Islamic intellectuals of the 20th century. His works, including those on the sunnah and hadith, became a cornerstone for progressive Islamic thought. As such, Rahman's intellectual legacy remains relevant and makes an important contribution to contemporary Islamic studies.

Ahmad Syafii Maarif, a follower of Fazlur Rahman, reveals that Fazlur Rahman's image is often associated with controversy. This is something that is often mentioned when Rahman's name is mentioned or discussed. Many deplore his straight to the point approach in presenting his ideas. If he had been more flexible, especially towards the groups he criticized, he might not have had to be expelled from his country or endure the prolonged controversy that led to some of his works being banned from circulation in his own country. As a result, his thoughts only spread in very limited circles for a period of time (F. Rahman, 2003: 13).

Rahman is a thinker in various scientific studies, among the books he has written include: *Avicenna's Psychology* (1952), *Prophecy in Islam* (1958), *Ibn Sina, De Anima (Arabic Text)* (1959), *Islamic Methodology in History* (1965), *Islam* (1966), *Philosophy of Mulla Sadra Shirazi* (1975), *Major*

Themes of the Qur'an (1980), Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition (1982), Health and Medicine in Islamic Tradition (1987). In addition to book writings, Rahman also wrote many Islamic articles (F. Rahman, 1965: ii).

Fazlur Rahman grew up in a Hanafi family, one of the four main Sunni schools. Although educated in this tradition by his clerical father, Rahman began to explore thought outside the traditional confines of the school as a teenager (Sibawaihi, 2007: 18). This showed his inclination to think critically and embrace a broader understanding of Islam. His innovative and progressive approach to Islamic studies caught the attention of the academic and intellectual world.

### **The Hadith-Sunnah Distinction in Fazlur Rahman's Perspective**

Fazlur Rahman made an important contribution to the debate in Pakistan on the approach to sunnah and hadith. He highlighted the refutation of the views of Orientalists, such as Ignaz Goldziher, who claimed that not all hadith originated from the Prophet Muhammad or his companions. Goldziher saw the hadith as a chronicle of Islamic thought and character from the early generations (F. Rahman, 2010). He also states that the majority of traditions in hadith collections contain a high degree of uncertainty rather than firm belief. This is due to the process of documenting early Islamic history that took place during the period of Islamic expansion where traditions were often used for political and social purposes. This suggests that not all traditions can be accepted as absolute truth, and that the historical and social context must be considered in understanding them (Sibawaihi, 2007).

According to Rahman, Sunnah and hadith are not synonymous, what is in a hadith is not all sunnah, and what is sunnah is not all hadith (Ananda & Masruchin, 2021: 234). Sunnah comprises two key aspects: firstly, it includes the Prophet's behaviors as normative examples contextualized within historical and sociological frameworks, rather than rigid provisions. Secondly, it encompasses the practices of subsequent generations influenced by interpretations of the Prophet's companions, evolving over time to reflect the practical realities of Muslim societies (F. Rahman, 1965: 27). Rahman also underscores that disagreements in religious matters played a constructive role in the development of sunnah, helping to distinguish it from heresy. He

defines sunnah as encompassing the Prophet Muhammad's actions, words, approvals, or disapprovals witnessed by his companions, particularly the early caliphs, serving as behavioral models in daily life. Additionally, Rahman defines hadith as compilations summarizing the Prophet's sayings, actions, approvals, or disapprovals, transmitted through chains of narration consisting of the *matan* (text) and *isnad* (chain of transmission) (F. Rahman, 2010: 68).

The question of the validity of the use of traditions that are considered historical is questioned by Parwez and his group, arguing that they are not applicable to Muslims today because they are not standardized. They also argued that the Prophet Muhammad, in his statements and actions outside the Qur'an, could have made mistakes, and that such actions were only relevant for his historical context. This view has been resisted by traditionalists and has even led them to pronounce *takfir* on Parwez and his group. In response to this challenge, two articles published in the journal *Islamic Studies* in March and June 1962 writing on the veracity and relevance of the Prophet's sunnah were defended by Rahman, with a view to criticizing the views of Parwez and his group (Zakiyah et al., 2020: 24). This indicates the existence of varied debates among Muslims about the importance and authority of the Prophet's sunnah, as well as how it should be understood and applied by them.

Rahman explains that a hadith is an oral transmission from the Prophet or a narration and report of the oral tradition of the Prophet. This means that the hadith is a subset of the sunnah in the context of what is considered normative (Zakiyah et al., 2020: 25). Sunnah which is often associated with hadith, on the other hand, is more related to imitating the Prophet's direct actions or non-verbal transmission, be it silent or living practices. This means that the sunnah is a living tradition passed down from one generation to the next, although its essence may undergo natural changes over time, mainly derived from the actual practices of Muslims (Idris, 2012: 38).

Fazlur Rahman uses historical evidence to show that there is a living Sunnah, such as the practices of Muslims or Muslim leaders that can be observed in a historical context. An example mentioned was Imam Malik's efforts in collecting narratives to defend the Sunnah of the Muslims in Medina, where he placed great emphasis on traditions coming from multiple

narrators. Imam Malik also used the term "sunnah" to refer to practices that were regarded as normative in society, not just individual acts but also practices that were accepted by the Muslim community at large (Rhamadanty & Fauzi, 2023: 144).

In the context of hadith interpretation, Rahman argues that there are many parts of the hadith that need to be re-examined, as well as thoroughly reinterpreted in light of current social and moral conditions. This can be achieved through a historical study of the hadith, which transforms it into a living sunnah and evaluates its concrete values.

Through his theoretical framework, Rahman presents an important methodology for the development of Islamic scholarship. He encourages modern Muslims to improve their understanding of religion by thinking critically and paying attention to the Sunnah and Hadith (Mela & Davidra, 2022: 31). The resolution of this problem requires the role of Islamic legislative bodies, while Rahman's historical sociology approach makes a positive contribution to hadith studies, although it is not the sole determinant of its effectiveness.

In Fazlur Rahman's thought, the sunnah of Prophet Muhammad is more than just a set of rules that must be followed rigidly. Rahman emphasises that the sunnah should be understood as a concept of nurture or direction that provides inspiration and guidance for Muslims in their lives. This means that the sunnah does not only contain rigid rules, but also includes moral and ethical principles that guide Muslims in various life situations. With this approach, Rahman wants Muslims not only to follow the sunnah mechanically, but also to understand the deeper meaning behind these teachings. This difference in meaning was also a rebuttal to the allegations of orientalists such as Ignaz Goldziher who thought that hadith were the creation of second or third century scholars (Bullah, 2019: 84).

Furthermore, Rahman divides the sunnah into two aspects that are interrelated but must be distinguished. First, there is the normative sunnah or ideal sunnah, which refers to the behavior of the Prophet Muhammad that acquires normative properties (Rohman, 2020: 136). This sunnah should be viewed as an exemplary concept that provides moral and ethical guidance for Muslims. Secondly, there is the sunnah which refers to the tradition or behavior of the Prophet that continues silently or non-verbally. This also



applies to the behavior of generations after the Prophet, as long as that behavior conforms to the pattern of the Prophet's behaviour. Thus, Rahman emphasises the importance of understanding these two aspects of sunnah as a whole to gain a more complete understanding of Islamic teachings.

In addition, Rahman's idea of sunnah as an 'ideal' to be emulated also implies that the Prophet Muhammad's sunnah has evolved from generation to generation (Majid, 2020: 68). In other words, the sunnah is not static, but must be developed, interpreted and adapted according to changing social needs and contexts over time. This recognises the fact that moral, material and psychological situations in human life can vary, so Islamic teachings need to be adapted to the conditions of the times to remain relevant and beneficial to humanity as a whole.

### **Islamic Science Reconstruction**

Fazlur Rahman's thought about the reconstruction of Islamic sciences is an attempt to develop a systematic and contextual approach to the understanding and development of scientific disciplines in Islam. According to Rahman, the historical method and a deep understanding of the Qur'an and Sunnah are essential for creating intellectual and spiritual continuity in Islamic society (F. Rahman, 2005: 177). This aims to avoid distortions and narrow views that may arise from unsystematic reforms, as well as to ensure that the understanding of Islam is relevant to the needs and demands of the times.

Rahman emphasises that understanding the historical context of the Qur'an and Sunnah is an important aspect in formulating an understanding that is relevant and applicable in modern life. According to him, attempts to erase or ignore the intellectual and spiritual heritage that has been formed over centuries, as happened in Ataturk's radical reforms (F. Rahman, 2005: 174), is a dangerous step. Rahman considers that successful reform must integrate the understanding of the past with the needs of the present, not ignore it.

In this context, the understanding of the Qur'an and Sunnah cannot be separated from its historical context is also an unavoidable logical consequence (Hariyanti & Roqib, 2024: 3251). Rahman emphasises that the Qur'ān must be understood in its historical context in order for its teachings to be relevantly applied in modern life. The Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad,

as an integral part of historical Islam, provides practical guidance for understanding and applying the teachings of the Qur'an (Rohmansyah, 2019: 62; Z et al., 2023: 267). Rahman opposed approaches that saw the Qur'an as a text that could be interpreted without considering its historical and social context, because without a contextualized understanding, the teachings of the Qur'an could be misunderstood or applied inappropriately.

Rahman also calls for a critical and systematic study of the history of Islamic disciplines such as law, jurisprudence, theology, Sufism, philosophy, and science (F. Rahman, 2005: 182). According to him, many revolutionary ideas in Islamic history have been ignored or have had no significant impact on society due to the slow process of change and high conservatism. By critically examining these historical developments, Muslims can understand the evolution of thought and find ways to reconstruct these disciplines to make them more relevant to the needs of the times (Habibi, 2023: 162).

In Rahman's view, philosophy and science have an important role in the Islamic intellectual tradition. Muslim philosophers and scientists in the past saw their intellectual endeavors as part of their religious duties, as philosophy and science were considered an attempt to understand Allah's creation, which in turn deepened the understanding of the Creator (F. Rahman, 2005: 177). This view is supported by the Qur'an which encourages the study of the universe and science (Masang, 2020: 36). Therefore, according to Rahman, philosophical and scientific thought should be considered an integral part of Islamic intellectualism and should not be ignored.

Rahman also criticized the tendency among Muslims to retain the past without critical study, mainly because of the psychological complex that arises from Western intellectual dominance. He emphasized that a critical study of hadith could open the door to fresh new thought in Islam (F. Rahman, 2005: 183). By adopting a critical approach, Muslims can re-evaluate their intellectual heritage and find relevant principles to apply in a modern context.

Moreover, Rahman argues that the primary responsibility for the historical study and reconstruction of Islamic disciplines lies with Muslim scholars themselves (F. Rahman, 2005: 186). Although Western scholarship has made significant contributions, Muslims must take the initiative to

understand and develop their intellectual heritage (Pandi et al., 2023: 53). This is not only to maintain the intellectual integrity of Islam, but also to ensure that this reconstruction is in accordance with Islamic needs and values.

Rahman also highlighted that in the process of reconstructing Islamic sciences, it is important not only to adopt a methodical and critical approach, but also to draw inspiration from the existing intellectual heritage. He believes that many revolutionary ideas in Islamic history have been forgotten or neglected, which could be a source of inspiration to revitalise Islamic thought in the modern context (F. Rahman, 2005: 184). Thus, the reconstruction of Islamic sciences is not only about creating something new, but also about unearthing existing intellectual treasures and applying them in relevant and innovative ways.

In developing the reconstruction of Islamic sciences, Rahman emphasises the need to pay attention to a multidisciplinary approach. He recognises that the challenges and problems faced by modern Muslim societies are very complex and cannot be solved with a single approach. Therefore, in reconstructing Islamic sciences, cooperation between various disciplines, such as natural science, social science, philosophy, and theology, is needed to create a holistic and comprehensive understanding (Gade, 2020: 59).

Rahman's approach to the reconstruction of Islamic sciences also included an attempt to respond to the social, economic and political changes taking place in modern Muslim societies (Babullah et al., 2023: 75). He realised that science is not only about understanding the universe, but also about applying that knowledge to solve real-world problems. Therefore, the reconstruction of Islamic sciences must include an endeavour to develop innovative solutions to contemporary challenges faced by Muslim societies.

Furthermore, in the context of social sciences, Rahman highlights the importance of understanding and internalizing Islamic ethical values in scientific research and practice (F. Rahman, 2005: 189). For him, social sciences should not only be a tool to achieve practical goals, but should also be based on the moral principles provided by Islam. Therefore, in reconstructing Islamic social sciences, it is important to incorporate Islamic

moral values into the research methodology and interpretation of research results.

Furthermore, Rahman highlighted the importance of involving society in the process of reconstructing Islamic sciences. For him, science should not be seen as something separate from society, but should be an integral part of the daily lives of Muslims (F. Rahman, 2005: 191). Therefore, in reconstructing Islamic sciences, it is important to involve and educate society about the importance of science in achieving the progress and welfare of humanity.

Overall, Fazlur Rahman's thoughts on the reconstruction of Islamic sciences emphasise the importance of methodical, critical and multidisciplinary approaches, as well as the need to pay attention to Islamic ethical values and involve society in the process. Thus, the reconstruction of Islamic sciences aims not only to develop a new understanding of the universe, but also to create innovative solutions to contemporary challenges faced by Muslim societies.

## **CONCLUSION**

Fazlur Rahman's intellectual legacy stands as a pivotal bridge between traditional Islamic scholarship and modern critical inquiry. His profound contributions to the distinction between Hadith and Sunnah, alongside his innovative approaches to Islamic science reconstruction, have left an indelible mark on contemporary Islamic studies. Rahman's emphasis on contextual understanding and critical analysis of Islamic sources challenged orthodox interpretations, advocating instead for a nuanced approach that remains relevant in addressing the complexities of modern Muslim societies. By urging a re-evaluation of Islamic sciences through historical, methodological, and interdisciplinary lenses, Rahman sought not only to preserve intellectual integrity but also to inspire innovative solutions to contemporary challenges. Despite facing controversies and opposition, Rahman's pioneering work continues to shape discussions on the evolution of Islamic thought in the twenty-first century, cementing his stature as a seminal figure in Islamic intellectual history.

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