The Rational Psychology of Perfect Being Theology:
Towards a New Islamic Hermeneutics

Submitted by Babar Ahmed to the University of Exeter
as a dissertation for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Arab and Islamic Studies in October 2010

This dissertation is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright material
and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been identified
and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree
by this or any other University.

Signature: ..........................................................
Abstract

Some of the attributes of a perfect being (e.g. first cause, necessary being, intelligent creator) are established on the basis of theological arguments such as the cosmological and the teleological. At the deepest level, these theological arguments are based on principles of rational psychology such as simplicity and sufficient reason. Moreover, belief that the perfect being is the moral omnipotent God is an act of trust and thus based on the rational psychology of trust. Theists in the Abrahamic tradition subscribe to first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator theology and must therefore remain faithful to any psychological principles (simplicity, sufficient reason, trust) that are the rational grounds for believing in the existence of their God. But such faithfulness results in a deep tension within Judeo-Christian theism. For example, a Christian theist who believes in the Trinity must at the same time remain faithful to the principle of simplicity that rejects the Trinity. Because simplicity is the rational basis for the deeply cherished attributes of the Christian God (first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator), it is argued that faithfulness to psychological principles such as simplicity discipline Christian theistic belief, in particular the belief in the Trinity. Examples of this nature offer a framework for a similar disciplining of Islamic hermeneutics on the basis of rational psychology. Muslim interpreters tend not to systematically engage in the philosophy of religion, and for this reason do not explicitly articulate the psychological principles that gave them their theistic Muslim identity. As a result, they deviate from such principles when it comes time to interpret the original sources of Islam (Quran and Sunna). Consistency is one of the demands of rationality, and it is inconsistent to assume principles in arriving at a theistic Muslim identity and then subsequently fail to apply those principles consistently to the task of textual interpretation.
## Contents

**Acknowledgments** ................................................. 7

**Introduction** ...................................................... 9

**Chapter 1: Rational Psychology and Philosophical Hermeneutics**

1. A Cosmological Argument ........................................ 28

   *Principle of Sufficient Reason* ................................... 31

2. A Teleological Argument ........................................... 32

   *Some Half-Hearted Objections* .................................. 35

3. An Argument from Nothing ......................................... 37

4. Simplicity and Rational Psychology .............................. 39

5. Hermeneutics ....................................................... 43

   *Philosophical Hermeneutics* .................................... 44

6. Trust and the Literalist Imperative .............................. 55

7. Four Interpretive Strategies ...................................... 57

8. Textualism vs. Reason ............................................ 61

   *Textualist Literalism* ............................................. 63

   *Some Cases* ....................................................... 65

**Chapter 2: The Liberalism of Fazlur Rahman**

1. Rahman on Revelation ............................................. 74

2. The Order of Conceptual Priority ............................... 84

3. Functionality vs. Existence ...................................... 87

4. Rahman’s Ordering of Conceptual Priorities .................... 90

5. Morality vs. Symbol ............................................... 92

6. Reading God’s Mind ............................................... 95
## Chapter 3: The Humanism of AbdulKarim Soroush

1. Soroush on Revelation .......................................................... 117
2. Soroush on *Fiqh*: “Can we get a clean slate please?” .......... 126
3. Soroush on Democratic Religious Government ..................... 136
4. Rida, Buti, and the Liberal-Conservative Spectrum ............... 145

## Chapter 4: A New Hermeneutics of the Quran

1. A Literalist Reading .............................................................. 156
   - *All-Knowing Master and Quite the Author* ...................... 156
   - *Slaves to the Master* .................................................... 157
   - *Symbols of Submission* ................................................. 159
   - *The Work of Reason* ..................................................... 163
2. Literalism and the Scope for *Ijtihād* .................................. 165
   - *A Short History of Maqāsid* ......................................... 167
   - *Truth, Reason and Religion* ......................................... 171
   - *Truth Paradigm at Work: Some Cases* ........................... 173
   - *Literalism: Truth vs. Deen* .......................................... 176
3. The Liberal-Conservative Spectrum ..................................... 177

## Conclusion

Appendix 1: A Critique of Judeo-Christian Theism .................. 197
Appendix 2: Interpreting the Sunna ....................................... 269
Appendix 3: The Nature of God ............................................. 311
Appendix 4: The Physics of God ............................................ 355

Bibliography ............................................................................ 378