

# Western Perspective of Islamic Revivalist Movements: A Critical Analysis of John Obert Voll's Approach

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## Abstract

This study presents a critical evaluation of John Obert Voll's perspective on Islamic revivalist movements, highlighting his generally balanced and historically grounded approach. Voll, a prominent Western scholar of Islamic studies, is recognized for his impartial treatment of Islamic movements, diverging from the commonly prejudiced narrative among Western academics. His methodology emphasizes the historical continuity of Islamic resurgence, particularly through the traditions of *Tajdīd* (renewal) and *Islāh* (reform), tracing their roots back to prophetic teachings. Voll argues that revivalist movements are not novel phenomena but represent Islam's dynamic engagement with changing socio-political realities, especially since the 18th and 19th centuries. He adopts a three-dimensional analytical framework focusing on individual and group identification, global modern dynamics, and Islamic religious foundations. He classifies revivalist movements into four distinct styles of action: adaptationist, conservative, fundamentalist, and individualist. However, certain aspects of his analysis merit critical scrutiny. His categorization of the Kharijites alongside mainstream fundamentalist reformers like Ibn Taymiyyah and Ahmad Sirhindi is contested, as is his objection to the Muslim consensus declaring the Ahmadiyyah movement heretical. Additionally, his depiction of the Babi movement lacks context regarding its political ties and theological deviations. Despite these issues, Voll's work contributes positively to Western academic discourse on Islam by acknowledging the religious and historical legitimacy of revivalist movements. This study underscores the importance of contextual and source-based analysis when evaluating Western interpretations of Islamic resurgence, advocating for balanced scholarship that respects both historical evidence and theological sensitivities within the Muslim world.

**Keywords:** revivalism, Islamic movements, John Obert Voll, Islam and West, Islamic resurgence, Islam in the modern world

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## **Introduction**

In terms of John Obert Voll's narrative and his research about Islam and its related aspects, including revivalist movements, he is included in those Western writers who generally have a positive or unbiased approach. However, to critically analyze his approach towards Islamic revivalist movements, one must examine the pros and cons of his approach to reach a definitive conclusion. The following is the critical analysis of some essential aspects of his perspective.

### **Historical Perspective:**

There is a diverse academic discourse regarding the analysis of the renaissance of Islam, especially in the modern era. This discourse expanded during the postmodern era, particularly after the Iranian Revolution. Some Western writers examined the movements historically, while others examined them sociologically. Some have adopted a purely political approach, while others have defined it in religious terms. Some have examined through the lens of the crisis of modernity perspective. John O. Voll has generally examined these movements through the lens of history, as evident from his expertise in historical subjects. He thinks that Islamic revivalist movements, which started in the post-modern era, are not just the last breath of a dying religious tradition, but the entrance of Islam into a new phase or horizon.<sup>1</sup> He stated this fact by analyzing the links of post-modern Islamic revivalist movements with the past. He argues:

*"It is, of course, important to understand the particular conditions of individual groups and their specific experiences. In addition, it is of great importance to be aware of the broader Islamic historical context within which these movements operate. The historical heritage provides at least some of the symbols and concepts available for the Muslims in the contemporary resurgence."*<sup>2</sup>

Voll considers the historical background essential for retrieving the actual reasons behind the action plans of these movements. By his analysis, he concludes that considering these movements as a new phenomenon is entirely incorrect, as the Renaissance tradition in Islam is evident in past centuries preceding the modern era. He acknowledges the *Tajdīd* and *Islāh* tradition in Islam, which provides the religious context for the emergence of these movements.<sup>3</sup> This point of view is common among Muslim intellectuals also, which is rooted in the famous *hadith* of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him):

*"Allah will rise at the beginning of every century, such people in this Ummah as they will revive the Religion for it."*<sup>4</sup>

The interpretation of the *hadith* mentioned above is different among Muslim intellectuals. However, the main idea of the revival of Islam is common. So, this religious context of Islamic revivalist movements has been acknowledged by Voll.

However, when it comes to the political aspiration for the action plan of post-modern revivalist movements, Voll traces their historical background in the 18th and 19th centuries. Both of them are regarded as the foundations of

these movements. Still, the 18th century is considered more imminent in terms of inspiration and starting point of their background in the modern era. To provide a general scenario that shaped the movements later, he categorizes three main aspects of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These are:

1. Political and Economic Realignments
2. Reorientation of Sufi Tradition
3. Spirit of Socio-moral Reconstruction<sup>5</sup>

As evident from historical texts, the centers of power shifted in the 18th century in different regions of the Muslim World from a single main person, such as a king or leader, to multiple major politico-economic centers. At the same time, there was an active desire to reorient the Sufi tradition in actual Islamic terms or purify it from un-Islamic elements. Different revivalist movements emerged in this century to reconstruct the socio-moral rules and ideas in the Muslim World. In this century, the economic effects of Western imperialist aims were felt. However, direct Western invasion started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 19th century was a tough time for the Muslim world, both internally and externally. Internally, there were tasks of socio-moral reconstruction, while externally, the task was to hinder the Western invasion and its aftermath. So, in Voll's perspective, these are the general and essential aspects to keep in view if one has to analyze the foundations, strategy, and future of the movements. He also mentions other perspectives to explore, but the historical approach is dominant above all.

### **Three-Dimensional Approach:**

While analyzing Islamic Revivalism or what he calls Islamic activism, Voll also adopts a three-dimensional approach. That is, he takes the following essential aspects into account for the purpose:

1. Identification of important individuals and groups involved in Islamic resurgence, along with their local conditions.
2. The relationship of various movements to the fundamental dynamics of the modern world.
3. The Islamic dimension.<sup>6</sup>

The following three dimensions are essential for studying the Islamic Renaissance in detail. First of all, it is imperative to deal with the Islamic dimension that is the religious base of these movements because many Western writers ignore or deny this perspective and view these through a secular lens. They regard these movements as a reaction to the failure of modernism. However, Voll considers the religious aspect to be crucial in understanding the foundations of the movements. He also traces the relationship of various movements to the basic dynamics of the modern world. He analyzes these movements collectively to link them together in multiple aspects. Moreover, he analyzes them individually by differentiating their specific local conditions. While doing so, he identifies the crucial personalities related to them.<sup>7</sup>

## **Basic Styles of Action:**

To gain a deep insight into Voll's analysis of various Islamic revivalist movements, one must comprehend his classification of these movements. He classifies them according to his perception of their styles of action. These are:

### **1. Adaptationist Style of Action**

According to John Obert Voll, this style of action involves a representation of a strong will to adjust to the changing conditions of Muslims pragmatically through adaptation. He refers to the political realism of early caliphs and sultans in Islamic history. He also declares the intellectual traditions of those thinkers to be adaptationists who have adapted Greek philosophy to explain Islamic positions.<sup>8</sup>

Given Voll, the flexibility of popular *sufi* teachers and the general theme of the 19th century, especially in the central Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Tunisia, Iran, and Morocco, in which modernizing adaptation reforms were carried out by their governments, are examples of this style of action.

### **2. Conservative Style of Action**

This style of action is motivated by the adaptationist approach. The conservatives preserve the achievements gained before. They have played a role in keeping the compromises of the adaptationists within the bounds of what has become accepted as Islamic tradition.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the common perspective about this term 'conservative', John Obert Voll uses this term not for the representation of stagnation and narrow-mindedness but for the representation of a kind of preservation and careful adaptation. He is of the view that it is mistaken to identify radical Islamic revolution as a "conservative" force in the normal meaning of that term. In broader political discussions, conservatives are often perceived as seeking to preserve the fundamental structures of the existing social order.<sup>10</sup>

Voll classifies *Deoband School*, *Ahl al Hadith*, *Farangi Mahal*, *Nadwa tul Ulama* of the Sub-continent, and *Nahdatul Ulama* of Indonesia, *Muridiyyah* of Senegal as being conservative in style of action. Moreover, the Iranian Religious Establishment's support for the Constitutional Movement during the early 20th century has also been categorized in this manner.

### **3. Fundamentalist Style of Action**

A fundamentalist style of action emphasizes strict adherence to the fundamental principles of the faith. Voll writes:

*"The mission of Islamic fundamentalism is to keep adjustments to change within the range of those options that are clearly Islamic."*<sup>11</sup>

Fundamentalists critically analyze the existing conditions of society and the adaptations made in it according to the parameters of the fundamentals of Islam, that is, the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. Voll places the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, the *Wahhabiyah* Movement of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, and many others in this category, which falls under his definition.

### **4. Individualist Style of Action**

According to Voll, the fourth style emphasizes the more personal and

individual aspects of Islam. Despite the communal implications of the revelation, the individualistic style tends to subordinate legal structures and social institutions to the personal aspects of piety and leadership by charismatic, divinely guided individuals.<sup>12</sup> Voll places the *Shi'i* concept of *Imamate* in this category. He also declares the Islamic idea of belief in *the Mahdi and the Sufi tradition of personal piety as an individualist style of Islam*.<sup>13</sup>

### **Analysis of Voll's Approach**

As stated earlier, John Obert Voll is generally regarded as a moderate and unbiased Western writer on Islam. However, some objections and ambiguous points raised by his analysis require critical examination in light of the original sources and facts. Some of these are analyzed as follows.

#### **1. Declaring Kharijites (Khawarij) as Fundamentalists**

While quoting himself along with Muslim scholar, *Fazlur Rahman*, and a renowned western writer, R. Hrair Dekmejian, as proponents of the idea that modern Islamic fundamentalism has a continuous link with Islamic history as its foundation, he states:

*"Throughout Islamic history it is possible to see activist movements advocating a return to the pristine fundamentals of faith. From this perspective ... even early Islamic radicals like the Khariji sect represent premodern expressions of a fundamentalist style of Islamic affirmation."*<sup>14</sup>

There are several sayings of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) regarding the prediction of the emergence of such people who were later called Kharijites. Their signs and deeds are specified and condemned in various *ahadith*. *Abu Dharr* (may Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) as saying:

*"They would be the worst among the creation and the creatures."*<sup>15</sup>

So, in light of the *ahadith*, Muslim scholars agree on the point that Kharijites are deviated from the actual path of Islam. However, the disagreement is about whether they are disbelievers or not.

Like many others, John Obert Voll also thinks of fundamentalists as political activists. However, the point is that being a political activist alone doesn't combine two significantly different schools of thought into one category. Kharijites may have inspired those who are extremists in their vision about Islam and society. Still, they were never a source of inspiration for those who worked on the social and moral reconstruction of Muslim society. Instead, they have been condemned for their deviation and extremist approach. The case of *the Hanbali tradition, along with that of Ibn Taymiyah and Ahmad Sirhindi*, is different from that of the Kharijites. They all revived the true spirit of Islam in the *Muslim Ummah* of their era and inspired those who followed. Imam Ibn Hanbal was strict in his interpretation of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, and the same was true of *Ibn Taimiyyah*. But they were not deviated from the actual path of Islam. They purified the teachings of Islam in their era so that society could be saved from long-term chaos and instability. *Ahmed Sirhindi* also played a similar role in the subcontinent region. On the contrary,

if we look at the Kharijites, we find a history of political and social instability triggering chaos.

So, placing all the moderate and positive figures along with extremist, negative, and highly controversial figures in the same category raises many serious questions. The core of which is about the validity of the definition of 'fundamentalism' in the view of John Obert Voll and others who are also proponents of this idea.

## **2. Objection on Muslim Rejection of Ahmadiyyah Movement as being Heretical**

While explaining the fourth style of action (Individualist Style) of Islamic movements, he places the Ahmadiyyah movement of the Sub-continent in this category, which emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He writes in his famous book "Islam: Continuity and Change in Modern World" about the emergence, general beliefs, and history of this movement as:

*"In addition to adaptationsists, conservatives, and fundamentalists, the nineteenth-century Indian Islamic experience produced a major movement that can be seen as an assertion of the individualist emphasis on charismatic leadership. This was the Ahmadiyyah movement ...By the early twentieth century, the movement had become a separate religious community and had become active in missionary work outside of India."*<sup>16</sup>

Voll has been clear in stating the beliefs of the Ahmadiyyah movement founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian. Voll himself has said that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadiyani claimed to be a prophet because he represented himself as a recipient of God's revelation. He declared himself to be the promised Messiah, whom he identified as Imam Mahdi, in the end times. All these facts agree with the actual facts about the Ahmadiyyah movement.<sup>17</sup> But despite stating the above-mentioned beliefs of the founder of the movement and its followers, Voll objects that they are called heretical by other Muslims despite remaining within the bounds of Islam in many ways. To critically analyze this objection, one must comprehend some basic points and arguments of Muslims in this regard.

The most basic beliefs of Islam are to accept Allah as the sole creator and God while submitting to the fact that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the last prophet of Allah. Allah has stated in the Holy *Qur'an*:

*"Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the Messenger of Allah and the seal of the Prophets..."*<sup>18</sup>

So, whoever believes or claims to be God or a prophet after Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is a disbeliever. The same is the case with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadiyani, who not only claimed to be a prophet after Muhammad (peace be upon him) but also to be God.<sup>19</sup> His followers believe the same. So, all the above arguments and evidence are enough for Ahmadis to declare her a disbeliever, heretical, and apostate due to their denial of the final prophecy of Muhammad (peace be upon him). However, this declaration from the Muslim *Ummah* is not just due to this belief. They also hold many

other heretical beliefs.

*Mirza Ghulam Ahmad* claimed to be the Promised Messiah and Reviver (*Mujaddid*)<sup>20</sup> and to be descended from Hazrat Īsā, the recipient of revelation from Allah, and declared all non-*Ahmadiyyah* as disbelievers.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, *Mirza Ghulam Ahmad* has declared Qadian as the site for pilgrimage instead of Mecca and declared the abolishment of jihad.<sup>22</sup> He was a cat's paw of British imperialism, which wanted to keep Muslims of the Sub-continent away from resistance to their imperial and oppressive aims. So, the British Government trained and introduced *Mirza Ghulam Ahmad* to distort the actual teachings of Islam, the main target of which was to abolish jihad to weaken the storm of resistance movements against their unjustified rule.<sup>23</sup>

He has made incorrect interpretations of the Holy Qur'an and Ahadith to justify his false and heretical beliefs and actions.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, he claimed to be God.<sup>25</sup> There are many other false and heretical beliefs in addition to the beliefs mentioned above, which are followed by the whole *Ahmadiyyah* community.

### **3. Incomplete Facts about the Babi Movement of Iran**

Another movement characterized by Voll as having an individualist style of action is the Babi Movement of Iran, founded by *Ali Muhammad Shirazi*. *Ali Muhammad Shirazi* was inspired by the *Sheikhi* movement, which was an offshoot of the Shi'i Akhbari school of thought and emphasized the direct relation between charismatic leadership, whom Shi'a call the hidden Imam, i.e., Imam Mahdi, and the community. During his stay in Iraq, he became a student of a *Sheikhi* scholar, *Sayyid Kāzīm Rashtī*. *After his death, he claimed to be Rashtī's successor and the gate (bab) to the Twelfth Imam, the expected messiah of the Twelver Shi'is.*<sup>26</sup> Therefore, he is known as *Al-Bab*, and his movement is referred to as the *Babi* movement, which later evolved into a separate religion. *John Obert Voll* states:

*"In 1844, Ali Muhammad declared himself to be the Bab (Gateway) to the Truth and the initiator of a new prophetic age. The Bab soon clashed with the ulama because of his criticism of their practices. Then his followers began to revolt against the religious leadership as well as the state in Iran... the government suppressed the movement and executed the Bab and other leaders."*<sup>27</sup>

By reading Voll's narrative about *Ali Muhammad Shirazi* and the Babi Movement, it builds a perception in the reader's mind that after the prophetic claim, *Bab* clashed with the traditional Shi'ite *ulama* because *Bab* criticized their practices. Later, he revolted against the *ulama* establishment and the government along with his followers, but his movement met its fate with his execution along with that of his followers. The actual reason for the clash, revolt, and later suppression and execution remains incomplete, which alters the perception one may have about this movement. Firstly, it is essential to critically analyze the reasons and facts that Voll does not mention.

### **4. Ali Muhammad Shirazi's Actual Message and Its Context**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Qajar* rule in Iran faced the fear of Russian

imperialism. At that time, Russia was interested in invading Iran, for which it used many tactics. One of their primary goals was to train *Ali Muhammad Shirazi (Bab)* against Iranian scholars and eventually against the government. In early 1848, the *Bab* announced himself as the Hidden *Imam* and claimed to have initiated a new era in religion. This radical change was formalized at a meeting of *Babi* activists in July, when the laws of the *Qur'an* were declared null and void.<sup>28</sup> Denis MacEoin states in "The Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World" about *Bab's* claims and his message as:

*"... his own writings show a development through several stages, from that of claiming to be a gate to the Hidden Imam and an interpreter of the Qur'an, to that of being the imam in person, to a final stage in which he proclaimed himself the bearer of a new divine revelation."*<sup>29</sup>

The declaration of *Bab* to be the Hidden *Imam* and then the abrogation of Islamic Law (*Shariah*) infuriated the Shi'ite scholars and later on the government due to his being a Russian agent working in Iran for the destabilization of the country. The *Bab* organized an armed revolt against the state, which threatened the peace and stability of the state. So, the government took serious action against him and his followers to hold them accountable for their actions. The government arrested him and many of his followers and ordered their execution. After this, the *Bab* tried to seek help from his Russian and Roman allies. The Russian government, in particular, sent its ambassador to Iran to assess the situation in the country and the condition of *Bab* and his followers. The ambassadors of Russia, Rome, and many other states pressured the Iranian government to withdraw its decision to execute, but the Iranian government didn't accept their pressure.<sup>30</sup> At last, the *Bab* was executed in *Tabriz* on either July 8 or 9 in 1850.<sup>31</sup>

## **Conclusion**

John Obert Voll is one of the prominent Western writers who is well-educated in the subject of Islamic Movements. He is a strong proponent of the historical approach towards Islamic Revivalist Movements. He agrees with Muslim scholars that the actual historical foundations of these movements are rooted in Islamic scriptures, and this has been evident since the era of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him). However, he argues that the roots of movements in the second half of the 20th century also lie in the 18th and 19th centuries. These movements are exceptionally inspired by those of the 18th and 19th centuries. His analysis is based on a three-dimensional approach. He analyzes the movements according to their own specific context as well as their connection with each other in a broad pattern. He classifies all movements according to particular attributes in four styles of action. Those are fundamentalist, conservative, adaptationist, and individualist styles of action.

Contrary to most Western scholars, John Obert Voll's approach to Modern Islamic Revivalist Movements appears positive to a great extent. He even admits the prejudice and propaganda of Western writers against these

movements and tries to present an unbiased analysis of them. Many aspects of his analysis are similar to those of Muslim scholars. But there are certain aspects of his analysis which are not adequately addressed according to sources, therefore seem to be biased regarding them or being ambiguous, like his point of view about Kharijites, Ahmadiyyah, and *Babi* movements and their faiths.



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- <sup>21</sup> Qadiyani, *Rūḥānī Khazā'in*, 22: 168.
- <sup>22</sup> Qadiyani, *Rūḥānī Khazā'in*, 15: 155-156.
- <sup>23</sup> Abul Hassan Ali Nadvi, *Qādiyāniyat Muṭāla'ah o Jā'izah*, (Karachi: Majlis e Nashriyat e Islam, 1378 A.H.), p: 106.
- <sup>24</sup> For example, In Qur'anic verse: *وَدَاعِيَا إِلَى اللَّهِ بِأَذْنِهِ وَسِرَاجًا مُنِيرًا* (Sūrah Al-Aḥzāb: 46) Mirza Ghulam Ahmad has interpreted that this verse has been revealed for his glory instead

of that of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). There are numerous examples of his misinterpretations of Holy Scripture.

For Reference See: Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadiyani, *Ḥaqīqatul Wahī*, (Qadiyan: Magazine Publications, 1907), p: 75.

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