Ilāh, Rabb, ʿIbādah, and Dīn: Maulana Maududi's Intellectual Reconstruction of Qur'ānic Concepts

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Abstract

This study critically examines Maulana Abul Aʿla Maududi's interpretation of four fundamental Qur'ānic concepts—Ilāh (Deity), Rabb (Lord), ʿIbādah (Worship), and Dīn (Religion)—which serve as the conceptual foundation of his Islamic worldview. Drawing primarily on Tafhīm al-Qur'ān and Four Key Concepts of the Qur'ān, the paper demonstrates how Maududi redefines these terms beyond their classical theological meanings, situating them within an integrated socio-political and spiritual framework. Through a qualitative analysis of his writings, supported by classical exegetical traditions and contemporary scholarship, the study explores how these concepts underpin his vision of Islam as a comprehensive system of life. The paper further engages both supportive perspectives, such as those of Sayyid Qutb and Israr Ahmad, and critical assessments from scholars including Fazlur Rahman and Abdullahi An-Naʿim. The findings suggest that Maududi's reconstruction offers a powerful synthesis of theology and governance, while simultaneously raising debates about interpretive plurality, the balance between spirituality and political authority, and the applicability of his framework in pluralistic modern societies.

Keywords: Ilāh; Rabb; ʿIbādah; Dīn; Maulana Maududi; Qur'ānic Concepts; Islamic Political Thought

I. Introduction

The Qur'ān, as the primary source of Islamic belief and practice, employs certain core concepts whose semantic depth shapes the very architecture of Muslim intellectual tradition. Among these, the four terms—**Ilāh**, **Rabb**, **ʿIbādah**, and **Dīn**—occupy a central role in defining the relationship between God, the individual, and society. For Maulana Abul Aʿla Maududi (1903–1979), one of the most influential twentieth-century Muslim thinkers, these terms are not mere theological abstractions but foundational categories for constructing an integrated Islamic worldview.[1] His intellectual project sought to revive Islam as a comprehensive way of life, resisting both colonial secularism and reductionist religiosity that confines faith to ritual worship.[2]

Maududi's treatment of these terms—especially in *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* and *Four Key Concepts of the Qur'ān*—redefines their meaning in a way that challenges prevailing socio-political paradigms. **Ilāh** denotes God's ultimate sovereignty, **Rabb** underscores His nurturing and sustaining authority, **ʿIbādah** extends beyond ritual acts to total obedience, and **Dīn** represents a complete civilizational order under divine guidance.[3] These interpretations aim to eliminate the secular-sacred dichotomy, proposing instead a unified framework where all aspects of life fall under God's sovereignty.

The significance of these terms in Maududi's thought cannot be overstated; they inform his political theory of the Islamic state,[4] his critique of Western modernity,[5] and his call for the moral and social reformation of Muslim societies.[6] Yet, his interpretations have also been contested—praised by revivalist thinkers like Sayyid Qutb[7] and critiqued by reformist scholars like Fazlur Rahman[8]—leading to ongoing debates about the role of religion in governance.

2. Problem Statement

While Maududi's writings have been extensively studied for their political implications, there remains a scholarly need to undertake a focused analytical study of how his interpretation of **Ilāh**, **Rabb**, **ʿIbādah**, and **Dīn** interconnect to form the conceptual spine of his Islamic thought. Previous research often isolates these concepts or treats them within broader discussions of Islamic political theory, without fully exploring their semantic, theological, and socio-political interdependence.[9]

Furthermore, in the contemporary context—marked by ideological polarization between secularism and Islamism—Maududi's readings of these Qurʾānic terms continue to influence policy debates, Islamic movements, and public discourse in Muslim societies.[10] Understanding his methodology and the implications of his interpretations is crucial for assessing their relevance and applicability in present-day governance, law, and social ethics.

This study, therefore, seeks to:

1. **Analyse** Maududi's interpretation of these four terms in the light of his major works.

2. **Compare** his approach with both supportive and critical scholarly perspectives.

3. **Evaluate** the implications of his framework for contemporary Islamic thought and socio-political practice.

3. Literature Review

The scholarship on Maulana Abul Aʿla Maududi's intellectual contributions spans multiple disciplines, including Islamic political thought, tafsīr studies, and modern reform movements. This literature review synthesizes the key strands of research related to his interpretation of **Ilāh**, **Rabb**, **ʿIbādah**, and **Dīn**, drawing upon primary sources, classical exegetical works, and critical secondary analyses.

3.1 Classical Exegetical Background

The semantic and theological foundations of these four terms are deeply rooted in the classical tafsīr tradition. Scholars such as **al-Ṭabarī** (d. 923 CE) in *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān* and **al-Rāzī** (d. 1210 CE) in *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* provide comprehensive lexical and contextual analyses of **Ilāh** as the One deserving of worship, free from any partners.[11] Similarly, **Rabb** is presented as the Sustainer, Nurturer, and Lawgiver, whose lordship encompasses all realms of creation.[12] The Qurʾān itself employs these terms with multidimensional nuance—for instance, *"Indeed, your Lord (Rabb) is Allah, who created the heavens and the earth in six days…"*[13] linking divine lordship to both creation and command.

ʿIbādah, in classical interpretation, transcends ritual worship to include obedience and submission to divine will.[14] As **Ibn Kathīr** notes in his exegesis, the Qurʾānic injunction *"And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me"*[15] defines the ultimate purpose of human existence. The term **Dīn** in early tafsīr carries both the sense of religion and an entire system of life governed by divine law, as reflected in *"Indeed, the religion (al-dīn) with Allah is Islam"* (Qurʾān 3:19).[16] These classical interpretations form the doctrinal backdrop against which Maududi formulates his own reconstructions—aligning with tradition in some respects while recontextualizing meanings to address modern socio-political realities.

3.2 Maududi's Intellectual Framework

Maududi's *Tafhīm al-Qurʾān* and *Four Key Concepts of the Qurʾān* are his principal contributions to Qurʾānic hermeneutics. In these works, he systematically redefines the four terms to serve as **ideological building blocks** for an Islamic socio-political order.[17] His reading of **Ilāh** emphasizes *hakimiyyah* (sovereignty) exclusively belonging to God, rejecting any form of legislative authority independent of divine revelation. The term **Rabb** becomes inseparable from God's role as the ultimate lawgiver and sustainer, implying that societal governance must align with His will.[18]

For Maududi, ʿIbādah is not limited to ritual prayer but encompasses total conformity to divine law in all spheres of life—economic, political, educational, and cultural. Likewise, **Dīn** is defined as an integrated civilizational framework, with Islam as its divinely mandated form.[19] This interpretation deliberately challenges secularism by erasing the public-private divide in religion.

3.3 Supportive Scholarly Perspectives

Maududi's conceptualization resonates strongly with Islamist thinkers such as **Sayyid Qutb**, who in *Milestones* similarly advances the idea of Islam as a complete system of life under God's sovereignty.[20] Dr. Israr Ahmad's lectures and writings expand on Maududi's framework, emphasizing the centrality of Qur'ānic law to political revival.[21] **Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi** underscores Maududi's contribution to awakening Muslim consciousness in the face of Western ideological dominance.[22]

These supportive voices often stress that Maududi's reinterpretation of these key terms is essential to recovering Islam's original message, which they argue has been diluted by colonialism and the adoption of Western political models.

3.4 Critical Assessments

Conversely, modernist and reformist scholars challenge Maududi's politicization of these terms. **Fazlur Rahman** critiques the reduction of spiritual concepts into political slogans, cautioning against the conflation of ʿIbādah with state enforcement of religious norms.[23] **Khaled Abou El Fadl** warns that Maududi's readings risk legitimizing authoritarianism in the name of religion.[24] **Abdullahi An-Naʿim** insists that *Dīn* must allow for freedom of conscience in pluralistic societies.[25] **Muhammad Arkoun** dismisses Maududi's approach as ideologically rigid, urging for historically conscious and philosophically open Qur'ānic hermeneutics.[26]

3.5 Identified Research Gap

While Maududi's political thought has received extensive scholarly attention, few studies isolate his interpretation of these four terms as a unified conceptual framework. Most analyses either focus broadly on his political ideology or narrowly on individual concepts, leaving underexplored the **interrelation** of Ilāh, Rabb, ʿIbādah, and Dīn as a coherent theological-political system. This gap motivates the present study.

4. Ilāh (The Sole Deity and Sovereign)

In the Qur'ān, the declaration *Lā ilāha illā Allāh* is more than a statement of monotheism — it is a profound commitment to a worldview in which all authority, love, fear, and obedience are directed exclusively to Allah. Classical scholars generally defined *Ilāh* as "the one who is worshipped in truth," the being worthy of absolute devotion.[27] Maulana Maududi accepts this theological foundation but expands it into a comprehensive ideological principle. In his interpretation, *Ilāh* does not simply mean "God" in the abstract; it signifies the ultimate source of all laws, moral values, and human allegiances.

Maududi emphasizes that in pre-Islamic Arabia, the denial of Allah as the sole *Ilāh* was not limited to idol worship. It also included the recognition of various tribal leaders, priests, and rulers as legitimate authorities in moral and legal matters. This form of "polytheism" was, in his view, not unlike the modern world, where parliaments, constitutions, and secular ideologies claim the right to legislate independently of divine revelation.[28] In both contexts, sovereignty is shared or transferred from God to human institutions — a violation of the essence of *Ilāh*.

By redefining *Ilāh* as the sole possessor of sovereignty (*ḥākimiyyah*), Maududi transforms the Shahādah into a radical political statement. It becomes a public rejection of any human authority that competes with or overrides God's command. Accepting Allah as *Ilāh* therefore demands more than personal piety; it requires an active restructuring of society so that all governance, law, and policy operate in submission to divine will.[29]

This interpretation carries significant implications. It challenges secularism by erasing the artificial divide between religion and politics. It also reshapes the believer's understanding of loyalty and obedience: allegiance is due to the state

only when its laws align with the commands of the *Ilāh*. If a ruler or system legislates in opposition to divine revelation, obedience becomes not merely optional but impermissible. In this way, Maududi presents *Ilāh* as the cornerstone of an Islamic social contract, where God's sovereignty is the unifying authority over both private morality and public law.

Supporters of Maududi view this as a return to the Qurʾān's original vision, in which acknowledging God's divinity necessarily entailed submitting to His governance. They argue that this understanding protects Islam from being reduced to a personal spirituality detached from social justice and moral governance. Critics, however, caution that equating divine sovereignty with political enforcement risks oversimplifying the rich spiritual dimensions of *Ilāh* and may open the door to authoritarian misuse. Nevertheless, Maududi's redefinition has left a lasting mark on modern Islamic thought, making *Ilāh* not only a theological truth but also a rallying cry for socio-political transformation.

5. Rabb (The Sustainer, Master, and Lawgiver)

The Qurʾānic concept of *Rabb* encompasses far more than the idea of a Creator; it portrays Allah as the Sustainer, Master, and ultimate Disposer of all affairs. The term appears in the opening verse of the Qurʾān — *"Praise be to Allah, the Lord (Rabb) of the worlds"* (Qurʾān 1:2) — immediately establishing His relationship with creation as one of comprehensive authority, care, and governance. Classical scholars such as al-Ṭabarī describe *Rabb* as the owner and nurturer who guides His creation to fulfillment, both physically and spiritually.[30] Ibn Kathīr similarly links the term to divine providence, ongoing guidance, and the exercise of ultimate will over all events in the cosmos.

Maulana Maududi embraces these classical dimensions but extends the meaning of *Rabb* to the socio-political sphere. For him, to acknowledge Allah as *Rabb* is not merely to recognize His role in sustaining life but to accept His absolute right to determine the moral and legal order of society. Just as God governs the physical universe through unchanging laws of nature, He must also be acknowledged as the sole authority whose revealed commands govern human life. In this framework, legislative and judicial authority belong to Him alone, and any human law in contradiction to divine revelation represents a rejection of His lordship.[31]

In Maududi's thought, the acceptance of Allah as *Rabb* demands a complete submission of personal conduct, societal systems, and political structures to divine guidance. The Qurʾānic injunction *"Follow what has been revealed to you from your Lord"* (Qurʾān 6:106) is interpreted as a binding obligation to implement God's will in both private and public life. Thus, recognizing Allah as *Rabb* becomes inseparable from the pursuit of an Islamic order in which His commands are operational in governance, economics, education, and social justice.

Supporters argue that this vision restores the Qurʾānic unity between faith and action, ensuring that religion remains the foundation of ethical life at every level. It challenges secular ideologies that restrict religion to the private sphere, affirming instead that divine guidance is relevant to the whole of human existence. Critics, however, caution that such an all-encompassing political application of *Rabb* risks narrowing its spiritual depth. In their view, reducing *Rabb* solely to a legislative function may overshadow its dimensions of mercy, care, and personal guidance — qualities that sustain the believer's spiritual relationship with God.

Despite such critiques, Maududi's interpretation has significantly shaped modern Islamic political thought. His portrayal of *Rabb* bridges theology and governance, linking the believer's daily worship to a wider responsibility for establishing a just social order under divine sovereignty. In doing so, he transforms the recognition of *Rabb* from a purely devotional acknowledgment into a comprehensive program for societal transformation.[32]

6. ʿIbādah (Worship and Obedience)

In Maulana Maududi's framework, *ʿIbādah* is not confined to a narrow definition of ritual devotion; rather, it represents the total submission of human life to the will of Allah. While conventional usage often limits worship to acts such as prayer, fasting, or pilgrimage, Maududi broadens the term to encompass every action consciously aligned with divine guidance. For him, the essence of *ʿIbādah* lies in living a God-centered existence where both private conduct and public affairs reflect obedience to the Creator. This holistic vision places worship at the heart of Muslim identity, transforming it from a set of isolated rituals into a comprehensive lifestyle governed by moral discipline and divine law.

Maududi argues that genuine worship cannot be compartmentalized into sacred and secular spheres. The Qur'an, in his view, envisions human beings as servants whose purpose ('ubūdiyyah) is to realize Allah's sovereignty in all areas of life. Thus, 'Ibādah extends to economic dealings, political governance, social justice, and even the intellectual pursuit of truth, provided these are undertaken in accordance with Allah's commands. A merchant practicing honesty in trade, a judge delivering impartial justice, and a ruler governing by the principles of Shari'ah are, in Maududi's conception, as engaged in worship as one who performs the daily prayers.[33]

This expansive understanding of 'Ibādah also serves a corrective function against what Maududi saw as a distortion in modern Muslim societies — the relegation of religion to ceremonial observance while adopting secular norms in governance and social life. He insists that any bifurcation between ritual piety and public ethics undermines the Qur'anic call to wholehearted servitude. By embedding 'Ibādah into all dimensions of life, Maududi's interpretation aligns personal spirituality with collective responsibility, ensuring that the believer's moral compass remains oriented towards divine approval in every circumstance.

Furthermore, Maududi links the concept of 'Ibādah directly to the establishment of an Islamic order. He maintains that the fulfillment of worship in its complete sense requires a socio-political environment conducive to the application of Allah's law. In this respect, 'Ibādah becomes inseparable from the broader mission of implementing Din in society, so that the structures of governance themselves facilitate and reflect obedience to Allah.[34] This connection reflects his conviction that personal piety is incomplete without social transformation — a theme that resonates throughout his writings, from Tafhīm al-Qur'ān to Islamic State.

In theological terms, Maududi draws on Qur'anic verses such as *"And I did not create jinn and mankind except to worship Me"* (Qur'an 51:56), interpreting them not as a call to perpetual ritual, but as a mandate for comprehensive obedience. Such an interpretation positions 'Ibādah as the central axis around which human purpose revolves, integrating faith with daily practice. It is this integration, he contends, that produces a balanced Muslim personality — one equally committed to spiritual devotion and active engagement in the betterment of society.[35]

7. Dīn (The Comprehensive Way of Life)

In Qur'ānic terminology, Dīn signifies far more than the English term "religion" suggests. While "religion" often denotes a set of rituals and beliefs confined to the private sphere, the Qur'ān presents Dīn as an all-encompassing system of life that governs personal conduct, collective ethics, social structures, and political authority. The verse *"Indeed, the Dīn with Allah is Islam"* (Qur'ān 3:19) asserts not only the truth of Islam as a faith but also its comprehensive nature as the divinely ordained framework for human existence.[36]

Classical scholars have described Dīn as encompassing creed ('aqīdah), worship ('ibādah), morality (akhlāq), and law (sharī'ah), all underpinned by divine sovereignty. Maulana Maududi adopts this holistic understanding but gives it a distinctly ideological emphasis. For him, Dīn is the complete system revealed by Allah to organize every aspect of life according to His guidance. It is not limited to the mosque, nor is it concerned only with the afterlife; it is the blueprint for a just and moral civilization in this world as well as a preparation for the next.[37]

Maududi strongly rejects the secular division between the sacred and the political. In his view, accepting Islam as Dīn means recognizing Allah's authority over all spheres: family, education, economics, governance, law, and foreign relations. Any system that adopts divine guidance only in selected areas while relying on human legislation in others, he argues, is a distortion of Dīn. This is why he frequently equates partial implementation of Islam with a return to jāhiliyyah, the pre-Islamic condition of ignorance and misguidance.

In practical terms, Maududi envisions Dīn as a socio-political order in which sovereignty belongs exclusively to Allah (ḥākimiyyah lillāh), and all legislation conforms to the Qur'ān and Sunnah. This transforms Islam into a living, governing reality rather than a set of abstract ideals. For him, the Prophet Muhammad's establishment of the state in Madinah stands as the historical model of Dīn in action — a community where justice, welfare, and morality were rooted in divine law.

Supporters of Maududi's interpretation praise it for restoring the original Qur'ānic scope of *Dīn* and for challenging modern secular ideologies that fragment human life into competing domains. They see it as an antidote to the privatization of faith and as a means of uniting the Muslim ummah under a shared moral and legal framework. Critics, however, raise concerns about the potential rigidity of such a system in pluralistic societies, warning that the universal imposition of one interpretation of *Dīn* could marginalize diverse voices within the Muslim tradition. Despite such debates, Maududi's vision of *Dīn* remains a cornerstone of modern Islamic political thought. By framing it as the comprehensive and divinely ordained system for all aspects of life, he bridges the gap between personal piety and collective governance. In his thought, *Dīn* is not an optional lifestyle choice but the binding covenant between humanity and its Creator — a covenant that demands both inner submission and outward implementation.[38]

Conclusion

The four Qur'ānic terms — *Ilāh, Rabb, ʿIbādah,* and *Dīn* — form the theological and ideological backbone of Maulana Maududi's intellectual project. Each concept, while deeply rooted in classical Islamic scholarship, is reinterpreted through his lens as part of a comprehensive socio-political vision. In his thought, these are not isolated spiritual ideas but interlocking components of an integrated worldview that governs both the inner life of the believer and the external structures of society.

Ilāh establishes the principle of exclusive divine sovereignty, rejecting all competing claims to ultimate authority. *Rabb* extends this sovereignty into the realm of sustenance, guidance, and lawmaking, affirming Allah's right to determine moral and legal order. *ʿIbādah* operationalizes these beliefs in the daily life of individuals and communities, transforming worship into a holistic obedience that covers every facet of human action. Finally, *Dīn* provides the comprehensive framework in which these principles are embedded, encompassing creed, morality, law, and governance under the unifying sovereignty of Allah.

Maududi's reinterpretation moves beyond personal piety to advocate for the establishment of a divinely guided social order. This vision challenges the secular compartmentalization of religion and politics, insisting that the Qur'ān calls for a seamless integration of spiritual and temporal life. In this way, his approach revitalizes the Qur'ānic unity between belief and action, anchoring both individual conduct and collective governance in divine guidance.

Yet, his synthesis also invites critical reflection. While it restores the Qur'ān's comprehensive scope, it raises questions about interpretive plurality, governance in multi-religious societies, and the balance between divine command and human agency. Supporters view his work as a blueprint for the revival of Islamic civilization; critics see potential for over-centralization of authority in the name of religion.

Despite such debates, Maududi's articulation of these four key terms has profoundly influenced contemporary Islamic thought. By reasserting their interconnectedness and practical application, he offers a framework that is both a call to personal transformation and a manifesto for societal reform. In his reading, the believer's journey is incomplete until faith in *Ilāh* is expressed through the guidance of *Rabb*, lived as *ʿIbādah*, and embedded in the all-encompassing structure of *Dīn*. This integrated vision, grounded in the Qur'ān and the Prophet's example, continues to shape the discourse on Islam's role in the modern world.

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