

# A THEOLOGY OF MORAL PROGRESS

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It is not easy being a Muslim in the West today. The year 2014, which roughly corresponds to 1436 in the Islamic calendar, will go down as an especially difficult time. Two sets of political developments have contributed to this state of affairs: the rise and expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the crushing of the Arab Spring revolutions.

The rise of ISIS has unleashed a tidal wave of Islamophobia not seen since 11 September 2001. The seizure of large parts of Iraq and Syria by this notorious militant movement, replete with the beheadings of foreign hostages, the enslavement and rape of women from minority communities, the mass execution of prisoners – all in the name of Islam, and with the apparent approbation of tens of thousands of Muslims who have flocked to the Middle East to help build a new Caliphate – has reinforced the worst Western stereotypes and prejudices about Islam and Muslims. The anti-Muslims floodgates have burst open. This time, however, the intellectual attacks are not only coming from the traditional centres of Islamophobia on the political right, but anti-Muslim bigotry has gone mainstream and is now being parroted by prominent voices on the liberal left. The one event that best captures this phenomenon was the recent debate between the comedian Bill Maher and the actor Ben Affleck.

Bill Maher has a long history of Muslim bigotry. On a previous episode of his widely watched show, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, he expressed alarm that the most popular name for babies in Britain was Muhammad. ‘Am I a racist to feel alarmed by that?’ Maher asked. ‘Because I am [alarmed]. And it’s not because of the race, it’s because of the religion. I don’t have to apologise, do I, for not wanting the Western world to be taken over by Islam in 300 years?’

His more recent outburst came in the context of the ISIS crisis, and was justified in the name of liberal values. With his usual arrogance and self-righteousness, Maher insinuated that ISIS was a reflection of Islam's essential nature, and that liberals should not be afraid of both affirming this and publicly condemning it. Islam is 'the only religion,' he claimed, 'that acts like the mafia, that will fucking kill you if you say the wrong thing, draw the wrong picture or write the wrong book.' When Ben Affleck pushed back against this characterisation, an intense debate ensued. The episode soon went viral and it has subsequently been viewed by more than two million people on YouTube. The clip has spawned a much larger debate on the relationship between Islam, liberalism, violence and Islamophobia.

Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shariah in the Modern Age*, Roman and Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, 2014.

The following day, CNN interviewed the prominent author and public intellectual Reza Aslan on the same subject. Another tense debate and terse exchange ensued. The two CNN hosts, Don Lemon and Alisyn Camerota, grew visibly frustrated and cantankerous when Aslan challenged their simplistic over-generalisations about the status of women in the Muslim world, with a set of nuanced arguments and empirical facts. The next day, the same CNN hosts invited the liberal television journalist and fellow CNN news host, Chris Cuomo, to comment on the debate. Cuomo took it a step further. He argued that Aslan had behaved like a typical Muslim militant, thus confirming and perpetuating the fears that many Americans had of Islam. Aslan's 'tone was very angry,' Cuomo claimed, 'so he wound up ... demonstrating what people are fearful about when they think of the faith in the first place, which is the hostility of it.' Then prominent left-liberal filmmaker, Michael Moore, leapt to Bill Maher's defence. There was no reaction from liberal intellectuals to Moore's strident defence of Maher's bigotry. Nor did Moore suffer any negative publicity, another reflection of the spread and mainstreaming of Islamophobia in the United States.

The second development that has contributed to a general sense of despair and frustration about the future of Muslim societies has been the defeat of the Arab Spring. Four years ago, beginning in Tunisia and spreading

eastwards, a series of democratic revolts toppled three of the longest serving dictators in the Islamic world, and came close to overthrowing two more. These largely nonviolent protests shook the foundations of political authoritarianism throughout North Africa and the Middle East, while inspiring democratic forces to action around the world. There was widespread optimism at this time that the tide had finally turned, and a new democratic future had opened up for the Arab world. But this was not to be. The rollback and crushing of these democratic openings, most notably represented by the military coup in Egypt in July 2013, and the ongoing near genocidal onslaught of Bashar Asad against his own people, has been emotionally debilitating, and it has produced a deep sense of despondency amongst Muslim democrats. The old authoritarian and despotic order is back with a vengeance, buttressed by billions of dollars of Saudi and Emirati money, with the apparent approbation of the West, particularly the Obama Administration. John Kerry infamously described the military coup in Egypt as a case of ‘restoring democracy,’ while President Obama has steadfastly refused to support the Syrian revolutionaries – sarin gas, state-sanctioned war crimes and crimes against humanity notwithstanding – because he did not want to get entangled in somebody else’s war of ‘ancient sectarian differences’. To this picture one can add the ongoing colonisation of the West Bank, the recent Israeli attack on Gaza that killed over 2,000 Palestinians (including 500 children), the chaos in Libya, frequent bombings and massacres of civilians by Boko Haram and the Taliban, and the steady rollback of democracy in Turkey, once an inspiration and a model for its blend of religion and democracy, under the careful tutelage of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Tunisia stands alone as a bright democratic light in a sea of authoritarian darkness.

Given this wretched political context that characterises the contemporary Islamic world, and the accompanying deep sense of despair that hangs like a fog over Muslim societies today, the publication of Khaled Abou El Fadl’s *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shariah in the Modern Age*, could not be more timely. Part memoir, part scholarly analysis, and part message to the bewildered, this book is precisely what is needed during these dark times to educate a non-Muslim audience on Islam’s ethical potential, and to reinvigorate and inspire beleaguered Muslim intellectuals and activists who have been demoralised by recent events.

Khaled Abou El Fadl is the Omar and Azmeralda Alfi Distinguished Professor in Islamic Law at the UCLA School of Law, where he teaches International Human Rights and other subjects. He has served on the Board of Directors of Human Rights Watch, the US Commission for International Freedom and has won numerous awards, including The University of Oslo's Human Rights Award – Lisl and Leo Eitinger Prize. He is perhaps best known for *The Search for Beauty in Islam: A Conference of the Books* (2005), *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (2007) and other books. *Reasoning with God*, which took ten years to write, is his eighth and most important book.

What gives Abou El Fadl's such a powerful and persuasive pen is his intimate knowledge of and affection for two intellectual and civilisational traditions: the Western and the Islamic. His Ivy League education and his formal training in Islamic jurisprudence in Egypt and Kuwait allows him to probe, critique and analyse both traditions at a profound level while making insightful cross-comparisons. He has thought long and hard about the challenges facing Muslim societies today, with a particular focus on how to reconcile tradition with modernity. While he has been invariably described as a shaykh, a law professor, a human rights scholar and a public intellectual, the label that best fits him is that of a Muslim ethicist, and this book could easily have been subtitled: a treatise on Islamic ethics.

He begins by noting that this has been a 'painfully personal book' to write. The social and political conditions that have led to the decline of Islamic civilisation and to the rise of Islamophobia are the source of his pain, but the problem is much deeper than this. With his characteristic intellectual honesty, a theme that permeates this book, he identifies a fundamental tension that adds to the intensity of his personal agony. On the one hand, he finds 'the Islamic faith to be a source of boundless wisdom and tranquility,' while also noting that 'it is difficult to deny that this same faith has become a source of anxiety and apprehension for many in the world today.' It is precisely this paradox that shapes this book, and it is one he seeks to reconcile.

Abou El Fadl focuses on God's covenant with Muslims: have Muslims upheld their end of the bargain? This is the leitmotif of the book. 'Per this covenant,' he writes, 'the role of Muslims in relation to the rest of the world is to bear witness on God's behalf, to call for the good and just, to resist

what is evil and unjust.' By this reading, Muslims are obligated to pursue justice, and to embody the divine attributes of compassion and mercy, themes that are repeated in the Qur'an, the daily prayers and throughout Islamic jurisprudential theory. In this context, he asks his fellow Muslims to ponder the following question: how does your understanding of Islam 'contribute to goodness in the world?' Muslims must reflect upon this question and strive to answer it. If Muslims truly believe that Islam carries a universal message for humanity that is not limited by race, tribe or nation, 'the response given to the question of the moral quality of the contribution [to our world] must have some reasonable basis in fact to withstand scrutiny.'

*Reasoning with God* is divided into three parts. Part one, 'The Islamic Dream and the Chaos of the Modern Condition,' is largely descriptive in terms of laying out the myriad of problems that are tearing apart the moral fabric of contemporary Muslim societies. Part two, 'The Culture of Ugliness and the Plight of Modern Islam' focuses on examining the historical, political and ideological roots of the problems that are laid out in the first part of the book. Arguably, the most important chapter in this section is a play on words from Bernard Lewis' controversial post-9/11 bestseller: 'What Really Went Wrong.' Part three shares the subtitle of the book: 'Reclaiming the Shariah in the Modern Age.' It looks for solutions and explores possible avenues for developing an ethical and humanistic Islamic interpretation that is rooted in the Shariah, and is compatible with the demands of the modern age.

Abou El Fad begins the diagnosis of the crisis facing Muslim societies today with a gripping description of what he calls the 'Islamic nightmare.' We have reached a point in Islamic history, he observes, where 'criminal sociopaths pretend to be the guardians and ministers of the Islamic faith; one in which extremists assume the role of the spokesmen for the religion of moderation; one in which unspeakable acts of shameless ugliness are perpetuated on God's behalf and in His name; one in which the religion of compassion and mercy has become associated in people's minds with cruelty and oppression; and one in which many Muslims no longer recall the ethical norms that ought to guide their relationship to God and humanity.' He continues. 'Even more, it is a living nightmare in which apologetics passes for rigorous thought, in which the gift of intellect and human reason is declared to be the gateway to the Devil, in which the very idea of beauty and representations

of beauty, such as music, are condemned as frivolous and corrupting, and perhaps most important of all... we have reached the point that in parts of the Muslim world, the more profound a person's ignorance about Islamic theology and law, the more expansive his bombastic demagoguery, and even the more "Islamically authentic" his wardrobe and outward appearance, the better the chances are that he will be recognised as a great leader and expert in Islam.' While this may sound polemical, it does not undercut Abou El Fadl's argument; it merely reflects the deep frustration the author feels with the state of the Islamic world today.

Personal anecdotes from within Muslim communities in the United States reinforce his argument that something has gone deeply wrong. Perhaps best among these is the story of an Islamic camp. One summer Abou El Fadl was asked to teach Islamic law at a summer youth retreat in California. While dinner was being prepared, someone suggested that soft Hawaiian music be played to pass the time. Unsure if this was Islamically permitted, Khaled's counsel was sought as the resident Islamic law expert. He replied that 'playing Hawaiian music might only be a sin because it is utterly boring, but other than that there [is] no problem with serving dinner to the elevator melodies of this music.' He thought nothing more of it until late in the evening when he was summoned to the mess hall. The camp elders were gathered with looks of consternation on their faces. They had been meeting for two hours to discuss this grave breach of Islamic norms. Abou El Fadl was informed that all forms of music were strictly forbidden in Islam, and he was asked to apologise for his transgression. If he refused he would have to leave the camp immediately.

Anyone who has spent time in a Muslim community in North America in past three decades can immediately relate to this story; variations of it are abundant and they highlight the rise of a toxic new interpretation of Islam that masquerades as authentic Islam. Abou El Fadl describes this development as the emergence of a 'culture of ugliness in modern Islam' that eschews notions of beauty and 'continues to be the single most important obstacle to articulating reasonable narratives of legitimate possibilities of Islam's contribution to human goodness'. The new 'Puritanical-Salafism', as he describes it, is a recent phenomenon in Muslim societies and it is directly related to the convergence of two corrosive developments: the legacy of colonialism and the spread of Wahhabism.

Both the colonial and postcolonial Muslim condition has left a detrimental legacy that Muslims are still struggling to overcome. Ideologically, Abou El Fadl argues, Muslims have become obsessed with trying to remedy a collective sense of powerlessness and political defeat by 'engaging in highly symbolic sensationalistic acts of power symbolism'. This has produced a 'doctrinal dynamic ... of the theology of power in modern Islam'. The net result of this development is that 'the normative imperatives and intellectual subtleties of the Islamic moral tradition have not been treated with the analytical and critical rigor that the Islamic tradition rightly deserves but are rendered subservient to political expedience and symbolic displays of power.' Defining a religious identity against the West becomes the primary goal. 'Instead of Islam being a moral vision given to humanity', Abou El Fadl observes, 'it becomes constructed into a nationalistic cause that is often the antithesis of the West'. Muslims who work within this moral and intellectual paradigm are more anti-Western than they are pro-Islamic, he contends.

Abou El Fadl weaves a brilliant narrative that links these corrosive colonial and postcolonial effects to the emergence of an intellectual tradition of apologetics. He describes how this created a fertile ground for the spread of Wahhabi puritanism. The sequencing of these transformations and how they feed and reinforce each other are convincingly argued by the author. He observes that the challenges of modernity were met with 'pietistic fictions' about the completeness and perfection of Islam, as traditionally understood. There is nothing to be learned sociologically, philosophically and politically from the West, perhaps technologically there might be some useful borrowing, but that is all. This practice of Muslim apologetics 'proved to be like an addictive drug – it induced a pleasant state of oblivion alongside an artificial self-confidence, but the problems remained unchanged'. With time they became worse. The main effects are ideologically destructive. All of this has contributed to a 'sense of intellectual self-sufficiency that often descended into moral arrogance', Abou El Fadl observes. 'To the extent that apologetics were habit-forming, [they] produced a culture that eschewed self-critical and introspective insight, and embraced the projection of blame and a fantasy-like level of confidence and arrogance. Effectively, apologists got into the habit of paying homage to the presumed superiority of the Islamic tradition, but marginalised the Islamic

intellectual heritage in everyday life'. This set the stage for the rise and spread within the Sunni Muslim world of puritanical Wahhabism.

While Abou El Fadl has written critically about Wahhabism in his previous works, in this book he draws upon original research with scholarly rigor and precision, to examine the roots and expansion of Wahhabi and Salafi intellectual currents. He convincingly argues that the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, buttressed by Saudi petro dollars and a longstanding alliance with the United States and Europe, has contributed to the deep moral failures of Muslim societies, thus undermining the ethical potential of Islam's humanistic tradition. For anyone interested in the question of what went wrong with Muslim societies and how things could be set right again, these chapters are essential reading. And it is to this theme that the last part of the book is devoted.

It is not an exaggeration to say that given the extreme acts of ugliness that have taken place recently around the world, and which are justified in the name of Shariah, the word Shariah has become radioactive. Islamic law is widely viewed in the West as being as opprobrious as the dictates of Nazi law. It cannot be redeemed or reformed, and should not be promulgated anywhere. Abou El Fadl takes the exact view opposite view.

For Abou El Fadl, Shariah is not the problem, rather it stands as a major part of the solution. These final chapters of the book will be the most difficult for non-Muslims to absorb, given the current notoriety of Shariah. Abou El Fadl acknowledges this image problem, which is why he begins his book with an introduction to Shariah, and stringently clarifies the terms and concepts related to the Islamic legal tradition. The decline and corruption of Shariah, and how the tradition might be reconstituted to provide ethical and moral guidance for the rebirth of Islamic civilisation is carefully explained with a depth and nuance. Abou El Fadl's argues that the Shariah should receive the same consideration, treatment and respect as other legal traditions. It must certainly pain him deeply to see this tradition misunderstood, misapplied, abused and vilified by a whole host of groups from Orientalists and Islamophobes, to Wahhabis and mainstream Muslims. The task of reforming, renewing and recasting Islamic law for the contemporary age is the mainstay of this book.

From a Muslim perspective, this book was deeply soothing. It had the same effect that medicine does on a wasted human body. In this case, the



malaise is not a physical illness related to human physiology, but the general Muslim political condition that is bracketed by the rise of ISIS and the deepening of political authoritarianism on the one side, and the proliferation of new levels of anti-Muslim bigotry and prejudice on the other. Its contribution to resolving our current existential crises cannot be overstated; and, as such, I would argue that *Reasoning with God* is indispensable reading for those who seek to understand how a healthy, flourishing and ethically rooted Islam can be re-created.

I am reminded of an argument made by the late Canadian scholar of comparative history and religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Smith was concerned throughout his life with the future development of Muslim societies. He concluded his classic work, *Islam in Modern History*, first published over fifty years ago, by anticipating the destabilising effects of Muslim politics on global affairs. He wrote: 'the various intellectual and moral issues are today themselves internationalised. We would contend that a healthy, flourishing Islam is as important not only for the Muslims but for all the world today.' How prescient those words seem today.