Book Reviews

The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists

Khaled Abou El Fadl
New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005. 310 pages.

Written creeds, which always come much later than the original revelation, invariably seek to define theological "orthodoxy" over and against the perceived heresies of competing sects. Thus, in Islam, the *Fiqh Akbar I* stood against the Kharajites, the *Wasiyat Abu Hanifah* against the Qadarites and the first Mu`tazilites, and the *Fiqh Akbar II* against the later Mu`tazilites. Later on, such theological treatises as al-Ash`ari's *Al-Ibanah* and `Abd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi's *Kitab Usul al-Din* appeared.

In *The Great Theft*, Khaled Abou El Fadl revives this tradition by stating that in the wake of numerous "acts of ugliness" committed by Muslims, the ummah has reached a grave theological crossroads. Muslims are now divided along a spectrum between two extremes. Fundamentally, this schism is one between "moderates" (the extreme being defined by those most willing to reinterpret the Islamic tradition in the light of contemporary realities) and "puritans," who, on the basis of a selective reading of Islam's strictest school of law (Hanbali), claim that 90 percent of human affairs are already covered by God's law (the Shari`ah). At the heart of these diametrically opposed worldviews, he claims, is a theological decision regarding creation and the Shari`ah's meaning.

Significantly, the book's first part is devoted to an analysis of the present crisis. In the first chapter ("Islam Torn between Extremism and Moderation"), Abou El Fadl describes the split that divides the Islamic community and helpfully defines the terms *moderate* (as opposed to *modernist*, *progressive*, or *reformist*) and *puritan* (not *fundamentalist*, *militant*, *extremist*, *radical*, or *jihadist*). From the beginning, he lays aside the common Muslim objections in the face of suicide bombings or beheadings: "the problem is with Muslims, not Islam *per se*." Unfortunately, he argues, all sides claim that they are following the precepts of Islam. What is needed is a crit-

ical look at doctrine – how one understands and articulates the basic tenets of the Islamic faith in the light of present realities, whether sociopolitical or intellectual.

The second chapter explores "the roots of the problem." In the wake of western colonialism, the postcolonial period has been characterized by the crumbling of the authority structures that held the Islamic abode together for centuries. The jurists of the various legal schools provided the needed stability in often shifting and uncertain political times via their ability to define religious orthodoxy, offer support to fair-minded regimes, and occasionally call for rebellion against autocratic rulers or foreign invaders. Today, notes Abou El Fadl, the fact that engineers, doctors, and even those with little formal education pontificate on issues of Islamic law is but one sign of a Muslim society in complete disarray.

This leads him to devote the next two chapters to a detailed examination of Wahhabism's historical and doctrinal backdrop in the eighteenth century, its military and political defeat, its resurrection thanks to the British in the 1920s, and its gradual takeover of Salafism – this time due to rising Saudi oil revenues in the 1970s. For him, it is a tragedy that an extremist theology and legal philosophy (that normally would have been sidelined and terminated by the moderate majority in the nineteenth century) should be bankrolled by a state and take over the ummah to such an extent that Islam's reputation has been seriously tarnished in the eyes of most non-Muslims.

Part Two, then, represents the author's constructive proposal: how to reclaim Islam (as it was intended to be) from the puritans. The fifth chapter is the creed: "What All Muslims Agree Upon." After this comes the heart of his argument: "God and the Purpose of Creation" (chapter 6). For puritans, the ethical values of mercy, compassion, and justice are already contained in the law. Only scrupulous observation of the law's minutiae will curry the favor of a God who will mathematically sum up the good deeds, subtract the bad ones, and give His verdict on the Day of Judgment. In contrast, moderates see creation as establishing a trust between God and humanity. Owing to their gift of rationality, people are empowered to be God's viceroys on Earth and are entrusted with civilizing it according to the "Divine attributes of justice, mercy, compassion, goodness, and beauty" (p. 129).

For Abou El Fadl, a classically trained religious scholar (*`ălim*), this interpretation has profound implications for how one approaches Islamic law (chapter 7: "The Nature of Law and Morality"). This God-given burden placed on humanity to establish godliness, civilize Earth, and resist corruption therein implies a necessary distinction between the Shari`ah, "the Way

of Truth and Justice as it exists in God's mind" (p. 150), and *fiqh*, the fallible and tentative human effort to apply those ethical qualities within changing human contexts. For puritans, the Shari`ah becomes their own selective packaging of past *fiqhi* rulings in order to form a watertight legal code.

In contrast, moderates see the details of law as flowing out of "the ethical and moral objectives of the Qur'an" (p. 156). The hermeneutical key is found in the primacy of the ethical principles, which trump even the specific rulings found in the Qur'an and the authentic Sunnah. The last five chapters lay out the implications of this perspective in one's approach to history (chapter 8), democracy and human rights (chapter 9), relationships to non-Muslims and pluralism (chapter 10), "Jihad, Warfare, and Terrorism" (chapter 11), and "The Nature and Role of Women" (chapter 12).

In this book, Abou El Fadl continues in a more popular vein the arguments of his previous books. But nowhere else has he summed up his theological argument so systematically and defined the current Islamic schism so poignantly. For non-Muslims, this may be the best window yet into the theological ferment now dividing the Muslim community. For Muslim readers, it may be a historic call to rethink their "creed" and take sides.

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