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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW: *REASONING WITH GOD: RECLAIMING SHARI'AH IN THE MODERN AGE*

Ramia Sultan*

Abou El Fadl, Khaled. *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*. US, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 2014. pp. 556. \$53.00. 978-0-7425-5232-6.

During contemporary times, when Islamophobia has become an established norm globally and some Muslims are contending with a lack of or weakness in faith and spirituality, it is imprecise as to whether culpability can be directed toward external environmental influences, such as secularism, or each individual's failure to preserve their spiritual faculties. This desolate reality has been realised by contemporary Islamic scholar, author, lawyer, education activist and social advocate Khaled Abou El Fadl – an Egyptian native of Kuwait – a distinguished professor in Islamic law at the University of California. Through his abundant public speeches, lectures and published works, Abou El Fadl has revived Islam by awakening those in a state of spiritual dormancy or obliteration, and redirecting them towards spiritual enlightenment through education. One of Abou El Fadl's works that articulately achieves this initiative is *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*. The book, which is intended for Muslims and non-Muslims within the general public, ventures on a theological path to reclaim Sharia by considering profound historical knowledge and cross-cultural teachings, allowing the reader to reconsider Islam from a modernistic angle, something infrequently embraced by conventional scholars.

The book is divided into four main sections: An Introduction to Sharia; the Islamic Dream and the Chaos of the Modern Condition; the Culture of Ugliness and the Plight of Modern Islam; and Reclaiming the Sharia in the Modern Age. The book conveys a recurrently underlying theme – that the essence of Sharia is to inspire harmony and beauty, to safeguard justice and to be directed by wisdom. Abou El Fadl argues that the ugliness that is found in mainstream understanding of Sharia is primarily due to the absence of God in people's hearts and also Muslims' lack of contribution to intellectual thought in modernity. He also calls for understanding and respect from non-Muslims. Abou El Fadl's unique and innovative perspective allows the reader to reflect deeply upon one's own beliefs in the hope of eradicating the veil that may have prevented one from seeing Islam's authentic message.

The reader is given the opportunity to connect with the author through the proviso of Abou El Fadl's account of why he sought to write the book. In the author's note section, Abou El Fadl begins by writing, "This was a daunting book to write, not only because it is inspired

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by a sense of urgency and perhaps a foreboding seriousness, but more so because it is intended to be a painfully personal book.” The author notes in the preface that he is “writing as someone who cares about the current Muslim condition and the future of Muslims and Islam” and he invites the reader to participate in a long occurring debate (a fourteen hundred year old debate) concerning the definition and role of Islam. The book is not contrite, despite the author illustrating the West’s inability to understand and deal with Sharia, as well as Muslims’ rigid approach towards Islam. Abou El Fadl highlights the irony shared between the opponents and supporters of Islam in that both sides use ignorance to validate their inaccurate positions.

Abou El Fadl seeks to highlight the importance of using “reasonableness” as a standard for judgment of any issue. He states, “Classical Muslim jurists frequently argued that appropriate standards of judgement must be founded on knowledge of what counts as the norm or average human conduct in a particular time and place” (p. 53). He continues by explaining, “Something is reasonable when it appears to make sense and when it appears to be fair for the great majority of people existing within a specific context”. Abou El Fadl cleverly highlights, although what is reasonable will vary from one place to another, there are certain universal standards, such as fairness, good and sensible, which always remain the same.

In examining the definition and nature of Sharia, Abou El Fadl demonstrates how it has developed over the past centuries, where it has evolved as common law rather than a set of principles not subject to development and expansion. The author refers to the founding fathers of Islamic jurisprudence, such as Imam al-Shafi’i (820 CE) who “had one set of legal opinions that he thought properly applied in Iraq but changed his positions and rulings when he moved to Egypt to account for the changed circumstances and special differences between the two regions” (p. xxxix). Abou El Fadl argues Sharia has been complicated due to the blend of culture and personal opinions with well-established Islamic principles.

The book offers a deep observation into the Muslim community globally, who has erroneously come to believe it is defending authentic Sharia, when instead, has actually endorsed positions that are faulty from an ethical and Islamic perspective, “contemporary fundamentalist and essentialistic orientations imagine Islamic law to be highly deterministic and casuistic, but this is in sharp contrast to the epistemology and institution of the Islamic legal tradition that supported the existence of multiple equally orthodox and authoritative legal schools of thought, all of which are valid representations of the divine will” (p. xxxix).

Abou El Fadl examines some of the reasons why Muslims in the West have been unable to revive authentic Islam, and he places the blame on extremists in the Muslim and non-Muslim community who propagate ill-informed views on Islam. He also emphasises the lack of qualified scholars and experts who may help guide the Muslim community as a serious problem since untrained “experts” end up engaging in complex branches of Sharia. The author talks about incidents at a certain Islamic centre in Texas, where the board of directors placed a requirement that anyone who leads the Friday sermon must be married. When Abou El Fadl raised concerns about this rule and referred to previous scholars in Islamic history who were unmarried, he was expelled from the premises and named the “Grand Satan” of the community.

The author personalises his experiences by retelling stories, such as when he was accused of promoting sedition (*fitna*) due to his suggestion that women be allowed to listen to his lectures directly rather than behind a segregated area (p. 76). Here, Abou El Fadl illustrates how unqualified scholars or leaders interpret Sharia according to their own views and perspectives, which is detrimental to its overarching principles.

Abou El Fadl then turns to various events that have led to the erosion of Sharia and points to factors such as colonialism of Muslim countries, differing ways of practicing law and lack of resources and support offered to those embarking on a journey to study Islam. The book also examines the regression of Sharia at the same time in which Wahhabism and Salafism have risen. Abou El Fadl notes these two dogmas oppose rationality and tradition, which leads to a literal misinterpretation of Islamic texts.

Although the book is just over 500 pages long, Abou El Fadl provides a comprehensive outlook on some recommendations of Muslim reformers, including Irshad Manji, Ibn Warraq and others, who often rely on Western and Orientalist understandings of Islam, frequently calling for the reformation of Islam. Such writers have identified the lack of rationality of Islamic thought as central to the mortification of current Muslim societies. Abou El Fadl demonstrates that many of these claims are not only wrong, but also deceive the true understanding of the Islamic juridical tradition. The author highlights that such an understanding gives room for “Islamophobes” to feast on such views.

After identifying the key challenges faced by the Muslim community, Abou El Fadl provides some tools and observations to assist in overcoming these issues. He notes the importance of the Muslim community to intellectually engage with its religion and with wider society, as a means of reclaiming the authentic definition of Sharia.

Overall, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age* provides personal and intellectual insights into Sharia and the struggle contemporary Muslims are facing, particularly in the West. Abou El Fadl skilfully demonstrates how modern interpretations of Islam have in fact weakened its potential for peace and harmony, and he allows the reader to develop a deeper understanding of the authentic meaning of Islam.