



The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists

Khaled Abou El Fadl

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Despite President George W. Bush's assurances that Islam is a peaceful religion and that all good Muslims hunger for democracy, confusion persists and far too many Westerners remain convinced that Muslims and terrorists are synonymous. In the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the recent bombings in London, an unprecedented amount of attention has been directed toward Islam and the Muslim world. Yet, even with this increased scrutiny, most of the public discourse regarding Islam revolves around the actions of extremist factions such as the Wahhabis and al-Qa'ida. But what of the Islam we don't hear about?

As the second-largest and fastest-growing religion in the world, Islam is deemed by more than a billion Muslims to be a source of serenity and spiritual peace, and a touchstone for moral and ethical guidance. While extremists have an impact upon the religion that is wildly disproportionate to their numbers, moderates constitute the majority of Muslims worldwide. It is this rift between the quiet voice of the moderates and the deafening statements of the extremists that threatens the future of the faith.

In *The Great Theft*, Khaled Abou El Fadl, one of the world's preeminent Islamic scholars, argues that Islam is currently passing through a transformative period no less dramatic than the movements that swept through Europe during the Reformation. At this critical juncture there are two completely opposed worldviews within Islam competing to define this great world religion. The stakes have never been higher, and the future of the Muslim world hangs in the balance.

Drawing on the rich tradition of Islamic history and law, *The Great Theft* is an impassioned defense of Islam against the encroaching power of the extremists. As an accomplished Islamic jurist, Abou El Fadl roots his arguments in long-standing historical legal debates and delineates point by point the beliefs and practices of moderate Muslims, distinguishing these tenets from the corrupting influences of the extremists. From the role of women in Islam to the nature of jihad, from democracy and human rights to terrorism and warfare, Abou El Fadl builds a vital vision for a moderate Islam. At long last, the great majority of Muslims who oppose extremism have a desperately needed voice to help reclaim Islam's great moral tradition.

The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists Details

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From Reader Review The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists for online ebook

Ann El-moslimany says

The GreatTheft

The Great Theft is the usurpation of the religion of Islam from its mainstream roots. The book distinguishes between what the author calls the Islam of the 'moderates', that includes the vast majority of Muslims, and the Islam of the 'puritans'. Addressing both Muslims and non-Muslims. He carefully explains Islamic law, emphasizing the fundamental unity that remained within a wealth of broadly diverse interpretations. That is, until colonialism and its emphasis on secular power and nationalism caused a void to arise within Sharia and attempts to use Islam for political gain.

In the opinion of the author it is this politicalization of Islam that allowed the rise and spread of puritanism in the form of the movement by Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahab. Whatever the causes behind Wahabism and the various movements that were influenced by it such as Al-Qua'ida and the Taliban (ISIS, the so-called Islamic State had not come into existence at the time this book was published) the results were devastating to the Muslim world.

The next two chapters —3 and 4—should be read and digested by everyone who needs to understand the differences between the 'moderates' and the 'puritans' and particularly by those who have come to believe that the repressive regime of present-day Saudi Arabia must epitomize the Muslim religion, primarily because (1) the wealth of Arabia has allowed their Wahabi ideas to have influence throughout the Muslim world and (2) the Saudis rule over the holy sites of Medina and Mecca.

The remainder of the book basically can be considered a primer on the religion of Islam as the author describes the traditional established beliefs and practices of Islam in contrast with those of the puritans.

Chadijah Mastura says

My parents sent me to two schools at once when I was a kid: to the public elementary school (the secular one) and to an Islamic school (Islamic "madrassah," or "school" in Arabic, often spelled "madrassa" in English).

Yet, as the world attention to Islam has been growing as the result of the massive terrorist activities from the fanatics (I call them the lunatics, actually), there are a lot of things I cannot fully explain to my friends from other religions (who sometimes ask me about this and that) and, probably, my husband, as I also don't really understand why there are such abominable practices among the people who call themselves pious Muslims.

I feel like I'm becoming alienated to my own faith. The lunatics have defined the term of what I believe in to the world. I have to admit though that they have louder voice, because they speak with guns.

Besides, regular Muslims like me don't really know our stuff. I mean, of course I know the basic principles of Islam (which is just, really, to admit that there is this one entity who'd created and controls the universe,

either you call it "God" in English, "Allah" in Arabic, or "Tuhan" in Indonesia, and that Muhammad is also one of the special people He/She/It had sent to this Earth, and among those special people are including Jesus, Moses, Abraham, and Adam) and other set of rules some people call "Sharia."

But ask me to define the definitive resources of various rules, and I would say I don't know, despite my many years in the Islamic school. For example, our ustaz ("a male teacher," in Arabic, but in Indonesia it's understood as "a teacher of Islamic teaching"), who was not fluent in Arabic, taught us that wearing a headscarf for a woman is obligatory. My parents said it is obligatory, but if you cannot be a better person by wearing it, then don't. And there was no way we could track each opinion down to its definitive sources since the Islamic books we found usually did not tell different opinions: that headscarf was obligatory, for example. We didn't know that there are different interpretations on it, and how these interpretations became different from one another.

If only we knew that there were different interpretations on this and that, and why some scholars came to different conclusions, people would have had better grounds to what they believe in, and understood why people do differently, without any grudges and judgment whatsoever. Ultimately, it is about our personal choice on which set of beliefs most suited to our personal logic.

As are millions of other Muslims in the world, I was lacked of book resources that could've guided me better to various interpretations and history of Islam. I am so grateful that I got open-minded parents and relatively good teachers who'd paid attention to the philosophical aspects of the Islamic teaching, not the strict form of it. But looking back to what my ustaz had used as manual books in the classroom, as well as various Islamic books sold in front of my campus when I got into the university years later, I realize now that they actually represent the puritanical point of view of Islam.

And I wouldn't have known this if only I didn't read this Abou El-Fadl book. Back then, I was told by some friends or teachers that this Muslim intellectual was good, and that Muslim intellectual was great, and I should read this book or that. There was no Internet to do better research on their suggestions.

I remember one day a friend of mine in university bought me a Sayd Quthb book. That friend was a prominent leader of a student organization in my university's mosque. He was soft-spoken and popular and very generous, and I remember he bought me the Sayd Quthb book impulsively just because we'd met in the canteen at lunch time and then walked to the classroom together, passing some street booksellers on the sidewalk.

I never read the Sayd Quthb book because I couldn't get past the first page--I found it really weird. I remember the next time I saw that friend again I asked him why did he consider Sayd Quthb as interesting. He said he didn't know. He just knew that Sayd Quthb was famous, and his books must be worth to read because "he came from the Arab region" -- a view that seems to be shared by many others, especially--perhaps--Indonesians. As if any Islamic interpretation that comes from an Arabic scholar is the right one.

By reading this Khaled Abou El-Fadl book, I realized that Muslims--or, perhaps, just Indonesians--don't know that much about Arabic scholars, and some of us perhaps have picked the wrong ones to read. Some of us perhaps don't have the resources to get our hands on the variety of scholars to make comparisons and learn better about our own belief. I realized how the lacking of book resources might've led to the growing movement of puritanism we see nowadays.

This book explains the history of the so-called "Sharia" nowadays, and how it was so different in the early centuries of Islam. It also explains generations of Islamic scholars who'd influenced various interpretations

found in Islam. It explains why the fanatics insist on "building the Islamic caliphate in this world": because they are so afraid of change and ignorant to the history and refuse to learn humanity.

My favorite subject in this book is the term of salvation in Qur'an, because I think this is the most important part of the puritanical movement. The puritans believe they are abiding to what God really wants of them, and thus they are better than the rest of us and deserve heaven. Since they think making other people go to "the way of heaven" is also their obligation, they push other people to do what they're doing and resemble them, by any means.

Abou El-Fadl explains why he thinks Qur'an insists that salvation is not exclusive to certain party, which means anybody could go to heaven, and only God who has the right to judge on us. Actually, this is a common knowledge among Muslims--that only God who has the right to judge and therefore you should not be judgmental to other people; a lot of Qur'anic passages cite this subject, but only a few of us really grasp it. But that salvation is not exclusive is probably a new concept for the puritans, conservatives, and a lot of Muslims.

This book also makes me know why Sayd Quthb is popular and what he'd stood for and that he's probably one of the inspirations of the Islamic fanatical movement. Perhaps that's why I couldn't read his book because our point of views toward religion are so different from the very first page. Sadly, Sayd Quthb's books are widely spread and read, at least in Indonesia. There are many other Islamic scholars deemed prominent in the Islamic world although the followers of the religion don't know those scholars' place in history.

If only "a scholar from Arab" is the only qualification welcomed among Muslims, then they should read this Arabic scholar. They would probably be shocked of Abou El-Fadl's interpretation as it is very different from the puritanical teachings more popular nowadays, thanks to the Wahhabi/Salafi gang supported by the Arab's oil money. Perhaps, those puritans would also argue that Abou El-Fadl--despite his status as an Arabic sheikh, his study of formal Islamic jurisprudence in Kuwait and Egypt, and his resources of about 50,000 books on Islamic subjects--is not really an "Arab" because he lives in USA and teaches at UCLA and thus already "Westernized."

However, for the better understanding among us, people in the world, who believe and don't believe in God, this book is one of the good resources to understand the lunatic Muslims and bridge our differences.

Anne Meyer says

Detailed and knowledgeable discussion on the conflict within Islam today. The author describes the rift along lines those muslims with puritan worldview and those with a moderate worldview, and discusses how they see Islam differently because of this difference.

This goes miles beyond the appallingly slack journalism you commonly see to shed light on the situation. Exposes the contradictory behavior of puritan muslims, and disassembles the authority they claim, and gives a desperately needed critique of that behavior in the light of Quran and Sunna. Discusses motivations and how systems of oppression and intolerance work, and continue to survive while mainstream and moderate muslims claim that Islam is something else altogether.

Discusses puritan techniques of dominating others, such as denying history and claiming inconvenient verses of the Quran have been abrogated.

A highly valuable book.

Sara Chouki says

Khaled's views are very refreshing, and very much needed in our time. He speaks the words that many think but refrain from saying due to the fear of being condemned or seen to be 'controversial'.

Let it be clear that he under no circumstances sees 'Islam' as being the issue in creating extremism, but the interpretation of Islam by some groups.

Although I did not agree with all of his points, such as the extent or even the idea of 'reforming' some areas, I did agree with his general argument.

I think this is necessary reading for anyone, both Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Although I do believe that it is imperative for Muslims of today to read this in order to fully understand why they see Islam the way they do. Why the majority of 'Islamic' scholarship in our time tends to push one narrative, that being a strict, black and white interpretation of Islam. Why some groups teach you not to question their beliefs, and that if one does so then one is not a true follower. Why some groups have the audacity to claim that a person is a believer or not if they do or do not believe in a particular ideology. Islam is a peaceful religion, one of tolerance, compassion, mercy, kindness and ease. Not one of arrogance, harshness, rigidness and ugliness. Khaled makes this clear in this beautifully written book.

A few quotes I highlighted below:

"By controlling Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia became naturally positioned to exercise a considerable influence on Muslim culture and thinking. by regulating what might be considered orthodox belief and practice, Saudi Arabia became uniquely positioned to greatly influence the belief systems of Islam itself." | p.72

"According to its adherents, Wahhabism is not a school of thought within Islam, but is Islam itself, and it is the only possible Islam." | p. 74

"In the puritan paradigm, subjectivities of the interpreting agent are irrelevant to the realisation and implementation of the Divine command, which is fully and comprehensively contained in the text. Therefore, the aesthetics and moral insights or experiences of the interpreting agent are considered irrelevant and superfluous." | p.96

"If the men of this orientation feel the need to compensate for feelings of powerlessness by dominating women, they read the text to validate the subjugation and disempowerment of women." | p.97

"All along the puritans claim to be entirely literal and objective, and to faithfully implement what the texts demand without their personal interference. This claim is simply fraudulent and untrue because in every situation we find that the puritan reading of the text is entirely subjective." | p.97

"God has many attributes, but it is fair to say that the attributes most emphasised in the Quran are the mercy and compassion of God." | p.126

"In moderate thought, God is too great to be embodied in a code of law. The law helps Muslims in the quest for Godliness, but Godliness cannot be equated to the law. The ultimate objective of the law is to achieve goodness, which includes justice, mercy, and compassion, and the technicalities of the law cannot be allowed to subvert the objectives of the law. Therefore, if the application of the law produces injustice, suffering and

misery, this means that the law is not serving its purposes." | p.131

"Submission to God means refusing to submit to any other person or thing. For a Muslim to be dominated or subjugated by a human oppressor is fundamentally at odds with the duty of submission to God. Human free will cannot be surrendered or submitted to anyone but God, and a Muslim is commanded to accept no master other than God." | p. 131

"God consistently sets out in the Quran the types of people that God loves - God loves those who are just, fair, equitable, merciful, kind, and forgiving, those who persistently purify themselves, and so on. At the same time, the Quran repeats that God does not love those who are aggressors, unjust, corrupters, cruel, unforgiving, treacherous, liars, ungrateful, arrogant, and so on." | p. 133

"To truly love God, one must love all human beings, whether Muslim or not, and love all living beings as well as all of Gods nature." | p. 134

"According to moderate Muslims, no person or institution is authorised to judge the piety of another or evaluate the closeness of any particular individual to God. In this regard, moderate Muslims rely on the Prophets teachings, which emphasised that people should not be so arrogant as to presume that they know what is concealed in a persons heart." | p. 137

"In numerous traditions, the Prophet Muhammaed also warned Muslims against the immorality of thinking ill of others and the arrogance of presuming to know how or what God thinks about any particular person. Furthermore, in addressing the Prophet Muhammad in the Quran, God emphasises time and time again that he (Muhammaed) was sent but to deliver a message and not to subjugate or dominate people. Accordingly, as the Quran stresses, even God's Messenger does not have the right to presume to know what is in the hearts of people." | p. 137

"Human beings make a best effort to reach for and understand the eternal law, but it is arrogant and offensive to ever claim that human beings could be certain that they have successfully comprehended the eternal law." | p. 150

"The specific rulings of the Quran came in response to particular problems that confronted the Muslim community at the time of the Prophet. The particular and specific rules set out in the Quran are not objectives in themselves. The rulings are contingent on particular historical circumstances that might or might not exist in the modern age. At the time these rulings were revealed, they were sought to achieve particular moral objectives, such as justice, equity, equality, mercy, compassion, benevolence, and so on." | p. 156

"Building upon the Islamic tradition, moderates argue that at a minimum all human beings have a right to dignity and liberty. The moderates' belief in democracy and human rights begins with the premise that oppression is a great offence against God and human beings. The Quran described oppressors as corrupter of the earth and also described oppression as an offence against God. In moderate thinking, it is recognised that all human beings are entitled to dignity. The Quran clearly states that God has endowed all human beings with dignity. Liberty and choice are the essential components that constitute human dignity. I think it is all too obvious that when human beings are shackled, imprisoned, suppressed, or denied the means to self-determination, they feel that their sense of self-worth is greatly diminished." | p. 184

On liberty and freedom of choice

"In a well known islamic tradition, Umar, the second caliph and the close Companions of the Prophet, declared that humans are created free. Umar instructed one of his governors that injustice could be a form of

enslavement and subjugation, and he rhetorically asked his governor: Who has the right to oppress people when God has created them free? Moderates usually cite this tradition and others in arguing that liberty is a natural right for all human beings, and that robbing people of their liberty is equivalent to subjugating and enslaving them. Submission to God can only be meaningful if human beings are free to submit or not to submit. Without freedom of choice, obedience, and submission to God became entirely meaningless. Choice (liberty) is a Divine gift, and this gift is part and parcel of the ability to submit to God, and hence, the freedom to pursue Godliness or to refuse to do so." | p.184

"Being enslaved or subjugated by a human being is fundamentally inconsistent with the duty to submit oneself without reservation to God. In fact, the Quran invites Muslims and non-Muslims to reach a consensus between them to worship God alone and not to take one another as lords. For moderates, this verse affirms a basic and crucial principle: human beings should not dominate each other. The only submission that is ethical is submission to God, but the submission of a human being before another is nothing but oppression. This Quranic discourse encourages Muslims and non-Muslims to find an arrangement according to which each one of them does not dominate the other." | p. 185

On the status of women...

"There is one word that sums up the puritan attitude toward women: fitna. Fitna is a vast term that has many connotations, all of which are decidedly negative. Fitna mean sexual enticement, a source of danger, civic and social discord, a sense of instability and impending evil."

"Although puritans often praise and celebrate the role of women as mothers, in every other role women are portrayed as deficient and subservient. Therefore, as a wife, she is completely under the tutelage of her husband; as a daughter, she is under the tutelage of her father; as a member of society, she is under the tutelage of all men. she is never an independent and autonomous being who shares in equal measure the obligation of fulfilling the Divine convenient.

In the puritan paradigm, she is cast in a role in which she fulfils her obligations only through men-whether as husbands, fathers, or men who control the public space. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that puritans often claim that women will not enter Heaven unless they subserviently obey men on this earth." | p. 257

"The Quran exclaimed that a husband should either live with his wife in kindness and honor, or divorce her also in kindness and honor; but in all situations, those who hold on to their wives in order to torment or harass them have committed a great sin and they have . become among those who are unjust toward themselves." | p. 270

"The Quran consistently and systematically condemned conditions that were oppressive and abusive toward women. There is a condition in the Quranic language called 'istid'af (abusive and oppressive treatment that renders a person powerless). The ethical lesson consistently and systematically taught by the Quran is that placing women in oppressive and abusive conditions is fundamentally at odds with Islamic morality and with the very idea of submission to God." | p. 270

Foxglove says

What an amazing, well written, educating book, a must read book on Islam which taught me so much. Very impressed.

Book says

The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists by Khaled Abou El Fadl

"The Great Theft" is the enlightening book about the Islamic divide between the "puritans" and "moderates. The author labels "puritans" as that faction considered fanatical, extremist, and militant; as opposed to "moderates" who are reasonable. Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl is an accomplished Islamic jurist and scholar, law professor at UCLA and former appointee of the Bush administration to the U.S. commission on International Religious Freedom. El Fadl has written a very accessible and instructive book that has helped me have a better understanding of the aforementioned divide and most importantly why is that so and what will it take for the "moderates" to wrestle Islam away from the "puritans". A welcomed and informative book that has taken me to a world I know so little about. A recommended and worthwhile excursion into this religious divide. This 336-page book is broken out into two main parts: Part One, The Battleground for Faith, and Part Two, Charting the Moderate Versus Puritan Divide.

Positives:

1. Well written, accessible book for the masses.
2. A fascinating topic in the hands of a scholar.
3. El Fadl treats his subject with utmost respect and care.
4. The author sets out to delineate the reality of Muslim thought and in doing so provided me some much needed education on the topic.
5. The first part of the book the author focuses on defining what Islam and the basic differences between the "puritans" and the "moderates".
6. Islamic culture well defined. Many basic terms defined and explained.
7. Islamic law and its sources. Qur'an and the Sunna.
8. What Shari'a truly is.
9. The most influential puritan movements, the Salafis and Wahhabis, and the four main factors that contributed to the survival and expansion.
10. Some very interesting insights throughout the book.
11. Thought-provoking comments, "The problem today, however, is that the traditional institutions of Islam that historically acted to marginalize extremist creeds no longer exist".
12. What the puritans prohibit...
13. In part two of the book, the book really takes off as El Fadl provides more practical examples of the puritan, moderate divide.
14. The five pillars, the heart and soul of Islam and something that all Muslims agree on.
15. The relationship of the individual to God and how it varies from puritan to moderate.
16. Good use of the Qur'an to make the distinctions clear between puritans and moderates.
17. Great use of topical examples to make the points clear.
18. How Islamic law and morality works. Once again the great divide is established.
19. The main reasons the puritans are so opposed to peace with Israel. Fascinating.
20. The moderate points of view on justice and democracy.
21. The five protected interests: life, intellect, lineage, reputation and property.
22. The questions of salvation.
23. The most interesting chapters by far are the last two chapters of the book: Chapter 11, Jihad, Warfare, and Terrorism, and Chapter 12, The Nature and Role of Women.
24. What jihad is with a luxury of details. Educational history.
25. How women are treated in puritan societies.
26. The issue of slavery.

27. An excellent conclusion chapter that wraps everything together including what moderates need to do to wrestle Islam back from the puritans.
28. A comprehensive notes section.

Negatives:

1. The author never lets you know the percentage of "puritans" versus "moderates". He mentions that the moderates are the silent majority but never answers specifically how much more.
2. A chart or illustrations would have added much value. As an example, a chart showing those countries that profess the Islamic faith and what percentage are "puritans" versus "moderates".
3. The first part of the book is repetitive and not quite as interesting as the second half of the book where this book really shines.
4. No formal bibliography.
5. A couple of misspells...the word Prophet was misspelled on page 191 as an example.

Overall, this was a very educational book for me. I read this book with the intent to learn more about Islamic culture and I accomplished that with flying colors. El Fadl has written a fair and balanced book that is useful. If you are interested in learning more about this fascinating topic I encourage you to get this book, a few shortcomings aside this is a worthwhile and educational book. I recommend it.

Chrissie says

Focuses on those of the moderate Islam faith rather than just the fundamentalists. What is the future of Islam? Author is a UCLA teacher and religious jurist. Excerpt very clear and readable.

Ay says

i **HEART** this man and this book. im going to read it again. a most glowing review coming soon...

what's so interesting to me about religion and beliefs, is that alot of what we believe has been already predecided for us and pushed so hard that generatons later what we think is truth is in fact nothing more than someone elses opinion/ coloured interpretations of an interpretation of an interpretation...

you dont realize the reasons behind the way you think and do like you do, until a book like this comes along and lifts that cliche "veil" from your eyes.

more later. =)

Serign says

Provides a lot of food for thought and reflection worthy material; I was a disappointed by the lack of nuance in a lot of places, but to be fair, the author did state in the beginning that he would be generalizing for the sake of brevity.

The term "puritan" in this books seems to be used to refer to most people who don't agree with Dr. Khaled on

a given issue; for example, he points to Wahabism as the main cause/promoters of puritanism in our age in the introduction, but somewhere later in the book, he uses an example of what appears to be the Ashari position on moral ontology and quickly dismisses it as something "puritans believe".

He also calls out the puritans on their use of not-rigorously authenticated traditions but he seems to have no problem using them himself in the book where convenient; although of-course the consequences of him doing so are obviously far less dire than when a puritanical group, to use his definition, does it to justify some crazy stuff you'll probably see on the internets.

I have a lot of respect for Dr. Khaled, all of his articles that I've read online have been extremely thought provoking, people I look up to have lots of respect for him, so I guess I was anticipating all sorts of [I don't know, super-mind-blowing-ing-instant-enlightenment-ness-ism lol] when I decided to pick this book up; disappointment was inevitable. I look forward to reading his other works, and hopefully there won't be as many vague/confusing statements such as "Moderates, perhaps unlike Sufis, do not believe that loving God can lead to a complete unity with God".

Half of me would recommend this book to anyone who doesn't know much about Islam and wants to make sense of some of what's going on around the world today because this book will definitely help; the other half worries that all someone might take away from it is an overly simplistic binary view of the Muslims, puritan/extremist/bad vs moderate/moderate/good... reality is obviously more complicated.

Kristen says

As its title suggests, this is a book aimed at reclaiming one of the world's great religions from those who have hijacked it - at least in the eyes of the Western world. Real Muslims living in most Muslim countries know the difference between their own moderate faith and the version Dr. Abou el Fadl dubs "puritan." He tells an alarming story of a great tradition of ethical religious jurisprudence (quite similar to the Talmudic tradition, it seems) cut off at the knees by colonialism and despotic nationalist regimes. Much of what he says is like other balanced accounts of extremism (including Christian fundamentalism) have said, which lends his analysis further credibility. It also is written by a formidable scholar intimately familiar with the various historical traditions that the puritans are working to eradicate. A must-read for anyone who actually wants to understand what's going on in the world.

Sadaf says

I wish all Muslims were able to read this book. A very systematic analysis of how fundamentalism in Islam started and gained strength. He also gives a lot of information regarding issues that you thought were part of Islamic teachings and realize that you have been misinformed all along. Makes me want to read more books by this author. Highly recommended.

Nathaniel says

"It is due time that moderate Muslims realize that they are in a state of war with puritan Muslims." - El Fadl

The following is drawn in its entirety from El Fadl:

To win this very real war that has done inestimable damage to so many Muslims and to the truth of the Islamic faith, it is absolutely imperative that moderates declare a counter-jihad against the puritan heresy. This is not a call for the shedding of blood; it is a call for matching the zeal of puritans through unrelenting intellectual activism. This is a counter-jihad to reclaim the truth about the Islamic faith and win the hearts and minds of Muslims and non-Muslims all around the world.

"According to the Wahhabis, it was imperative to return to a presumed pristine, simple, and straightforward Islam, which was believed to be entirely reclaimable by a literal implementation of the commands and precedents of the Prophet, and by a strict adherence to correct ritual practice. In effect, the Wahhabis treated religious texts - the Qur'an and the Sunna - as an instruction manual to a virtual utopia modeled after the Prophet's city-state in Medina. If only Muslims would return to adopting the correct beliefs and practices mandated by God, the reasons for their backwardness and for their collective sense of humiliation would disappear because Muslims would once again earn God's favor and support."

It is important to note that Wahhabism did not spread in the modern Muslim world under its own banner. Rather, it spread under the banner of Salafism.

Salafism appealed to a very basic and fundamental concept in Islam – that Muslims ought to follow the precedents of the Prophet and his Rightly Guided Companions as well as the pious early generations. Methodologically and in substance, Salafism was nearly identical to Wahhabism, except that Wahhabism was far less tolerant of diversity and differences of opinions. In many ways, Salafism was intuitively undeniable, partly because of its epistemological promise: it offered a worldview that was difficult to deny or challenge. The founders of Salafism maintained that on all issues, Muslims ought to return to the original sources of the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet. In doing so, Muslims ought to reinterpret the original sources in light of modern needs and demands without being slavishly bound to the interpretive precedents of earlier Muslim generations. But as originally conceived, Salafism was not necessarily anti-intellectual, but like Wahhabism it did tend to be uninterested in history. By emphasizing a presumed "golden age" in Islam, the adherents of Salafism idealized the time of the Prophet and his Companions, and ignored or were uninterested in the balance of Islamic history.

Furthermore, by rejecting juristic precedents and undervaluing tradition as a source of authoritativeness, Salafism adopted a form of egalitarianism that deconstructed traditional notions of established authority within Islam. According to Salafism, effectively anyone was considered qualified to return to the original sources and speak for God. The very logic and premise of Salafism was that any commoner or layperson could read the Qur'an and the books containing the traditions of the Prophet and his Companions and then issue legal judgments. Taken to the extreme, this meant that each individual Muslim could fabricate his own version of Islamic law.

Effectively, by liberating Muslims from the burdens of the technocratic tradition of the jurists, Salafism contributed to the vacuum of authority in contemporary Islam.

– El Fadl

Bruce says

"Khaled Abou El Fadl has written an important work for anyone trying to understand the split within Islam. He posits a choice for Muslims who are confronted with negative perceptions of Islam: complain, cry and "grow old in silent bitterness" or "teach others about their faith." However, the author admits there is a problem because "many Muslims are woefully ignorant about their religion." He then offers a third option, to study and think about Islam and why so many non-Muslims have a negative perception of it. Though modern Islam is more complex than the division into two groups, moderates versus puritans, this work, by comparing these two 'extremes,' elucidates the schism.

There are only a couple of references to the history of 'Christianity,' however, anyone with a basic understanding of 'Christianity' can see similarities. For instance, Fadl writes that the puritans pick and choose the verses they use and then interpret them in such a way as to support their world view. This doesn't sound much different than what we understand is the method of 'Christian' fundamentalists.

Part one is the first third of the book. It is "The Battleground for Faith." This is a general introduction into the problem. Part Two is "Charting the Moderate Versus Puritan Divide." Fadl gets into more specific issues in this part, from differing interpretations on 'God and the Purpose of Creation' to 'The Nature and Role of Women.' Of special note are his treatment of jihad and its historical context and the historical examples on the treatment of women.

I recommend this work to anyone desiring to gain a better understanding of Islam in the world today. Both Muslim and non-Muslim will benefit from reading this book."

Sofia says

This was a highly anticipated read for me, and perhaps this is where the disappointment lay. The book is well argued and has lots of insightful chapters. Khaled Abou Fadl is a scholar of well deserved repute, but I found the argument to be quite flawed. I don't think it's sufficient to lay the entire blame of extremism on Salafi/Wahabi movements. The historical contexts of both these groups is very well relayed but doesn't go far back enough to find the root of the problems. Mustafa Akyol in his book "Islam without Extremes" goes much further back in the evolution of Islamic law to highlight the historical contexts of various fiqh positions which were relevant (sometimes!) in their particular context, but the literal application of them in modern times is archaic, illiberal and even anathema to the very objectives of Islam. I found his approach far more authentic and likely. In addition to this, Abou Fadl's book ignores other contributors to extremism; the politicisation of muslims and their genuine frustrations at global politics. While he makes some mention of colonialism and while I agree with his arguments regarding this, it also does not go far enough. As Leilah Ahmad illustrates in "Women and Gender in Islam" colonialism also played a tremendous role in sewing the seeds of resistance among muslims, through which certain practises took on symbolic meaning and era, deep rooted in the Muslim view of what religion is.

An interesting read with plenty of interesting analysis and reference but the few flaws are rather deep, hence three stars.

Cara says

I really liked this book, though in certain ways it seemed incomplete to me. I don't know if that's a reflection of the book itself or merely that it was intended for a slightly different audience, more of an introduction to

Islam. Khaled Abou El Fadl divides the Muslim world into Moderates and "Puritans" (I love that term - better than Islamists or Extremists or Fanatics or Fundamentalists or any of the other words people tend to use) and this is a bit over simplistic for my liking. But I don't get the impression that the author himself is actually unaware of the many shades of grey, only that he neglected to include them for this book. I look forward to reading some of his other works.
