

BOOK REVIEWS

Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 485 pp.

Khaled Abou El Fadl's book begins with a 'crash course' in Islamic Law that explains main concepts, terminology, and differences between Shari'ah and Fiqh, Islamic Law and Muslim Law, and rights of God and rights of humans. The main body consists of three sections. The first section includes an analysis of the challenges facing Muslims in the modern world that are hindering their moral progress, which range from grassroots challenges, such as problematic methods of instruction in current Islamic circles, to high-level challenges such as a lack of reasonableness in Islamic rulings. The second section consists of a historical and sociopolitical exploration of the root causes that led to the problems discussed earlier, which include colonialism and the rise of the Puritanical-Salafi movement, whose ideology, according to Abou El Fadl, led to the spread of extreme acts of ugliness that culminated in the 9/11 tragedy and, thus, gave birth to Islamophobia.

The third section presents an approach for an ethical and morally progressive application of Shari'ah in the modern age. Abou El Fadl argues that Shari'ah is the epitome of justice, goodness, and beauty and that in order to get closer to these ideals, Muslims should use both reason and revelation to search for God's laws. Thus, he suggests that Muslims adopt an epistemological approach towards the text, as opposed to an historical one, in which the moral objectives of the revealed texts are

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understood in light of the contemporary context. Consequently, rulings must exhibit a level of ‘reasonableness’ that can be measured by assessing their proportionality, balance, and measuredness. In short, he proposes three steps to understanding God’s commandments as moral trajectories that would fulfill the purpose of Shari’ah and bring the world closer to godliness: (1) understanding the epistemological paradigms that God’s commandments had to negotiate at the time of revelation, (2) understanding the epistemological positioning of the same problems raised by the commandments in their contemporary context, and (3) understanding the moral and ethical objectives of the commandments. Finally, he gives a methodology for dealing with non-Muslims that revolves around the Quranic notions of noncoercion, nonaggression, and human and religious diversity.

This book is a formidable effort that displays the author’s vast knowledge of Islamic law, history, ethics and morality, philosophy, and sociology. However, at its heart it is a philosophical endeavour that aims to revive Muslims’ conscience and morality in an attempt to reengage them with the modern world so as not to render them at the periphery of humanity.

Abou El Fadl’s deep analysis of the historical and political root causes that have led Muslims to their current abysmal state, which he further bolsters by social psychological explanations (e.g., social death, scapegoating, etc.), is particularly noteworthy, for he goes beyond the typical, superficial, and overly simplistic explanations that are usually circulated within Muslims circles. In light of such a grave situation, it follows that only a revolutionary solution can prove to be of any use. He does not fail to live up to this task, for he puts forth a framework that addresses the current state of moral lethargy plaguing the Muslim world. His emphasis on ethics, morality, and ideals such as beauty, mercy, and justice are much needed in a time in which the majority of Islamic discourses focus on technicalities and trivialities.

However, one cannot help but ask whether the lofty ideals that Abou El Fadl is promoting would ever be realized when his proposed approaches towards achieving them would be hard to swallow for a large number of Muslims. Would less revolutionary solutions be more realistic? How can the author assume acceptance of such an approach when, according to him, the reach of Puritanical-Salafism has reached far and wide in the Muslim world and its adherents most likely will not view his proposed methods favourably?

In sum, this book has something to offer to every reader. With its fair share of personal anecdotes, philosophical arguments, legal tools, and historical and political discussions, the book has the ability to engage the layman and scholar, the Muslim and non-Muslim, and anyone interested in the relationship between Islam and modernity. In particular, theologians, political and human rights activists, religious and

secular ethicists, and, of course, spiritual and religious leaders and counsellors can all benefit from this book.

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