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Islam as a Religion of Tolerance and Moderation

By David F. Duncan

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Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl has been described as "the most important and influential Islamic thinker in the modern age." An accomplished Islamic jurist and scholar, he received formal training in Islamic jurisprudence in Egypt and Kuwait as well as holding degrees from Yale, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania School of Law. He is currently the Omar and Azmeralda Alfi Distinguished Fellow in Islamic Law at the UCLA School of Law. Before joining the faculty at UCLA, he taught Islamic law at the University of Texas at Austin Law School, Yale Law School and Princeton University.

In the extended essay that begins his book, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, Dr. Abou El Fadl argues that the post-September 11th image of Islam as a reactionary, intolerant, and violent religion does not accurately represent the real traditional belief of Muslims. To the contrary, he declares his "unwavering conviction that I belong to a great moral humanistic tradition." Traditional Islamic jurists, he writes, "tolerated and even celebrated divergent opinions and schools of thought."

During the first centuries of Islam, clerics underwent a lengthy and intellectually demanding training that included an open discussion of differing viewpoints and interpretations. This training prepared them to be community leaders and judges in disputes between their coreligionists. As the secular authority in Muslim states grew increasingly powerful, centralized, and autocratic, Muslim clergy lost much of their authority, producing "a profound vacuum in religious authority" and "a state of virtual anarchy in modern Islam."

As the Muslim clergy were increasingly marginalized, the great centers of learning at which they were trained became equally marginalized and more and more clerics were self-declared holy men with little or no formal training. Consequently, amateurish interpretations of Islam, exemplified by those of Osama bin Laden, gained sway over theologically illiterate Muslims justifiably angry at the poverty and powerlessness they experienced in comparison to citizens of the U.S. and other Western nations.

Dr. Abou El Fadl is particularly critical of Wahhabism -- a puritanical revision of Islam propagated by the Saudi monarchy. While Wahhabism claims to be the "straight path" of Islam, it is, according to Abou El Fadl, an aberrant form of Islam, forged in the 18th-century slaughter of Muslims and

non-Muslims alike. To call it "fundamentalist," he asserts, is misleading, since it flouts fundamental Islamic truths and distorts Islam by rejecting "any attempt to interpret the divine law historically or contextually."

He quotes specific passages to show that the Quran declares diversity among peoples to be Allah's divine intent. Further, contrary to what you may have been taught in a high school history class, the Quran opposes forced conversion of others to Islam, as practiced by the Taliban. In fact, the Quran explicitly states that Jews and Christians as well as Muslims will go to Heaven.

Interpretations of the Quran that urge violence against innocents, he argues, require poorly informed, out of context readings of a line here/ a line there in my view, not unlike the practice of many Christian Fundamentalists. To show that, he cites the ambiguous verses by which Muslim extremists justify their

acts, and their deceitful disregard of everything Quranic that prohibits their acts. He insists that any valid Quranic interpretation must square with the holy book's "general moral imperatives such as mercy, justice, kindness." "If the reader is intolerant, hateful, or oppressive," he concludes, "so will be the interpretation."

Far from sanctioning "holy war," Abou El Fadl reports, the Quran does not even contain the phrase. The entire concept of jihad as holy war was a later development rooted more in political and economic conflict than in religious difference. Moreover, far from supporting the "get even" (for Israel, for economic imperialism, etc) justification for terrorism, the Quran warns Muslims that the injustice of others does not permit them to be unjust in return. Furthermore, warriors who attacked innocent civilians were regarded by classic Muslim jurists to be "corrupters of the earth and criminals" — guilty of "especially heinous crimes."

The eleven reactions to Abou El Fadl's essay add further depth to the debate. Milton Viorst, Middle East correspondent for *The New Yorker*, praises it as a "brilliant" explanation of why Muslims are "on the brink of becoming a permanent global underclass." Sohail Hashmi, who teaches international relations at Mount Holyoke College, agrees that politically motivated Quranic interpreters, not the Quran itself, feed the us-against-them mentality of violent Muslims. British culture critic Tariq Ali laments that "there was more dissent and skepticism in Islam during the 11th and 12th centuries than there is today." On the other hand, Abid Ullah Jan, a political analyst from Pakistan, blames all debates about Islam on "efforts by the United States and its allies to achieve economic and cultural hegemony by dominating or destroying all opposition." He denounces the essay as "an attempt to please Islam-bashers."

Abou El Fadl's response to the commentaries asserts that the extremists' false fundamentalism threatens to turn Islam into "an idiosyncrasy — a moral and social oddity that is incapable of finding common ground with the rest of human society." His motivation for engaging in debate against extremists, he says, is "to deny such groups their Islamic banner." In his view, the ultimate issue for all Muslims ought to be the extremists' degradation of "the moral integrity of the Islamic tradition."

Khaled Abou El Fadl, Tariq Ali, Milton Viorst and John Esposito. *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2002.

Dr. David F. Duncan is the President of Duncan & Associates, a research and policy studies consulting firm in the areas of public health, mental health, and drug abuse.<http://www.duncan-associates.com>His Commonplace Book is a collection of excerpts, book reviews, and commentary on classic movies and favorite authors.<http://commonplacebook.tripod.com/home/>

Scientists Declaration about The Holy Quran and Islam–Joe Leigh Simpson

By Joe Leigh Simpson

Author and editor of over 20 books, and has published over 181 scientific papers. Co–author of The Developing He is the President of the American Fertility Society. He has received many awards, including the Association of Professors of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Public Recognition Award in 1992. Like many others, Professor Simpson was taken by surprise when he discovered that the Qur'ân and Hadîth contain verses related to his specialised field of study. When he met with Sheikh cAbdul–Majeed A.Zindani, he insisted on verifying the text presented to him from the Qur'ân and Hadîth.

"... these Hadîths (sayings of Muhammad) could not have been obtained on the basis of the scientific knowledge that was available at the time of the 'writer'... It follows that not only is there no conflict between genetics and religion (Islâm) but in fact religion (Islâm) may guide science by adding revelation to some of the traditional scientific approaches... There exist statements in the Qur'ân shown centuries later to be valid which support knowledge in the Qur'ân having been derived from God."

Professor and Chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, Texas, USA.

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