

**Khaled Abou El-Fadl. *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari‘ah in the Modern Age*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014. iv + 499 pages.**

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What happens if an age comes where divine norms no longer constitute a reference point in guiding people’s lives? Who is to speak for the divine will in the modern age, and how is God’s law to play any meaningful role in the age of modernity? We live in a world where Muslims are misunderstood and terribly mistreated by those who are ignorant or prejudiced towards Islam. However, it is difficult to escape the reality that Muslims have become unjust and destructive towards others, each other and themselves. As a result, Muslims find themselves with a conflicting conscience, as Khaled Abou El-Fadl describes it, trying to reconcile between the “Islamic dream and the chaos of the modern condition.” With the rise of what the author refers to as a culture of ugliness among Muslims, it has become “clear that the Islamic dream [is] at a risk of becoming a delusion.” (p. 27) *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari‘ah in the Modern Age* aims to reignite Shari‘ah, which, as the author defines it, is the core of Islam as well as the source of goodness and ethics for the entirety of mankind. Setting itself against the definition of Shari‘ah as a set of rules and commands that are dogmatically proclaimed to be God’s law by a given authoritarian regime, *Reasoning with God* proves to be a brave, bold and powerful attempt to find and show the path for reclaiming Islam’s moral and ethical fabric.

*Reasoning with God* comprises an introduction and three main parts. In the introduction, he defines Shari‘ah as “God’s eternal and immutable law—the way of truth, virtue and justice. In essence, Shari‘ah is the ideal law in an objective and noncontingent sense, as it ought to be in the divine’s realm. [...] While Shari‘ah is divine, *fiqh* (the human understanding of Shari‘ah) [has been] recognized to be only potentially so, and it is the distinction between Shari‘ah and *fiqh* that [has] fueled and legitimated the practice of legal pluralism in Islamic history.” (p. xxxii-xi) In addition to the

sources, nature as well as purpose of Islamic Law, he discusses the rights of God and those of human beings along with some comments regarding modernity and the deterioration it has led to in the conception and practice of Islamic Law.

The first part of the book, “The Islamic Dream and the Chaos of the Modern Condition,” examines the “symptoms” of the ugly reality that we are in through numerous examples. In its first chapter, El-Fadl criticizes those who use the argument of Islam being “perfect” but Muslims being at fault. He is of the conviction that this only justifies the ailments that plague Muslims and has become an excuse for Muslims to not confront the grave realities they are up against. El-Fadl identifies two extremes in the contemporary world: (i) the erasing of the boundaries between God and those who speak for God and (ii) the complete collapse of the authoritative and objectivism in articulating Islamic law and theology. (p. 16-17) In the second chapter, he challenges Muslims practicing technical, legalistic solutions without contemplating their moral impact, social acceptability or reasonableness. He cites two primary causes for this: (i) the lack of qualified people who speak for Islamic law and (ii) the deterioration in the quality of educational institutions training those who practice Islamic jurisprudence in the modern age to unprecedented levels. El-Fadl writes of how puritanism, by using the text as a shield against reason and rationality, has made it so that Shari‘ah stands for irrational and unreasonable propositions, which robs Muslims of the ability to cultivate and practice being reasonable, or that which “appears to be fair for the great majority of people existing within a specific context” (p. 54) In this first part, El-Fadl also describes the Shari‘ah tradition as a creative, dynamic and diverse enterprise. Accordingly, he criticizes approaching the Shari‘ah in a dogmatic way. He is also critical of pietistic affectations and external symbolisms.

The second part, “The Culture of Ugliness and the Plight of Modern Islam,” builds on the first, studying the roots and causes of the problems identified. The primary historical, political and sociological factors that have contributed to the rise of the Salafi and Wahhabi movements and other puritanical dogmatic and literalist orientations and the grave moral repercussions they have brought on are elaborated on in detail. In its first chapter, El-Fadl explores civilizational paradigms. He starts by asking the question: what defines a civilization? Then, after discussing Huntington’s paradigm, he inquires whether this explains the presence of ugliness and vulgarity in the contemporary image of Islam. Indeed, as Samuel Huntington claims, “culture matters.” Nevertheless, according to El-Fadl, within the Islamic context, the role of culture seems to pale in comparison to the complexity of the faith, its history and followers. The second chapter heavily focuses

on “empathetic knowing” and its description as being imperative to the realization of the first principle of Shari’ah: justice, the only moral alternative towards the future of humanity. El-Fadl’s definition of empathetic knowing relies on three key points; empathetic engagement with the other, transparency and honesty in discourse and finally, self-criticism. He criticizes the West’s way of approaching Islamophobia as being constructed as an issue of freedom of speech and not elevated to the level of an offense or crime. The fourth chapter, titled “What *Really* Went Wrong?” is filled with thought provoking assessments regarding Bernard Lewis and his acclaimed work *What Went Wrong?* El-Fadl’s primary criticism is with reference to Lewis’ “inability to gaze to the Western contribution to what went wrong with Muslims. [...] In his [Lewis] long career and extensive writing, he has never made a single critical remark toward Israel, the Jewish tradition, or the colonial legacy” (p. 164) An integral theme of this chapter is the history and nature of authority in Islam and, relying on entirely new research and findings, the emergence of Salafism and Wahhabism and the possible reasons for not only their survival but also overreaching influence. Unlike the extremist religious groups that have emerged over the course of Islamic history, Wahhabism has not become marginalized and eventually reduced to merely a historical curiosity. To the contrary, fundamentalist, extremist movements, inspired by Wahhabism, have only grown stronger in their influence. El-Fadl draws attention to the parallels in the attitude of the Westernized elite and Wahhabis: both share “the same attitude toward Islamic history – both treat this history as a narrative of degeneration, frustrated possibilities, and failure.” (p. 247)

The third part, “Reclaiming Shari’ah in the Modern Age,” is devoted to the study of understanding the road ahead and possible solutions. This part starts with the exposition of the ways of overcoming one of the greatest predicaments of Shari’ah: the state and its role in exercising a set of positive commandments in God’s name. El-Fadl’s argument in this regard is that the duties of the state towards the Shari’ah should be nothing different from those of a modern state towards the ethics of virtue. In essence, to him, there is an immense difference between the state that enforces a code of law as God’s law and defines it as Shari’ah and that which approaches Shari’ah as an all-inclusive moral system to and from God. Hence, the emphasis is continually on the intent of the Shari’ah rather than the set of positive commandments it represents. According to El-Fadl, the idea of God as the political sovereign is fundamentally flawed. Therefore, Shari’ah is not an authoritarian system of government that rules in God’s name. “A Shari’ah-oriented society reasons with God. It consistently visits and revisits the rational and textual indicators to stay on the *sirat al-musta-*

*qim* (straight path) knowing full well that anyone who claims to have an exclusive claim over the *sirat* has by definition deviated from it.” (p. 327) El-Fadl also expands on the concept of reason and its relationship with the divine, confronting the inevitable and inescapable question: “Do we need Shari’ah?” According to the author, while reason, when it comes to personal and social rights and duties, can lead to the same conclusions as revelation, it is not sufficient in obligating. Furthermore, according to El-Fadl, a democratic state cannot coercively enforce the *fiqh* tradition. The Shari’ah stands for certain ideals and the state can acknowledge and encourage these ideals. However, “the branch of government that controls and yields the power of coercion and force should not be empowered to violate these rights of individuals and communities in the name of these ideals.” (p. 333) for the “Qur’an prohibits coercion in matters of religion.” (p. 382) Then, what does one have to do? El-Fadl responds to this question by saying that those searching for the divine will must “seek to understand the moral and ethical objectives and trajectories set in motion and direction by the commandment.” (p. 373) In other words, although occasionally crowded by seemingly theoretical abstractions, what El-Fadl is describing is the need for an epistemological approach. Furthermore, although many maintain that Islamic Law is a viable option in today’s world, the reality is that they do not seem to treat it as such; it is not readily open to be engaged critically or analytically and there seems to be a measure of fear in doing so. Instead, in order to make Islamic law a dynamic, living and real option, El-Fadl writes that it must be freed of convenient and stereotyped responses and given the opportunity to confront and meet real-life challenges

*Reasoning with God* revisits many deep-rooted issues of contemporary Islamic thought and practice and discloses a new interpretation of Islam and the Shari’ah. It is much more than a theoretical journey on defining the role and potential of Shari’ah in the contemporary world, it is more of a comprehensive journey through Islamic theology, law and history, through the Muslim past and present. The book has many strengths. It raises many well-founded criticisms and confronts “myths” towards searching for real answers. At the same time, its part memoir, part academic analysis narrative offers the reader a more enriching reading experience. El-Fadl takes freedom in referencing current figures, some of whom have previously been close acquaintances. His honest assessments and judgments regarding politics (comments about Donald Trump, Asad, Gaddafi, the Arab Spring, etc.) all add to this quality of the book, making it feel incredibly current. It is this personal, anecdotal quality makes it more than a “purely” objective or intellectual journey devoid of any feeling.

Another strength is its emphasis on the primary objective of Shari‘ah being securing the welfare of all human beings, not only Muslims. On this note, in order for people to connect over their humanity El-Fadl writes that there must be no tribal or nationalist affiliation, nor can what is being thought or done solely benefit Muslims. Thus, in order for Muslims to not only reclaim Islam but also enable it to reach its moral and ethical potential, they must “engage the ethical tradition of their faith, especially the Shari‘ah in a dynamic process of moral progress which is untenable without genuine interaction with non-Muslims.” (p. xxvi) The author maintains that, all religions have to be “reasonable” and that “reasonableness” cannot be negotiated through faith based communication; it is a universal enterprise. While this is an empowering message, questions regarding its feasibility do come up. Whether or not people will, in their pursuit of universality, be able to know when something is no longer Islamic, for example, is a concern that surfaces.

Along with its many strengths, there are some features of this work which are, although not weaknesses, important to be aware of whilst reading. First, throughout the book the author consistently invites Muslims to engage in critical inquiry, perhaps most so with their own conscience. He displays trust in the inherent and intrinsic “goodness” of mankind and writes that that which is overwhelmingly recognized as beautiful will, indeed, be beautiful and that which is recognized as “ugly” will, indeed, prove to be ugly to all. In other words, people do not have to agree on a universal definition of value. However, it is important to note here that one must not confuse satisfying one’s own desires with seeking and determining what is right. El-Fadl emphasizes this distinction, “[failing] to differentiate between the cravings of the personal ego and the public good, human beings will inevitably commit injustice.” (p. 27) In the process of reading *Reasoning with God*, there are many points where one is required to be willing to think out of their own mold, to be willing to be more “flexible” in their approach and their religious, cultural as well as social backgrounds. His discussion of women’s issues and of them wearing the *hijab*, having dogs as pets and the selling of alcohol, for example, are just a few examples. While this is necessary and constructive, one does sometimes ask oneself; where the line for critical inquiry must be drawn, if at all?

Second, the reader catches on with what can be identified as a measure of Americanism carried in the narrative of this work. El-Fadl describes the 9/11 atrocities as being “shockingly immoral and ugly to the point of uniting practically all human beings against its evil.” (p. xxvii) As the reader, we cannot help but ask why the calendar of “ugliness” must seemingly need to start with this event. The September 11 attacks were highly dis-

turbing, very disappointing and carried tragic consequences. However, it being absolutely necessary to be described as such by the author in order to be adequately heard by the American and Western audience also raises questions. El-Fadl writes that there is “no denying the virtuous position of the United States as the land of moral salvation and freedom.” (p. 24) Indeed, perhaps this line of thinking about the United States, considering its politics is not something the Middle Eastern audience will be able to resonate with. However, El-Fadl’s admiration of the United States seems to set the stage for him reminding it of the responsibilities it remains to fulfill. With reference to Islamophobia, for instance, he writes, “Perhaps as generations of American Muslims are raised, armed with the values of self-empowerment, they will react to Islamophobia by rejecting the politics of religious affectations, puritanism, and anachronisms [...] [They] perhaps will ignite an intellectual revolution that will be the key to reclaiming the Muslim contribution to humanity.” (p. 86)

*Reasoning with God* is an honest effort towards identifying the errors being made around the world regarding Islam and the ways in which they can be overcome. The author aims to develop an ethical and humanistic Islamic understanding that is rooted in Shari’ah which is also in harmony with the demands of the modern age. What El-Fadl is truly inviting the reader to is a journey of discovering goodness and beauty, for he believes it is only then that one can succeed in reorienting the moral trajectory of Shari’ah. In essence, this is a call for sincerity not only personally but also as a community towards healing wounds, building bridges and creating frameworks through which Islam and other religions can come together to promote “a common goodness and beauty in human life.” On this note, as El-Fadl emphasizes on numerous occasions, while our rational understanding of things has developed greatly, spiritually, we find ourselves trapped in a crisis. The lack of spirituality within the current Muslim world is a serious problem, arguably the greatest of our time. We lack living role models, people who uphold and live by the Prophet Muhammad’s example. Seeking spiritual depth is not only something we are in desperate need of but also imperative to make any meaningful progress.

I think that reading this book would be greatly beneficial for graduate students of Religious Studies, History and Law. They may engage with one another over some of its practical implications as part of their studies or research. This being said, while its language and content is complex, it need not and should not be limited to academically motivated pursuits alone. It will be an incredible resource for anyone who is interested in the relationship between Islam, Muslims, Shari’ah, extremism and modernity and understanding the problems we find ourselves in individually as well as a larger global community.