

The Great Theft — Wrestling Islam from the Extremists

Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl
HarperCollins Publishers, 2005

In coming to terms with other religions, especially Islam in these days, it is helpful to place violent extremist practitioners within the context of the larger faith. Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl's book, *The Great Theft — Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, is such a work. Balanced and readable, the text is of value for Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

The reality of our Army world sees combat deployed commanders and others asking 'Is there a genetic predisposition to violence within Islam?' This text, written by a UCLA professor of law,

eloquently argues that restrictive, harsh Salafist/Wahabist interpretations do not represent broad, tolerant, Muslim majority belief and practice. Fadl treats violent extremist ideology seriously and sees it as a theological orientation of some Muslim practitioners. The book can be a helpful addition in responding to questions concerning violence within Islam.

This text is especially useful for religious support teams in the following ways:

Ideology of violent extremists. Fadl does not minimize, discount, or demonize violent extremist practitioners. Rather, he sees these ‘puritans’ as having a devastating impact upon the faith with their arrogant, hostile, self-righteous, supremacist theological orientation. He advocates a peaceful jihad, whereby with reasoned dialogue and tempered debate, these extremist ideologues may be shepherded back to the tolerant richness of Muslim thought and practice. (For deeper analysis of ideological/theological breaks within violent extremist thought, see Lawrence Wright’s “The Rebellion Within — An Al Qaeda Mastermind Questions Terrorism,” *The New Yorker*, June 2, 2008, pp. 37-53).

Core Muslim values. The author argues that, for over a billion practitioners of Islam throughout the world, compassion, mercy, love and beauty are the core Muslim values. Working in concert with those of other faiths to discover “the potential for beauty and goodness that God has deposited into every human being” (p. 217) is the ethical aspiration of moderate Muslim practice. The richness of the faith is seen, in part, in the forbearance and wisdom brought about by the diversity and interaction of the many different schools of thought within Islam.

Troublesome times. The impact of ‘puritan’ (violent extremist) practice, contends Fadl, is more widespread in these days partially due to Mecca and Medina — the center of the Islamic world — being under the restrictive, intolerant and self-righteous theological orientation of Saudi Wahhabist practice. Though controversial, this analysis sees Wahhabism as “not a school of thought within Islam, but...Islam itself, and it is the only possible Islam” (p. 74), reducing the faith to simple, decisive, absolute terms. Richness and variety

of practice are stifled. Rigidity sets in. Reduction to ‘mechanized robot’ practice results. The ‘puritan’ violent extremist ideal increases.

The Great Theft encourages moderate Muslims to become educated about the richness of the faith. Additionally, by engaging in a “defensive jihad to protect their religion from the onslaught of deformed interpretations and disinformation perpetuated by puritans” (p. 286) moderates can foster truth about the historic faith.

Non-Muslims are encouraged to seek to learn and understand the richness of Islamic thought and practice; support the work of moderate practitioners; take clear stands against torture and states practicing torture; and demonstrate the mercy and compassion (kindness and tenderness) of God in daily interactions and pursuits.

To build my appreciation for the Muslim faith, I often consider the creative beauty of Islamic art or recall the piety of individual practitioners I’m privileged to know. Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl’s work, *The Great Theft*, is an additional resource that promotes empathy, tolerance and respect. The text is a welcome addition to the growing body of work that fosters such understanding.

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