

El Fadl, Khaled Abou. *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.

Khaled Abou El Fadl is the rising star in the contemporary search for a moderate Muslim intellectual who will reassure liberal Americans of the essentially unthreatening nature of Islam. Currently the Omar and Azmeralda Alfi Distinguished Fellow in Islamic Law at UCLA, he is also the author of *And God Knows the Soldiers* (2001), *Speaking in God's Name* (2001), *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (2002), *Reasoning With God* (2002), and other works on Islamic law, theology, and politics. Given the events of 9/11 and their aftermath, and given his views, El Fadl has attracted a good deal of media attention, getting favorable coverage in *The New Republic*, *National Review*, the *Los Angeles Times* and elsewhere, and having also been featured in the PBS Frontline Documentary, "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero." (The most detailed journalistic account is Franklin Foer, "Moral Hazard," *The New Republic*, Nov. 7, 2002).

*The Place of Tolerance in Islam (TPTI)* is a book-length reprinting of an extended discussion between El Fadl and eleven commentators for the magazine *Boston Review*. The book begins with a short Preface by the Editors, followed by a twenty-page title essay by El Fadl, defending the compatibility of Islam with a virtue of tolerance; the eleven commentaries, totaling 65 pages and averaging about six, constitute the bulk of the book, and are followed by a short Reply by El Fadl. Six of the commentators are believing Muslims (Sohail Hashmi, Abid Ullah Jan, Amina Wadud, Akeel Bilgrami, Mashood Rizvi, and Qamar-ul Huda), although in one case, Bilgrami's, the commentator's beliefs are enigmatic enough to raise "Straussian" questions about what it is that he really believes. A seventh commentator, Tariq Ali, is an Anglo-Pakistani "apostate" of Marxist sympathies ("apostate" in scare quotes because it's not clear he ever was a genuine believer); the rest are outsiders to the faith, invited to comment in virtue of their academic expertise (Milton Viorst, Stanley Kurtz, John L. Esposito, and R. Scott Appleby).

As far as I can see, *TPTI* is a failure with respect to virtually every goal it sets for itself. El Fadl's opening essay is unconvincing, and the commentaries responding to it are of a pretty low caliber. Having successfully rebutted his critics in the Reply at the end of the book, the fact remains that El Fadl establishes nothing of philosophical or political significance in the book, and ultimately does nothing to respond to the real questions an intelligent layperson might have about the connections between Islam, terrorism, and theocracy. The book is about nine parts hype to perhaps one part substance.

Part of the problem here is structural. Whatever one thinks of his views, El Fadl is an able and intelligent theoretician with substantial expertise in the subject at hand. Given the opportunity, I'm sure he would have been able to offer a respectable defense of the thesis he defends in this book. But he isn't given the

opportunity: there is no way to defend the thesis he wants to defend in the twenty pages allotted to him here. Unsurprisingly, little that he says in those pages convinces the skeptical reader. The commentaries confront the same problem, but more acutely. What sense does it make to invite *eleven* commentators to write *six* pages a piece on a *twenty* page essay? None that I can think of, and it's no surprise that given these constraints, none of the commentators says anything of substance in the few pages at his or her disposal.

A more sensible volume would have given El Fadl at least sixty pages for his opening essay, cut the number of commentators down to two or three, and then given El Fadl another thirty or forty pages for a proper rebuttal. That would have made the book longer and more expensive, but it would also have made it worth reading.

Structure, however, cannot by itself account for the deficiencies of the book. The problem with its content is precisely its content, and the problems begin with El Fadl's opening essay. El Fadl begins with a ten-page historical sketch that takes up about half of his space, and spends the remaining ten pages or so on his direct argument, which discuss the necessary preconditions of a proper interpretation of the Quran. The first of these is the possession of a "moral sense" cultivated prior to and independently of any contact with the Quran, which serves to regulate one's interpretation of its text. The second is a historically-informed sense of context, so that one knows what is essential to the message of a given Quranic verse and what is not. With these two interpretive tools in hand, El Fadl claims that we discern an "ethic of diversity and tolerance" in the Quran, a defensive and proportional conception of *jihad*, and a means of explaining away the otherwise troublesome ethico-political prescriptions one finds in the Quranic text.

Limitations of space preclude an extended discussion of El Fadl's argument, but the problems with it are easily enumerated. For one, El Fadl seems unaware of the way in which his appeal to a "moral sense" subordinates the Quran to a humanistic ethic not found within it. Consequently, he neither accounts for this moral sense nor explains what is distinctively Islamic about it. Nor does he have a good answer to the Islamic fundamentalist who resists his interpretive procedures and insists that Islam be treated as a self-contained normative system divorced from humanism. Second, to the extent that El Fadl seeks textual warrant for his claim of an "ethic of diversity and tolerance" in the Quran, his readings are simply implausible (15-16); the Quran recognizes diversity, but contrary to El Fadl, does not in the least "endorse" or "sanction" it. Third, with respect to *jihad*, even if we accept the thesis that the Quranic conception of *jihad* is defensive and involves a principle of proportionality (a generally but not wholly convincing thesis on textual grounds), I don't see what El Fadl has to say to the Islamist terrorist or fellow-traveler who claims that such terrorism *is* defensive and proportional, as they often do. Such a person may

wrongly be applying the criteria of self-defense and proportionality, but neither the right reasons nor the right criteria are to be found in the text of the Quran. Fourth, El Fadl himself concedes that his reading of the texts is not the only legitimate one; others are possible. But if so, it's hard to see why his reading should carry the day except insofar as it coheres with his "moral sense"—which leads us right back to the initial problem.

The failure of El Fadl's project is instructive, and the diagnosis, I think, is that the Quran is, at the end of the day, a poetically powerful but normatively indeterminate text. To look to it for a viable ethics or political theory is like looking to find the same in, say, the Homeric epics. An ingenious interpreter could, I suppose, find an "ethic of diversity and tolerance" in the *Odyssey*, as easily as she might find an ethic of "holy war" in the *Iliad*. But there would be something quixotic about either enterprise, and there is something similarly quixotic about El Fadl's. It's obvious to anyone who has read and thought about the Quran that El Fadl's interpretation of it is not an exegetic attempt to tell us what the Quran says in its own terms, but a Procrustean attempt to impose his own humanistic assumptions on it. At a certain point of following this project, one wonders why El Fadl doesn't just ditch the Quran altogether and argue for his favored moral conception in just the way that the rest of us do—without a Scriptural safety-net. Why use the Quranic text as a safety-net if it's ultimately going to end up subordinate to the interpreter's "moral sense" anyway? And what normative work is the *text* doing if the project is driven so thoroughly by that moral sense?

If El Fadl's essay fails to convince, the commentaries do less. John L. Esposito and R. Scott Appleby function as cheerleaders for El Fadl, wasting about fifteen pages to congratulate him for the sheer act of having put pen to paper. There isn't, to use a Quranic phrase, an atom's weight of substance in these essays, nor is there any point in reading them—except perhaps as documentary evidence of the sad fate of secular criticism in the American academy. Tariq Ali, Stanley Kurtz, Amina Wadud and Mashood Rizvi seem frankly uninterested in what El Fadl actually says in the book, devoting the space allotted to them to unrelated topics that they found more interesting: that's another twenty pages down the drain. Milton Viorst and Qamar-ul Huda produce tangentially-relevant commentaries that discuss logistical problems involved in implementing El Fadl's prescriptions; though interesting, neither essay deals with El Fadl's central interpretive claims, and so neither really addresses the main issues. Finally, Sohail Hashmi's essay serves to confuse as many issues in as little space as possible—making it, in a way, the most efficient piece of writing in the book. That leaves two on-topic essays from widely-divergent perspectives, one by Abid Ullah Jan, the other by Akeel Bilgrami.

Jan, an open sympathizer with Islamic terrorism and theocracy, thinks that El Fadl has conceded too much to critics of Islam. El Fadl makes short work

of Jan's fallacy-strewn and historically-illiterate essay, but never raises the question of how it is that such a person got to write for *Boston Review* in the first place. A look at Jan's website tells us that he's an open ally of the most reactionary, anti-Semitic and militarist factions of the Pakistani military and secret service (go to <http://www.icssa.org>, and note the favorable reference made to the notorious General Hamid Gul). It's not clear to me whether the editors were aware of any of this: if they weren't aware, it's not clear why not; if they were aware, it's unclear what, if anything, the knowledge meant to them. In any case, they say nothing about it.

Akeel Bilgrami makes the interpretive recommendation that we read the Quran by distinguishing sharply between the "spiritual" verses associated with the so-called "Meccan Revelation," (i.e., those verses revealed early on in the Prophet's career, when he lived in the city of Mecca) and the "legalistic" ones associated with the so-called "Medinian Revelation" (i.e., those verses revealed after the Prophet's exile to Medina). The Meccan Revelation, Bilgrami argues, supersedes the Medinian one; since the problematic texts are located in the Medinian Revelation, we can do away with the largest textual problems in the Quran simply by discarding the texts that get in the way.

El Fadl raises some obvious semi-technical criticisms of Bilgrami's view, but one doesn't need those criticisms to discern its brazen absurdity. In plain speech, what Bilgrami's thesis amounts to is the assertion that God revealed his will to Muhammad and "perfected" the Islamic faith so that Muslims would one day decide arbitrarily to divide the revelation in half, throw out one half, and treat the favored half as uplifting poetry—on the grounds that the favored half coheres better with "our" secular/left-wing political commitments in reflective equilibrium (for elaboration, see Bilgrami's "What Is a Muslim? Fundamental Commitment and Cultural Identity," *Critical Inquiry*, 18:4 [Summer 1992]). Bilgrami claims to find textual warrant for this interpretation, but doesn't cite a single Quranic verse that does so. Inference to the best explanation: there isn't one. Of all the absurdities that theism has produced, I don't think things get any better than the idea of a divine revelation based on planned obsolescence.

*TPTI* is, in short, a feel-good volume intended for those raised in the Church of Multicultural Neutrality, eager to be absolved of the need to grapple with fundamental theological or philosophical questions, eager to think well of "the Other," and incapable of imagining that Islam as such might figure in a causal explanation of the current travails of the Islamic world. It functions principally as a document of what has gone wrong with contemporary English-speaking scholarship on Islam, and only secondarily, if that, as a guide to "the place of tolerance in Islam"—or for that matter, to anything else about Islam, terrorism, war, or theocracy. It will not convince orthodox Muslims or hard-core secularists of its claims, and I doubt it will *convince* anyone else. But then, I doubt it was meant to. The task of persuasion requires an effort at argumentation,

## Reason Papers Vol. 27

and that is precisely what is missing from this book. For what it's worth, that is also the key to understanding the book's content, its purpose, and its intended audience.

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