

Book Review

The Prophet's Pulpit: Commentaries on the State of Islam (Volume 1)

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The Prophet's Pulpit: Commentaries on the State of Islam (Vol. 1) is a collection of twenty-two *khutbahs* (Islamic sermons) delivered online by Khaled Abou El Fadl. The *khutbahs* are divided in five parts, namely Foundations: From Darkness to Light; On Love and Building a Relationship with God; Keeping Our Faith in the Modern Day; On Justice; and On Gratitude and Navigating Hardship, where Khaled attempts to delineate the spiritual and ethical path forward for the Muslims while addressing issues like the challenges of oppression, injustice and an overwhelming Islamophobia in the contemporary world.

Khaled Abou El Fadl is the Omar and Azmeralda Alfi Distinguished Professor of Law at the UCLA School of Law where he teaches *International Human Rights; Islamic Jurisprudence; Political Asylum and Refugee Law; The Trafficking of Human Beings: Law and Policy; Political Crimes and Legal Systems; and Muslims, Race and Law*. He was formerly the Chair of the Islamic Studies Interdepartmental Program at UCLA. He is the founder of the Institute of Advanced Usuli Studies ("The Usuli Institute"), a non-profit educational institute dedicated to ethics, beauty and critical thinking in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

He, as he states in his *khutbah* 10, has sometimes been charged of liberalizing and westernizing Islam. They say that he does not like Islam the way it is, so he wants to change it. As a response to this charge, Khaled says:

The same cleric who once called me a person of "innovation and heresy", who put me on blacklists, and who declared that I should not be allowed to speak at Islamic events, have lo and behold, discovered overnight that music was not *haram* after all. Not only this, but they have come to some odd, even ironic, conclusions. These clerics now declare that Mariah Carey, with her exposed bosom, is an acceptable form of entertainment, yet they still insist that methods of reciting the Qur'an that observe the rules of tonality and music are *haram*. Apparently, the recitations of Abdul Basit and Shaykh Tablawi are *haram*, but Mariah Carey is not ... The same clerics that for years said it is *haram* for men and women to interact in

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mosques or at work now say that there is no problem with them attending music concerts. I, the so called "liberal" and "progressive," would not attend these concerts because my Islamic sense of character would find it distasteful and morally uncomfortable (pp.93-94).

Khaled argues, in the same *khutbah*, "it does not take a genius to know why they (the clerics) changed overnight. They changed because the King or Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia wanted the change. It is as simple as that. No juristic explanations. No *fiqh*. No method or research." The Islam they imagine is "an artificial and invented Islam" that "have nothing to do with the intuitive, beautiful, and serene message of the Islamic faith."

Khaled's opinions and arguments throughout the *khutbahs* appear to be based on the following conceptualization of Islam: Islamic faith considers God as a loving God, and God's creation of humanity as an act of love (p.68, *khutbah* 7). Every human being on the face of earth is equally important to God. God's love engulfs every human being with "mercy, kindness, beauty, justice, and equity." God expects human beings to recognize this love. To truly recognize it is to love it back. It is the love that comes from giving every human being their worth and dignity. Hence, Islamic faith commands a Muslim to manifest the "Divine attributes" of "mercy, kindness, beauty, justice, and equity" (p.51, *khutbah* 5). When one kills a human being, they commit an offence against God. One does the same when they act like certain human beings are worth more than others (p.60, *khutbah* 6). "God reminds us time and again that God does not love the unjust and God does not accept injustice. Injustice and oppression are antithetical to the soul of Islam" (p.44, *khutbah* 4).

Oppression and injustice are a common phenomenon of society where certain people enjoy wealth, power and status denying others their freedom and rights to live with human dignity. To maintain the oppressive status quo, the oppressors require obedience of other people. And obedience is exacted with reference to money, status, institutions, ideologies, etc. which appear as gods having the share of the Divine right to obedience (*khutbahs* 4 & 13). Obeying the oppressive status quo is presented as a moral obligation for people, and oppression legitimated (p.29, *khutbah* 3). Thus, as Khaled argues, human claim of share of the Divine right to obedience is the root of all oppression and injustice in society.

Hence, as *khutbah* 13 goes, Islam declares "There is no god but God" to overthrow the moral ground of all oppressions. This declaration entails that one must worship only the Divine Entity God, the creator, provider and sustainer, none else. That means, obedience is due only to the Divine Entity Allah, none else. As the creation of Allah, everybody has the equal status in this world. They are free agents in this world, responsible to Allah only, none else. No one is superior to anybody else, particularly the type of superiority that makes one feel entitled to obedience simply by status (p.123). Thus, the declaration problematizes all possibilities of oppression, inequality and injustice to liberate human beings.

The declaration sums up the moral vision of Islam: the moral vision of human dignity and liberation that urges human beings to eradicate all oppressions and injustice from the world and liberate all human beings. The liberating message,

as *khutbah* 15 goes, declared to both rich and poor, Black and White, free and slave: “Your dignity stems from your Maker. Worship your Maker alone. In the eyes of God, money does not belong to whoever controls it. Rather, it belongs to God, and you are simply deputies in charge of wealth on God’s behalf.” It was a revolutionary and liberating message. The earliest Muslims believed that *sharia* of God broke the yoke of submission, empowering people to assert their humanity and to stand tall in dignity against those who controlled, dominated and abused human beings (p.143). This explains the excitement of the Companions to fight all oppressions in society and sacrifice their life for the moral cause of establishing human freedom, equality, and justice.

However, Islam has now been confined to empty rituals only. They do not lead to the liberation of human beings, the aspirations of justice, or to a higher ethical existence any more. Whereas, the rituals are actually to strengthen the relationship with God. For example, as Khaled says, prayer is a mechanism to acknowledge the ethical issue of gratitude to God (p.155, *khutbah* 15). Moreover, Muslims have now been intellectually inactive and have lost the liberating spirit of Islam. They do not have the courage to speak for the oppressed. Their heart has been dead. The instances of oppressions do not touch their heart. That’s why, they have nothing to give to the modern world. As a result, an overwhelming Islamophobia has engulfed the Muslim mind. Islamophobia, as Khaled says, is a movement to control information to create deep-seated insecurities in the hearts and minds of Muslims about their own tradition (p.109, *khutbah*, 12). As a result, they lose their self-determination and suffer from inferiority complex.

Khaled argues that if our hearts do not cry at the oppressed, then our *iman* is in serious trouble; one is in serious trouble when one sees genocide, for example, and their hearts do not even move, as the Prophet said that if you do not even recognize evil, then you are in serious trouble (*khutbah* 2). Hence, he calls on the Muslims to train their heart so that they feel the suffering of the oppressed. One needs to think and reflect to train the heart by using the intellect, as the Qur’an time and again urges human beings to use their reasoning faculty. With both the heart and mind active, we need to establish a relationship with God to be good Muslims (*khutbah* 9). And that can be done through *zikr*, i.e. remembering God always in our life (*khutbah* 4), the remembrance of obedience only to God. All other obedience is *shirk*, the cause of all oppressions and injustices. Khaled’s argument also implies that negating all obedience “without bringing God into the equation” may fall into obedience to the ego, a false god. Hence, obedience to God only, none else, is a must for liberation of human beings (*khutbah* 5). Khaled maintains that this does not mean that one must disobey the law. Obedience to the law is not a problem as far as the law upholds justice (*khutbah* 3).

Thus, in these *khutbahs*, Khaled unlocks the gist of Islam in simple, clear and accessible language.

However, Khaled’s conceptualization of Islam takes a basic sense of morality as universal (*khutbah* 2), which might be questioned as the moral sense appears to be different in different cultural groups. The Qur’anic message, i.e. “God created people to be different” (Q 10:99; 13:31; 35:28), and his interpretation

of the message, i.e. “every intellect is unique and this is part of the miracle of diversity that God has created,” also question the idea of the basic moral sense as universal. Moreover, even a liberating idea when considered universal may be used to exploit and oppress others, while Islam has emerged to problematize all possibilities of oppression. Hence, Khaled’s fixation with the universal moral sense appears to contradict the moral vision of Islam which he propounded in his *khutbahs*. Apart from this contradiction, his understanding of Islam is piercing and his presentation demystifying.