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Islamic Reformation or "Big Crunch"? A Review Essay

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Khaled Abou El Fadl. *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists.* New York: Harper Collins, 2005. 308 pages.

Tariq Ramadan. *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 272 pages.

Like the physical cosmos, the universe of Islam began with a "big bang" God saying to Muhammad, "Recite!" The release of religious energy triggered by this command was not as instantaneous as the one that physicists visualize when they model the origin of the physical universe, but it is universally agreed that this moment—or belief in the moment—was one of the most powerful events in history. Conquest and empire followed in almost miraculous fashion, and Islam has since spread through every clime.

The physical big bang started with an undifferentiated singularity but quickly developed an unevenness that led to the formation of stars and galaxies of astonishing variety. According to some scientists, after eons of time, a "big crunch" will follow the big bang. Stars and galaxies will lose their heterogeneity and meld their energy in a return to the singularity from which they began. Then the cycle will start all over again. This model of diversity expanding from singularity and then contracting again toward renewed singularity may help to illuminate a pattern in the history of Islam that has manifested itself three times in the past and is recurring at the present moment. It may further help in identifying the positions that some prominent Muslim thinkers have staked out in recent writings.

God's word, the Qur'an, does not contain detailed blueprints for ei-

ther political or social action. Supplementary knowledge, initially in the form of the hadith (the oral tradition of the Prophet), was needed to understand the particulars of God's message. Scholars today debate the "who?" and the "when?" of this supplementary knowledge, but Muslims have never doubted its authority. If Muhammad was a historical personage who lived in seventh-century Arabia and if political and social forces that were associated with him accomplished the momentous military and political transformations that are attributed to them by both Muslim and non-Muslim historians, then many individuals must have known him personally. Common sense further suggests that his associates who participated in the far-flung military and political activities of the early community would have told and retold their stories about him to the next generation in more than one location.

People also made up stories about Muhammad and attributed to him things that he neither did nor said. It is possible that many frauds and misattributions (perhaps most) were perpetrated in the early Abbasid period, where scholars who are skeptical of the entire corpus of hadith like to situate this exfoliation of tradition.

Yet it is unreasonable to think that no stories that were told about Muhammad were true, unless Muhammad the man never existed. And it is similarly unreasonable to think that the stories that were told about Muhammad (whether true or false) were first told in the same five places—Mecca, Medina, Basra, Kufa, and Baghdad. People would have repeated stories about the Prophet (whether true or not) wherever the vagaries of their lives chanced to take them and wherever they found an audience.

The result—confirmed by thousands of anecdotes about hadith collectors who traveled hither and yon in search of new or corroborating lore—is that stories about Muhammad's life practices and non-Qur'anic teachings diverged. Hadith varied greatly from place to place, which was why hadith collectors had to travel (otherwise, they all would have traveled to the same few birthplaces of hadith invention).

In the Islamic big bang, the homogeneity of the initial singularity (that is, the verses of the Qur'an) expanded through hadith and less formal storytelling into scores of localized understandings of Islam. The Muslim communities that were strewn sparsely over the immense expanse of land conquered by the Arab armies understood their faith in different ways, and pious men in each locality elaborated on what they understood—either by inventing new lore that was consonant with their beliefs or by choosing to repeat only those hadith that suited their out-

look. Although the term *sunna* comes to mean "tradition" in the sense of the more or less uniform religious praxis of all Muslims, in the first three centuries the big bang led to a multiplicity of highly localized *sunnas.*

Scholars who became concerned about the proliferation of hadith touched off Islam's first big crunch. They established rules for distinguishing truth from falsehood, and they discarded any hadith that did not come up to their standards. These collectors (al-Bukhari, Muslim, and four others) of "sound" traditions all worked in Iran, and today they are universally lauded for the service they performed in delegitimizing tens of thousands of hadith. For many Muslims at the time, however, the effect of their triage must have been devastating. Local practices and beliefs that were explicitly based on previously unquestioned Prophetic example suddenly became suspect. And suspicion was cast on the veracity of eminent persons in each town's religious history.

The collectors of "sound" traditions discarded huge quantities of previously authoritative lore and homogenized whatever remained. Although the chains of authorities that they reported for each hadith can be analyzed for clues to the geography of dispersal, the collections were organized in ways that implied that "sound" hadith had always been the common property of all Muslims. Hundreds of scholars did continue to collect hadith outside the framework of criteria set by these collectors, and guardians of local traditions preserved hundreds of unsound hadith. But in time, the work of the master collectors succeeded in paring away most of this heterogeneity and establishing a new singularity—Qur'an and a unified *Sunna,* the common basis for all Sunni Muslim life. Accordingly, the era of differing local *sunnas* faded from the history books.

The second big crunch came in the area of law. The collections of "sound" hadith were completed by al-Bukhari, Muslim, and others in the ninth century. The full impact of their work took much longer to be felt, but the scholarly principles they established eliminated hadith as an innovative medium for expanding the concept and practice of Islam. As the hadith were brought under control, so to speak, differences of opinion about Islam increasingly became the province of legal scholars. Their views on how Islam was to be lived ranged from hyperrigid (Hanbalis) to almost laissez faire (Zahiris), and these differences were encapsulated in theories about how law should be derived from first principles. Dozens of thinkers propounded theories, and their disciples spread them across the land.

Historians have traced the geographical expansion of the most enduring schools of interpretation, but the unsuccessful approaches have left few traces. Heterogeneity based on legal outlook did not become as highly localized as heterogeneity had been in the era of proliferating hadith because by the tenth century the Muslim community had become more geographically unified. Therefore, instead of different communities having different *sunnas* defined by the corpus of hadith passed on by local reciters, major population centers experienced legal competition of such intensity that it sometimes bordered on civil war. From the tenth through the twelfth centuries, chronicles report hundreds of incidents of social conflict ranging from protests and riots to all-out urban fratricide. More often than not, the parties to these conflicts are labeled by the names of law schools, even though the exact content of these labels varied from place to place. Hanafis and Shafiʻis competed ferociously in almost every urban center in Iran and Iraq, for example, and Baghdad was kept in perpetual turmoil by Hanbali zealots. Even when the confrontation was between Sunnis and Shiʻites, the Sunni side was often identified by law school. Yet it seems likely that calling someone a Hanbali (or Shafiʻi or Hanafi) in Baghdad meant something rather different from calling someone the same thing in Herat or Nishapur or Damascus. Only four law school names survived this period of conflict. Those named in earlier sources disappeared.

By the fourteenth century, the struggle between law schools had died down. Most educational institutions (the period of legal conflict coincides with the proliferation of *madrassas,* or colleges of higher Islamic learning) continued to be devoted to one or another legal interpretation. But a small number of influential *madrassas* taught all four of the surviving Sunni law schools. The belief became engrained that these four schools—Hanafi, Shafiʻi, Maliki, and Hanbali—were so respectful of one another that individual Sunnis could choose to affiliate with any one of them.

This second big crunch reformed the (Sunni) Muslim singularity—Qur'an, *Sunna,* and *Shariʻa,* the new uniform basis for all Muslim belief and practice. Just as the canonization of the major hadith collections required a rewriting of history to make it seem that Muslims everywhere had always centered their lives on stories that were "sound," so the anointing of four schools of law as equally legitimate necessitated some historical revision. New historical accounts smoothed away the legal conflicts of the past and exaggerated the degree of harmony between and within the surviving schools. Law was now enshrined as the central

concern of Muslim scholars from the very beginning. Although the law schools took shape well after the lifetimes of the Prophet, his immediate successors, and even the schools' namesakes, Islam now came to be considered almost synonymous with *Shari'a.*

The third big crunch followed a new wave of heterogeneity that grew out of a dynamic current of Islamic expansiveness that began at the very time that jurists were struggling to gain control of their legal differences and retrojecting into the past a new sort of legal-based Islamic homogeneity. The first formal Sufi brotherhoods took shape in the thirteenth century, and organized Sufism proliferated and diversified in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Mystics who dedicated themselves to seeking a sense of union with God had been known since the beginning of Islam, and some mystic practices and instructive tales had entered Islam from other religions. However, mysticism as the central experience of elaborately organized and geographically extensive fraternal organizations was new.

Beyond the idea of a mystic quest and a ritual focus on *dhikr* (a form of remembrance or invocation of God), the brotherhoods varied greatly in devotional practice, formal organization, social profile, and even costume. Geographically, they also represented a new stage in Islamic social history. At the height of the hadith era, Muslim communities had been few and far between. Their isolation had bred diversity. It took the efforts of thousands of itinerant hadith collectors to bring order and a measure of homogeneity to this diversity. During the succeeding phase, the law schools spread through master-disciple linkages. The views of recognized masters had influence beyond their immediate milieu, but there was no formal hierarchy, no way of assuring uniformity of doctrine from place to place, and no attempt at geographical organization. It took the proliferation of *madrassas* and later the institution of state-controlled judicial hierarchies to bring order and instill the degree of homogeneity that was implied by the myth of mutual toleration. In the third phase, the Sufi orders developed formal organizational links across broad geographical areas that did not conform to political frontiers. They also turned master-disciple relationships into formal hierarchies, both locally and interregionally.

By the eighteenth century, there were thousands of Sufi brotherhoods reaching into every Muslim community and spreading knowledge of Islam into new lands. As had happened with the proliferation of hadith and of legal philosophies, the move to curtail Sufism began with scholars. Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab is notorious for his categorical

opposition to Sufism in the eighteenth century, but his antipathy was shared in the nineteenth century by would-be modernizers who felt that Sufism had become a shameful sink of superstitious practices and beliefs. With the help of governments that shared these views, the scholars saw to it that by the end of the nineteenth century Sufi "excesses" had been largely discredited, and a moderate and spiritual frame of mind sometimes referred to as *neo-Sufism* came to replace a wide variety of devotional practices. The big crunch that put the brakes on Sufi expansion produced a new singularity—Qur'an, *Sunna, Shari'a,* and a nondemonstrative form of fraternal pietism.

In each of these three historical instances, some aspect of Islam experienced dynamic growth and burgeoning diversity only to be reined in by scholars who felt that things were going too far. During their growth periods, however, hadith transmission, legal speculation, and organized Sufism all served as avenues for the assimilation of new ideas and practices that were drawn from sources outside Islam. Hadith came in from Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian traditions. Legal disagreements incorporated theological and rationalistic outlooks from non-Islamic sources. And the Sufi brotherhoods accommodated local beliefs and rituals in lands far beyond the frontiers of the medieval caliphate.

The three big crunch periods curtailed and normalized these processes of assimilation. They also were occasions for rewriting history and downplaying information that did not conform to newly consolidated norms. Each fresh articulation of the Islamic singularity presented itself as being the true essence of Islam from the time of the Prophet onward.

Today we can see a new proliferation of diversity as the world Muslim community seeks to assimilate influences from non-Islamic sources, primarily Western culture and science. This fourth phase of expansion began in the eighteenth century and has accelerated rapidly in recent decades. Many fresh articulations of Islam are now being put forward by Muslim scholars and laypersons, and a good share of them emanate from individuals who live in Europe and North America.

Just as it happened in the earlier phases of Islamic expansion and contraction, from the mid-twentieth century onward this burgeoning heterogeneity has generated a growing countereffort to contain proliferation of ideas and restore doctrinal and ritual homogeneity. Because this struggle (between those who would shape new understandings of Islam and those who want to hold fast to what they proclaim to be the true practice of Islam in the time of the Prophet) has become immersed in a worldwide struggle that is increasingly defined by political interests,

both Muslim and non-Muslim, little attention is paid to the earlier episodes of diversity versus homogeneity. This is regrettable since there are lessons to be learned through comparisons of then and now.

The first lesson is that the outcome of a big crunch usually appears as a victory for the most sober, intelligent, hard-working, and pacific thinkers. But their victory is never entirely one-sided. Despite the pleadings of a few purists, some hadith did come to be recognized as integral components of everyone's Islam. And despite the absolutist attitudes of some legal zealots, a degree of legal diversity did come to be accepted as normal within the broader truth of the *Shari'a.* Even Sufism, which many legal scholars initially abhorred, became in time a respectable form of Muslim devotion—once it had been shorn of behavioral "excesses" and subordinated to Qur'an, *Sunna,* and *Shari'a.* In other words, a big crunch never pares away everything that has accreted during a period of heterogeneity. A big crunch is a compromise that presents itself as a renewed truth or reconstituted singularity through the process of selectively reinterpreting the history of the faith.

The second lesson is that however much laypersons (in the sense of people outside the ranks of recognized scholars) may have contributed to the experiential, cultural, and geographical expansions of the faith, the big crunch compromises have normally been crafted by scholars of recognized authority. But in the absence of any formal ecclesiastical structure, authority itself is subject to evolution.

It is within this schema of Islamic religious history that I would like to discuss recent books by two notable Muslim scholars. Both Khaled Abou El Fadl's *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* and Tariq Ramadan's *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* are written in English, though both authors are Arabs. The former is a professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, and the latter a long-time resident of Geneva (he has also written a number of books in French) who would happily accept a senior professorial post at Notre Dame University if he could obtain a visa to enter the United States. Needless to say, their choice of language indicates a choice of audience, and even though more Muslims worldwide might read English than Arabic, the audience that the authors are aiming for is likely to be as much non-Muslim as Muslim and resident in either Europe or the United States. This mixed readership puts both authors in the camp of thinkers who are contributing to the growing heterogeneity of views in the Muslim world and who are opening Muslim religious discourse to ideas of non-Muslim provenance.

The opposing current of thought that is trying to rein in Islam's

growing diversity is more commonly expressed in Arabic or some other non-European language spoken in the Muslim world. Thus, these contemporary figures are engaged in a contest over whether nontraditional languages are valid vehicles for making authoritative statements about Islam. This is a rerun of the battle that Sufi writers fought and won centuries ago to legitimate Persian, Turkish, and Urdu as central languages of Islamic religious expression.

With Abou El Fadl and Ramadan, the appeal to a (partially) non-Muslim readership suggests a belief that non-Muslims will have some influence over what Islam becomes in coming decades. However, they frame this belief in different ways. As signaled by his choice of title, Abou El Fadl is engaged in a vehement attack on "extremists," by which he means not just Muslims who are committed to using violence to advance their cause but *salafis* (those who believe that the precise practices of the Prophet's generation define perfect Islam) in general. Inasmuch as he presents his ideas of those of a "moderate" who is thoroughly based in the Muslim legal tradition, he would probably disagree with the argument of this review that Islam is experiencing a tug of war between those who would militantly rein in Muslim heterogeneity and those who would expand the Muslim conceptual world to make room for attitudes found in non-Muslim, mainly Western traditions. But he sees the militant conservatives as attempting to hijack the faith and redefine it in a rigid and stultifying manner, and he sees himself as a paladin in the struggle against this assault (p. 105):

> The Muslim mainstream is targeted by puritans. The puritan creed is strongly evangelical, and through proselytizing, the puritans hope to convert the mainstream to what they consider to be the true Islam. In my view, this is where moderate Muslims must play a critical role. For the reasons discussed elsewhere, the juristic class will not be able to play its historical role in marginalizing the puritans. The burden must fall on moderate Muslims to articulate the alternative to the puritan menace. Modern Muslims must be able to tap into the collective inherited memory of Muslims and remind them that the moderate way is indeed the heart and soul of Islam.

Abou El Fadl's use of words from the Western Christian tradition—"puritan," "evangelical," "proselytizing," "convert"—signals his consciousness of a non-Muslim audience that is also disquieted by the strength of Protestant fundamentalism in American life. In targeting the

religious traditions of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab and of the Saudi kingdom as the mainstays of "the puritan menace," he is searching for common ground with non-Muslim Americans who harbor deep suspicions of America's most important Middle Eastern ally (283):

> Puritans and moderates are opposite poles that are both products of modernity and that also respond to modernity. Both orientations react to modernity, the one by rejecting it and the other by embracing it. There are some orientations in Islam that do not seem to be touched by modernity and do not respond to it, such as the conservatives or traditionalists, but I do not believe that they are significant in shaping the future of Islam. I believe the future of Islam will be shaped either by the puritans or the moderates.

Here Abou El Fadl explicitly states his personal goals—embracing modernity and shaping the future of Islam. In so doing, he almost casually dismisses the conservative and traditionalist approaches that engage probably most of the world's Muslims at the present moment. Like Usama bin Laden at one pole and George W. Bush at the other, he implies, "If you are not with me, you are with the puritans." His position calls to mind what Ayatollah Khomeini once termed "American Islam," meaning not the Islam actually practiced in the United States but a form of Islam that the American government (or more charitably, believers in the American credo of freedom, secularism, and democracy) can feel comfortable with. In the later chapters of his book, his detailed discussions of modernity, democracy, human rights, interactions with non-Muslims, *jihad,* terrorism, and women all present conclusions that are in the comfort zone of American non-Muslim readers.

Khalid Abou El Fadl is not the only author who has undertaken to explain Islam in a fashion that is calculated to appeal to Western non-Muslims. Although he is far better schooled in Islamic law than most of these writers, he shares with them a readership that is eager for their message and an ability to have his writings ballyhooed in the American press. The question that is yet to be answered is whether preaching that is sensitive to the hopes and fears of non-Muslims and intent on weaning them of their real or latent Islamophobia can also shape the future of Islam, which Abou El Fadl feels is hanging in the balance.

With Tariq Ramadan, we encounter a different strategy, though he seems to agree with Abou El Fadl's opposition to militant *salafism,* embrace of modernity, and aspiration to shape Islam's future. Being at-

tuned to the contested status of Islam in Europe, where he has long lived, he clearly expects non-Muslim as well as Muslim readers to explore his ideas. But his primary audience is the Muslims of the European diaspora. Moreover, he does not present himself as a uniquely gifted moderate interpreter of Islam in the way that Abou El Fadl does. Instead, he places himself in a current of thought that he terms "reformist" (164):

> Most contemporary reformist scholars hold the view that political involvement is legitimate, and even a duty, for Muslims in the West. In addition to the fact that they all refer to the exceptional situation (of Muslims being outside a Muslim majority society), their conclusions all point in the same direction: it is necessary to be socially and politically active in the West by trying to bear witness to one's spirituality and, essentially, by adapting one's presence to one's ethics. Of course, the first general principle *(al-asl)* is not to become involved in a system that is not totally in accord with the demands of Islamic spirituality, values, and morals, but in fact Muslims still have to respond to an ethical requirement: to limit injustice and evil as much as possible, to be committed in all circumstances to choosing the least evil option, to find solutions that will ease people's lives, and to work in stages.

Non-Muslim European readers will not feel as sanguine about Ramadan's Islam as non-Muslim American readers will feel about Abou El Fadl's. They will ask what exactly he means by a "system" that "is not totally in accord with the demands of Islamic spirituality, values, and morality." The situational ethics that he seems to embrace do not give clear or immediate answers to issues involving headscarves, blasphemous cartoons, and similar flashpoints of intercultural friction.

Traditional Muslim readers, on the other hand, may have problems with Ramadan's attitude toward religious authority (163):

> This critical effort to understand the scriptural sources and the world, this *ijtihad,* cannot be the work only of the *ulama* and of specialists in law and jurisprudence. The world has become too complex, in every area, for us to be satisfied with theoretical studies "outside real life." It is time to promote councils that would bring together on an equal footing *ulama* and experts from various fields (the human sciences as well as the natural sciences) to make it possible to formulate legal positions in step with our time.

Although Khalid Abou El Fadl's Islam fits comfortably with American views on tolerance, women's rights, and rejection of terrorism, nothing he proposes is as radical as Ramadan's suggestion that religious scholars like Abou El Fadl should grant as much respect to the "real-life" viewpoints of educated laypersons as they do to one another. Nor does Abou El Fadl embed his advocacy of "moderate" Islam in as innovative a theoretical framework as Ramadan's. Observing that the contemporary West is the center of the world in almost every significant way, Ramadan maintains that the Muslims who live in the West are ipso facto the most important Muslims and the ones most likely to make telling contributions to the Islam of tomorrow. By this view, the "exceptional situation" of being Muslims outside a Muslim majority society becomes a strength rather than a hardship, though he would probably not be as sanguine about Muslims who live outside a Muslim majority society but who do not live in the West, such as the Muslims of India or China.

To return to our initial discussion of the succession of big crunch moments in Islamic history, both Abou El Fadl and Ramadan are consciously contributing to the growing heterogeneity of Islam and are accommodating Islam to the values and practices of America and Europe, respectively. Both also express concerns about militant conservatism in the Muslim world, though Ramadan's intellectual style does not make room for the vehement diatribes against "puritans" that make up much of Abou El Fadl's book. The question is whether their respective contributions to contemporary thinking about Islam mark them as contributors to a "reformation" or whether they will be remembered historically as being too adventurous or too accommodating of Western attitudes for a worldwide Muslim *umma* that eventually finds a new standard of homogeneity in some kind of mild *salafism.* By "mild *salafism,*" I mean a common understanding that adding emulation of the earliest Muslim community to the Islamic singularity can provide a means of accommodating extra-Shari'atic religious outlooks.

People who speak of a reformation in Islam tend to forget that Protestantism did not supplant Catholicism. The Protestant reformers brought in new ideas and practices, and the Catholic counterreformation reacted to these, but a deep and often violent cleavage between the two forms of Christianity persisted for centuries. Judging from the historical examples discussed earlier, what is happening in Islam today is not the introduction of new views that will crystallize into an opposing school of religious thought and practice that is seriously and permanently at

odds with the religious observances sponsored by Saudi Arabia. The Sunni-Shi'i split aside, Islam has shown itself to be much more prone to homogenizing difference, delegitimizing the most radical or dubious of competing trends, and renarrating history to make the resulting compromise appear to be primordial.

Americans and Europeans of both faiths may sympathize with the views of Khalid Abou El Fadl and Tariq Ramadan and hope that they become standard for Islam's next generation, but this is an unlikely outcome. More conservative forms of Islam will not just fade away. What is more likely is that some respected authority or assembly of authorities, perhaps constituted on a fresh understanding of what constitutes authority, will eventually enunciate compromise formulations that will be accepted as ways of agreeing to disagree, possibly on the basis of different geographical circumstances. Like the revisions of the Islamic singularity in past historical episodes, such a new synthesis would likely accommodate difference even while claiming to being a restatement of homogeneity—and history would be rewritten accordingly. In other words, unlike the cataclysmic big crunch of the physicists, the big crunch of the theologians and jurists will manifest itself through whispers of mutual acceptance that take the place of today's cacophonous debates.