

In the Spirit of Emir Abd al-Kader

Muslim Leaders of the Middle Ground

(Thus have we made you an Ummah justly balanced...Q. Surah 2, Verse 143)

The ink of the scholar is worth more than the blood of martyrs. Abd el-Kader memorized this saying of the Prophet.. Marabouts, holy men, were expected to be literate and learned. Religion and knowledge were considered inseparable.

Ali Shariati (1933-1977)

Shariati was born in Iran into Shi'a Islam. He never wore a turban. Nor spoke for the religious establishment which in Iran was very influential. He was absorbed in the tales of the killing of Hussein and Hassan, the grandchildren of the Prophet Muhammad and sons of fourth caliph Ali, which forms the basis for the distinction between the Muslim world's 85% Sunni population and the Shi'a 15%, the power of today's Iran poses an enormous challenge to today's Sunni Arab Middle East and North Africa. In the words of Iranian-American scholar Hamid Dabashi, author of *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest*:

After a long and arduous medieval history, raising the banner of revolt across Muslim lands, Shi'ism reached colonial modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ready for a sustained course of combative contestation with its evolving history. Today in Iraq and Lebanon, and above all in Iran, Shi'ism seems to have ceased to be a mere branch within the larger context of Islam. Shi'ism is now in its combative mode again—always reminiscent of its traumatic birth in early Islamic history.

Ali Shariati was a Sorbonne trained sociologist who had studied Franz Fanon and Jean Paul Sartre. But he was neither an Islamic fundamentalist nor a philosopher. For young Iranians, he was much more. He was a Shi'i story-teller who, in the guise of university lecturer, gave them access to the emotional energy and the spiritual power of the most progressive strands of their distinctive Islamic heritage. In his writings and lectures he regularly cited Abu Dharr al Ghifari, Islam's "first socialist," and companion of the Prophet. As he wrote in his influential "Where Shall we Begin", Abu Dharr, "who is my mentor, whose thought, whose understanding of Islam and Shi'ism, and whose ideals, wants, and rage I emulate...I begin my talk in the name of the oppressed ..." Shariati aimed for nothing less than to build a revolutionary Islam. Given the long history of the Shi'a as a quiescent minority, Shariati had much greater influence than one might expect. The messianic Shi'i doctrine promising the reign of justice with the return of the hidden imam, had for centuries rationalized inaction and patience in the face of injustice and suffering. Shariati instead tied the future reign of justice to present revolutionary struggles. Acting for the revolution could advance today the ultimate victory of age-old Shi'i dreams.

Ali Shariati died in London in 1977, two years before Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. Many Iranians believe he was killed by the shah's secret police. Shariati was a man who felt deeply the suffering of the least of the Iranians, a man whose empathy for the dispossessed gave him an appeal that rivaled Khomeini's. The ayatollah was smart enough to understand the political power of the liberals in Iran. He had read Shariati's work, and he understood his appeal to the Iranian liberal-left. But Khomeini ignored the human rights values that Shariati embraced after coming to power in 1979. It is estimated that some 2000 Iranians died during the period that the Islamic Revolution consolidated its power. But it is more likely that close to 6000 died as the Islamic state played the role of executioner.

Ali Shariati could not be lumped with the Sunni centrists that the Sunni Emir Abd el-Kader symbolized. But it is critical that Sunni scholars and shaykhs read him to understand what needs to be healed in the current savage violence between Shi'i troops and militias in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon before a new Sunni-Shi'i social and political contract can be negotiated to create a genuine peace in the Islamic community world-wide.

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Muhammad al-Ghazzali (1917-1996)

Born in a modest village in the Nile Delta, Muhammad al-Ghazzali became one of the most learned scholars of what was called the New Islamic Trend. He published more than forty books and had a reputation that extended far beyond the borders of Egypt in the Muslim world. He believed that the realization of the common good is not so much a function of civic and political action in the time of severe destabilization but rather of the strengthening of an Islamic civilizational identity.

As a member of the Islamic midstream, Ghazzali rejected the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt because of its organization around a leadership hierarchy, and its determination to form an Islamic state. He argued that “such political work should take no more than 1% of the effort of the Islamic trend, while 99% should go to the call for Islam and to efforts of Islamic education and upbringing to heal destroyed societies and broken people.” He was suspicious of those who called for an Islamic state and wrote of his fears for the future of Islam in their hands. The new Islamic intellectuals in Egypt embraced the idea of multiple identities and affirmed the Coptic and African dimensions of Egypt’s culture, against the dangerously exclusivist and potentially violent conceptions of the extremists.

Ghazzali lived his life as the as an example of the new kind of centrist intellectual that Islam would need not just to survive but to flourish in the new conditions of globalization in the post-Cold War world. Like so many in the Islamic world, Ghazzali felt the humiliation of foreign--Christian—occupation and rule. He refused to be shamed by it. He catalogued the terrible crimes of Western imperialism against the Islamic world. But the deepest anger in his voice was saved for the way Muslims made their lands so vulnerable and for the irresponsible tyrannies responsible. He saw in Islam a both spiritual and worldly power of great potential.

Inspiration of Ghazzali’s stern position came for the Qur’anic verse that said “verily never will God change the conditions of a people until they change it themselves.” To read Ghazzali’s most important work in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s is to see how Western critics were profoundly mistaken in the belief that Muslim people and intellectuals are programmed to blame others for their predicaments. Ghazzali spoke simultaneously to the educated and ordinary people. He insisted that all Muslims should acknowledge their failures and that they should do better, much better.

When the Arab Spring hit Egypt in 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood that came to power showed the limitations of its intellectual and organizational powers, although Ghazzali would have deplored its overthrow by the Egyptian military. Thanks to the Muslim Brotherhood’s limitations, and a succession of Egyptian Islamic thinkers, centrist Islam had found a way around the limitations of Al-Azhar which was controlled by the military rulers.

The politicized Islam of the Muslim Brothers suffered in the year of Brotherhood rule. Islam did not.

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Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905)

Centrist Islam owes a great debt to Abduh who was born in Egypt. He was committed to reform the heritage of Islam but to articulate and preserve the timeless values during a period of rapidly changing and diverse circumstances created by European colonialism. For today's centrist Islam, Abduh's guiding idea prevails—that is, while the strength of a nation has important economic and political factors, cultural independence is the foundation for autonomy. For Abduh, the essentials of the nineteenth century's Islamic Renewal were based on the understanding that Islamic heritage as a civilization in all its essence provides the framework for cultural autonomy.

The new knowledge in science and philosophy learned from the West could be absorbed in the context of Muslim civilizational identity. This belief, in fact, was manifested in the leadership of Emir Abd el-Kader. The new conception of the *maslaha 'amma*—common good—was directly linked to the realization of an Islamic identity. The common good is thus understood in terms of a fluid conception of an identity. This provides a flexibility for adapting as opposed to a dogmatic religious perspective.

Most important in considering the current politics of Islamic extremism, Abduh insisted that the idea of a religious state, justified on the basis of divine authority, was the exact opposite of what and Islamic order was meant to be. He explained that Islam is a world religion and a human system to guide people to do what is right and realize justice and spread peace and announce the common brotherhood of human beings without reference to skin color, gender, or language. Abduh had visited Europe where the day to day moral behavior of ordinary people impressed him a greatly. He wrote that in Europe he had seen Islam without Muslims.

As time passed, however, it became clear in Egypt and the Arab world, that political and economic gains brought only a limited sense of independence. The imitative modernization strategy left a cultural void. From within the Islamic wave, a new kind of leader emerged to organize a mass following to counter rampant Western influences. Islamic intellectuals came to see Hassan al Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, as leader who promoted Abduh's centrist philosophy in competition with extremist political actors.

Today, centrist Islamic intellectuals understand perfectly well the dangers of extremism. As one explained in 1992, if Islam were to come to power by force, it would be far worse than the current situation. Those who are in power today are in dialogue with us, which is far better than being slaughtered in the name of Islam. Midstream intellectuals also have an understanding of Islam's 1,400 year old history that told them that extremists mattered far less than the center. They project confidence that extremist currents will eventually be reabsorbed into the mainstream, although they might do damage from the margins in the interim.

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Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah (1935-2010)

Born in Iraq, Fadlallah became Lebanese grand ayatollah with the title of *marja'*, the highest rank among Shi'i scholars. And like Abd el Kader, he was also a poet.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was so dramatic that it overshadowed many other important contributions that came to the Islamic Renewal from Shi'i communities. Fadlallah led one of those efforts from Lebanon with its large Shi'a plurality. For many who know very little about the Shi'a and their rich legacy, Ayatollah Khomeini and the repressive theocracy he established has become the dominant face of Shi'a Islam. Close study of Fadlallah's teaching and other senior Shi'i senior clergy can be an antidote to the widespread belief that there is in Shi'ism an instinctive authoritarianism that simply is wrong.

In a poem called *To Be Human* Fadlallah writes: "Freedom comes from the will to freedom within oneself. Freedom cannot be issued by a decree....Freedom is exactly like a spring that erupts from the depth of the earth....Only a freedom that erupts from within can give man his humanity: The freedom to say "NO" when "NO" is your thought. Even if the whole world says 'YES!' The issue is not being self-centered. This issue is simply being human."

Fadlallah sees politics in the broadest sense as the relationship of individuals to the community of Muslims. This concept of politics addresses large issues that preoccupy all Muslims. He connects the individual freedom of Muslims to the struggle to transcend sectarian divides that destroy the unity of the community.

As a Shi'i *marja*, Fadlallah had a great following beyond Lebanon that extended to Shi'i communities in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, the Gulf, and central Asia. Many Sunnis also followed him and sought his guidance. Western and regional media consistently identified Fadlallah as a Shi'i religious leader. But he rejected this title because his appeal was to all Muslims. He invoked a "true Islam" that "wants us to base our lives on reason and to elevate by means of knowledge, so as to enrich it and be enriched by it." Fadlallah's many contributions to the renewal of Islamic thought and legal reasoning aimed to strengthen a modern and nonsectarian Islam.

Fadlallah denounced violent Islamic extremists who claimed that their actions defended Islam. Indeed, he charged that their violence did lasting damage to Islam. He was particularly harsh in his criticism of *takfiri* ideologues who claimed their enemies to be unbelievers and therefore excommunicated from the faith. He wrote: "At a time where the Muslim *Ummah* faces severe challenges from the outside, a fanatic *takfiri* group from within continues its war on Muslims inside their mosques, armed with an alienating sectarian mindset and a murderous mentality....that has nothing to do with Islam and its principles" Fadlallah also described men and women as equals and issues a *fatwa* condemning violence against woman. He also banned female circumcision and "honor killings."

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Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1878-1960)

In March, 1960 Nursi's body was placed in a tomb in Urfa in southeast Turkey. On July 12 of that year Turkish troops stormed the tomb and seized Nursi's body and flew it away. Earlier in the year thousands of Turks had come to mourn Nursi at the tomb. Apparently the military was afraid that the site would become a symbolic place of Islamic opposition to the late founder of modern Turkey Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's version of extreme secularism.

Nursi was deeply worried about the survival of the ummah, the community of Muslims, at the beginning of the twentieth century and not only in Turkey. The impact of European Christian colonialism was powerful in the Islamic world. He wrote, "the pain and suffering of the Muslim ummah have always bruised me so deeply. I feel as though the stabs directed at the Muslim world are directed at my heart first. That is, my heart is often wounded." Nursi focused on saving Islam's impact on the interior of mind and hearts in Turkey. In the 1940's through the '60's, it appeared that extreme secularism had endless victories. But Nursi continued to nourish the spirit of Islam in ordinary Turkish citizens where it was later mobilized politically by religious oriented political parties.

Nursi had a firm commitment to freedom of conscience and expression because he believed Muslims needed these freedoms to know God. In order to resist the corrosive effects of materialism and Western capitalism, not to mention the continual attacks on Islam, Muslims needed to resist these effects through collective efforts of believers who could draw on such freedoms to strengthen their faith. Nursi believed such a collective force could only grow in a pluralistic society and democratic political system. His thinking led to an acceptance of moderate secularism that has existed in Turkey in recent times.

Nursi believed that only extreme secularism was anti-Islamic. He believed that moderate secularism would not be for or against any religion as long as religious figures did not rule, and freedom of conscience was protected. Moderate secularism, he believed, would guarantee freedom of religion for all people of any faith, or no faith, and they all would have equal status and rights.

Nursi developed a political theory rooted in Islam that could co-exist with moderate secularism. In his vision the political culture would be based on both constitutional democracy and economic and social development. He was convinced that such a political system could work under the basic freedoms he outlined, including the freedom of Turks to affirm their Islamic faith. He prepared the way for Islamist parties to win power through democratic elections in Turkey, one of the leading countries in the Islamic Ummah.

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