

# Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl as Scholar of the House (Part II)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Devotees of the genre know the pleasure to be derived from reading Hamid Dabashi's eulogy to Edward Said, with its echoes, for the connoisseur, of Dzhambul's 1936 "Song About Stalin" – the first verse of which you can find, if you wish, in *Ogonyok*, No. 14, 14 March 1990. The "Song About Stalin" goes thus in rough translation:

*Stalin-Sun! For our happiness, may you live [forever] in the  
Kremlin,  
We bring offerings to you – our songs, our hearts, and our  
flowers.  
In the whole wide world, on this earthly sphere of Man,  
No one is more important for All Humanity [or: the Folk] than  
You.*

Now, with those lines dew-fresh in your memory, quickly google "Hamid Dabashi" and "Edward Said." You will certainly detect the influence of the "Song About Stalin" on Dabashi's "Ode to Edward Said" as surely as you would, in "Hyperion," that of Milton on Keats (two names that naturally come to mind when Said and Dabashi are mentioned).

Why bring up Dabashi on Said yet again? Only because I never dared hope to find something else that would supply the kind and degree of pleasure you obtain from Dabashi's immortal work. But I have, and it would be churlish not to share it.

Here it is:

[scholarofthehouse.org](http://scholarofthehouse.org) is the work of “Friends and Supporters” of Khaled Abou El Fadl. Like hagiographers of the Middle Ages producing the “Vita morte e miracoli” of a favorite saint, these magnificent friends choose to remain self-effacingly anonymous. Khaled Abou El Fadl would be the first to deplore anything that smacked of self-promotion, and certainly would have no reason to know who is behind this site dedicated so effusively to him. He may not even know that the site exists. Under these circumstances, one should be grateful to those friends and supporters for managing to ferret out so much about and by Khaled Abou El Fadl, for the permanent edification of so many.

The “Friends and Supporters” explain that the website is “dedicated to providing a path to peace through education and understanding by advancing the school of thought of Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl, the world’s leading expert at the intersection of Islamic and Western law.”

The domain name “[scholarofthehouse](http://scholarofthehouse.org)” was also explained in a previous iteration of the site, although this explanation now appears to have been taken down:

*We chose to name the site “[Scholar of the House](http://scholarofthehouse.org)” as tribute to Dr. Abou El Fadl’s having earned this high academic distinction early in his scholarly career while at Yale University...We felt it [the website name] a fitting title and name for an organization dedicated to Dr. Abou El Fadl’s distinguished work. For more information on other related efforts, please e-mail us.*

This “high academic distinction” is received by a dozen or more undergraduates each year at Yale for getting good grades, and allows those undergraduates to continue to pay tuition in their final year but exempts them from taking courses, so that they may at long last concentrate on their concentration. When El Fadl was named one of the dozen “scholars of the year” as a

junior at Yale, the news traveled to Cairo, and his feat received mention in Al-Ahram.

Khaled Abou El Fadl is simply a specific example of a more general phenomenon: Every Man His Own Hero. In pre-Internet days, hundreds of millions of Chinese (some of them now the proud parents and grandparents of single-minded capitalists) held aloft Chairman Mao's Little Red Book. Tens of millions of Russians in bad old Soviet days put Stalin's "Short Course" on their bookshelves, even though it was hardly the stuff that would qualify, nowadays, for Oprah's Book Club. In Libya, Khaddafy flogged his "Green Book," containing the Wisdom of Muammar Khaddafy; once upon a time, thousands read it, for the book was the talk and the toast of the town, if the town was in Tripolitania.

Now, with the Internet, disinterested "Friends and Supporters" of virtually anyone can offer that anyone's words by way of a Spiritual and All-Purpose Guide to Just About Everything. It is not merely that Everyman can now blog here, and post there, over and over again. Now Everyman Can Appear on the World-Wide Web as The Glorious Helmsman of Humanity, courtesy of his self-effacing "Friends and Supporters." On the Internet, at a dedicated website, you can be not only King or Queen of the Universe, and not just for a day but from here on out, and from beyond the grave (your website will outlast you). Everyman can now count himself a king of infinite space, even if bound in his own gigabyte nutshell, in mysterious Googlelandia, or of something, somewhere.

In offering so many different aspects of Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl's Life and Works, [scholarofthehouse.org](http://scholarofthehouse.org) is simply ahead of its time. It would be hard to choose which section most impresses. There is the biographical "[About Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl](#)." There is the scholarly "[Bibliography of Khaled Abou El Fadl](#)." There are the epistolary "[Letters to Dr. Abou El Fadl](#)." There is "[Dr. Abou El Fadl In the Media](#)." There are "[Khutbahs by Dr. Abou El Fadl](#)." And there is even "[Recommended Reading](#)"

– “recommended” by none other than Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl, some of whose books are among those he finds most recommendable. But that is not cause for carping. It would be silly indeed for someone to write a book that, afterwards, he felt he could not recommend.

Indeed, Khaled Abou El Fadl’s refreshing absence of humility, rightly understood, is truly humble. Was it not Golda Meir who once cut short someone engaging in pro-forma self-deprecation: “Don’t be so humble, you’re not that great.” Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl is “not so humble”; it logically follows that, therefore, he is very likely great.

Not the least of Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl’s services is the list he compiled, available at [scholarofthehouse.org](http://scholarofthehouse.org), of what he calls “[The Worst Books About Islam](#),” books so bad that Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl hopes no one will waste his time even opening one of them. That list includes, among much else, Professor John Wansbrough’s *Qur’anic Studies*, Ibn Warraq’s anthology of scholarly articles *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, and Joseph Schacht’s *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. Wansbrough and Schacht have long been admired by Western scholars of Islam: the first as a pioneer in the study of early Islam and a teacher of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook; the second as one of the most scrupulous and authoritative students of Islamic law in the Western world. But neither Wansbrough nor Schacht was a Muslim. And by now it should be obvious that one cannot rely on any non-Muslim scholar’s supposed “understanding” of Islam, no matter how many languages that scholar may know, or how many decades of tireless and, on the surface, disinterested study he may have devoted to the matter. The simplest of seminarians at Al-Azhar, the most grizzled Afghani poppy farmer, by virtue of being a Muslim, necessarily understands Islam in a way that no non-Muslim, no matter how learned, possibly can.

This should not be confused with the whole business of “Orientalism.” Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl is no Edward Said, who

has been receiving so many palpable hits that his likeness is beginning to look like St. Sebastian. Khaled Abou El Fadl realizes that Schacht and Wansbrough and Crone and Luxenberg and Ibn Warraq may well have had nothing to do with the "imperialism project." He needs, other Muslims need, to find an objection broader and deeper and sturdier now that burnt offerings are no longer made with quite the same frequency at the Temple of Said.

No, Khaled Abou El Fadl's objection is broader and deeper and much more profound. It is just that non-Muslims obviously cannot be expected to feel, deeply, the profound richness and variety and multiplicity of Islam. Khaled Abou El Fadl realizes the permanent impossibility of any non-Muslim making any valid generalizations about Islam ever – or indeed, of saying anything at all about Islam from "the outside," as richly various and variously rich as Islam is, so different in its theory and practice, depending on the time, depending on the space. There are practically as many Islams as there are Muslims, and non-Muslims – who seem disturbingly confident that they can make pronouncements on matters they know nothing about – should never forget it. Especially when they are about to say something negative, as they do so often nowadays, simply because they need that old whipping-boy – the Other. Ever since the Communist lead retired, they have been grooming Islam to fill that role.

Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl knows that non-Muslims cannot talk about "Islam" because "Islam," as one thing, does not exist, but only as many things, and only Muslims can talk truthfully, without rancor or hidden agendas, about those things which seem never to overlap or add up to one thing. One particular kind of non-Muslim – the kind that speaks Arabic, and has an Arab name, and calls himself an Arab, but happens to be Christian – may sometimes be exempted from the ban, because the genetic makeup of such people, their DNA, permits a special insight into the nature of Islam. But Schacht,

Wansbrough, Snouck Hurgronje and a thousand other scholars did not possess that precious strand of recombinant DNA. The entire corpus of their work, as a result, was fatally vitiated.

Ibn Warraq, whose *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* makes the list compiled by Khaled Abou El Fadl of "The Worst Books on Islam," suffers from a different, equally fatal handicap. Although Ibn Warraq was raised as a Muslim, and began attending a madrasa at the age of 6 (the very age at which, Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl began to attend his own elementary classes in Qur'an at Al-Azhar), Ibn Warraq fell away from Islam, and ultimately renounced it. And now he spends his time writing about Islam, as if he understood it.

But a mysterious phenomenon, of which Muslims have long been aware but which is insufficiently appreciated by non-Muslims, is that of the complete mental disarray, accompanied by severe memory loss, that results from the shock to the apostate's system. It's akin to whirling about in a centrifuge in a dark laboratory, with a mad scientist rubbing his gleeful hands as he watches you whirl, and whirl. And the name of that mad scientist is Shaytan – Satan. Apostasy from Islam is a truly wrenching experience, often proving fatal. For in leaving Islam, one is giving up all chance for Eternal Happiness and throwing away the Total Explanation of the Universe, which gives daily life the only coherence it may be said to possess. Imagine stumbling upon the Secret of the Universe, and failing to recognize it, or picking it up, and then throwing it away. That is what apostates from Islam do.

Naturally there are consequences. Whatever they may once have known, or thought they knew, about Islam before, the very act of apostasy renders them incapable of recalling anything of value about the faith that for so long sustained them. Their apostasy renders them incapable of understanding or speaking about Islam. Their so-called "testimony" about Islam is thus essentially worthless. That is true of Ibn Warraq as well as

of Ali Sina and so many others. The minute they became apostates, they no longer knew what they were talking about when they talked about Islam.

A comparison may be instructive. One marketing trick of Ibn Warraq, and of other ex-Muslims, is the assumption of an alias, designed to make it seem that they are in some danger. Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl, in contrast, does not use an alias despite the “many threats” he has received, and has repeatedly told us about only with great reluctance. He is determined, he says, to continue his heroic refusal to kowtow to the “Wahhabists” who are giving Islam such a bad name in some quarters.

Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl has been just as brave in speaking truth to powerful non-Muslims. It was he who fearlessly argued that “Jihad” means “struggle” and not “Holy War,” and that therefore there could not possibly be any kind of “Holy War” in Islam. It was Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl who, just after 9/11, forthrightly expressed his immediate thoughts, which were to worry about harm that might come to Muslims as a result of this attack. That could not have been an easy and popular thing to say in America just after the attacks of 9/11. The cowardly, of course, would only offer some words of sympathy and solidarity with American non-Muslims; Khaled Abou El Fadl was not about to play the taqiyya hypocrite. He is a Muslim, and he worries about his fellow Muslims. Whether dealing with those threatening Wahhabists, or their mirror-image, the threatening Infidels, he will not trim his sails. “Ich kann nicht anders” – “I can do no other” – is as much his motto as it is anyone’s.

At the [Secular Islam site](#), Ibn Warraq inflicts his [articles on Islam](#) on the entire universe, or at least the universe of those who happen to stumble upon his website, free of charge, there for the taking. At [scholarofthehouse.org](#), Khaled Abou El Fadl, or rather his Friends and Supporters, at least initially did things differently. Visitors, at least at first, had

nothing inflicted on them. Instead, in the original version of [scholarofthehouse.org](http://scholarofthehouse.org) still bears an icon labeled “E-Commerce by Yahoo!” There is still a [Shopping Cart](#). There just doesn’t seem to be any readily discernible way to put anything into it. Originally, there were so many things on sale at this website devoted to Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl. These included collections of his articles (for \$60) and whole series of his recorded lectures on this or that aspect of Islam, which could be ordered on either audiocassette or CD. The first item at the website was “What’s New”: new articles, new interviews, new Qur’anic commentaries, brave new books by Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl, each with the price helpfully appended.

Should you, for example, have in years past wanted to buy Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl’s commentary on Surah 103: Al-Asr, that would have cost you \$8.00; for the same price, you could have purchased his discussion of Sura 111: Al-Lahab. A lecture, “Islam and Democracy,” went for \$4.00, while an Unedited Interview on “Islamic Democracy” was a bargain at \$8.00. And if you are moved to send a contribution to support those who operate the website in gathering, and posting, and selling Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl’s work, information about how to do that in the most expeditious manner was also conveniently available.

All this is gone now, although its traces remain in the E-Commerce tag and the Shopping Cart. Could this change have been made in reaction to a previous version of this very article, which I published here at Jihad Watch in 2005?

At the website, under the “Our Mission” rubric, the “Friends and Supporters” of Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl note that “Dr. Abou El Fadl is neither involved in nor responsible for any of the activities related to this website, including the naming of the site, the conducting of any matters of business, or the making of any decisions regarding its policies. Dr. Abou El Fadl does not gain any profit from the sales generated from the website.” (Again, an odd reference, since nothing appears



to be currently for sale at the website.)

But before the buying apparatus was removed, someone must have been making some money from the sale of Dr. Abou El Fadl's articles, and the 10-part lecture series (on audiocassettes and CD) on Marriage and Divorce, and on the gallimaufry of taped lectures, interviews, writings, and opinions on this and on that. The halo of the hagiographic sanctified the brazenly commercial enterprise at this website dedicated so flatteringly, even djambullishly, to the Thought and Greatness of One Man.

This raises an awkward question. Could it be that these "Friends and Supporters" were trying to make money from the genius of Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl while purporting to honor him, and were using the website only to flog his wares? Meanwhile, the trusting and unworldly Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl himself, that "inexhaustible fountain of fertilacious fertility whose rivetting rivulets water the oasis where the roses and bulbuls of Gulistan bloom and twitter both day and night, even in the endless tract-housing wastes of the American intellectual desert," as Hamid Dabashi might put it, apparently received not a penny for his thoughts – at least not those of his thoughts that were available for sale at [www.scholarofthehouse.com](http://www.scholarofthehouse.com).

What kind of "Friends and Supporters" are these, anyway? Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl has a right to know.

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