

[Remembering the Assassination of Farag Foda](#)

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On Sunday, 8 June, 2008, the daily online Elaph published an article commemorating the assassination of a liberal Egyptian writer, Farag Foda. He was gunned down on 8 June, 1992, by an Islamist group known as *al-Jama'at al-Islamiyyat*. They entered his office in Cairo to execute a sentence for blasphemy that was issued against him, by a group of teachers at *al-Azhar University*. Their argument was that since the government had not done its duty, it was their responsibility to apply the *Shari'ah Law* against Dr. Foda!

The following are excerpts from the article, followed by my analysis and comments.

"The 8th of June reminds us of the assassination of Dr. Farag Foda. He was murdered for his liberal thoughts, and his endeavors to enlighten his compatriots who have been led astray by the Islamist radicals. He was an outspoken advocate of civil government that separates religion from politics, and a leader for Egyptian national unity under the well-known banner of "*Al-Deenu li-Lahi, wal watanu l'l Jamee*" **Religion is to God, and the Country is for All.**" [A slogan that became popular in the aftermath of WWI, when both Christians and Muslims united together in their fight against European imperialism.]

"During the 1980s, he stood for elections in a community that was populated mostly by Christians. He failed in his bid, due to the interference of the authorities. One of his last public activities was his defense of the cause of "*civil government*" during the 1992 Book Expo in Cairo.

"Dr. Farag Foda was assassinated on 8 June, 1992, an event that is remembered every year at the *Center for Enlightenment (Al-Markaz al-Tanwiri)* that he had founded. Several modernizing intellectuals join in this commemoration, calling for the liberation of religious thought from the rigidity of traditionalism.

"Farag Foda was not the only Egyptian who was declared a *kafir* during the 1990s. Several other intellectuals and authors were regarded as "*unbelievers*," which allowed the authorities to confiscate their writings. Others met with different types of persecution as in the case of a writer who was declared a *kafir* and was thus ordered to divorce his wife; since now, as a non-Muslim man, he could not be married to a Muslim woman!

"Here are some questions Dr. Farag Foda put forth in his book, '*The Absent Truth among Those calling for a Religious State.*'

"We face problems of great magnitude, so how can they be resolved by the application of *Shari'ah Law*, since these problems did not exist in the early centuries of Islam? How would *Shari'ah*, for example, deal with the problems of housing, indebtedness, famine,

and unemployment?

"We seem to be excessively interested and preoccupied with matters of worship; does that relieve us from our responsibility to get involved in the great scientific and technological advancements of our times? We are equally busy with fatwas that deal with such topics as marriage, how to relieve ourselves when we happen to be in the countryside, and the like!

"What are the benefits that come from the imposition of the *hijab* on Muslim women?

"What good has come out of the practice of the so-called '*prophetic healing*' of the sick, as based on spurious *Hadiths*, when at the same time, we witness the astronomically growing number of the sick? And what about the latest charlatanry of those 'experts' who claim that healing may be found in the flies' wings, as well as in the camels' urine?!

"Near the end of his book, '*The Absent Truth*,' Farag Foda drew attention to the fact that Islam came as a religion; but Muslims are still doing a terrible thing to it. They consider those who differ from them in opinion, or who attempt to work for renewal and reform, as *Kuffar (plural of Kafir)*! What a wonderful thing it would have been, if *tafkir* (reasoning) took precedence over *takfir* (declaring someone to be an unbeliever!) [In Arabic, *fikr* means thought or reasoning, while *kifr* means unbelief]

Analysis

The assassination of Farag Foda on 8 June, 1992, provided the author with the opportunity to reflect on the tremendous harm being done to Egypt, by the Islamists who are calling for the establishment of an Islamic state.

Comments

It was good for the author of the article to remind us of the terrible crime that was committed by the Islamists when they silenced an outspoken Egyptian intellectual. This brings to our mind other cases where other intellectuals and activists in the cause of human rights have been persecuted by the state for their alleged crimes, such as the case of Saad El-Din Ibrahim, who is professor of political sociology at the American University in Cairo, and Director of the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development.

The questions posed by the late Farag Foda should remind all Muslims that there is no magic in the Shari'a Law, since it was promulgated for days that are utterly different from ours. The slogan, "*Al-Islam Huwa al-Hall*" (Islam has the Solution) may fool millions of Muslims, but remains a vapid statement.

My basic problem with this otherwise good article is that the writer tried to distinguish between Islam and what Muslims have done with Islam. Let me quote that sentence:

"Near the end of his book, 'The Absent Truth,' Farag Foda drew attention to the fact

that Islam came as a religion; but Muslims are still doing a terrible thing to it. But may we fault Muslims for taking the teachings of their Holy Book, the Hadiths, and the Sunna seriously? Islam has been saddled, from its earliest days, with an ideology that merges religion with politics. The early caliphs were the "successors" of Muhammad, the Prophet of Allah. Later on, they claimed to be "*Allah's Shadow on Earth.*" While the way they conducted the business of the Islamic Ummah may have been thoroughly secular, nevertheless, they always clothed their actions and decisions, with the mantle of religion. Their speeches would begin with the "*Basmalah*" (*Bismi-Llahi al-Rahman, al Raheem, In the name of the Merciful and Compassionate Allah.*)

During the 9th century, when the Mu'tazilites propounded the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an, it was an Abbasid caliph who enforced that teaching, over-ruling the objection of Imam Hanbal. So, as long as Muslims cling to the absolute authority of their sacred book, and the infallibility of the Prophet in all his acts and sayings, they must deal with the hard and harsh statements of their tradition. Are they bold enough to declare that certain parts of the Qur'an (i.e. those 'revealed' in Medina) are no longer normative for our times?

In this connection, I would like to quote my op-ed [Reformation in Islam: "Islam of Mecca" versus "Islam of Medina"](#), that was posted on the FFI website on Thursday,

22, June, 2006:

"While the goal of these reformists is laudable, unfortunately it is simply a shot in the dark. Islam is firmly entrenched in the entire Qur'an, the Hadith, and the Sunna. Neither these authoritative texts, nor the way they have been expounded during the last fourteen centuries, allow for any disjunction between the teachings of the "Meccan Surahs" and the "Medinan Surahs" of the Qur'an. The orthodox doctrine regarding the text of the Qur'an is its uncreatedness. Imam Hanbal, one of the founders of the Four Schools for the interpretation of the Shari'a, went to prison during the 9th century, rather than compromise on this point. He fought and eventually, he won the battle for the Qur'an being *qadeem*, i.e., having always existed in heaven. So, there can be no pick and choose between the revelations that descended in Mecca, and the revelations that came later on in Medina.

Unfortunately for Muslim reformers, they do not have the same tradition vis-à-vis the Qur'an as Christians have regarding the Bible. What I mean is that in the Christian tradition, the teachings of the Old Testaments must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament. Thus, since the New Testament clearly teaches two distinct and separate realms: the realm of God, and the realm of "Caesar," it leaves no room for the establishment of a theocracy in areas of the world where Christians dominate. Furthermore, such parts of the Old Testament that dealt with the conquest of the Promised Land, and the various aspects of the Mosaic law, excepting the Ten Commandments, are regarded as pertaining to a specific temporary era, and thus, are not normative for the present.

What I mean is that the Christian Scriptures themselves describe two phases of revelation, the first being temporary and preparatory for the second phase, which is final. As mentioned above, it is the New Testament itself that authoritatively endorses this view, and is not a later addition to the Christian tradition. It is true that after the conversion of Emperor Constantine, the lines of demarcation separating Church and State became blurred. And after the fall of Rome, the Western Church began to interfere in the affairs of the State. However, such changes were contrary to the teachings of the Bible. So the Reformers of the 16th Century simply called for a return to the Biblical teachings, not only regarding spiritual matters, but equally in connection with the affairs of the state.

Muslim scholars today, interested in some kind of reform, don't have the "luxury" that Luther, Calvin, and Knox had, almost five hundred years ago. Their Holy Book doesn't allow for such a radical hermeneutic as called-for by the author of the article I referred to at the beginning of my essay. I cannot solve their dilemma. It is intractable; as they find themselves [boxed] within a closed circle. I wonder how many other would-be reformers will join the call for making the Meccan Qur'an, the only standard for politics in Islam!