Book Review

Name of the Book: Global Mufti—The Phenomenon of Yusuf al-Qaradawi
Edited by: Jakob Skovgaard-Peterson & Bettina Gräf
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The Qatar-based Egyptian Yusuf al-Qaradawi is among the most well-known Islamic scholars on the contemporary global scene. It might be something of an exaggeration to label him as a ‘phenomenon’ and as the ‘global mufti’—which is what the very title of this book hails him as—but that he exercises an enormous influence in numerous Islamic scholarly and activist circles is undeniable.

This book is a collection of essays on diverse aspects of Qaradawi’s life, achievements and writings. In their introductory essay, the editors of the volume provide a broad overview of his life, against which they situate his scholarly and activist accomplishments. Born in a poor family in a village in Egypt in 1926, Qaradawi studied at Cairo’s Al-Azhar, then the largest seat of traditional Islamic learning, after which he shifted to Qatar as emissary of his alma mater. It was there, we are told, that Qaradawi established himself as a noted scholar and activist, traveling widely across the world and establishing a number of Islamic institutions. The editors provide a pen-portrait of a passionate, dedicated scholar-activist, seeking to revive the rapidly disappearing tradition of socially-engaged ulema, who Qaradawi believes, should lead Muslims in the twenty-first century. They account for the wide reverence in which Qaradawi is held in many Muslim circles by pointing to his charismatic personality, his innovative approach to, and use of, modern methods of communications (such as television and the Internet), his eagerness to discuss and deal with issues of contemporary social and political concern, his championing of a contextually-relevant understanding of Islam that can engage with issues of the day, his distance from ruling regimes (in contrast to his many fellow ulema), and his advocacy of a vision of ‘moderate’ Islam or Islam of the ‘middle-path’. Readers are offered a general survey of Qaradawi’s prolific writings as well as fatwas that illustrate how he has sought to depart from the obsession of many traditional ulema simply with issues of ritual and personal law to engage with complex and pressing social and political concerns. This point is further elaborated upon in the following chapter, by Bettina Graf, where she discusses the ‘state of research’ on Qaradaw and examines writings about the Qaradawi by both Western as well as Arab scholars, including some hardliner self-styled Salafists, who regard Qaradawi as too soft and liberal for their liking.

Despite his relative openness, Qaradawi is, as Jakob Skovgaard-Peterson reminds us in his essay, a scholar trained in the traditional mould of Al-Azhar before it was nationalized by the Nasser’s secularizing regime. As such, he continues to insist that the ulema have the foremost role in leading the global Muslim ummah. Qaradawi has been in the forefront of efforts to goad the ulema to be more socially and politically active and engaged than they presently are, as reflected in the number of institutions that he has established or heads that bring together ulema from various countries to debate and discuss issues of contemporary concern. At the same time, he remains critical of aspects of traditional madrasa training, such as what he underwent in his years at Al-Azhar, including reluctance to engage in ijtihad or independent
reflection, obsession with the minutiae of *fiqh* rules that were developed by the medieval *ulema*, absence of modern subjects and languages in the curriculum, and lack of sufficient exposure to contemporary developments. He also remains bitterly opposed to the tendency of numerous traditionalist *ulema* and their institutions—and here al-Azhar is no exception—to supinely accept the diktats of dictatorial regimes and their willingness to issue fatwas simply to please their political bosses.

At the same time as Qaradawi, a traditionally-trained *alim*, identifies himself with his fellow *ulema*, he has also been, as Husam Tammam explains in his article, a sympathizer of the Muslim Brotherhood or Ikhwan ul-Muslimeen. Tammam writes of Qaradawi’s long-standing association with the Brothers, beginning from his student days at Al-Azhar, and with which he continues to enjoy a somewhat ambiguous relationship. He shares the Brothers’ understanding of Islam as a ‘complete system’, but, at the same time, has been critical of their excesses—including, and particularly, the extremists among them, such as Syed Qutb, who Qaradawi has critiqued in several of his writings for their radical utopianism that hungers for violence as a means to bring about social transformation, but which, far from producing any positive results, has only led to further spirals of violence and repression.

Repeating some of the same arguments made by the editors of this volume in their Introduction, Motaz Al-Khateeb’s article looks at the factors that have made Qaradawi what he terms an ‘authoritative reference’ for many Sunni Muslims today. This is further explored in the essay by Alexandre Caeiro and Mahmoud al-Saify, where they describe Qaradawi’s activities in Europe, and the responses to these by European Muslims, the European media and European states. In this regard, they discuss the innovative efforts Qaradawi has made in developing a *fiqh* for minorities and appropriate *fiqh* responses to the problems Muslims face as citizens of non-Muslim countries; the role of numerous Europe-based Islamic scholarly institutions with which Qaradawi is associated in responding to the concerns of European Muslims; and the different ways in which different sectors of the European media and governments have reacted to him (predictably, some praising him as heralding the arrival of ‘moderate’ Islam, others branding him as a ‘fundamentalist’ or worse).

In part, Qaradawi’s fame rests on his willingness to use modern means of communications to spread his views, which is what Ehab Galal deals with in his essay, which examines Qaradawi’s programmes that are broadcast on numerous Arab television channels, notably Al-Jazeera. He makes a detailed content analysis of these programmes and concludes that Qaradawi’s popularity has much to do with the ways in which he creatively engages with the media to deal with issues of pressing social and political importance in an accessible manner, and not just arcane *fiqh* rules about ritual and personal deportment that most traditionally-trained *ulema* specialize in.

Central to Qaradawi’s understanding of Islam, which distinguish it from many Islamists, on the one hand, and traditionalist *ulema*, on the other are, his views on women, moderation and public welfare. Barbara Stowasser examines several of Qaradawi’s writings as well as fatwas on women, where she shows how he seeks to maintain a delicate balance between traditionalist views on gender-related issues, on the one hand, and, on the other, the need for women to play a more socially-engaged role. Bettina Graf examines the concept of *wasatiya* in Qaradawi’s writings, which he uses to argue for what he regards as the Islamic ‘middle-path’ of moderation and balance: a middle-way between tradition and reform, between key Western values and total opposition to them, a path that eschews, even condemns, terrorism at the same time as it vociferously opposes imperialism. The concluding essay, by Armando Salvatore, purports to discuss Qaradawi’s approach to the concept of *maslaha* or public
welfare as a tool for developing more flexible and appropriate *fiqh* responses to contemporary conditions. However, Salvatore’s arguments are dense, almost opaque, which makes his essay—at least so this reviewer found it—quite incomprehensible, quite in contrast to the other essays in this volume.