

Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi .. A free mind and a high aspiration

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An objective perspective requires acknowledging the virtues, knowledge, efforts, and leadership of our beloved Sheikh and esteemed teacher, Dr. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, Rahimahullah, while also recognizing that disagreement with this honorable scholar on certain issues—if it happens—should not, in the eyes of fair-minded and rational individuals, erase the man's long history, which began in his youth and continues now at the age of ninety! It is well known that God's wisdom, the nature of this great religion, and the esteemed status of His noble Messenger, peace be upon him, dictate that every scholar's words can be accepted or rejected—except for those of the infallible Messenger, peace be upon him. Every great scholar in the history of this religion has had opinions and interpretations that differed with those of their students and other scholars, and so what?

### ### Two Distinctive Traits

There are two prominent qualities of our esteemed Sheikh Al-Qaradawi, Rahimahullah, that, in my view, have had the greatest influence on his practical life, scholarly output, and on his students and followers everywhere: a free mind and a high aspiration. In this essay, I will recount some of the incidents I witnessed over the decades in which these two traits were clearly displayed. I will also highlight key ideas and jurisprudential views of the Sheikh where these two traits are manifest. I hope this serves as an expression of gratitude for what I have learned from the Sheikh by giving credit where it is due, and perhaps these brief words will benefit those who wish to follow in his footsteps—on the path of knowledge, teaching, and calling to Allah—a path that only those with high ambition and free minds can truly walk.

Since the early 1980s, when Sheikh Al-Qaradawi, Rahimahullah, used to visit Cairo to deliver Eid sermons or lectures, I noticed his high aspiration and ambition, first evident in the passionate way he delivered his speeches, the eloquence of his expressions, the strength of his voice, and his boundless energy. I also observed his free mind and broad intellectual horizon in the way he addressed topics, his fresh perspectives, and his boldness in issuing fatwas. These observations were further confirmed during the 1990s when I had the opportunity to interact with the Sheikh more closely during his repeated visits to North America, where he delivered lectures and participated in the various Islamic activities we organized as graduate students. His efforts to develop what he called the "jurisprudence of Muslim minorities" and his contribution to the integration of these minorities into their societies were particularly significant. During the last 2 decades of his blessed life, I have been fortunate to work with the Sheikh directly through the Maqasid Research Center in London, under Al-Furqan Foundation, then through the Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies in Doha, and finally through the International Union of Muslim Scholars and the European Council for Fatwa and Research, of which I am members.

Thus, this essay differs from my previous writings on the Sheikh's thoughts and works, as its sources are personal experiences and direct observations, not just his written and spoken scholarly output.

### ### In Pursuit of Knowledge

I can testify that even at the age of ninety five when I last saw him, Rahimahullah, the Sheikh continued to go down to his home office every morning without fail, spending most of the day reading and writing, interrupted only by prayer times and receiving guests, whom he met at

specific times each day. Once a guest leaves, he immediately returns to reading and writing. Over the years, whether I visited him in health or illness, summer or winter, amidst personal or public upheavals, or during times of calm, I always found an open book (or several) on his desk, with the Sheikh either reading and/or writing.

This dedication to knowledge has produced a remarkable breadth of understanding and a vast perspective rarely found among Islamic scholars—or thinkers in general. It's no surprise, then, that the Sheikh has a profound grasp of both ancient and contemporary Western and Eastern philosophies, as if he had studied them in their homelands. He is equally familiar with intricate matters of the Arabic language, tasawwuf, and poetry, as if these were his sole areas of interest. His knowledge of characters, cities, and events unknown to even specialists in history and geography is astounding, and his command of the immense body of Islamic jurisprudential heritage over our long history is unparalleled—a testament to what I have witnessed over the years.

The Sheikh's dedication to the pursuit of knowledge is extraordinary, as he was deeply pained by what he did not know or had not have the opportunity to learn. For example, one day, I mentioned to him the effort I had put into learning English, and I was surprised by how much it affected him emotionally. He expressed his deep regret that he had not learned languages other than Arabic and lamented that his age no longer allowed him to do so, as he was in his eighties at that time. I tried to console him by saying that language skills were secondary in Islamic sciences and that he could always rely on translations. However, he responded by saying that translation cannot replace the original language, especially as a means to communicate and learn about other civilizations, cultures and ideas.

### ### On Writing and Authorship

Sheikh Al-Qaradawi, Rahimahullah, never wasted time that could be spent writing, whether at home or during travel. Even when traveling, he always carried a supply of pens and blank paper to write on. If he runs out of paper while on a aeroplane, he asks the flight attendants for some tray papers used to serve meals so that he can write on their backs, ensuring that no time is wasted.

Speaking of paper, the Sheikh was also extremely mindful of not wasting it. He never allows a blank sheet of paper to be thrown away or used partially without fully filling both sides. If he sees part of a page left blank, he says, "It is not permissible to waste paper," and he will cut off the blank portion to use later for writing.

The Sheikh was highly protective of his writing time, often canceling or postponing appointments and trips to complete his book projects. I recall, in the late 1990s, calling him from Canada to Doha to invite him again to attend the Arab Muslim Youth Conference in America, a major conference he regularly attended for several days each year. He replied, "My dear, I have book projects I want to finish before I die, and therefore I will only have time to attend your conference every two years."

One of the Sheikh's long-held wishes was to complete the \*Tafsir al-Manar\*, the commentary on the Qur'an started by Sheikh Rashid Reda, who narrated the teachings of his mentor, the great Sheikh Muhammad Abduh. Sheikh Rashid Rida continued writing the tafsir in the same manner but was unable to complete the entire Qur'an. The Sheikh had always hoped to complete this work in the same methodology, but time did not allow him to do so. His only consolation was that he managed to write a tafsir for 5 chapters of the Qur'an in a similar manner.

### ### On Ijtihad and Fatwa

The Sheikh's free mind and high aspiration are particularly evident in the field of issuing fatwas. He had always delivered fatwas based on his sincere convictions, regardless of the objections from critics. Some of these critics include traditionalist scholars who disapprove of the Sheikh's facilitative approach to jurisprudence and his freedom to choose between various schools and perspectives based on what he deems to best serve public interest and desired outcomes. Others are those who reject religion altogether or certain aspects of it, and they dislike the Sheikh's steadfast adherence to a moderate approach to Islam that preserves the core principles while adapting to changing circumstances. In my view, the fact that the Sheikh's views were often caught between two opposing extremes—each critical and disgruntled—indicates his balance, centrism, and sound methodology. Ultimately, everyone's words are subject to acceptance or rejection.

One of the Sheikh's distinguishing qualities in his *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning) is his humility in retracting a fatwa if he realized it was incorrect. For example, the Sheikh attended a symposium many decades ago, where my other Ustadh Dr. Hassan al-Turabi, Rahimahullah, issued a fatwa permitting a woman who converts to Islam to stay with her non-Muslim husband. Sheikh Al-Qaradawi, Rahimahullah, objected to this opinion during the symposium. However, after the event, he researched the matter extensively and discovered that there were many diverse opinions on the issue. At that point, the Sheikh retracted his initial stance and issued a fatwa allowing it, and he would frequently mention his change of opinion and credit Dr. Al-Turabi whenever he was asked about or wrote on this subject.

### ### On Travels and Journeys

I have traveled to nearly seventy countries across all continents, visiting institutes, organizations, mosques, associations, and both Islamic and non-Islamic universities. I can testify that, wherever I went—whether to a village in rural India, a remote island in East Asia, a European capital, the far reaches of Africa, or the prairies of America—I would always find that the Sheikh had already been there before me, except in rare cases. Moreover, in almost every place I visited, I found that the Sheikh had left a lasting and positive impact, whether by founding an association, launching a translated version of one of his books, opening a university or institute, teaching students, or supporting a civilizational or a rights initiative. Many times, I heard people recount their memories of the Sheikh's visits and how he sometimes fulfilled his planned visits even when unwell, such as when he once arrived at a location in India lying flat in the back of a car due to severe back pain.

### ### On Building Institutions and Organizations

One of the most distinctive qualities of the honorable Sheikh Al-Qaradawi, Rahimahullah, in my opinion, compared to other scholars of his time and even those of earlier eras, is his exceptional ability and high aspiration to transform ideas into institutions. He has a remarkable understanding of how to capitalize on public interest in a particular issue and turn reactive efforts into well-structured, sustainable institutions that address the issue methodically and effectively. This is a testament to both his high aspirations and broad perspective.

I have personally witnessed the Sheikh's significant contributions to founding several institutions that have had a profound impact on the Islamic world in recent decades. One of these is the website *\*Islam Online\** in its original form, which made a substantial impact on the internet due to the centrist approach outlined by the Sheikh. I had the honor of contributing to shaping the policies for both the Arabic and English versions of the site. Another example is the *\*International Union of Muslim Scholars\**, of which I had the honor of being a founding member and later being elected to its Board of Trustees.

The Union was an attempt to coordinate scholars from different schools of thought, uniting their efforts to serve the issues of the Muslim Ummah, particularly on the issue of Palestine, where the Sheikh played a pivotal role and was always passionate about Palestine. The Sheikh wished so many times to die as a martyr for the sake of Al-Aqsa Masjid, and was sad that he was not granted his wish. Additionally, I witnessed his contributions to the \*Center for the Study of Maqasid al-Shariah\*, founded by the last Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, Rahimahullah, with Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi as the head of its Supreme Advisory Council. I had the privilege of directing the center for its first five years, during which it spread the concept of \*maqasid\* worldwide and published key books and papers, many of them authored by the Sheikh, on this important topic.

I also witnessed his pioneering role in the \*European Council for Fatwa and Research\* in Dublin, of which I am a member. This council had a significant impact on the jurisprudence of Muslims in Europe and the West for a considerable period and until today. I also observed his leading contributions to the \*College of Islamic Studies\* and the \*Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics\* in Doha, both of which—at their respective times—were important attempts to offer contemporary Islamic studies.

In my administrative work with these institutions, I also witnessed the Sheikh's refusal to accept honorary rewards that the regulations of these institutions offered. He was content with his salary alone. On one occasion, when I requested him to sign for a modest symbolic reward after contributing to one of the Boards, unaware of his practice in this matter, the Sheikh rebuked me, saying, "What is this? I didn't come here for this. This is work for the sake of Allah, my son."

#### ### On Politics and Revolution

The Sheikh's high aspirations, broad perspective, and desire to please his Lord manifested not only in applying Islamic jurisprudence to matters of law and personal conduct but also, especially, to political affairs. He took positions on every significant political event and often assigned researchers in his office to follow global political news and summarize them for him. This allowed him to stay informed about current events and take appropriate stances, even participating when possible. The Sheikh had a long history of taking political stances, and because he had always stood with the truth and its people, he faced various consequences for his positions, from his youth till the end of his blessed.

Whether you agree or disagree with the Sheikh politically, I bear witness to what I have seen: that the Sheikh—whom Allah holds accountable—only seeks the interest of Islam and its Ummah. He aligned himself with Islam wherever it leads. It is not fair to diminish the Sheikh's long life of almost one century (on the Hijri calendar), in which he struggled since he was a teenager, against tyranny in all its forms, advocating for rights, and defending human dignity simply because of a disagreement over some political assessments. Instead, we should honor the Sheikh's efforts, contributions, and leadership. Rahimahullah!