Review of Abdul Aziz Said: A Pioneer in peace, intercultural dialogue, and cooperative global politics

Patricia Mische

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters

Part of the International and Area Studies Commons, International Relations Commons, Peace and Conflict Studies Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, Religion Commons, and the Sociology of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Social Encounters by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Patricia M. Mische*

In the March, 2022 issue of this journal I was pleased to share a retrospective on the life, thought and vision of peace educator and practitioner, Abdul Aziz Said. It is my pleasure now to review a book published since then: Abdul Aziz Said: A Pioneer in Peace, Intercultural Dialogue, and Cooperative Global Politics, edited by Nathan C. Funk and Meena Sharify-Funk.

The editors, who now teach at the University of Waterloo (Nathan) and the Wilfrid Laurier University (Meena) in Waterloo, Ontario in Canada, were former students and close collaborators with Said at American University in Washington DC. Their long personal relationship with Said, as well as their scholarly engagement with his written work and intellectual legacy, make them highly qualified to produce this volume containing a biography and selections from more than fifty years of Said’s publications.

It is clear from the outset when you open this book that you are being invited into the mind and heart of a very special human being, one who deeply inspired not only these editors, but thousands of other students and colleagues in his 57-year teaching career, and also hundreds of diplomats and government officials around the world whom he advised on peace and nonviolence and on the cultures and politics of the Middle East. In their Dedication the editors not only describe Abdul Aziz Said, but also enjoin readers and new generations of scholars to grow into their own deepest humanity:

We dedicate this book
to the next generation of scholars
aspiring toward a global, compassionate,
and intercultural outlook on the human condition.

May you explore
new frontiers of knowledge and practice
In the spirit of Abdul Aziz.

May you be guided by
creative imagination,
authenticity, the courage
to challenge conventional assumptions,
and an abiding, humanistic, commitment to a
future of dignity and well-being for all peoples.

The Foreword is aptly written by Mohammed Abu-Nimer, who holds the newly created Abdul Aziz Said Chair in International Peace and Conflict Resolution in the School of International
Review of Abdul Aziz Said:
A Pioneer in peace, intercultural dialogue, and cooperative global politics

Service at American University. As Said’s long-time colleague and friend, Abu-Nimer is familiar with the contributions Said made to the fields of International Relations, Peace Studies and Cultural Understanding. He outlines how Said was ahead of the curve in introducing the role of culture and religion into the study of International Relations and the practice of diplomacy. He also points to Said’s critiques of US foreign policy in the Arab region. Said advocated for focusing on “the root causes of terrorism – exclusion, maldistribution of resources, absence of legitimate and genuinely participatory political authority – rather than Islamic revivalism and fundamentalism.” He also underscores Said’s emphasis on the “limits of interventionism” and the need to “localize peace,” i.e., “look for peacebuilding opportunities in your own neighborhood.” And he highlights Said’s track record in overcoming political and academic obstacles and successfully institutionalizing International Peace and Conflict Resolution studies at American University. The program at AU was among the first wave of graduate programs in this field in the United States. Said then went on to create a sub-field on Islam and Peace. Abu-Nimer concludes by pointing to Said’s legacy as a teacher and mentor who did not mask his spirituality but let it guide all aspects of his life, including his teaching. Consequently, he deeply touched the hearts and minds of his students. His spirituality embraced the insights of all religions, especially their aspects related to universal love. Abu-Nimer concludes that Said, a Sufi Master, “was always guided by the famous saying of Ibn ‘Arabi about spirituality and humanism:

My heart has become capable of every form:
It is a pasture for gazelles,
And a convent for Christian monks,
And a temple for idols,
And the pilgrim’s Ka ‘ba,
And the tables of the Torah,
And the book of the Koran.
I follow the religion of Love,
Whatever direction its caravans may take,
For Love is my religion and my faith.

--Muhiddin Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240)

Following the Foreword and a short Preface by the editors, the book is organized in three parts summarized below.

Part I, Abdul Aziz Said’s Pioneering Life and Works, includes a biographical overview, a photo-essay, and a comprehensive bibliography of Said’s publications compiled by Nathan Funk and Meena Sharify-Funk with the assistance of Elena Turner (Said’s spouse) and others close to Said. The biography covers key details of Said’s life, from his birth and early childhood in Syria, through his academic career at American University and his peace-building service to the global community.

Said was born in 1930 in the town of Amuda, located in northeastern Syria, just a few kilometers from the border with Turkey. Said would later tell his friends and students that he was proud to come from this Jazira region situated between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and famed as Mesopotamia and the “Cradle of Civilization.” He felt the vast expanse of desert with its unlimited horizons, inhabited by people of many diverse cultures and beliefs (including Sunni Muslim,
Kurds, Arabs of various tribes, Jews, Yazidis, and Christians of various ethnicities and denominations from Armenian and Assyrian to Syrian Orthodox and Syriac, played a significant role in shaping his world view and opening his mind and heart to the beauty and gifts of cultural diversity.

Said’s parents were Syriac Orthodox Christians, and minorities within this mosaic. His mother was of mixed Arab and Armenian heritage. His father, a businessman whose family came from Turkey, respected the diverse cultures and beliefs in the region, and, while a pious Christian, took the time to become fluent in Arabic and knowledgeable about the Qur’an and Islamic beliefs and values. As a result, he was highly respected by Muslims and others in the community and elected to serve as mayor of Amuda in 1928, and then, in 1932, elected to the first session of the Syrian Parliament. Critical of French colonial rule and defiant of French authorities, Said’s father was imprisoned, and then exiled, and, for about six years, absent from his family. Abdul Aziz and his siblings were proud of their father’s courage and leadership but their father’s absence was hard for the family. Said’s mother died in childbirth at the age of 37, and her six living children came under the care of Said’s grandmother who held the family together. Said remembers his grandmother, and also his older sister Rose, fondly as having a great influence on his life.

Meanwhile, as part of the civilizing mission of French colonial rule, Abdul Aziz Said, as the son of a local leader, was required to attend French schools. He went to the Lycee Francaise for elementary school in Damascus, and then, for middle school, studied under the Marist brothers in Aleppo. As a result, Said became immersed in French culture and language in addition to his early experience with Arab, Islamic, and other cultures.

WWII deeply affected the young Abdul Aziz. Syria came under the pro-German Vichy regime and was a target in the armed conflict between Vichy French and Allied forces. At school in Aleppo, he had to run to underground shelters when air raid sirens sounded. At home in Amuda, he saw his mother confronted by French soldiers trying to force their way into his home. He remembers a French soldier grabbing his headgear from his head, throwing it on the ground and pissing on it. With his father gone, Abdul Aziz was left to protect his family and pointed a gun at a soldier trying to appropriate Amuda’s wheat harvest. His youngest brother, Riyad was hit and killed by a French military truck and died in Abdul’s arms. These and other childhood experiences of war influenced his later commitment to peacebuilding.

After WWII Said continued his studies outside Syria, first at the American University of Beirut, and then at the American University of Cairo. It was a time of major shifts in Arab politics, including Arab-Israeli conflicts, and his time in Lebanon and Egypt exposed him to wider realities of the Middle East and its cultures, history and struggles.

Eventually Abdul Aziz made his way to Washington DC, where he studied at Howard University and then George Washington University, and finally, in 1953, at American University where, between 1954-1957, he undertook graduate studies in the Department of International Relations and Organizations. His doctoral dissertation was on the United Nations mandate system and the process of decolonization. After graduating he joined the faculty in the newly established School of International Service at American University where he continued to teach for more than fifty years, becoming AU’s longest serving faculty member and one of its most beloved and admired
Review of Abdul Aziz Said:
A Pioneer in peace, intercultural dialogue, and cooperative global politics

professors. At one point he was asked to consider becoming the president of AU, but declined because he felt teaching was his true vocation. Among his major achievements was establishing the International Peace and Conflict Resolution program, offering M.A. and PhD degrees within the School of International Service. It grew into one of the largest student attractions and prepared new generations for careers in peacebuilding around the world. Said also launched a program on Islamic Peace, one of the first of its kind, offering courses and conferences and fostering research that serves a critical area of global peace building. With an endowment from former student Hani Farsi, the Mohamed Said Amed Said Farsi Chair of Islamic Peace was established within SIS at American University and Abdul Aziz Said was the first appointed to hold the chair.

Alongside his academic work, Said also served as a consultant to the U.S. State Department, the United Nations, and numerous international organizations and universities on Middle Eastern peace building and on cooperative global politics. He received numerous awards recognizing his contributions, which are detailed over several pages.

Throughout his long career as both teacher and practitioner, Said persisted in his search for meaning and spiritual deepening through Sufism, Christian mysticism, retreats with the Trappist monks at Our Lady of the Holy Cross in Virginia, and other pathways. His spiritual depth came through in his teaching and personal relationships with students, colleagues, and friends. He never tried to separate or hide it. It was an integral part of him, of his purpose and vision, of his work, of his legacy.

Part II, Selections from Abdul Aziz Said’s Writings, comprises the largest part of the book but can only be given a short summary here. After an overview chapter by Funk and Sharify-Funk, selections from Said’s writings are organized in chapters with the following themes, indicating the scope and focus of Said’s work:
- Toward a Global Perspective on International Policy
- A World in Transition: Rethinking International Relations
- Human Dignity, Cooperation, and Peace
- Middle East Politics
- Making Peace with Islam
- Dialogue, Spirituality, and Transformation

In the concluding paragraphs of their overview Funk and Shairfy-Funk offer an insightful and eloquent summary of Said’s life and intellectual legacy which deserves to be shared here word for word:

When read collectively, Said’s writings offer fascinating insights not just into his personal intellectual history, but also into the major historical developments and changes in the field of international relations. Said was a witness to these developments and changes, but also an active and prescient contributor to consequential debates and a pioneer of new, leading-edge perspectives. He took risks and proposed unconventional frameworks for understanding that often anticipated areas of significant intellectual change in later years. He sought to identify consequential forces and new dynamics in a changing world and invited others to join him in “thinking outside the box.”
A multifaceted scholar if ever there was one, Abdul Aziz Said was many things while still being a singular person with a lasting intellectual legacy. He was a former colonial subject who sought to project a vision of how a fully decolonized world might function. A youth who lived through a period of total war in the 20th century, and who invited reflection on the need for comprehensive understandings of “total peace” in the 21st century. A man from a remote region of rural Syria who challenged American academics and multiple generations of students to appreciate cultural diversity, embrace a “big enough” view of the world, promote internal as well as external disarmament, and cooperate to secure public goods within an emergent global civilization. An Arab born to a Christian family who appeared to move seamlessly among Muslim, Christian, Jewish and secular academic colleagues, and who cited a 13th century Sufi philosopher as a cherished intellectual influence. A political scientist with ambitions to influence foreign policy frameworks and academic paradigms for development and democracy, while also instilling an ecumenical spiritual vision. A pioneer in peace, intercultural dialogue, and cooperative global politics.

(p. 122)


All in all, Funk and Sharify-Funk have made an important contribution in compiling the biography, photos, a comprehensive bibliography, and selected writings and testimonials covering the life and legacy of an amazing peace educator, practitioner, and human being. That being said, I have only one concern. The hefty price tag may discourage people from purchasing and reading it. Hopefully the publishers will find a way to offer this work at a more affordable price. In the meantime, perhaps potential readers can ask their university or public library to purchase and make it available to a wide public.

*Pat Mische was Lloyd Professor of Peace Studies and World Law (retired), Antioch College and author of more than a hundred articles, including several in the JSE, and several books, including: Star Wars and the State of our Souls; Toward a Human World Order: Beyond the National Security Straitjacket; Toward a Global Civilization? The Contribution of Religions.*