BOOK REVIEWS

Mustafa Akyol, *Islam without Extremes: a Muslim Case for Liberty*

(New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), ISBN: 978-0-393-07086-6, 352 pp.

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Freedom is frequently a topic of controversy in discussions of Islam and the West. Mustafa Akyol's recent book goes further than making the claim that freedom is indigenous to Islam, and it reads closer to an ideological manifesto in offering a spirited defence of liberalism and free market capitalism from an Islamic perspective: "[L]iberty is ... what everyone needs to find God." But freedom in Islam is morally assured, legally secured and theologically grounded and sanctified—and thus forms a crucial part of the entire worldview of Islam. It can be conceived as a higher purpose (*maqsid*) of the Shariah, and not merely a principle or a transient reality. An ideological reading of freedom, as we find in Akyol's book, actually truncates that worldview, as it dislodges freedom from its Islamic theological-moral-spiritual sanctuary in favour of classical liberalism.

Akyol's principal claim is that freedom is coeval with the Qur'an itself and realised by the Prophet during his lifetime. Islam created the individual out of the tribe, extolled man as God's viceroy on earth and enjoined righteous deeds as part of religious faith. Such proto-liberal tendencies within Islam, Akyol argues, brought about radical transformation to the Arabian society of the time—endowing women with hitherto unknown rights, protecting the weak and the powerless, freeing the individual from the shackles of tribal ethics, and more. But when the Prophet died, this all proved to be short-lived. His death gave way to a "medieval war of ideas" between two camps, one that championed reason, freedom and pluralism, and another, espousing a rigid, dogmatic, literalist and exclusivist variety of Islam. Examples of the former, according to Akyol, include the *ahl al-ra'y* (People of Opinion), Abu Hanifah, the Hanafis, the "Rationalist" Mu'tazilites, and the "Pluralist" antinomian Murji'ites. Examples of the latter would be the *ahl al-hadith* (People of Tradition), Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, the Kharijites, the Wahhabis, the Ash'aris, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, al-Shafi'i and the hadith literature.

In Akyol's view the eventual triumph of the latter camp has led the Muslim world to the stagnation that has persisted till today. However, Akyol considers the external environment—the social milieu, geographical landscape, land fertility, etc.—to have been central to the triumph of this latter camp. Above all, trade allowed for rational, liberal and plural traditions within Islam to flourish, if only for a while. The decline of trade brought about the decline of rationality and, along with it, freedom (and everything else that is good).

Contemporary Turkey offers a promising hope to actualise the dormant—or rather, suppressed—liberal tendencies within Islam. Historically, the Ottomans nurtured a healthy liberal and plural tradition. The millet system enabled different communities to flourish with their own culture and mores. It offered refuge to Jews fleeing persecution in Europe, winning the admiration of Martin Luther and Jean Bodin. But when the winds of change swept across Europe, once a hotbed for bloody ethnic, religious and cultural wars, and for oppression and tyranny, the continent then rapidly transformed itself to define new standards of civilisation. The Ottoman accomplishments paled by comparison. Ottoman leaders, conscious of the need to adapt and compete gradually undertook reforms along European lines, called the Tanzimat (Reorganisation). During this time and the later Second Constitutional Period, known as the *Hurriyyet* (liberty), the reform-minded Young Ottomans emerged, and a single law for all Ottoman citizens was introduced. Mustafa Kemal, “Ataturk”, the father of modern Turkey, cut this short and led a rebellion against the last remnant of the Ottomans to establish Turkey as a modern state. The new state did not continue the liberal agenda of its predecessor, evincing instead an excessive infatuation with secularism, forcing citizens to wear brimmed hats, keeping religion out of the public and emulating the West down to the lowest detail. This attracted various forms of backlash: “zealots” with an authoritarian Islamist ideology were a by-product of Kemalism, as were liberals joining Muslims in an alliance against secularist authoritarianism. We believe that hope for the future in Turkey lies in the latter direction.

Akyol’s narrative is compelling, and his discourse offers a defence of freedom and liberty from within Islam. But when the author equates religion with authority, duty and obedience alone, he falls into something of an all-pervasive error in this text. By such logic then, the moment something ceases to be obligatory, it ceases to be a religious matter. So the Prophet’s tactics in war were for example not religious, since they were not obligatory (247). The state is not obligatory, therefore not religious (252). A related error is the author’s failure to see Islam not as ideal but as reality, or of viewing religion as being synonymous with scripture, instead of being based on it. This gives rise to false distinctions such that *religious* is contrasted with intellectual, rational, and secular. This seriously cripples an otherwise compelling analysis, in our view.

Akyol’s defence of the “freedom to sin” (262-272) is a case in point, arguing that “the means to commit sin should be available” (272) so that one may be able to exercise free choice in choosing what is right and refraining from what is wrong: choice should not arise as a result of state coercion, but out one’s own volition. It seems that for Akyol freedom itself is not free from the state, insofar as freedom depends on the state abstaining from coercion! The resolution of this contradiction is for freedom to be anchored to the source of freedom itself, i.e.,

to God Himself, as was most succinctly captured by the Sufi Ibn al-‘Arabi in his dictum “freedom (*hurriyyah*) is slavery to God.” It is when we are closest to God that we are truly free “from man’s lordship over man”.

Akyol defends the Mu’tazilite argument that man has free will and creates his own actions, which are not predetermined by God. Nevertheless, “environmental determinism” (131) is so powerful as to be able to “[shape] not just the mindsets of individuals and the culture of societies but also the political structures of states” (132-133). Is man free enough to resist divine determination, but helpless against his environment?

Akyol seems to take it for granted that the salvation of Muslims today lies in wise economic policies and social planning: in other words, seeking solutions to the challenges that lie outside man, not those that are within him. One may argue that such an external basis for freedom is at best unstable and at worst precarious.

Islam is precisely a force to enable individuals to remain righteous and ethical despite economic hardship. A moral and just society dependent on economic stability offers only a false sense of security and a fragile basis for a moral order. The Quranic attitude is seen in its challenging of the Makkan practices of burying babies alive on account of poverty (al-Nahl, 16:58-59), asking instead for them to put their trust in Allah (al-‘Isra’, 17:31), offering neither pennies nor policies but quite simply hope. To lapse into crime and immorality as a result of poverty suggests the failure, not merely of policy but of remaining true to absolute moral constraints enshrined by religion.

Nevertheless, despite caveats, in the book *Islam without Extremes: a Muslim Case for Liberty*, Akyol’s analysis of the Turkish Islamo-liberal experiment remains compelling.

R. Skidelsky and C. W. Wigström, Eds., *The Economic Crisis and the State of Economics*

(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 140 pp., ISBN 978-0-230-10254-5.

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The Economic Crisis and the State of Economics, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2010, is a product of a symposium held with the purpose of identifying the causes of the current financial crisis as well as prescribing remedies. Robert Skidelsky, organiser of the symposium, is a British economic historian, former politician, and author of the acclaimed three-volume biography of J. M. Keynes. He is Emeritus Professor of Political Economy at the University of Warwick, UK. Christian Westerlind Wigström is a graduate student of philosophy at Merton College, Oxford.