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A Review of "Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty"

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‘Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty’

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Mustafa Akyol’s timely book challenges the Muslim stereotypes formed in Western minds after Sept. 11. Akyol observes that the portrayal of “Muslim” as being equivalent to people like Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein has convinced many that Muslims are inherently terrorists and deserve authoritarian rule.

Exploring this issue, and taking modern Turkey as an example, Akyol argues that this is by no means the case.

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The topic of whether Islam at its core is a religion compatible with the idea of liberty as it has evolved in the (post)Enlightenment Anglo-American intellectual and popular tradition has attracted much academic and journalistic interest in recent decades. Some pundits, spanning a wide spectrum, have argued that the faith with its origin in unquestionable divine revelation is not only practically but also doctrinally discordant with liberal thought - the foundations of which rest upon miscellaneous presumptions of the primacy of rational discourse and reason. While others have vouched for fundamentally different positions and sought to carve out idiosyncratic spaces for such notions as free will and individual liberties from within a religious framework. An endless variety of questions fueled the debates and discussions in this regard: What does Islam say about the nature and extent of the control individuals are able or allowed to exert over their lives? Is there such a phenomenon as an Islamic state, and what is it supposed to look like? How much freedom is too much - or too

little - from a Muslim perspective, and does any one person or group have religiously ordained authority to impose restrictions on freedom of thought, trade, movement, etc.?

Mustafa Akyol, an Istanbul-based newspaper columnist and political commentator, boards this train of thought with “Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty.” The book opens with a map of early seventh century Arabia, presumably inserted to familiarize the reader with the geographic context of the discussion offered in Part I “The Beginnings,” which covers the early history of Islam. A second map showing the reach of the Ottoman Empire over the centuries follows, which serves as a useful complement to Chapter 6, “The Ottoman Revival.” Given the author’s decision to use maps, however, one wonders why a map of modern Turkey is missing. The Turkish example is crucial, for it is what is presented as the embodiment of the book’s main theme, “a liberal-minded understanding of Islam” (p. 37). It would have been pragmatic to add a map of the country simply to better orient the reader in Chapter 8, “The Turkish March to Islamic Liberalism.”

Next in the book is a 12-page glossary. This



Mustafa Akyol, “Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty,” W.W. Norton & Company, New York & London, 2011 (352 pp.)

reviewer is generally impressed with definitions offered for the terms used in the book. Just about all of them cut to the chase and thus enhance the accessibility of individual chapters. Some quibbles remain, however: Firstly, most terms are given in Arabic transliteration first and then defined in English (e.g. "hijra," "Jabriyyah," "iqta," etc.), but then the order is curiously reversed when it comes, for instance, to such terms as "ahl al-ray," "ahl al-Kitab" or "ahl al-hadith." It would be better if it were the English equivalents of these terms that were in parentheses, not least for the sake of consistency. Secondly, the definition of "hijra" is not precise enough. What distinguishes that event is not that it is a case of migration, but one of forced migration. If it is safe to assume that the book's average reader is unlikely to be familiar with the reasons Prophet Muhammad sought refuge in Medina, this is no simple distinction (and one that would matter quite a bit to refugee studies scholars), and the "forced" character of the departure from Mecca is worthy of emphasis as soon as the term is introduced (it will take a while before the reader gets to page 56, where the author does just that). Third, and last in the interest of brevity, is the definition given for ahl al-ray. It is unclear why Akyol chose People of Reason as the term's English counterpart. This reviewer does not speak Arabic and neither does the author, but sources almost uniformly suggest English equivalents to the tune of "choice, opinion, judgment" to define "al-ray." Though uncommon in modern Turkish usage, the Arabic word also happens to have been imported into Turkish lexicon (with a spelling as "rey") where it commonly means "vote." Taking a few hints from linguistic anthropology (Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, et al.), one might suggest the following: The difference between ahl al-ray and ahl al-hadith was not that the former were people of reason and the latter people of no reason or unreason (these people are, after all, known for their profound knowledge of the hadith). Rather, one needs to focus on what people in each group did with their reasoning faculty.

ILLUSTRATION: CEM KIZILTUG

The People of Tradition were also people of reason, it is just they used their reason for a radically different end than the ahl al-ray. Long story short: The difference in approach would have been better illuminated had the author chosen a definition for ahl al-ray that says (before one reaches page 89) a thing or two about what these people did with their reason (opine, pass independent judgment, prefer a certain position, etc.).

And then the reader is presented with the beautifully written introduction. This reviewer appreciated the way Akyol segues into his subject matter by fusing the personal with the political and moving effortlessly between the local and the global. He gets straight to business with a childhood memory of authoritarian perceptions; proceeds to a discussion of coercive practices in Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan, where Islamic jurisprudence has remained illiberal - to the detriment of their populace; and then offers other examples from around the world (such as the well-known cases of Salman Rushdie, Theo van Gogh, and the Jyllands-Posten) in which a liberal understanding of Islam is in short supply or altogether absent. Once the reader has completed the introduction of "Islam





Without Extremes” he or she should have a reliable idea of what the rest of the book will advocate; that there is no essential relationship between Islam and authoritarianism, and a liberal interpretation of the faith is possible from within a religious framework.

The remainder of the work is divided into three large parts, each containing a varying number of chapters. Part I, “The Beginnings,” starts with a chapter discussing how the advent of Islam meant the arrival of the individual in an otherwise collectivist milieu, focusing on Quranic messages asking human beings to exercise their reason, referencing God-given rights of men and women, and emphasizing the need to understand historical and religious dimensions of Muhammad’s career. The chapter closes with a discussion of what Akyol calls “The Great Mystery in Islam,” namely the paradox that the individualist, rights-based, rationality-prone groundwork laid in Islam’s beginning is at complete odds with the current state of freedom in the Muslim world. Postponing the answer to this puzzle to

THE TURKISH CASE IS OFFERED AS A PROMISING SYNTHESIS OF RELIGIOUS AND LIBERAL IDEAS; A WAY OUT OF THE AUTHORITARIANISM THAT HAS BEEN HAUNTING THE MUSLIM WORLD. AKYOL FINDS AN EXCEPTIONALISM IN THE TURKISH-ISLAMIC EXPERIENCE

later pages of the book, Akyol moves on to the second chapter, in which he explores the many different manifestations (e.g. in the realms of combat and trade) of the idea of divinely guaranteed freedom in the Orient in the centuries immediately following Muhammad’s death. The third and fourth chapters offer a highly informative survey of - almost a crash course in - the emergence, growth and decline of, and the battles between, various sets of ideas in the lands of Islam concerning free will and predestination, sources of political authority, jurisprudential technique and procedure, the nature of God, and the place of Hadith in various schools of thought in a span of over five centuries, from the 13th to the 18th (with respect to these two chapters, I would strongly recommend future editions include a flowchart illustrating the progression of various streams of thought). The author concludes these two chapters by noting that the end result of the

these ideational battles was that literalist and rigid interpretations, thanks in part to the political support they enjoyed during the reigns of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, established themselves at the expense of rationalist, flexible approaches that had room for individual liberties. The next chapter sets out to explain, basically, why the winning ideas won and the losing ideas lost. The shift in trade routes, the reassertion of Bedouin Arab ways in the faith, the aridity of the Middle East, the author suggests, are the reasons pluralism and freedom did not flourish and fatalistic, non-innovative, centralized structures grew in Islamdom. This chapter concludes with a rhetorical question that presents a causal mechanism, characteristic of modernization theories and economic liberalism, postulating a necessary relationship between socioeconomic growth and political, religious, cultural progress. Islamic liberty and rationality, Akyol assumes, will follow from a socioeconomic reawakening (p.135).

Part II opens with Chapter 6, which kicks off with the story of the foundation of the Ottoman Empire. Most of the chapter relates efforts in the later centuries of the empire to catch up with the dynamism of the West, mostly in matters of governance. Akyol considers these reformist efforts to be a form of Islamic liberalism, hailing, for instance, the Young Ottomans, known for their publication of the *Hürriyet* (Liberty) newspaper in 1868, for having “...[been] the first movement in the Muslim world to devise a modern [liberal] ideology inspired by Islam” (p.155). After discussing the reasons Ottoman experiments with liberal ideas were destined to be short-lived, as the empire crumbled at the end of World War I, the author moves to Chapter 7, where he begins with the birth of the Republic of Turkey, the heir to the Ottoman legacy. The illiberal tendencies of the republic’s founding elite are illustrated with reference to the top-down modernization efforts they undertook as they solidified an authoritarian rule over the country in the two decades following the foundation of modern Turkey. Presenting the early republic as a case of secularist authoritarianism, Akyol then goes on to offer examples of Islamist authoritarianism, along with possible explanations for the phenomenon. Then comes “The Turkish March to Islamic Liberalism,” the book’s longest chapter, dealing with



ILLUSTRATION: CEM KIZILTUG

more recent decades in the republic. The Turkish case is offered as a promising synthesis of religious and liberal ideas, sort of a way out of the authoritarianism that has been haunting the Muslim world. Akyol finds an exceptionalism in the Turkish-Islamic experience, explaining that “...unlike most other Muslim countries, Turkey was never colonized by European powers [...] Turkey’s secularists were more restrained and less arbi-

trary than others in the Muslim world [...] modern Turkish Islam [had a] strong aversion to Communism, an antipathy unparalleled in the Arab world” (pp. 212-213). Discussing the ups and downs of the development of Islamo-liberal synthesis in the country, Akyol alludes to the ideas of the early 20th century Islamic thinker Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, who sought to merge modern science, a desire for liberty and a staunch



devotion to the core of Islam. He also discusses the post-1980 coup revolution of the late President Turgut Özal with its emphasis on freedoms; the secularist backlash in the 1990s, followed by the establishment of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party); the emergence of an urbanized, freedom-loving Muslim middle class; and the contemporary theological efforts under the auspices of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate to revise the Hadith corpus. Akyol completes the chapter on a cautious note, suggesting that "The century-long dominance of the two opposing yet mutually enhancing ideologies - secularism and Islamism - has constrained the intellectual appeal of Islamic liberalism [...] Muslim societies need to hear more accessible arguments for liberty" (p. 244). And that is what he sets out to produce in Part III, which comprises three chapters presenting arguments in favor of various freedoms.

Chapter 9, "Freedom from the State," advances the claim that Islam does not prescribe a specific type of

AS A REPORTER OF GRAND EPISTEMOLOGIES CRAFTED IN VARIOUS CONTEXTS OVER THE CENTURIES IN POST-PROPHETIC ISLAMDOM, AKYOL IS AN EFFECTIVE NARRATOR WITH ACCESSIBLE PROSE - OFTEN WITTY AND EFFICIENT

government, and develops a religiously inspired argument for the acceptance of a secular democratic state by Muslims. Meanwhile Chapter 10, "Freedom to Sin," following the same inspiration, champions the idea that "[r]eligious virtue [...] should be sought under the umbrella of freedom. It should not be the job of Muslims to forcefully prevent people from sin - with methods such as banning alcohol, closing down bars, or enforcing a particular dress code" (p. 272). Chapter 11, "Freedom from Islam," builds on the idea that certain Muslims' violent reactions to apostasy and blasphemy are unwarranted Islamically. Akyol suggests medieval categories (such "Abode of War" or "Abode of Treaty") are no longer appropriate to understanding the modern world and Muslims should exercise reason and wisdom in responding to ideas they dislike or find abhorrent. Although the three chapters comprising Part III eventually prove to be a highly accessible introduc-

tion to reformist thinking in Islam, readers who have previously scratched the surface of scholarship on reform in Islam or the Muslim mindset (i.e., who have some familiarity with the ideas of Fazlur Rahman Malik, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad 'Abduh, Musa Jarullah Bigi, etc.) are unlikely to find much new here.

This is in essence a journalist's book, one that reads like an extended feature story addressed to a popular audience (which is probably what it is meant to be) rather than a scholarly treatise promising major theoretical or empirical steps forward. As a faithful conveyor or reporter of grand epistemologies crafted in various contexts over the centuries in post-Prophetic Islamdom, Akyol is an effective narrator with accessible prose; often witty and rhetorically efficient, it provides for a very smooth read. To its author's credit, the text should presents no particular challenges in terms of comprehensibility (partly why this reviewer plans to adopt it as recommended reading in their undergraduate Middle East course).

Future editions would do well to devote some attention to two broad issues. The first is this: If "[a]t certain fateful junctures in Islamic history [...] some particular interpretations of the Qur'an prevailed over others - not because they were necessarily more valid, but because they were politically or culturally more convenient" - as Akyol notes (p. 33), the question that

practically asks itself, and appositely so, is this: shall we then assume that a liberal modern day interpretation of the Quran is warranted, not because it is necessarily more valid than other possible, contemporaneous interpretations of the holy book, but because a liberal approach to the revelation would serve political expediency and cultural convenience more efficiently? To more effectively show that liberal ideas are not epiphenomenal to (or simply functions of) other determinants, Akyol might want to consider the so-called "ideational literature" in international relations scholarship so that the independent impact of liberal ideas as ideas can be emphasized. The second issue is that the book reads as an effort to carve out a genuine space for liberalism from within Islam - which is fine. But one also longs for some remarks, perhaps no longer than a few pages, on how the core of Islam offers the potential to tame the excesses of liberalism as a political and economic doctrine.