

DAWN

Non-Fiction: Enlightenment in a Box

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A major lesson of the past 500 years is that societies thrive when they embrace humanism and the scientific method as their principal interfaces with reality, and wither if they are unwilling or unable to break with traditionalism.

Mustafa Akyol, in his new book *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom and Tolerance*, makes an important, but flawed, case for the revival of Islam's classical tradition of philosophy and humanism. The central contention of this study is that the decline of Muslim civilisation is because of a combination of political and religious authoritarianism, characterised by the intellectual dominance of the anti-philosophical worldview embodied by the Persian polymath al Ghazali.

Akyol is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Global Liberty and Prosperity, the Cato Institute, Washington DC. The Cato Institute is a right-wing American think tank funded by the Koch family. It propagates a globalist, libertarian, free-market ideology and is closely aligned with American conservatism.

In his book, Akyol explores the link between worldview and modernisation and marshals an impressive array of classical and contemporary sources to recreate the lost world of Muslim humanism — from al Kindi to Ibn Khaldun — while arguing for a renaissance of sorts. Akyol situates the Muslim world's decline in its lack of pluralism and adherence to mental habits that have long ceased to be useful. At the same time, the author appears to be unaware of 'how' modernisation took place in the West, or in East Asia, or even in his native Turkey, and he misidentifies the source of authoritarianism in the Muslim world.

Mustafa Akyol's latest book demonstrates that humanism and rationalism aren't as alien to the Muslim tradition as many think, even though it falters in its understanding of historical causation

In terms of modernisation, of the two historical models of modernisation that have worked, neither is particularly edifying from a moral or humane perspective. One model, which took root in Britain and the United States, is that a humanistic oligarchy comes to power and adopts a framework that allows large scale capital accumulation through ruthless exploitation of land and subject peoples. Within the core of such polities, liberalism prevails, with rights for some, and a political settlement that allows power to be shared amongst constituent elements of the ruling class and rotated peacefully.

The other model, which took the USSR from the Iron Age to the Space Age in 40 years at horrific human cost — and has recently worked a similar miracle in China — is that of an enlightened despotism in which a charismatic leader, supported by a party apparatus that shared a commitment to modernisation, seized power and enacted radical reforms. Less extreme variants of this despotic model include Napoleonic France, Imperial Germany, Meiji Japan and Kemalist Turkey.

The trouble is that modernisation is extremely difficult because it requires the rewriting of ancient rules of engagement with reality and, for that very reason, is often an intensely violent process. Perhaps a third of Central Europe's population died in the wars of the Protestant Reformation — wars that broke the power of mediaeval Christendom over many parts of Europe and enabled the Scientific Revolution to survive the Catholic Church's counteroffensive. Akyol refers to the British campaign for the abolition of slavery and the American creed of universal equality, omitting that much of the wealth that paid for industrialisation in these liberal polities came from the exploitation of enslaved labour.

Incidentally, John Locke — one of Akyol's favourite thinkers — invested GBP600 in the Royal African Company, which brought 75,000 enslaved Africans to the land of liberty and free enterprise between 1673 and 1725. In the American case, it took a civil war (1861-65) that left more than 600,000 dead to finally end slavery, and another century for the extension of formal equality to African Americans.

In contrast, czarist Russia peacefully emancipated some 50 million serfs starting in 1861. In the Muslim world, there are only a handful of states where religious leaders can be said to be in government, even if rulers are sensitive to some types of mass sentiment. Much of the present disarray in the Muslim world stems from the failure of modernist elites to deliver on their promises of dignity and development.

On political authoritarianism, Akyol seems to forget that the territories where Islam spread were autocracies for centuries, if not millennia, prior to the Muslim advent. The early Muslim rulers, as Ibn Khaldun explains, adopted the governance structures that they found in place and started to behave as absolute monarchs. If anything, the memory of the Rightly Guided Caliphate (632-661) sits very uncomfortably with hereditary rule by divine right.

This is why, in South Asia, for instance, the sultanate of Delhi and the Mughal Empire relied primarily on the classical Persian theory of divine right kingship — variations of which we can find in cultures as diverse as China, Byzantium, Russia, Spain and France. At any rate, it isn't the authoritarianism or liberalism of a regime that prevents or facilitates modernisation, but the understanding and competence of the ruling elite.

While Muslim-ruled empires were dynastic autocracies, they remained remarkably tolerant and pluralistic long after the triumph of al Ghazali's approach to religious doctrine. Yes, some rulers persecuted their enemies and committed atrocities, but Islam had nothing compared to the organised Church of medieval Christendom, with its transcontinental apparatus of thought policing, censorship, violence, the Inquisition and unparalleled resource capture.

Thus, when the Spanish monarch purged the Jews in 1492, they were welcomed by the Ottomans (a point noted by Akyol) who, via the millet [religious community] system, granted diverse communities internal autonomy in exchange for political loyalty and taxes.

While Europe tore itself apart in sectarian conflict, in Mughal India, Emperor Akbar proclaimed universal toleration, abolished the poll tax on non-Muslims, admitted Hindus to the higher nobility, propagated a syncretic royal cult (Deen-i-Ilahi) and extracted an infallibility decree for himself from the ulema. Muslim empires relied upon royal legislation and orders for providing the legal framework for their administration and these enactments were largely secular in nature.

Customary law, much of it pre-Islamic, also played a major role at the field level. Akyol greatly overestimates the place of the ulema and Islamic jurisprudence in Muslim history and underestimates the autonomy that Muslim rulers had on all matters, including religious ones, especially when compared to their counterparts in Europe.

Akyol's proposed solution to the plight of the Muslims is to create a kind of Enlightenment in an Islamic box. While it can be argued that an accommodation between Christianity and humanism was critical, through the Reformation, in breaking the hold of medieval Christendom, the ultimate outcome was the marginalisation of all religious authority and the rise of humanistic ideologies such as nationalism, republicanism, libertarianism, liberalism, fascism and communism.

In other words, if we take Akyol's favourite Immanuel Kant quote (about the meaning of Enlightenment) to its logical conclusion, then, the empire of reason, with its rational universalism, cannot be contained by even the most elastic interpretations of religion and tradition.

These quibbles notwithstanding, *Reopening Muslim Minds* is an engaging take on the intellectual heritage of Islam. It demonstrates that humanism and rationalism aren't as alien to the Muslim tradition as many think and provides a vibrant account of the philosophies and perspectives that stood out during Islam's Golden Age.

Consequently, Akyol's latest offering, while deficient in its understanding of historical causation, deserves to be read, for one must concede that Enlightenment in a box is better than immersion in darkness.