

## Mustafa Akyol argues for Islamic reform from within

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(RNS) — Mustafa Akyol knows the problems with apostasy laws better than most. In 2017 the Turkish thinker was supposed to be a guest lecturer in Malaysia. Yet, when he finished his trip, he was approached by Malaysian government agents and detained for 18 hours on the order of agents of the Federal Territory Islamic Affairs Department. His lecture had run up against the Malaysian state’s apostasy laws though he was formally charged with teaching religion without a permit.

Despite his ordeal, Akyol continues to speak well of the country and trivializes his experience in comparison with that of others in who face similar accusations in certain Muslim-majority countries.

Malaysian authorities were particularly incensed by his use of the Quranic phrase “la ikraha fiddin.” The phrase, which can be translated as “there is no compulsion in religion,” is often cited as an example of religious tolerance found within Islam’s holiest text. Indeed, a reexamination of authoritative sources based on reason is at the heart of Akyol’s new book: “Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance.”

Akyol rose to international prominence on the strengths of his work as a columnist in his native Turkey, where he combined his interests in Sunni Islamic thought and classical liberalism. Today he is both a fellow of the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., and a New York Times contributing opinion writer.

“This book, to some extent, grows out of disappointment with what happened in the Middle East over the past decade, including the failure of the Arab Spring, which saw an Islamic supremacist ideology gain prominence with groups like ISIS and at the same time an authoritarian retreatment such as in Egypt,” Akyol told Religion News Service. “This was unfortunate for those of us concerned about freedom in the Muslim world but, I also realized, there was a growing ethical gap within some puritan tradition of Islam in particular and wanted to look deeper into the sources.”

The book offers a readable introduction into Islamic sources and viewpoints that Akyol argues have often been overlooked or discounted for a number of reasons over the centuries. Not least is the tendency for Islamic scholars to choose interpretations that favored centralizing and often authoritarian tendencies — in particular those of their patrons.

Akyol's work offers the reader a journey into largely forgotten but important theological debates that took place among Muslim scholars in the Middle Ages. The most important of these occurred between two schools of Islamic theology known to us today as the Asharites and Mutazilites. The Mutazilites took the view that faith was largely compatible with free will and believed all humans have a natural ethical compass. Conversely, the Asharites argued in favor of a more predeterministic view of the world. It was the Asharites who won that debate.

In Islamic studies, this victory is often portrayed as closing the door toward rational views and reform for centuries. "If you don't discuss these issues, a deeply textual mindset can dominate your thinking, and there is a serious limit to what you can bring into the conversation about the relationship between ethics and the Shariah," Akyol said, using the Arab word for the Islamic legal canon.

This is particularly relevant in the book's discussion of apostasy. Apostasy remains a crime punishable by death in a handful of Muslim majority countries and a major crime in many more. Apostasy has been used not just to suppress those who wish to leave Islam. Such laws have often been used to suppress those who preach heterodox views on Islam.

One famous example mentioned by Akyol is the Sudanese scholar and engineer Mahmoud Taha, who was killed in 1985 for preaching, among other things, that the tolerant Meccan surahs, or chapters in the Quran, should take precedence over the historically later Medinan surahs. For this and other claims, Taha was executed by the Sudanese government, famously smiling as the hood was put over his head for his hanging.

"One of the clear sources of tension between freedom and the mainstream Islamic tradition is the ban on apostasy," Akyol told RNS. "Whether *rida* is perfectly translated as apostasy is just one discussion we need to have now. Another burning problem is the death penalty for blasphemy. How long will we wait for orthodox scholars to reach a consensus on free speech while people *are* killed for blasphemy? We have people killed in Pakistan and elsewhere over blasphemy laws or controversies over blasphemy laws."

Akyol argues that the Arabic word *rida* more likely referred to acts of political treason and betrayal rather than religious faith. During the medieval period, civilizations around the world took a similar view conflating political allegiance with religious faith as was the case in the neighboring Byzantine Empire. Indeed, well into the Renaissance period in the English language, the expression "to turn Turk" was used to describe both a "betrayer" and someone who became Muslim. The expression is archaic in modern English but does appear in the former usage in Shakespeare's play "Hamlet." Yet, if anything, Akyol argues, the Quran and the earliest Islamic sources provide some examples of those who left Islam without being punished.

Akyol reminds his fellow Muslims that they would be deeply offended if Christians had apostasy laws threatening converts to Islam today. For Akyol the book is the latest in a career spent researching and making arguments for the compatibility of Islam with classical liberal values and the Enlightenment, following his previous works published in the West, "Islam Without Extremes" and "The Islamic Jesus."

"One of the goals of the book is to make a case (that) ethical values come from human nature. Therefore those values exist beyond religious boundaries. Hence the book offers a deep criticism of the current parochialism in the world of Islam. And surely this is not a problem that is unique

to Islam. Any community that rejects universal human dignity will breed intolerance and oppression.”