



John Locke's Lesson for the Taliban

'True and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind.'

Mustafa Akyol

May 12, 2022

The Taliban issued a decree last weekend ordering the women of Afghanistan to wear an all-covering veil, ideally the burqa, in public. If a woman doesn't follow this rule, her male "guardian" could face jail time. This is only the latest example of how the Taliban, who seized power over Afghanistan last summer, haven't changed much since their brutal rule in 1996-2001.

In the '90s, women who traveled alone or failed to wear a burqa were lashed in public. The "new" Taliban are keen to avoid graphic scenes as they try to save face internationally amid an economic catastrophe. But the basic idea is the same: If the Taliban consider something a religious obligation, the group will use force to ensure the population complies.

The Taliban are exceptionally harsh, but they're hardly the only group engaging in religious coercion. Unlike terrorism in the name of Islam—which really is an extreme position—the enforcement of Islam with state power is a mainstream idea in much of the Muslim world. Nuances of culture, sect and context aside, it is the standard practice under any regime that considers itself "Islamic."

In Saudi Arabia and Iran, women are also forced to wear a veil, which may not necessarily cover the face but certainly covers the head. At least a dozen such "Islamic" states have harsh laws, including the death penalty, against apostasy and blasphemy. There are "Ramadan laws," from Malaysia to Morocco, which ban Muslims from eating or drinking in public during fasting hours.

Liberal-minded Muslims, especially those living in the West, often consider these religious dictates bizarre, finding support for a soft touch in the Quran. The most famous of these is a short phrase in the scripture's longest chapter: "There is no compulsion in religion."

This statement sounds like a proclamation of freedom of religion—even freedom from religion. But medieval Muslim scholars who interpreted the Quran didn't understand this verse in such liberal terms. They understood it only as sparing Jews and Christians from forced conversion to Islam. This limited toleration, despite second-class status, was quite generous for its time. But it was short of equal rights under the law, which we owe to modern liberalism.

Meanwhile, in its medieval interpretation, the "no compulsion" verse didn't apply to Muslims, who could be beaten with sticks if they gave up public prayers or drank wine. Because of the criminalization of apostasy, they could even be executed if they renounced Islam.

No wonder some conservative translations of the Quran carefully edit the “no compulsion” verse. Sahih International, published in Saudi Arabia, inserts a caveat: “There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion.” It means that you are free to stay out of Islam. But once you have accepted it, even by birth, you aren’t free.

The Quran also repeatedly calls for “commanding the right and forbidding the wrong.” A survey of Islamic tradition shows that this duty had more-noble interpretations than religious coercion, such as merely propagating Islam or speaking out against tyrannical rulers. Those rulers, however, preferred an orthodoxy that preached docile “obedience” to themselves while zealously pursuing heretics and sinners.

The same orthodoxy also turned an institution that the prophet Muhammad founded to combat fraud in the marketplace—the *muhtasib*—into full-fledged religion police.

Today, critical readings of the Islamic tradition are necessary to challenge the coercive Islam of the Taliban and their ilk. It is also necessary to stress what coercion really achieves: not a genuine, heartfelt piety but only hypocrisy. It even achieves what Islamists abhor most: loss of faith in Islam, even contempt of it—as proven by a large number of vocal ex-Muslims, especially from countries with Islamist regimes such as Iran.

A Christian thinker in the 17th century had observed similar troubles with coercion, when his faith hadn’t yet outgrown it. “True and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind,” he wrote, dismissing the “outward force” of the state. Instead, the philosopher added, state-imposed religion only creates “hypocrisy and contempt of his Divine Majesty.” His name was John Locke, and his landmark essay, “A Letter Concerning Toleration,” would help transform Christendom.

Today parts of the Muslim world like Afghanistan need a Lockean step forward. This comes from a simple but powerful insight: Religion is “true and saving” only when based on free choice and free practice. When coerced, it turns soulless, oppressive, and ugly. It turns into the Taliban—old and new.

Mr. Akyol is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and author of “Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom and Tolerance.”