Gap Between Muslim World & The Rest Becoming Wider: Akyol

David Lepeska

May 29, 2021

Mustafa Akyol, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a contributing opinion writer for *The New York Times*, is all about Reopening Muslim Minds, which is the title of his new book. The Turkey-born Akyol recently spoke with *Kashmir Observer* contributor David Lepeska about the value of questioning Islamic theology, the problematic thinking of Muslim leaders like Maulana Mawdudi, how to start fixing this crisis and much more.

DL: Ramadan recently ended and Muslims celebrated Eid al-Fitr, the festival of breaking the fast. Next month comes the other big Muslim holiday, Eid al-Azha, or the feast of the sacrifice, during which Muslims sacrifice and often consume a lamb. This tradition is a nod to the story of Abraham, who was asked by God to kill his son Ismael, but then is stopped at the last minute. In your book you share an interesting Islamic variation on this story, which for me put a very interesting twist on this biblical tale that I learned in my Catholic school days.

MA: In Islam, when we Muslims hear commandments from the divine, God, the Prophet, such as do this or don't do that, from the Quran or Hadith, are we supposed to obey blindly? Or do we legitimately have our own internal conscience to check things and say, "Wait a minute, this doesn't sound right. Let me look into this more carefully." I advocate this latter view because I believe there are commandments from God in every religion, but also there are god-given values to humanity that are universal. And these two values in every religion should be used together…When there is a commandment from revelation that doesn't sound right, as a believer you should have the right to say I'm not sure whether this is the right thing to do. Which is called wrestling with the text. This approach is called ethical objectivism. The other one is divine command theory -- so whatever you hear as a divine command is the end of the story, you just have to do it. In my book I criticise divine command and that sort of thinking. In doing that you have to unpack some stories, Abraham is probably the biggest of those and seems to support divine command theory. Well, no sane conscientious human being would consider harming your

own child, let alone killing your own child. That is deeply unconscientious. But we have the story, in the Bible and the Quran, that (Prophet) Abraham, receiving revelation from God as he understands it, to sacrifice his son for the sake of God. He obeys and he gets close to doing it. Luckily God is merciful and the lamb replaces the son, and then he sacrifices this lamb. And this is the very reason, as you pointed out, that we have an Eid in Islam, Eid al-Azha, where you sacrifice an animal just to follow in the footsteps of Abraham. This story has been among religious believers as a strong basis for divine command theory, for those who say that we should do whatever God tells us without asking, as Abraham did. But I dug into this issue and highlighted a different take on this story in Islamic tradition, which was offered by the Mu'tazila scholar Abd al-Jabbar and later the Sufi master Ibn al-Arabi. They said, wait, actually, God never sent a revelation to Abraham in the Quran to sacrifice his son. Abraham just saw a dream and interpreted the dream. It was not a revelation so there was no divine command. And what happened was God saved him from doing this terrible thing by sending a lamb. Why is this important? This is important because it shows there's a way to look at this Abraham sacrifice story, which is very fundamental, in a way that vindicates not divine command theory but ethical objectivism.

DL: Early in the book you write about the prominent mid-20th century Pakistani thinker Sayyid Mawdudi. At its essence, your book is about encouraging Muslims to embrace reason when it comes to their religion, to allow Islamic scripture and theology to be seen as more adaptable to the modern age, and you go quite deeply into why it has not been. Mawdudi perfectly encapsulates this problem, as he argues both that Islam is scientific and rational, and that there's no room for rationalism and reason in Islam because if a person is a Muslim then he has surrendered himself to Allah and cannot be seen to doubt that authority. He compares this to a soldier in an army, arguing that the entire system would collapse if soldiers were encouraged to question their orders.

MA: Mawdudi, on the one hand praises reason -- that's very common, Islam is a rational religion. If you think rationally you will see the truth of Islam. So on the one hand reason helps religion by bringing people to the religion itself. But once you become Muslim the role of religion becomes less important, and actually it becomes a problem. Because once you become Muslim you have to obey divine commandments without asking why and how. And actually if you ask why and how that becomes *vesvese* -- that is the call of the devil, a kind of seduction. Mawdudi says we should obey without asking why and how. The obvious problem with this is if you follow a certain interpretation of Islam that says it's a good thing to go and kill the infidels or the heretics, you will do it without asking why and how, which is exactly what gives us the problem of extremism. This is the very mindset of terrorist groups. They think they are following divine commandments and nothing could be higher than that. They don't use reason and conscience as a brake to a possible misinterpretation.

This is an extreme case, but if you understand divine commandments without bringing in any natural law without any universal philosophy to check that, you can turn into a bigot, you can turn into an oppressive person. There are texts in our religious scriptures that are violent, calling for combat. If you don't have that interpretive lens religion can become very toxic, which I see in certain parts of the Muslim world today. Which is why I'm calling for reviving the theological views in early Islam that gave human reason and conscience an ethical authority. We have to harmonize these rather than blindly obey the religious law.

DL: One running argument and irony in the book is that even though many Muslims today find it easy to dismiss the rules of the secular state, to embrace illiberalism or dismiss Enlightenment ideas, Islam flourished in the centuries after its founding largely because it was so open, so thoughtful, cosmopolitan and willing to accept and absorb outside ideas and practices. You open with the story of Ibn Tufayl and his forward-thinking and highly influential 12th century novel. But these ideas were marginalized and crushed because reason and rationality were unhelpful to Muslim despots, who aspired for absolute power, often in the name of God. You write: "the theology of a God whose wisdom is beyond question was well fit for the politics of a ruler whose wisdom, likewise, was beyond question." We might say that the Sunni Islam that became mainstream, or nearly mainstream, is pro-authoritarian, illiberal.

MA: I would not say Sunni Islam per se but a certain strain in Sunni Islam. According to Ashar'ism, things are right or wrong because God said so. That view became dominant in Sunni Islam, and I clearly say that this was a wrong theological turn that is at the root of some of the problems we have today. Because if you abandon the notion that human nature, the human mind can discern ethical value, you deny the basis of being universalistic, the chance to learn anything from other religions and civilisations. Why study the ethics of Aristotle if infidels cannot have moral wisdom? Early Muslims studied Aristotle and other civilisations, let's say, because they believed in universalism. I show that it's not an accident that the golden age of Islamic civilization was marked by openness, cosmopolitanism, universalism, learning from other civilizations as well and synthesizing them and creating new visions enriched by Islam. We lost that. So all our values come from scripture and over time you run into the problem of dry literalism. You stop thinking about the context because your job is to obey the commandment.

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Hardcore conservatives who say there's nothing wrong with marrying a 12-year-old girl because there's nothing against it in the Sharia, they are thinking in these lines. They are denying any ethical value that humanity has brought in by looking at how marriage at that age affects a little girl. They deny that human society has evolved, that we now have education and people mature at age 18 at least. They ignore all this input coming from the progress of humanity. All they're saying is, is it haram or halal based on Islamic jurisprudence fiqh? Well there's no age limit in fiqh, so that's the end of the discussion. So what I do in the book is I show some wrong theological or jurisprudential turns and I display how they are creating a lot of problems in the Islamic world today.

DL: I want to quote at length from the Epilogue of your book: "Why do we need to reopen such long-closed doors, which may only disrupt our peaceful minds? Because, as a fourteen-century-old Ummah, we have come to a dead end. We are no more powerful, creative, sophisticated, beautiful civilization than we once were. Quite the contrary; today our lands are among the most underdeveloped places in the world…We are suppressed by authoritarian regimes, whose triumphant rivals often turn out to be new disappointments. We are also torn by hateful divisions

and violent conflicts, not to mention the extremists who do unspeakable evils in our name. Certainly outside powers—colonialists and imperialists—have a share in the making of this modern Muslim crisis. But that is often all we want to hear and see. We don't want to focus on the only thing we can change: our own behavior, our own mindset, our own worldview." Pretty stinging stuff. Do you not fear reprisals from those who might see this as anti-Islam or anti-Muslim?

MA: I would be surprised as anyone sees it as anti-Islam or anti-Muslim. What this is is a call for self-criticism and self-improvement. It's a fact that we don't have the glory, that Islamic civilization doesn't have the glory it had 1000 years ago. We don't have…

DL: Well, I agree, but I don't know if hardline fundamentalists will agree with that.

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MA: They agree too. They just think that this happened because of a Zionist conspiracy. They think that this happened because of forces outside or because of treachery, traitors among us who brought in godlessness. Some say this is happening because God is punishing us. I can't say every Muslim, but I see it all across the board. Everybody agrees that something is wrong, that we are not in a good state. We are oppressed. From Palestine to Kashmir, Muslims are oppressed, and that is a big part of the trauma. It's not that Muslims are always wrong. They are being wronged as well. But this boils down to, why are we not the leaders of science, philosophy, and social sciences? Why can't we establish democracies? Why can't we have more religious freedom, more freedom of speech? I see these things as connected. Every Muslim I think agrees that there's something wrong. I'm saying there is something wrong and it has to do with the way we understand our religious tradition and we have to rethink this. This is not against Islam -- this comes from care for Islam. I worry that if it goes on like this, we will have tougher decades ahead. We will have maybe a terrible century ahead, because I see that the gap between the Muslim world and the rest of the world is becoming larger and larger. Asian countries like South Korea have moved on, China is rising. What do we have, as Muslims? We have oil money, but that's going to be irrelevant. I see deeper tensions in Muslim societies because of religion. I see a lot of people becoming bitter ones, because of the terrible things they see in the name of Islam. I do see a crisis and as a Muslim who feels responsibility about this, I want to say something to take my *Ummah* out of this.