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Cato's Letter

The Case for an Islamic Enlightenment

MUSTAFA AKYOL

I'd like to start by saying Ramadan Mubarak, or may your Ramadan be blessed. Today is the first day of the holy month of Ramadan this year, which means hundreds of millions of Muslims around the world will be fasting in the next 30 days. That is not a small matter. It means that from sunrise to sunset, people will not eat or drink anything; it's hard. But there's a lot of beauty in Ramadan and fasting. I grew up with that culture in Turkey. You anxiously wait for the iftar dinner, the fast-breaking dinner, the whole family gathers, and there's entertainment for the kids.



MUSTAFA AKYOL is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. He spoke at a forum in April about his new book, *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance*.

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here's a lot of spiritual and communal beauty in Ramadan, which I'm sure we will see around the Muslim world in the next 30 days. But I'm afraid we might see some ugliness as well. What I have in mind is what I call Ramadan policing, which one can see in various Arab countries, Saudi Arabia often being the most rigid, as well as Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia. In those countries, if you show up during the day during Ramadan and are drinking a glass of water or having a sandwich, the police will come after you. They might even give you a prison sentence. These governments seem to believe that fasting is not only an act of individual worship to please God but also an act of collective discipline to please the state. And that is just a small and relatively mild manifestation of the main problem that I address in my book *Reopening Muslim Minds*.

The problem is one of religious illiberalism in the contemporary Muslim world. To be clear, not the whole Muslim world, which is a diverse place. It should not be seen as a monolith. Some Muslim-majority countries, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania, are quite free. But in North

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Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, there are several Muslim-majority countries that have a huge problem with religious illiberalism. For example, in about two dozen Muslim-majority countries there are blasphemy laws, which means if someone says something offensive against the prophet Muhammad—peace be upon him—or other tenets of Islam, even just allegedly, he or she may end up in prison for years. Sometimes that person can be targeted by vigilante mobs, which unfortunately happens quite often in Pakistan.

In about a dozen Muslim-majority countries there are apostasy laws, which means if a Muslim publicly gives up his faith to become a Christian or an atheist or some other religious affiliation, he or she may be jailed and may even be given the death penalty. These apostasy laws work in another way, as we have seen in the past several decades in some countries under

so-called Islamic regimes. Muslim scholars or intellectuals who have reformist views about Islam can be condemned as apostates, even though they are believers. They are targeted so that they can be persecuted or executed, or most of the time they are forced to leave their country. And we know that when you silence one person, it's not only a tragedy for that person but also for the society, because you block the society for rethinking important issues.

In these Muslim-majority countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, there are also discriminatory laws against women or reli-

“ If there's an analogy in the history of the West, it is the Enlightenment. ”

gious minorities. There are also doctrines, which are especially popular in the Persian Gulf, that preach obedience to the ruler as a religious duty, no matter how tyrannical the ruler may be, as long as he upholds the religious orthodoxy.

There's a thread that is connecting all these things because there's a deeper problem that comes from classical Islamic jurisprudence. That means interpretation of the Sharia, which is Islamic legal tradition. That's why to be able to speak of compatibility of Islam and human rights today, I believe we need to address these issues. And I'm convinced that we need a reform, a major reform in Islamic law. What kind of reform? What's the goal? I define it in a simple way: giving up coercive power in the name of the faith. Not that Muslims should not be practicing their faith; it means Muslims should just not coerce other people to practice it or to be Muslims.

If there's an analogy in the history of the West, it is the Enlightenment as epitomized by John Locke, who offered the reinterpretation of Christianity to save it from its own centuries-old marriage with the coercive power of the state. My book makes a case for an Islamic enlightenment. Not an enlightenment that goes against religion, but one that faithfully reinterprets religion so that it is based on freedom and not coercion.

Scripturally speaking, these coercive acts have no basis in the Koran, the

only undisputed source of Islam. They have some basis in the post-Koranic sources, such as the Hadith and Sira, which are the reported—and sometimes alleged—sayings and acts of the prophet Muhammad. But a careful reading, in context, also offers a lot of room for interpretation.

But these burning issues, religious policing, blasphemy laws, apostasy laws, and the like, are just the tip of the iceberg. There's a deeper story, which I define in the book as the statute-ization of Islam, the codification



of the faith as a legal code enforced by the state. And that happened right at the birth of Islam, unlike in Christianity, where it happened much later, at least three centuries after the birth of Christianity, when Rome adopted it as the official state religion.

What I argue in the book is that this early marriage of Islam and the state was not a divinely ordained destiny

but a historical contingency. What does this mean? Islam was born in seventh-century Mecca when the prophet Muhammad, a former merchant, began preaching monotheism in a polytheist city. His followers, the first Muslims, formed a small community of believers. They were a civil community; they were not a state. They were oppressed by the polytheist establishment in the city. In response, the Muslims asked for the right to be able to live their faith in peace, preach their faith, and speak out against polytheism and idolatry. They asked for, in other words, what we today call freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

There are verses in the Koran that make this quite clear. In one, the prophet Muhammad is commanded to say to the polytheists of Mecca, "To you your religion, and to me mine." In my book, I ask a question that is not much asked in the Islamic tradition: What would have happened if the Meccans accepted the Koranic call for freedom of religion and freedom of speech? What if they had just stopped oppressing the Muslims and let them practice and preach their religion? I argue that we would then have a very different history of Islam. Instead, the Muslims fled this oppression to Medina, where they formed—not quite a state but an armed polity at

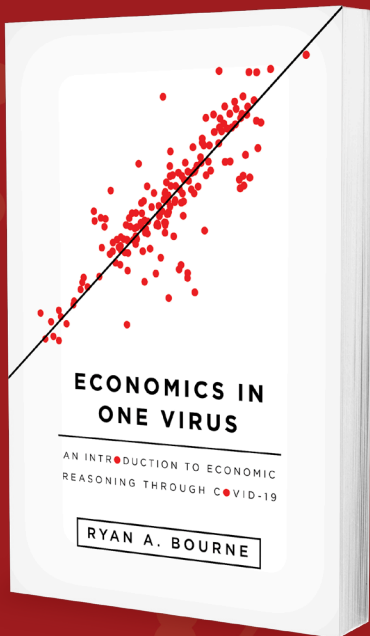
least—that many later took as the ideal form of Islamic governance.

In my book, I call on fellow Muslims to rethink and reconsider how this marriage with the state influenced our religion. Many Muslims, especially

“ Reconsider how this marriage with the state influenced our religion. ”

Islamists, think that when religion and state come together, that’s good for religion because the state upholds religion. You make people fast and pray by the power of the state. What it actually does is create hypocrisy rather than piety. And when you see that, you can also see how, when you bring the state and religion together, the state manipulates religion for its own ends.

This is the fundamental problem that, in my view, as a Muslim, obscures the beauties of my faith with a zealotry that comes from a despotic interpretation of the faith, which I believe we can revisit and change. ■



New from the Cato Institute

Economics in One Virus draws on the dramatic events of 2020 to bring to life some of the most important principles of economic thought. Packed with supporting data and the best new academic evidence, this book offers a crash course in economic analysis through the applied case study of the COVID-19 pandemic to help explain everything from why the United States was underprepared for the pandemic to how economists go about valuing the lives saved from lockdowns.



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CATO PROFILE

Chelsea Follett

Chelsea Follett is the managing editor of HumanProgress.org, a project of the Cato Institute that seeks to educate the public on the global improvements in well-being by providing free empirical data on long-term developments. She has BA in government and English from the College of William & Mary and an MA in foreign affairs from the University of Virginia.

What attracted you to the ideas of liberty, and how did you come to work at Cato?

I became drawn to the liberty movement during graduate school. It was there that I read Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and Matt Ridley's *The Rational Optimist*. Those two books had a big impact on my worldview. So, I was thrilled to be accepted to Cato's internship program and placed with HumanProgress.org, which has both Dr. Pinker and Mr. Ridley on its advisory board. I was very fortunate that HumanProgress.org was looking for a new managing editor at the time and that I was given the opportunity to take on that role at the internship's conclusion.

There's a lot of pessimism bias in people's view of the world. How do you find people react when given data that show the opposite?

I am always delighted by how positive reactions tend to be. During Cato's annual Sphere Summit, which draws middle and high school teachers from across the country and with different political leanings, I normally lead a session introducing the teachers to HumanProgress.org. Over 90 percent of attendees report a positive response to it, with teachers reaching out to me afterward saying how excited they are to use HumanProgress.org as a resource in their classrooms. I think that many people are starving for evidence-based optimism.

How does HumanProgress.org help educate people about the state of the world?

The progress that humanity has made over the long run is simply incredible, and drawing attention to it helps make the case for liberty by showing what people are capable of when given the freedom to innovate and exchange. HumanProgress.org helps to put the challenges that humanity currently faces into a proper perspective with a focus on long-term trends and an objective, data-based view of the world.

What is the most surprising fact you've found through HumanProgress.org's research and data compilation?

The extent of humanity's resilience is truly astounding. If you look at data from the 1918 flu pandemic, the global dip in life expectancy was dramatic but brief, with lifespans soon breaking pre-pandemic records. Many positive trends were disrupted last year amid the COVID-19 pandemic. But over the long run, free markets have helped to usher in an unprecedented decline in world poverty and dramatic improvements in life expectancy, literacy, and other important areas of well-being—and if we can just maintain what has enabled all that progress, then we can recover even from terrible disasters and tackle whatever challenges lie ahead. ■

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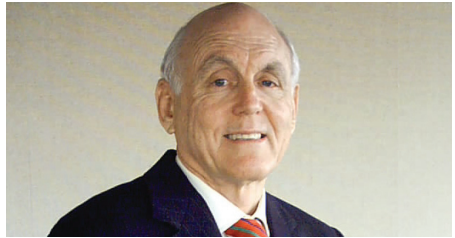
Richard Aster was one such devoted friend. During his life, he was a loyal and long-term supporter of Cato. In fact, he was more than a supporter—he became part of the fabric of our work and mission.

Over the years, Richard—Rick—kept pace with the work of Cato’s scholars and became a friend to many. As someone who fervently believed in individual liberty, free markets, and the rule of law, Rick created a plan to fund Cato’s work beyond his lifetime through a significant bequest. His bequest is among the largest Cato has ever received and has had a major impact on our ability to fulfill our mission.

Rick had many passions in life. As a natural athlete who played golf, tennis, and basketball, Rick coached Catholic Youth Organization basketball for many years, often taking his team to the championship level. Rick also traveled the world, digging deep into the history and economics of each country he visited. Not surprisingly, he was a voracious reader of history and biographies. Rick was passionate when it came to politics and economics.

Professionally, Rick was so successful as a money manager that he was named the Morningstar runner-up manager of the year in 2010. He believed in the positive

power of free markets and individual liberty. In the Cato Institute he found a powerful and effective advocate for the ideas that he believed must necessarily form the basis of a free and prosperous society. We are honored to celebrate Rick’s legacy.



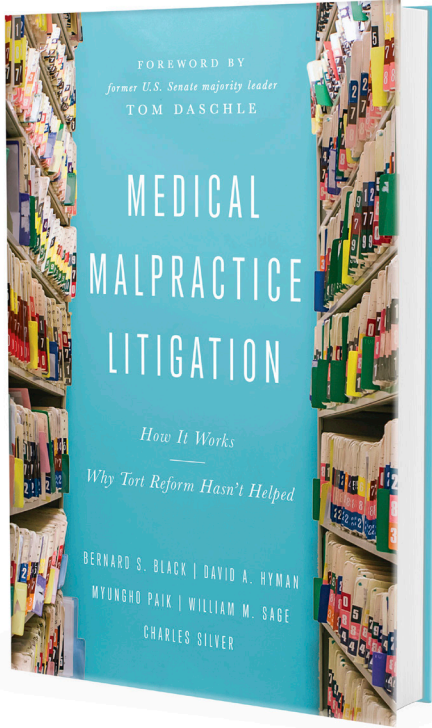
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