

Mustafa Akyol

Faith in

LIBERALISM

The Muslim pioneers of free speech and free markets remind the two great civilisations on earth that their stories are intertwined.

At the dawn of the 21st century, proponents of liberal democracy, including myself, were optimistic about the future. The two great totalitarian evils, fascism and communism, were finally defeated, and the rest of the world seemed inclined towards freedom. There were endless debates on whether Islam was an outlier, as the late Samuel Huntington had controversially claimed, but there were also hopeful signs. Turkey, my home country, appeared to be heading towards the European Union, even at the hands of a religious government, to show us all how Islam and democracy went together.

Today, two decades later, the world seems less rosy. In Russia and China, communism was replaced only by more efficient dictatorships that are smart enough to enlist not just markets but also “traditional values”. Dreams for a liberal Turkey failed dramatically, as well as hopes about the Arab revolutions of the early 2010s. Even Western liberal democracies are being challenged by illiberal forces within, ranging from the far-right to the far-left.

I still believe that this is not “the end of liberalism”, as some think, but a setback which calls for new efforts. I also believe that the big question over Islam, my faith, is still a pivotal matter, and for two different reasons. First, Muslims who reject liberalism in the name of their religion often create and sustain authoritarian regimes and oppressive societies, making the Muslim world, on average, the least free part of the globe. Second, the ensuing “fear of Islam” leads to illiberal nativism in the West which, just like the McCarthyism of the past, is prone to suffocating freedom while claiming to defend it.

Yet a way forward is still possible, and it partly lies in a better sense of history and understanding that these two great civilisations, Islam and the West, share a lot in common and have enriched each other for centuries.

More specifically — and to many, surprisingly — Western liberalism had some Islamic roots that we can see, in a nutshell, in the stories of two great Arab thinkers, Ibn Rushd from 12th century Muslim Spain, and Ibn Khaldun from 14th century North Africa.

The philosopher of Cordoba

Let's begin with Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), the towering Muslim judge, jurist and philosopher of Cordoba, who is often known in the West as Averroes. The reason why he has this Latinised name is that he had a big impact on late medieval Europe, beginning in the 13th century, when his massive commentaries on Aristotle were translated into Latin and caused an intellectual earthquake within the Catholic Church. Mainly thanks to Ibn Rushd, Western Europe rediscovered the Greek legacy, and created a legitimate space for philosophy, besides religion, as an independent path to truth.

This was not because Ibn Rushd was irreverently secular. Quite the contrary, he was a pious Muslim. But he represented a unique religious rationalism that emerged in the early Islamic civilisation, which considered reason and revelation as equally authoritative divine gifts. And since reason was a faculty of all humans, not just Muslims, Muslims could learn from all cultures and civilisations. "We ought not to be ashamed of appreciating the truth and of acquiring it wherever it comes from," a forerunner of Ibn Rushd, al-Kindi (d. c. 870), put it. "Even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us."

Thanks to this universalist vision, Muslim falasifa, or "philosophers", studied the works of Greek masters such as Aristotle, Plato, Galen and Plotinus, which had been preserved by Eastern Christians, some of whom also helped translate them into Arabic during a massive "translation movement". In the words of an expert, Dimitri Gutas, it was a world-changing event which "demonstrated for the first time in history that scientific and philosophical thought are international, not bound to a specific language or culture".

This movement had begun in Baghdad in the 8th century, but it reached its zenith in Cordoba four centuries later, with the works of Ibn Rushd. He not only wrote the most authoritative commentaries on Aristotle, but also transmitted them to Christian Europe. He pioneered a new approach to knowledge as well.

A precursor to free speech

In the age of Ibn Rushd, as in much of human history, knowledge was neatly divided into religious truth versus heresy, with silencing of the latter seen as fully justified if not absolutely necessary. This included the conviction that heresy should not be given much airtime, even while being condemned. Hence, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), a champion of dogmatic faith in early Islam, reproached his companion, al-Harith al-Muhasibi, for simply writing a refutation against the rationalist theologians — the Mu'tazila — which they both saw as heretics. "The problem with even writing against the heretics," Ibn Hanbal explained, "you first give an account of their false doctrines and afterwards a refutation of them. How can you be sure what men will do?"

Two centuries later, Imam al-Ghazali (d. 1111), a more sophisticated defender of the same orthodoxy, would add a nuance. "Ahmad's observation is justified," he wrote, "but it applies to false doctrine which is not widely and generally known." In his famed work, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, he not only opposed certain doctrines of the Muslim philosophers, but also condemned them for "apostasy", which came with a license to kill, a damning verdict that has delegitimised philosophy in the eyes of many Muslims.

Yet Ibn Rushd, who wrote his own rebuttal to al-Ghazali in his smartly titled *The Incoherence of Incoherence*, shows a different approach to knowledge. Whenever he opposes something as erroneous, he doesn't shy away from depicting it. When he makes pages-long quotations from al-Ghazali, he doesn't fear that readers will fall for his opponent's arguments. He rather trusts in the power of his own arguments.

What is most remarkable is that this unusual approach to knowledge didn't remain buried in the books of Ibn Rushd and left a trace on the world's intellectual history. I learned this from the late, great Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Britain and also a prominent public intellectual. In one of his books, Sacks pointed out that Ibn Rushd's spirit of fair and open argument influenced one of his successors, Rabbi Judah Loewe of Prague (d. 1609), a distinguished scholar of Judaism and also a philosopher in his own right. In one of his works, Rabbi Loewe shared a quote from Ibn Rushd: "You should always, when presenting a philosophical argument, cite the views of your opponents. Failure to do so is an implicit acknowledgement of the weakness of your own case." Taking this as an inspiration, the Rabbi went on to argue:

"[Averroës'] words hold true for religion as well...

It is not proper that we despise the words [of our adversaries], but rather we must draw them as close as we can.... Even if [their] beliefs are opposed to your own faith and religion, do not say [to your opponent], 'Speak not, close your mouth'. On the contrary, you should, at such times, say, 'Speak up as much as you want, say whatever you wish, and do not say later that had you been able to speak you would have replied further'."

This is the opposite of what some people think, namely, that when you prevent someone from speaking against religion, that strengthens religion. That is not so, because curbing the words of an opponent in religious matters is nothing but the curbing and enfeebling of religion itself.

This was quite a remarkable defence of freedom of speech, which would influence later generations. Rabbi Sacks traced it to the English intellectual John Milton (d. 1674), who famously argued: "Let [Truth] and Falsehood grapple... in a free and open encounter?" Then, two centuries later, there came John Stuart Mill (d. 1873), who made the most rigorous argument for free speech, condemning "the evil of silencing the expression of an opinion".

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All this progression showed us, in the words of Rabbi Sacks, how “first a Muslim, then a Jew, then a Christian, then a secular humanist come together to agree on the importance of free speech and making space for dissent.”

This progression also suggests that when we discuss the importance of free speech today, Westerners should not think it is an exclusive value of their civilisation. And Muslims, mirroring such nativism, should not dismiss free speech, thinking that it is “theirs”.

A precursor to free markets

Ibn Rushd was the last great philosopher of classical Islam, as his passing closed the Aristotelian chapter in Muslim thought. However, about two centuries later, there came another towering Muslim thinker, who stood back from philosophy, which had become a suspicious field, but advanced rationality on what we would call “social sciences” today. His name was Ibn Khaldun.

Born in Tunisia in 1332, Ibn Khaldun observed the social and political dynamics of North Africa, which he expounded in his magnum opus, *Muqaddima* or “Prolegomena”. It was such an extraordinary work of history, sociology and economics that the late British historian Arnold Toynbee would define it as “undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place.”

A particularly interesting insight in this book was a critique of what we would today call “big government”. Ibn Khaldun explained that as dynasties stay more and more in power, they grow opulent, employ bigger armies and bureaucracies, and impose higher taxes to finance all of these assets. But these taxes, he noted, “weigh heavily upon the subjects and overburden them”. As a result, “business falls off, because all hopes (of profit) are destroyed, permitting the dissolution of civilisation and reflecting upon (the status of) the dynasty. This (situation) becomes more and more aggravated, until (the dynasty) disintegrates.”

In contrast, when rulers act with “kindness, reverence, humility, respect for the

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property of other people, and disinclination to appropriate”, Ibn Khaldun observed, things got better for all: “When tax assessments and imposts upon the subjects are low, the latter have the energy and desire to do things. Cultural enterprises grow and increase, because the low taxes bring satisfaction. When cultural enterprises grow, the number of individual imposts and assessments mount. In consequence, the tax revenue, which is the sum total of (the individual assessments), increases.”

These views of Ibn Khaldun influenced a few Arab scholars who immediately followed him in the 15th century, and a few Ottomans reformers in the 17th century. Yet still, Ibn Khaldun won the fame he deserved only in the 20th century, in part thanks to some Westerners who found his work intriguing. Among them was Arthur Laffer, whose famous “Laffer Curve” about optimal tax rates clearly goes back to Ibn Khaldun, as he himself noted. Another was the World Bank, which hailed Ibn Khaldun as “the first advocate of privatization”.

Another admirer of Ibn Khaldun was Ronald Reagan, the 40th president of the United States, who surprised reporters in a press conference in 1981 by saying: “In college, I studied economics, and learned about a man named Ibn Khaldun.” Then the American president shared the famous observation of the Arab scholar: “At the beginning of the empire, the tax rates were low and the revenues were high. At the end of the empire, the tax rates were high and the revenues were low.”

A dark hour

The ideas of Ibn Rushd and Ibn Khaldun are much deeper than these snapshots. Also much deeper is the contribution that the Islamic civilisation has made to Western liberalism, as I argue in my new book, *Reopening Muslim Minds*. Yet it is also true that these proto-liberal ideas within Islamic civilisation often remained as the roads not taken. The widespread rejection of philosophy as an independent source of wisdom besides religion was the key problem, as it amounted to nothing short of intellectual suicide. When there remained no independent ethical wisdom — which Ibn Rushd had wisely defined as *sunan ghayr maktuba*, or “unwritten laws” of humanity, akin to natural law — there remained no obstacle to religious problems such as blind literalism and violent fanaticism. And when there remained no curiosity about the world beyond Islam, the latter inevitably stagnated.

One of the rare conservatives who realises and admits this problem, the prominent American Islamic scholar Hamza Yusuf, defines it as “the divorce between Athena and Medina”. He adds that it “explains much of what went wrong with Muslim civilisation”.

Yet civilisations can change and evolve. And they often begin to do that when they are at their darkest moments. Such was the state of Christendom back in the 17th century, when horrific religious wars and persecutions finally gave rise to ideas of freedom, toleration and limited government — the key ideas, so to speak, of classical liberalism.

The great Islamic civilisation has lately been going through such a dark moment, with oppressive regimes, militant groups, myopic clerics, and bigoted ideologues. Meanwhile, calls and campaigns for human rights and liberal regimes often fall on deaf ears, because they seem too associated with the West, whose colonial history is still too fresh.

And that is why the Muslim pioneers of Western liberalism matter. They remind the two great civilisations on earth that their stories are quite intertwined. They also call on Western societies to be humbler, while inviting Muslim societies to be more open-minded. ▀

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