

# “Islamic Modernist” Mustafa Akyol Betrays More of His Worldview Than He Likely Intended (Part 1)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The instructive and revealing piece was published about ten weeks ago, but with [The Observer](#), October 24, 2018:

*Mustafa Akyol, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute’s Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity and a self-described “Islamic modernist,” gave a lecture titled “Religious Freedom in Islam” on October 22 at the Eck Visitors Center, during which he promoted religious tolerance throughout the world.”*

*Akyol began the lecture by retelling a recent incident between him and the Malaysian religious police following a lecture he gave on apostasy in the country. Following his lecture on religious freedom, Akyol said, he was placed in front of a Sharia court for reciting the Qur’an without a permit, and was only released because of connections between*

*his father, the Turkish former president and the Malaysian monarchy.*

The verse that maddened the religious police in Malaysia was 2:256: "There is no compulsion in religion," which they interpret to mean, Akyol said at the time, "There is no compulsion in religion while you are holding onto Islam." In other words, as long as you do not become an apostate from Islam, you may disagree with other Muslims at the outer edges of the faith, on minor matters, but there will be "no compulsion" to make every Believer agree exactly on everything. That does not amount to apostasy. As for other religions, apostasy from them in favor of Islam is, of course, to be encouraged.

*The irony of this story provided a basis from which Akyol spoke on the need for more religious toleration in the Muslim world. Though many Westerners may feel that Islam is medieval and incongruent with toleration, Akyol said, there are many precedents for religious tolerance in its history.*

*"Islam has strong assets for religious freedom," he said. "But also we have issues in Islam that we have to deal with and we have to reinterpret. ... Muslims are proud to say at a time when in medieval Spain ... the Catholics at the time were not very liberal ... at that time in the Islamic world because it accepted the rights of Jews and Christians to remain as Jews and Christians – it was more liberal."*

"Islam has strong assets for religious freedom"? What can Akyol be thinking? Muslims themselves, as he recognized in a lecture at Harvard, can be executed for leaving Islam. He did not mention at the time, but he might have, for he certainly knows it, the hadith in which Muhammad says "If someone leaves his [Islamic] religion, kill him."

As for non-Muslims, Akyol has recognized that they may stay

alive and continue to practice their own faith in a Muslim country, but according to the Sharia, they can do so only if they accept the many onerous conditions imposed on non-Muslims. These include a ban on repairing old, and on building new, houses of worship, the requirement that: 1) they step aside for Muslims on footpaths; 2) that they ride donkeys instead of horses; 3) that they wear clothing – belts, turbans – identifying their religion, and similar identification on their dwellings; 4) most important of all, they pay the Jizyah, a tax which had to be paid by non-Muslims to the Muslim state in order to be free from attacks by Muslims – in short, the Jizyah was religiously-sanctioned extortion. Are these really Islam's "strong assets for religious freedom"?

*Though this precedent [of toleration] exists, Akyol said the toleration was contingent on the religious minorities' willingness to accept inferiority.*

The word "inferiority" hardly does justice to all that non-Muslims had to endure as "tolerated" dhimmis.

*"This toleration – and toleration is the right word – was not based on equality," he said. "Muslims made sure that they were the ruling, supreme nation. Jews and Christians are tolerated, but as inferior. And this has some clear expressions, one of them was that Jews and Christians were forced to pay an extra tax. ... They could not serve in the military and in the state, so the state belonged to Muslims."*

Akyol mentions the Jizyah, though he could hardly have avoided it. He does not discuss just how burdensome that tax was. Nor does he mention that the tax had to be proffered, and then received, in a manner that deliberately humiliated the giver. He might have mentioned how difficult it was for many non-Muslims to pay the tax, for merely mentioning the Jizyah, without more, does not give us any sense of just how onerous it was. After a lifetime of study of Jews in Arab lands, the

celebrated scholar S. D. Goitein, in his massive book, *A Mediterranean Society*, which made extensive use of the papers preserved by Jews in the Cairo Geniza, declared that the subject on which he had had to revise his previous views the most was the Jizyah. His research revealed that it was indeed very harsh, and for many almost impossible to pay. The "season of the tax," Goitein concluded, was always one of "horror, dread, and misery." Akyol might have conveyed this grim reality, but preferred to limit himself to mention of a vague "Jizyah."

While he does mention that dhimmis were not allowed to serve in the military, that was hardly the most onerous condition put upon them, and some might consider such an exemption to be welcome. But he fails to mention any of the other requirements imposed on dhimmis, as already noted. These included preventing Jews and Christians from repairing existing, or building new, houses of worship; forbidding them from riding horses and allowing them to only ride donkeys; requiring them to make way on a footpath for Muslims; making sure that they wore marks on both their clothing and their houses, identifying them as Christians or Jews. Given his abridged description of the treatment of dhimmis, the full effect of the humiliations visited upon the Christians and Jews is not adequately conveyed, and noticeably absent is any remark about the devastating financial effect on dhimmis of the Jizyah.

*Since this point in history, however, Akyol said the Islamic world has begun to fall behind in the development of human rights.*

The implication here is that the Islamic world was at one time equal to, or perhaps even superior to, the West in its recognition of human rights. When was this ever the case?

Let's start with the rights of women. The deep misogyny of Islam guaranteed that the treatment of women was always behind

that of the West. A husband has Qur'anic sanction to "beat" his wife (4:34); the status of men is always above that of women (4:228). The Muslim male could practice polygyny, and go unto his wives who are as a tilth to him (4:223); he could divorce any of his wives merely by uttering the triple-talaq. In Islam, daughters inherit half that of sons. A woman's testimony is worth half that of a man. Muhammad himself justified this rule in a hadith: "it is because of the deficiency in her intelligence."

As to the treatment of minorities, was Islam, which offered those conquered the options of death, conversion to Islam, or the permanent status of dhimmi (burdened with a host of disabilities), really superior to the West at one time, as Akyol claims? It's true that in Western Christendom there were those who attacked and murdered Jews, based mainly on the blood libel, that is, the charge of ritual murder of Christian children, whose blood was supposedly used to make matzohs for Passover. There was nothing that bad in the Islamic treatment of Jews, for they could remain alive and practice their religion, as long as they met the conditions imposed on them as dhimmis. But we should also remember that the Qur'an has several dozen antisemitic verses, and sudden murderous Muslim outbursts against Jews were not unknown. The most striking example of this was in Granada in 1066, where the appointment of a Jew, Joseph ibn Naghrela, to be vizier to the Berber king, led to the killing of almost all of the 4,000 Jews in the city. Both Jews and Christians were not to be taken as friends, it says in the Qur'an, for they "are friends only with each other."

Other human rights that finally came to be recognized, albeit very slowly, in the West, after the Enlightenment – including the right of freedom of speech, and of freedom of religion – never existed in the Islamic world, not 1400 years ago, not in medieval times, and not now. Any criticism of Islam or of Muhammad was treated as "blasphemy," a charge which greatly

limited “the freedom of speech.” As for “freedom of religion,” apostates from Islam could be executed. Unbelievers could practice their religion, but with so many disabilities, as dhimmis, that it would be inaccurate to describe this as “freedom of religion” as that is understood in the West. Many non-Muslims converted to Islam not out of conviction, but to escape the hardship and humiliation of being a dhimmi.

*“In the face of this modern development [of human rights] ... there is a friction today still between the modern definition of human rights and Islamic authorities and Islamic interpretations,” he [Mustafa Akyol] said.*

*Akyol said change is happening, but such massive change does not occur overnight.*

The definition of human rights that the Muslim states adhere to is not the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but rather, those found in the very different “Islamic” version, known as the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights of 1990, which was put forth to promote the idea that Muslims, too, respected human rights. But it was very different in its effect from the Universal Declaration. The Cairo Declaration declares that all human rights must be subject to the Sharia. Thus the Cairo version upheld the unequal treatment of women and of non-Muslim minorities. Freedom of speech according to the Sharia does not include the freedom, by Muslim or non-Muslim, to “blaspheme” the Prophet or Islam in any way. Religious freedom, too, is limited, both for Muslims who can still be severely punished, even executed, for apostasy, and for non-Muslims, many of whom felt compelled to convert to Islam in order to escape the miserable condition of dhimmi, and especially the payment of the Jizyah.

*“Now, are there Muslims trying to deal with this issue and offer this reformation? Yes,” he [Akyol] said. “There are Muslim rulers, intellectuals, institutions, countries – this*

*is a thing that's been going on for more than a century. It began in the 19th century, it's still going on, the battle is still going on. Let me tell you, it's not that easy and fast to change a culture and civilization."*

Akyol does not offer any evidence of this "reformation" succeeding. The would-be "reformers" of Islam came into existence in the late nineteenth-century, when the power of Muslims was at a low ebb; they recognized that the condition of Islamic peoples suggested that "reform," or "modernization" as Akyol prefers to call it, was needed. He declares that it "has been going on for more than a century," but the only country where real reformation – change – seemed to have succeeded was in his own country, Turkey, thanks to the forced secularization promoted by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Atatürk was determined to limit the power of the religion as much as he could, for he was an atheist, convinced that Islam was holding his country back. He empowered women, giving them the right to vote before they won it even in Western Europe. He banned polygamy and the triple-talaq. He gave women the right to inherit equally with men. A woman's testimony became equal to that of a man. Dress became un-Islamized. Women were allowed to show themselves without the hijab. As for men, the fez and turban, identified with Islam, were abolished by the Hat Act of 1925; Turkish men began to wear suits in the Western manner. All of this was part of Atatürk's campaign to secularise Turkish society. Nowhere else in the Islamic world was such a thoroughgoing attempt to de-emphasize Islam attempted.

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