

Mustafa Akyol: Faith versus tradition in Islam

A few weeks ago, I had a chance to go to Saudi Arabia. And the first thing I wanted to do as a Muslim was go to Mecca and visit the Kaaba, the holiest shrine of Islam. And I did that; I put on my ritualistic dress; I went to the holy mosque; I did my prayers; I observed all the rituals. And meanwhile, besides all the spirituality, there was one mundane detail in the Kaaba that was pretty interesting for me. There was no separation of sexes. In other words, men and women were worshiping all together. They were together while doing the tawaf, the circular walk around the Kaaba. They were together while praying.

And if you wonder why this is interesting at all, you have to see the rest of Saudi Arabia because it's a country which is strictly divided between the sexes. In other words, as men, you are not simply supposed to be in the same physical space with women. And I noticed this in a very funny way. I left the Kaaba to eat something in downtown Mecca. I headed to the nearest Burger King restaurant. And I went there -- I noticed that there was a male section, which was carefully separated from the female section. And I had to pay, order and eat at the male section. "It's funny," I said to myself, "You can mingle with the opposite sex at the holy Kaaba, but not at the Burger King."

Quite ironic. Ironic, and it's also, I think, quite telling. Because the Kaaba and the rituals around it are relics from the earliest phase of Islam, that of prophet Muhammad. And if there was a big emphasis at the time to separate men from women, the rituals around the Kaaba could have been designed accordingly. But apparently that was not an issue at the time. So the rituals came that way. This is also, I think, confirmed by the fact that the seclusion of women in creating a divided society is something that you also do not find in the Koran, the very core of Islam -- the divine core of Islam that all Muslims, and equally myself, believe. And I think it's not an accident that you don't find this idea in the very origin of Islam. Because many scholars who study the history of Islamic thought -- Muslim scholars or Westerners -- think that actually the practice of dividing men and women physically came as a later development in Islam, as Muslims adopted some preexisting cultures and traditions of the Middle East. Seclusion of women was actually a Byzantine and Persian practice, and Muslims adopted that and made that a part of their religion.

And actually this is just one example of a much larger phenomenon. What we call today Islamic Law, and especially Islamic culture -- and there are many Islamic cultures actually; the one in Saudi Arabia is much different from where I come from in Istanbul or Turkey. But still, if you're going to speak about a Muslim culture, this has a core, the divine message, which began the religion, but then many traditions, perceptions, many practices were added on top of it. And these were traditions of the Middle East -- medieval traditions.

And there are two important messages, or two lessons, to take from that reality. First of all, Muslims -- pious, conservative, believing Muslims who want to be loyal to their religion -- should not cling onto everything in their culture, thinking that that's divinely mandated. Maybe some things are bad traditions and they need to be changed. On the other hand, the Westerners who look at Islamic culture and see some troubling aspects should not readily conclude that this is what Islam ordains. Maybe it's a Middle Eastern culture that became confused with Islam.

There is a practice called female circumcision. It's something terrible, horrible. It is basically an operation to deprive women of sexual pleasure. And Westerners, Europeans or Americans, who didn't know about this before faced this practice within some of the Muslim communities who migrated from North Africa. And they've thought, "Oh, what a horrible religion that is which ordains something like that." But actually when you look at female circumcision, you see that it has nothing to do with Islam, it's just a North African practice, which predates Islam. It was there for thousands of years. And quite tellingly, some Muslims do practice that. The Muslims in North Africa, not in other places. But also the non-Muslim communities of North Africa -- the Animists, even some Christians and even a Jewish tribe in North Africa is known to practice female circumcision. So what might look like a problem within Islamic faith might turn out to be a tradition that Muslims have subscribed to.

The same thing can be said for honor killings, which is a recurrent theme in the Western media -- and which is, of course, a horrible tradition. And we see truly in some Muslim communities that tradition. But in the non-Muslim communities of the Middle East, such as some Christian communities, Eastern communities, you see the same practice. We had a tragic case of an honor killing within Turkey's Armenian community just a few months ago.

Now these are things about general culture, but I'm also very much interested in political culture and whether liberty and democracy is appreciated, or whether there's an authoritarian political culture in which the state is supposed to impose things on the citizens. And it is no secret that many Islamic movements in the Middle East tend to be authoritarian, and some of the so-called "Islamic regimes" such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and the worst case was the Taliban in Afghanistan -- they are pretty authoritarian. No doubt about that.

For example, in Saudi Arabia there is a phenomenon called the religious police. And the religious police imposes the supposed Islamic way of life on every citizen, by force -- like women are forced to cover their heads -- wear the hijab, the Islamic head cover. Now that is pretty authoritarian, and that's something I'm very much critical of. But when I realized that the non-Muslim, or the non-Islamic-minded actors in the same geography, sometimes behaved similarly, I realized that the problem maybe lies in the political culture of the whole region, not just Islam. Let me give you an example: in Turkey where I come from, which is a very hyper-secular republic, until very recently we used to have what I call secularism police, which would guard the universities against veiled students. In other words, they would force students to uncover their heads, and I think forcing

people to uncover their head is as tyrannical as forcing them to cover it. It should be the citizen's decision.

But when I saw that, I said, "Maybe the problem is just an authoritarian culture in the region, and some Muslims have been influenced by that. But the secular-minded people can be influenced by that. Maybe it's a problem of the political culture, and we have to think about how to change that political culture." Now these are some of the questions I had in mind a few years ago when I sat down to write a book. I said, "Well I will make a research about how Islam actually came to be what it is today, and what roads were taken and what roads could have been taken." The name of the book is "Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty." And as the subtitle suggests, I looked at Islamic tradition and the history of Islamic thought from the perspective of individual liberty, and I tried to find what are the strengths with regard to individual liberty.

And there are strengths in Islamic tradition. Islam actually, as a monotheistic religion, which defined man as a responsible agent by itself, created the idea of the individual in the Middle East and saved it from the communitarianism, the collectivism of the tribe. You can derive many ideas from that. But besides that, I also saw problems within Islamic tradition. But one thing was curious: most of those problems turn out to be problems that emerged later, not from the very divine core of Islam, the Koran, but from, again, traditions and mentalities, or the interpretations of the Koran that Muslims made in the Middle Ages. The Koran, for example, doesn't condone stoning. There is no punishment on apostasy. There is no punishment on personal things like drinking. These things which make Islamic Law, the troubling aspects of Islamic Law, were later developed into later interpretations of Islam. Which means that Muslims can, today, look at those things and say, "Well, the core of our religion is here to stay with us. It's our faith, and we will be loyal to it. But we can change how it was interpreted, because it was interpreted according to the time and milieu in the Middle Ages. Now we are living in a different world with different values and different political systems." That interpretation is quite possible and feasible.

Now if I were the only person thinking that way, we would be in trouble. But that's not the case at all. Actually, from the 19th century on, there's a whole revisionist, reformist -- whatever you call it -- tradition, a trend in Islamic thinking. And these were intellectuals or statesmen of the 19th century, and later, 20th century, which looked at Europe basically and saw that Europe has many things to admire, like science and technology. But not just that; also democracy, parliament, the idea of representation, the idea of equal citizenship. These Muslim thinkers and intellectuals and statesmen of the 19th century looked at Europe, saw these things. They said, "Why don't we have these things?" And they looked back at Islamic tradition, they saw that there are problematic aspects, but they're not the core of the religion, so maybe they can be re-understood, and the Koran can be reread in the modern world.

That trend is generally called Islamic modernism, and it was advanced by intellectuals and statesmen, not just as an intellectual idea though, but also as a political program. And that's why actually in the 19th century the Ottoman Empire, which then covered the

whole Middle East, made very important reforms -- reforms like giving Christians and Jews an equal citizenship status, accepting a constitution, accepting a representative parliament, advancing the idea of freedom of religion. And that's why the Ottoman Empire in its last decades turned into a proto-democracy, a constitutional monarchy, and freedom was a very important political value at the time.

Similarly, in the Arab world, there was what the great Arab historian Albert Hourani defines as the Liberal Age. He has a book, "Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age," and the Liberal Age, he defines as 19th century and early 20th century. Quite notably, this was the dominant trend in the early 20th century among Islamic thinkers and statesmen and theologians. But there is a very curious pattern in the rest of the 20th century, because we see a sharp decline in this Islamic modernist line. And in place of that, what happens is that Islamism grows as an ideology which is authoritarian, which is quite strident, which is quite anti-Western, and which wants to shape society based on a utopian vision.

So Islamism is the problematic idea that really created a lot of problems in the 20th century Islamic world. And even the very extreme forms of Islamism led to terrorism in the name of Islam -- which is actually a practice that I think is against Islam, but some, obviously, extremists did not think that way. But there is a curious question: If Islamic modernism was so popular in the 19th and early 20th centuries, why did Islamism become so popular in the rest of the 20th century? And this is a question, I think, which needs to be discussed carefully. And in my book, I went into that question as well. And actually you don't need to be a rocket scientist to understand that. You just look at the political history of the 20th century, and you see things have changed a lot. The context has changed.

In the 19th century, when Muslims were looking at Europe as an example, they were independent; they were more self-confident. In the early 20th century, with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the whole Middle East was colonized. And when you have colonization what do you have? You have anti-colonization. So Europe is not just an example now to emulate; it's an enemy to fight and to resist. So there's a very sharp decline in liberal ideas in the Muslim world, and what you see is more of a defensive, rigid, reactionary strain, which led to Arab socialism, Arab nationalism and ultimately to the Islamist ideology. And when the colonial period ended, what you had in place of that was, generally, secular dictators, which say they're a country, but did not bring democracy to the country, and established their own dictatorship. And I think the West, at least some powers in the West, particularly the United States, made the mistake of supporting those secular dictators, thinking that they were more helpful for their interests. But the fact that those dictators suppressed democracy in their country and suppressed Islamic groups in their country actually made the Islamists much more strident.

So in the 20th century, you had this vicious cycle in the Arab world where you have a dictatorship suppressing its own people including the Islamic-pious, and they're reacting in reactionary ways. There was one country, though, which was able to escape or stay away from that vicious cycle. And that's the country where I come from; that's Turkey.

Turkey has never been colonized, so it remained as an independent nation after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. That's one thing to remember. They did not share the same anti-colonial hype that you can find in some other countries in the region. Secondly, and most importantly, Turkey became a democracy earlier than any of the countries we are talking about. In 1950, Turkey had the first free and fair elections, which ended the more autocratic secular regime, which was the beginning of Turkey. And the pious Muslims in Turkey saw that they can change the political system by voting. And they realize that democracy is something that is compatible with Islam, compatible with their values, and they've been supportive of democracy. That's an experience that not every other Muslim nation in the Middle East had until very recently.

Secondly, in the past two decades, thanks to globalization, thanks to the market economy, thanks to the rise of a middle-class, we in Turkey see what I define as a rebirth of Islamic modernism. Now there's the more urban middle-class pious Muslims who, again, look at their tradition and see that there are some problems in the tradition, and they understand that they need to be changed and questioned and reformed. And they look at Europe, and they see an example, again, to follow. They see an example, at least, to take some inspiration from. That's why the E.U. process, Turkey's effort to join the E.U., has been supported inside Turkey by the Islamic-pious, while some secular nations were against that. Well that process has been a little bit blurred by the fact that not all Europeans are that welcoming -- but that's another discussion. But the pro-E.U. sentiment in Turkey in the past decade has become almost an Islamic cause and supported by the Islamic liberals and the secular liberals as well, of course. And thanks to that, Turkey has been able to reasonably create a success story in which Islam and the most pious understandings of Islam have become part of the democratic game, and even contributes to the democratic and economic advance of the country. And this has been an inspiring example right now for some of the Islamic movements or some of the countries in the Arab world.

You must have all seen the Arab Spring, which began in Tunis and in Egypt. And Arab masses just revolted against their dictators. They were asking for democracy; they were asking for freedom. And they did not turn out to be the Islamist boogymen that the dictators were always using to justify their regime. They said that "we want freedom; we want democracy. We are Muslim believers, but we want to be living as free people in free societies." Of course, this is a long road. Democracy is not an overnight achievement; it's a process. But this is a promising era in the Muslim world. And I believe that the Islamic modernism which began in the 19th century, but which had a setback in the 20th century because of the political troubles of the Muslim world, is having a rebirth. And I think the getaway message from that would be that Islam, despite some of the skeptics in the West, has the potential in itself to create its own way to democracy, create its own way to liberalism, create its own way to freedom. They just should be allowed to work for that.

Thanks so much.
(Applause)