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Editor, IIUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies (IJRCS)

Research Management Centre, RMC

International Islamic University Malaysia

53100 Gombak Campus

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Tel: (+603) 6421 5002/5010

Fax: (+603) 6421 4862

Website: <http://journals.iium.edu.my/irkh/index.php/ijrcs>

Comments and suggestions to: [alwialatas@iium.edu.my](mailto:alwialatas@iium.edu.my)

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## **Islamic Ethics and Liberal Democracy: A Critical Analysis of Mustafa Akyol's Perspectives**

**Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky<sup>1</sup> and Inaz Ilyas<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract:** The Arab Spring and its aftermath sparked a renewed interest among scholars and thinkers in exploring the potential compatibility between Islam and liberal democracy. This led to a series of debates both supporting and critiquing this idea. This study focuses on the ideas of Mustafa Akyol, a prominent scholar who actively engaged in the ongoing debate on reforming Islamic political thought over the past decade. By closely examining his primary work, *Reopening Muslim Minds*, this paper argues that Akyol not only presents a clear intellectual framework for demonstrating the convergence of Islam and liberal democracy but also explores how Islam can contribute to shaping modern multicultural societies. However, this study also suggests that Akyol's failure to critically examine modernity and liberalism as philosophical project to the same extent as he did with Islamic intellectual tradition resulted in a lack of genuine dialogue between Islam and liberal democracy in his work. Additionally, the paper argues that Akyol's analysis of Islamic intellectual tradition is somewhat flawed, particularly in his binary take on classical Islamic theological and philosophical movements.

**Keywords:** Mustafa Akyol, Islamic politics, political modernity, Islamic state, liberalism

### **Introduction**

Contemporary discourses and debates on Islam and politics can be situated within a context marked by the challenges faced by modern Muslim thought in grappling with modernity and secular values. In the contemporary era, Muslim-majority societies confront a multitude of socio-political transformations driven by globalisation, democratisation, and the spread of secular ideologies. These changes have prompted debates within Islamic scholarship about the compatibility of Islamic principles with modern political frameworks, such as liberal democracy, human rights, and secular governance. In that sense, in early 1800s and 1900s, Islamic reformists such as Tahtawi, Afghani, at-Tunisi and Rida strongly asserted that Islamic values are closely linked to democratic principles. They called for the restructuring of the political system in the Muslim world to align with democratic institutionalism in order to challenge Western colonialism (Islam & Islam, 2017). After the colonial era, Islamic thinkers began advocating for Islamic particularism and identity politics in response to the perceived impact of Westernisation on the Muslim world. This led to the emergence of discourses on an Islamic state and political system in opposition to Western liberal political values. This shift resulted in both more democratic and more theocratic orientations in Islamic politics, with the concept of 'God's sovereignty' shaping both aspects in the twentieth century Muslim world (March, 2023). The post-Cold War context reignited the debate on Islam and liberal democracy, particularly in response to the rise of a new world order and the discourse on Islamic extremism.

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<sup>1</sup> Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. He can be reached at [zackyfouz@iium.edu.my](mailto:zackyfouz@iium.edu.my).

<sup>2</sup> Inaz Ilyas is a Master's student of Arts in Applied Ethics, College of Islamic Studies, Hamad bin Khalifa University, Qatar.

Islamic political thought made serious attempts to incorporate democratic values into its theorisation efforts and expand its civic nature (Fadel, 2008; Jawad, 2013). This debate further ignited the aftermath of the Arab Spring as it opened up a fresh window for scholars to relook at the older discourses in light of new developing conditions.

Participating in this complex discursive debate, Mustafa Akyol played a significantly important role in developing a coherent set of ideas that envisioned to rethink Islam's commitment towards liberal democracy, freedom and political modernity. His popularity increased as he operated on multiple platforms as the public speaker, op-ed writer and also researcher. His fundamental argument is that there are ample avenues where Islam can meet liberal democracy philosophically and also politically. In addition, he has been a strong proponent of a discourse that Muslim world can only thrive through liberal democracy. Thus, he is currently considered as one of the leading voices of Muslim modernism that aim to make Islam more democratic and liberal.

Given this background, this paper explores key ideas of Mustafa Akyol on Islam, democracy and political modernity as found in his latest work, *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom and Tolerance* (henceforth, RMM). As the central work of Akyol, *Reopening Muslim Minds* is considered to be the culmination of his previous contributions. It delves deep into theology, ethics and epistemology in constructing an Islamic political theology that can potentially co-exist with liberal political principles. After exploring his ideas, this study argues that Akyol's project as developed in his work, *Reopening Muslim Minds* presents a coherent set of perspectives in reconciling Islam with liberal democracy. As such, his ideas could be seen a clear intellectual schema for democratisation and liberalisation of Islam. Nevertheless, Akyol failed to inquire modernity and liberalism in the same fashion as he questioned Islamic intellectual tradition. He takes the philosophical premises of liberalism and political modernity for granted. He totally ignores recent critical scholarship on the impact and implications of liberal philosophy on contemporary societies. Thus, his project failed to make honest conversation between Islam and liberal democracy at the end. As an overall note, this paper's main objective is to engage with Akyol's main work and respond to its ideas. For that purpose, this paper is divided into five sections. Beside this introduction, the section two gives a brief overview about the contemporary debate on the interplay between Islam, democracy and political modernity. The section three discusses a short biography of Mustafa Akyol. The section four elaboratively discussion the key arguments of Mustafa Akyol while section five is dedicated to critically explore Akyol's ideas and its intellectual merits. The paper ends with an analytical conclusion.

### **Islam, Democracy and Political Modernity: A Brief Review of an Evolving Debate**

This review mainly focuses the recent scholarship in debating compatibility thesis between Islam and the concept of liberal democracy. In that sense, it is possible to observe that current scholarship looks at Islam's relation to political modernity and liberal democracy from two different perspectives: Islamism's commitment to liberal democracy and Islamic thought's philosophical commitment to political modernity. Bassam Tibi argues that Islamism is an "exclusive ideology" and a manifestation of "religious fundamentalism". He believes that Islamism promotes a discourse of "totalizing Shariah" and embraces a vision of "remaking the world" in light of its ideology. Therefore, he concludes that while democratisation of Islam is possible, there can be no Islamisation of democracy (Tibi, 2010). Guida stresses that for Islamists, "democracy is only taken as a set of representative institutions and a free electoral system, and not pluralism, civility, and tolerance" (Guida, 2010). Nazek Jawad also points out

that even al-Ghannouchi, known as a “democrat within Islamism,” did not provide a clear explanation of how Islamism would embrace a political party that professes an ideology that contradicts the Islamic framework. All he did was develop an argument that the Islamic State would embrace democracy within its terms and conditions (Jawad, 2013).

Bayat argues that Islamism has been changing, and he names the new emerging phenomenon as post-Islamism. He notes that Islamist movements now try to legitimise their presence through liberal political terms. However, post-Islamists are not typical liberals. They are strict about separating the public from the private sphere. Instead, post-Islamists envision developing a socio-political discourse embracing all spheres of life in light of the Islamic value system. However, the Islamic value system is understood in a broader ethical sense that comes close to liberal philosophy (Bayat, 2013). Taking the discussion further, Raja Bahlul challengingly says that even post-Islamism could not reach the endgame of reconciling the political ambitions of Islamists with liberal-secular factions of the larger Muslim world. Exploring recent debates on the concept of a “civil state with Islamic reference” or “*Dawla Madaniyyah*,” a post-Islamist product, he argues that a civil state with Islamic reference seems to be a bridging concept. However, the ideological divide suddenly surfaces when the conversation discusses the role of religion and religious ethics in checking a state's executive and legislative power (Bahlul, 2018).

Regarding Islam's philosophical commitments towards liberal democracy, scholars Kuru, El-Fadl, and Abu Ziad argue that the consolidation of democratic pluralism in the Muslim world can only be possible after realising an epistemological revolution within Islamic thought. Kuru and El-Fadl emphasise the close connection between democratic pluralism and public reasoning. They believe that Islamic thought needs to revise its epistemological framework and recognise reason as having equal status with revelation in order to uphold a democratic community in a modern society. Kuru points out that the traditional rigid legalism that has dominated mainstream Islamic thought for centuries resists public deliberation based on shared human rationality (Kuru, 2023). Similarly, El-Fadl suggests that political philosophy is a form of applied ethics and that Islamic political thought can be reformed to meet the demands of modern plural societies by embracing ethical objectivism (Kaul, 2020). This ethical position emphasises that God has given human reason the capacity to judge moral and ethical principles and would lead to the development of Islamic democratic thought that incorporates pluralism and rational public policy. Abu Zaid, on the other hand, argues that Islam's primary and secondary sources are products of specific historical conditions and cannot be used as sources of eternal inspiration. Therefore, he suggests that we should focus on contemporary socio-political and legal concepts rather than confronting the past (Kaul, 2020). Fadel and Rane delve into Islamic intellectual history by examining the nature of Islamic political discourse in the context of modern democratic ideals. They emphasise that the current concept of democracy is rooted in Western thought, but this does not imply that pre-modern Islam was inherently authoritarian. A thorough examination of early and classical Islamic history reveals principles aligned with liberal democracy (Fadel, 2008; Rane, 2013).

In the last few decades, political liberalism has become an accepted form of liberalism. As a result, some scholars have explored how Islam could engage with political liberalism as form of governance to manage the plural societies (Pirsoul, 2018; Swaine, 2009). Political liberals try to argue that political liberalism is different from philosophical liberalism as their conception accepts religious reasoning as a part of democratic policy making process. On this issue, Raja Bahlul and Kaminski argue that public reason, as proposed by political liberals, is a kind of accommodative liberal reasoning (Kaminski, 2021; Bahlul, 2018). Contrarily, Fadel highlights that classical Islamic theological, ethical, and jurisprudential tradition supports the



possibility of participating in a democratic society rooted in political liberalism. For him, classical Islamic theology is founded upon rational deliberation about God. Even Islamic ethical and legal theories, for the most part, demand human reasoning considering public well-being. Hence, Muslims and Islam can participate in enriching political liberalism as a shared form of governance that incorporate religious reasoning to be part of making a democratic polity (Fadel, 2008).

### **Mustafa Akyol: Life and Works**

Mustafa Akyol is a Turkish by origin and an author of best-selling books on Islam and contemporary political theories. Having completed his Bachelor's and Master of Arts in political science at Bosphorus University, Istanbul, in 1999, he has been a regular writer for *Hurriyet Daily News*, *Al-Monitor.com*, and *The New York Times*. Apart from this journalistic orientation, he is an academic who served as a lecturer at Fatih University between 2012-2016. Since 2018, Akyol has joined the Cato Institute in Washington D.C. as a senior fellow at the Centre for Global Liberty and Prosperity, involved in research projects on the interplay between Islam, public policy and modernity. He has published more than six books. A few among those created a considerable public debate on the question of Islam, pluralism, and freedom, such as *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty* (2011), *The Islamic Jesus: How the King of Jews Became a Prophet of Muslims* (2017), *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom and Tolerance* (2021), and *Why as a Muslim I Defend Liberty* (2021). Akyol is a popular speaker and has delivered public lectures at prestigious academic institutions: Stanford University, Boston University, Georgetown University, Columbia University, Oxford University, London School of Economics, Birmingham University, London School of Oriental and African Studies, New York University, University of California, and more. As such, the world's leading think tanks also invited Akyol to share his ideas and views on Islam in the contemporary world, such as the Council for Foreign Relations, Brookings Institutions, Atlantic Council etc. Renowned academics like Khalid Abu El-Fadl and Asma Barlus and political analysts like Fareed Zakariyyah praised Akyol's works and ideas. El-Fadl mainly writes that Akyol's work on *Reopening Muslim Minds* is a must-read for those who are interested in contemporary Islam.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Crisis of Modern Islam and Political Modernity: Key Arguments of Akyol**

This section of the paper aims to summarise overall thrust of Mustafa Akyol's reformist concepts and ideas as presented in his work, *Reopening the Muslim Minds*. It is divided into three sub-themes: *The Context*, *Elements of an Exclusivist Islamic World View*, and *Towards a Non-Hegemonic Islam*.

#### ***The Context***

Akyol argues that contemporary Islamic political thought still needs to embrace freedom and liberty, which are fundamental values of the modern world. He believes that reformist voices in the Muslim world have not been successful in addressing this issue. While many have tried to reinterpret Islamic texts and jurisprudence in light of modern liberal values, Akyol thinks that this approach has only reinforced the problematic idea of Islamic supremacism against the shared values of political modernity. Instead, Akyol suggests that Islamic intellectuals should

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<sup>3</sup> Biographical information is available in Mustafa Akyol's personal website: <http://www.mustafaakyol.org/>

look beyond reinterpreting controversial texts and traditional jurisprudential opinions and strive for a fresh paradigm of Islamic enlightenment. Akyol recognises the need to advocate for Islamic enlightenment, which involves reconciling Islamic thought with democratic pluralism and freedom (RMM, p. xxiv). This requires a significant reconstruction of the traditional Islamic worldview, essentially redefining it within a new philosophical framework. The first step in this endeavour is to challenge the prevailing historical Islamic epistemic and ethical concepts that still influence discussions about the Islamic socio-political thought which aims to endorse Islamic supremacism, politicisation of religion, and political authoritarianism. Particularly, Akyol further observes that the promotion of slogans advocating the implementation of Islamic law by Islamists is considered a significant obstacle to political pluralism and liberty. He believes that the only way to address this issue is to reformulate Islamic political and ethical thought on rational grounds. However, contemporary Islamic politico-legal thought continues to resist the development of a political theory based on rational thinking, remaining trapped within the paradigm of rigid legalism. Akyol argues that the legal-centred nature of Islamic political thought and its reluctance to develop a rational political theory has been heavily influenced by the dominant epistemological and ethical reasoning methods within the context of the Islamic intellectual tradition. Thus, for Akyol, critical reading of Islamic intellectual history and locating key historical junctures that constructed an exclusivist and authoritarian view of Islam is foundational step to move in terms making a genuine reconciliation between Islamic thought and modern world (RMM, p.12-13).

### *Elements of Exclusivist Islamic Worldview*

In that sense, Akyol highlights that certain instances of Islamic intellectual history have led to the development of exclusive and authoritarian views of society and politics in the Muslim world.

**Theology and Politics in Umayyad Dynasty.** He contends that the main cause of this exclusivist view is the use of theology to justify political projects. As such, he notes that the toxic mix of theology and politics in the Muslim world originated with the emergence of the Umayyad dynasty. This authoritarianism was sustained with the support of theology. The Umayyads used theology to justify their political actions by resorting to one of the first theological controversies of early Islam, which debated whether human beings are free or just objects in the hands of God. He suggests that the Umayyads were deeply interested in this debate due to its political implications. They endorsed and supported the views of scholars who promoted anti-freewill discourse. This allowed them to suppress political dissenters who sought change by labelling them as anti-Islamic and theological. The Umayyads attempted to suppress the political aspirations of the masses by using theology, and the group that suffered the most in this campaign was Mu'tazilah. According to Akyol, the Mu'tazilah presented a "dignified anthropology" in contrast to a passive theology that assumes an all-powerful God and disempowered humans. On the contrary, the Mu'tazilah strongly advocated for free will, which they saw as representing God's justice. The Umayyads feared this theological trend, believing it would encourage people to become politically active. Akyol also suggests that there is a lesson to be learned from this early doctrinal conflict in Islam: Islamic theology, and all the conflicts and divisions within it, did not develop in isolation. It evolved under the influence of despotism, which dominated Islam from its early days and shaped it according to its own earthly goals and ambitions (RMM, p.18).

**Ascendency of Ash‘arī Theology.** In the early development of Islam, debates on the nature of God had a significant impact on political developments. Akyol argues that another critical factor in shaping an exclusivist and supremacist view of Islam was the consolidation of the Ash‘arī school, which is more sophisticated version of rejecting human moral agency. This school promoted divine command ethics and Islamic legalism. The key argument of the Ash‘arī school, as the dominant mainstream theological sect, was that reason cannot be considered an independent source of ethics or law. They strongly critiqued scholars who saw reason as independent, arguing that reason cannot act without the aid of revelation. In contrast, their rivals, the Mu‘tazilah school of thought, argued that, much like revelation, reason can also make moral judgments. They asserted that moral values are objective, and human reason can reach them through independent reasoning without revelation. The dominant Ash‘arī position rejected the idea of ethical objectivism while establishing itself as a protector of Islamic orthodoxy (RMM, p. 46-49). Akyol argues that dominance of Ash‘arī school even prevented the maturation of objective-based thinking or *Maqāṣid*-based thinking in the Islamic history. He states that traditional Islamic epistemology is largely sceptical of the idea of *Maqāṣid* or the objectives of Islamic Sharia. In Islamic intellectual history, *Maqāṣid* Sharia was only used to justify the existing legalism of Islamic jurists. It was allowed with strict preconditions in Islamic legal history. By examining the attitudes of two prominent classical legal theorists, al-Ghazālī and al-Rāzī, towards the idea of *Maqāṣid*, Akyol argues that "even for al-Ghazali and al-Razi, the *Maqasid* were not conceived as purely theoretical objectives that underpin the law, but they were themselves derived from existing laws. In other words, laws came first, and *Maqasid* were derived from them, not the other way around." For him, this way of looking at the *Maqāṣid* theory would further embolden the dominant legalistic approach to Islam, as the theory will be deployed to argue that existing Islamic legalistic corpuses contribute to the higher objectives of Shariah and must be preserved regardless of the space and time factor. This legal epistemology that tries to keep the theory of *Maqāṣid* Sharia within a narrow space has its roots in the Ash‘arī theory of ethics. As briefed previously, it promotes the idea that morality and ethics could only be known through revelation (RMM, p. 78-80)

**Theory of Islamic Caliphate and Politicisation of Religion.** Akyol explains that Ash‘arī ideas about knowledge and ethics significantly influenced classical Islamic political philosophy. For instance, he points out that the concept of the Caliphate, as understood by most Islamic thinkers in the past, was shaped by Ash‘arī worldview. One of the major impacts of Ash‘arī on Islamic political theory was that it brought politics into the realm of religion and theology rather than being based on rationality. Islamic scholars who represented Ash‘arī school of thought used revelatory grounds to justify the legitimacy of the Caliphate. In other words, instead of providing a secular reason for the existence of political order, Ash‘arī school of thought influenced them to the use of revelatory and juristic reasons to support the political community. This led classical Islamic political thinkers to defend the political office of the Caliph regardless of its efficiency and productivity (RMM, p. 148-150). As a result, the Ash‘arī political theology justified the controversial position of the legality of the Caliph's office despite the latter having adopted authoritarian tendencies and disrespecting the role of the community in managing the office. Islamic scholars and jurists approve of the authoritarian office even if it symbolically facilitates the implementation of basic Islamic rituals. Akyol explains that the literal readings of political institutions led medieval Islamic political theologians to legitimise authoritarian political systems and pay less attention to developing accountability mechanisms to check the ruler. Personal advice was the only accepted way to convey the people's wishes to the ruler. The fear of losing the remaining political institutions in case of challenging the ruler prevented

Islamic thinkers from reflecting on the concept of accountability. Additionally, Ash‘arī political theology advised the masses that even if they saw apparent injustice from the ruler, the people must obey them (RMM, p.151). Furthermore, another significant impact of Ash‘arī political theory was the reinforcement of the politicisation of Islam. If the justification for the political institution is based on revelation rather than rational grounds, one could easily conclude that the community lacks legitimacy if it does not have a political office dedicated to safeguarding their religious life and implementing Islamic law. According to Akyol, this understanding of politics has created a host of problems for Islamic political theology, which continues to challenge Islamic thinkers striving to establish a religious state in the modern world marked by profound moral pluralism and cultural diversity.

### ***Towards a Non-Hegemonic Islam, Ideal Islamic Polity and Epistemological Revolution***

Akyol argues that the historical origins of Ash‘arī political-ethical theory have caused Muslims to disconnect from the collective human wisdom. Islamic thought gradually lost its universality, failing to embrace the collective wisdom of human society. Instead of working with the rest of humanity based on shared experience and collective objectives, Islamic political and social thinkers sought defensive “Islamic” alternatives to existing political theories and concepts rooted in divine revelation. This led to the creation of a separate religious space and demands for the implementation of religious laws, ignoring the plural and complex nature of modern societies (RMM, p. 67). Akyol contends that this particularism is rooted in traditional epistemological and ethical reasoning, which inhibits the Muslim mind from considering that a plural society can generate its moral frameworks through democratic collective deliberation. To address this, Islamic thought needs to consider the rational faculty as an independent source of knowledge alongside revelation. He believes that such an epistemological shift would guide Muslim thinkers to develop a form of governance that guarantees freedom, liberty, and dignity for all individuals. This concept of governance should allow people to live according to their beliefs without interference from the state or imposition of moral values. Islamic thinkers should present Islam and its socio-political legal concepts as non-hegemonic, emphasising that public affairs can be addressed through public deliberation (RMM, p. 62). Muslims thinkers can theorise an Islamic paradigm of global cooperation and mutual exchange of experience and wisdom. In Akyol’s vision of an ideal political society, the state would not be responsible for promoting any religious doctrine. Instead, it would ensure a political system where everyone can live according to their conscience, regardless of their religious beliefs. The state would not push its citizens towards secularisation either. Religious citizens could contribute to the country’s shared concerns based on their religious principles, while others could participate using their ethical framework. Akyol suggests that citizens can engage in moral arguments and debates about religious beliefs, but they should not use state power or communal cohesion to cancel each other out. To achieve this kind of governance, Muslim thinkers should work on formulating a new vision for Islamic epistemology and ethics based on reason and rationality (RMM, p. 95).

### **Akyol’s Project: A Critical Analysis**

This section critically evaluates Akyol’s arguments and its intellectual merit. The analysis is organised into three important dimensions. First, it debates the overall contribution of Akyol’s project to the current debate on Islam, democracy, and political modernity. Second, it engages

with Akyol's reading of Islamic intellectual history. Finally, the analysis focuses critically on Akyol's understanding of modernity and liberal philosophy.

### *Akyol's Project in Context*

It is possible to stress that Akyol's project attempts to reconcile two seemingly contradictory paradigms: the public presence of Islam and respect for the liberal conception of freedom and human rights. Akyol acknowledges that current theories of an Islamic state, as developed by Islamists, only offer authoritarian versions of a religious state. These theories undermine political modernity and its values, such as freedom and pluralism, by enforcing Islamist supremacism and authoritarianism. However, Akyol does not want religion to be marginalised in shaping the modern world, fearing it could lead to complete secularisation in the Muslim world. To avoid religious authoritarianism on one hand and state-sponsored secularisation on the other, Akyol envisions a non-supremacist, yet active, role for religion in the public sphere. To reconcile these seemingly contradictory ends, he argues that religion needs to be interpreted in line with modern values such as freedom, liberty, and unrestricted democracy. He contends that these values are inherently Islamic if the religion is objectively understood. Therefore, if religion is interpreted in line with shared human values such as freedom, rights, and pluralism, promoting those values becomes a form of Islamic activism. By doing so, Islam could become a source of protection for the values of political modernity and an active shaper of the modern world. Akyol's vision is to present Islam as a source that empowers shared values and collective human wisdom. His project offers a middle-ground solution between religious authoritarianism and assertive secularism for the Muslim world.

Akyol's second essential contribution to the existing debate on the compatibility between Islam and political modernity is his perspective that reforming Islamic political thought is a multi-disciplinary project. Akyol situates his project of reconciling Islam with political modernity within law, ethics, and epistemology. Most discussions that try to find common ground between Islam and democracy and human rights confine their methodology to the traditional hermeneutical methods of Islamic primary or secondary sources. This approach emanates from an obsession of the Muslim mind with the mantra of revelation above reason. However, for Akyol, this approach would yield a negative result since both the traditional hermeneutical methods and political modernity are rooted in two different philosophical foundations. For Akyol, political modernity is the current global paradigm that shapes the world's political reality and is the most progressive and advanced form of human invention to regulate political power and ensure freedom and justice. The paradigm is philosophically rooted in rationality and public deliberation in formulating ethics and law-making. Hence, if Islam needs to become an effective partner in shaping the political discourse, it must find a way to positively engage with rationality and public reason from an epistemological and ethical perspective. Only this positivity about human reason and rationality would help contemporary Islam to situate itself in the modern world. The significance of Akyol's ideas is that they expand the current discussion on the interconnectivity of Islam, epistemology, and political thought reform more elaborately.

Contemporary scholarship generally concludes that one of the reasons for the modern anti-democratic tendencies in the Muslim world is the authoritarian nature of classical Islamic political thought. Despite Akyol's acceptance of this narrative, he expands the debate further by highlighting that the authoritarianism of classical Islamic political thought is not merely a failure of Islamic political thinkers to acknowledge the proper ethics of Islamic governance. It results from the politicisation of religion over the rationalisation of politics. The Ash'arī School

of Ethics, as a dominant school that shaped most parts of the Sunni world, brought politics into the fold of religion by justifying the need for a political office through revelation. This mainstream thought movement is the core of the issue that paved the way for religious-based politics in the Muslim world. Therefore, Akyol offers a new reflection on reading classical Islamic political thought from a holistic perspective incorporating ethics, law, and epistemological developments.

### ***Akyol's Reading of Classical Islamic Ethics: Some Methodological Issues***

The discussion on ethics emerges as a central aspect of Akyol's critique of Muslim intellectual stagnation and his proposed remedies for revitalising Islamic thought. Akyol emphasises the importance of reason (*aql*) in interpreting religious texts and understanding divine commandments, advocating for a return to the rationalist traditions, according to his understanding of *Mu'tazilite* theology and the philosophical insights of figures like Ibn Rushd by highlighting the role of reason as a moderating force in relation to revealed knowledge (*naql*). The central argument against Akyol's thesis on Islamic ethics is that it suffers from methodological flaws and does not align with the historical realities of Islamic intellectual history. Akyol's binary division between divine command ethics and philosophical ethics is overly simplistic and fails to capture the nuanced interplay between reason (*'aql*) and revelation (*naql*) that characterises the Islamic tradition. Contemporary scholarship on Islamic ethics, as highlighted by al-Attar, demonstrates that such binary divisions do not fully align with the classical Islamic tradition. Akyol's reliance on Western epistemological frameworks which was developed in a Christian religious context, such as divine command theory and philosophical ethics, is problematic because it disregards the unique nuances of the Islamic context (al-Attar, 2019, p. 99). For example, Akyol's critique of early theological frameworks, particularly Ash'arī theology, lacks depth and overlooks the intricate interplay between theology and law within Islamic thought. His tendency to conflate Ash'arī theology with Sunni legalism disregards the complementary relationship among disciplines such as theology, law and ethics. Within Sunni-Ash'arī legal theory, a clear distinction exists between theological beliefs (creed) and practical legal matters (praxis). While Ash'arī thought primarily concerns itself with theological matters, adherents historically aligned themselves with one of the four Sunni schools of law for practical application (Ali, 2021, p. 78). Moreover, Akyol's oversimplification is further underscored by the argument put forth by a leading authority, Aymen Shihadeh, on the early and classical development of Sunni Islamic theology. It is commonly believed that classical Ash'arites subscribed to a divine command theory of ethics, rejecting the ethical rationalism of the *Mu'tazilah*. However, recent scholarly discoveries of more classical Ash'arite texts reveal a fuller account of their teachings on the subject. A subtle yet significant shift towards a consequentialist theory of ethics can be discerned in the theological and juristic works of al-Ghazālī, a student of al-Juwaynī. Additionally, Al-Rāzī, a proponent of Ash'arī theology, presents a theory of ethical value distinct from both the *Mu'tazilah* and earlier Ash'arites. He supports ethical rationalism at the human level, akin to the *Mu'tazilah*, asserting that only the mind (*'aql*) can judge acts as good or bad. However, he maintains, in line with Ash'arī doctrine, that ethical rationalism does not apply to God's acts (Shihadeh, 2016) (Shihadeh, 2016, p. 21-23). This broader understanding of ethical thought within the Islamic tradition challenges prevalent tendencies to interpret such concepts through the lens of problematic yet influential liberal secular binaries, such as legal/mystical, moderate/extremist, and reformist/traditionalist or voluntarism/rationalism distinctions.

***Limits of Akyol's Engagement with Liberalism and Modernity***

One of the notable limitations of the Akyol project is that it simply assumed the solutions offered by liberalism and political modernity to the complexities of moral pluralism of the modern world. The author treats both modernity and liberalism as progressive and unavoidable realities of the current world. On one hand, he did not critically engage with any scholarship that emerged in the West that explores the philosophical and social implications of the modern liberal paradigm on the contemporary world. On the other hand, he failed to incorporate developing debates on reforming the modernist paradigm considering the religious and ethical wisdom of the epistemically marginalised communities in the global south. Specifically, these developing discourses aim to envision a new kind of human subjectivity formation, social order, and political philosophy that transcends the ethical constraints of modernity and liberalism. In the Western context, the works of Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel have offered a powerful critique of liberal individualism and rights discourses and exposed its moral and societal impacts in detail.

For example, MacIntyre suggests a theory of virtue as an alternative paradigm for liberal individualism. He argues that modern individualism has deconstructed the moral landscape of contemporary society. He believes that the Western enlightenment project, which worships individual autonomy and rights, has paved the way for social disorder and downfall. Instead, his theory of virtue aims to form a new human who prefers certain communal good over their individual interests. MacIntyre (2007) argues that this new human subjectivity formation cannot be attained under liberal conditions. American philosopher Sandel (1998) critiques the liberal conception of individual rights and autonomy, highlighting that it over-focuses on individuality, ignoring the importance of community and communal values in social development. He further stresses that communities play a vital role in crafting an individual's moral outlook and reasoning process. These scholarly debates fundamentally point out that liberalism has its own metaphysics and ontology, and it is also an all-encompassing system though it portrays itself not to be. Liberalism adopts a certain conception of the good life, permits other religious and ethical traditions to operate only within its limits, and eventually crafts a particular form of individual subjectivity that ignores communal values and ethical principles. On the topic of Islamic ethical and moral philosophy, Wael Hallaq, Taha A. Rahman, and Ovamir Anjum offered a systematic critique of the modernist legal and political paradigm. They presented several crucial arguments examining how Islam envisions an alternative conception of law, ethics, and political philosophy that aspires to produce an Islamic ethical being (Hallaq, 2013; Hallaq, 2019; Anjum 2012).

Given the importance of the ongoing discussions on liberalism and its moral and political impact in the West, it is surprising that Akyol did not engage in any of these conversations and instead urged Muslims to reconsider how they could potentially contribute to these discussions through their historical and philosophical moral resources. What Akyol suggests is to accept liberalism as a de facto regime and to reframe the Islamic worldview accordingly. Although Akyol's analysis covers a wide spectrum of academic realms such as ethics, law, and philosophy in the discussion of Islamic political reform, he only brings certain conversations from those realms that fit his overall project and avoids substantial works that strive to examine liberal philosophy critically. In that sense, his overall project fails to facilitate a genuine conversation between Islam and liberal political philosophy.

**Conclusion**

This article is motivated by a desire to critically understand the ideas of Mustafa Akyol as found in his major work *Reopening Muslim Minds*. In that sense, the research finds that Akyol's project is premised upon fundamental foundational assumptions. It is that the modern liberal world order has the potential to bring more freedom, progress, and liberty to the world, and those values are inherently Islamic in an objective sense. However, political Islamists and other conservative currents within the Muslim world aimed to disregard such an understanding of Islam. As a result, this mainstream current created a fracture between Islam and the modern world, leading to pushing Islam into a crisis. However, Akyol rightly notes that to meet the demands and values of liberal democracy and political modernity, Islamic thinkers need to actualise an epistemological revolution within Islamic thought. Because mainstream Islamist currents are primarily sceptical of independent reason as a source of knowledge and ethics, which is the cornerstone of political modernity. In addition, another critical point Akyol makes is that the root of the sceptical attitude of Islamists and conservatives towards reason comes from the mainstream Islamic intellectual tradition, the Ash'arī school of thought. According to Akyol, the worldview of Ash'arite shapes Islamists' current ethical and political views. Hence, Akyol calls for Islamic thinkers to adopt a rationalist interpretation of Islam that could guide Islamic thought to effectively contribute to the modern world. Against this background, the Akyol project is a critical intervention in developing dialogue between Islam and liberal democracy. Moving ahead, if we look at Akyol's work as a project to make a genuine conversation between Islam and modern liberal democracy, this study found that Akyol fails to critique liberal values and their impact on global societies and community ethics in a similar fashion as he critiques the Islamic intellectual tradition and modern Islamist and conservative currents. Modern scholarship on critiquing philosophical premises of the liberal political and ethical philosophy is rich and diverse. Akyol's project fails to incorporate any of that conversation in his discussion. Finally, this paper found that Akyol's critique of traditional Ash'arī Islamic epistemology has its limitations since it tries to impose ethical theories that developed in the Western context, such as divine command ethics, into the Islamic context.

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