

Book Review

Mustafa Akyol
*Reopening Muslim Minds:
A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance*
New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021, 336 pp.

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Mustafa Akyol's *Reopening Muslim Minds* offers a tantalizing tale of a religious community in crisis, its causes, and suggested remedies for recovering from its intellectual malaise. Akyol asks, why did Muslim civilization fall behind the West? His answer is simple: Muslims fell behind the West and have failed to contribute anything major to science since Islam's "golden age" (seventh to thirteenth century CE) due to anti-intellectual forces among the Sunnī orthodox; the main culprits were Ash'arī theologians who opposed Mu'tazilī rationalism, and their promulgation of voluntarism, fideism, and occasionalism. Accordingly, this mindset found its greatest champion in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), whose assault on philosophy left a lasting impression and effectively paralyzed Islamic civilization. Akyol's solution is a return to neo-Hellenistic philosophy as promoted by Mu'tazilī rationalists and/or the illuminating ideas of Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198; known in the West as Averroes). Each granted reason (*'aql*) a moderating role in relation to revealed knowledge (*naql*), unlike the Ash'arī majority who allegedly promoted a literal interpretation of scripture while rejecting secondary causation, human freedom, and natural law. In Akyol's view, a reappropriation of the legally relativistic doctrine of tolerance promoted by the (historically maligned) Murjīs is warranted to help the community overcome their views on accusations of disbelief (*takfīr*) and the freedom of expression.

Through his assault on Ash'arī theological voluntarism, Akyol unwittingly asserts that human beings should have greater autonomy than God. The Creator's prerogative to act independently of human moral strictures is deemed intolerable, thereby giving people a power greater than that of the divine. Though he champions Mu'tazilī

rationality and their doctrine obligating God to act in the interest of human beings, Akyol misleads his readers by obfuscating the fact that his own legal conclusions and remedies supersede those held by Mu'tazilis. He presents Mu'tazilis, Ibn Rushd, and Murj'is as anti-Ash'aris and as defenders of reason, freedom, and tolerance. Finding a minority voice among the Mu'tazilis, he asserts that they were anarchists, while Ash'aris were "pro-establishment" and blasphemously made analogies between the sultan and God. He revises the historically accurate Mu'tazilī *miḥna*¹ as an exaggerated Sunnī fabrication and falsely presents the anti-Mu'tazilī persecutory "Ḥanbalī" Qādirī creed as an Ash'arī campaign. Akyol claims that the Muslim failure to advance beyond Western civilization in science, technology, and human rights is solely because of Ash'arī theology. He never quotes an Ash'arī source in support of his claims, nor does he succeed in establishing a causal link between Ash'arī teachings and the current state of affairs in the Muslim world.

Lamenting the current plight of Muslim majority societies and voicing his desire to see them flourish once again, Akyol states,

Islam is not the powerful, creative, sophisticated, beautiful civilization that it once was. Quite the contrary; today our lands are among the most underdeveloped places in the world. Our wealth is scarce—unless it comes effortlessly from oil—as well as our science, knowledge, justice, and freedom. We are suppressed by authoritarian regimes, whose triumphant rivals often turn out to be new disappointments. We are also torn by hateful divisions and

1 The *miḥna* or *miḥna khalq al-Qur'ān* was the name given to an inquisition period (218–236/833–851) that began during the reign of the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 198–218/813–833; d. 218/833) and ended during the reign of al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–247/847–861; d. 246/861). The caliph, being influenced by Mu'tazilī doctrine, was convinced that he was required to compel the population to profess the 'creedness' of the Qur'ān thereby sparing those professing that it was God's word from the assertion that one of God's attributes (His speech) was emergent rather than eternal. Those who resisted were removed from their posts, imprisoned, whipped, or even killed. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), eponym of the Ḥanbalī school, was tortured and spent fifteen years in prison for his refusal to utter the words.

violent conflicts, not to mention the extremists who do unspeakable evils in our name. (232)

The book is replete with baseless assertions, half-truths, false allegations, and misapprehensions about the doctrines of the Ash‘arīs, and the Mu‘tazilīs and Murjīs Akyol lionizes. Akyol often demonstrates a lack of familiarity with the nuances of early theological frameworks, such as that of al-Ash‘arī; this may be a direct consequence of his overreliance on the distillations of modern and contemporary sources. His confirmation bias is fueled by an ostensibly cultural Darwinian viewpoint and uncritical embrace of Western civilizational superiority. Technological, scientific, and political “progress” are held up as the criteria of civilizational greatness, with no mention of the destructive environmental consequences of these advances and the moral duplicity of the Western champions of “human rights.” To be clear, no reasonable person would object to the project of expanding freedom, dialogue, and tolerance. However, one has little reason to anticipate major attitudinal changes among the modern Muslim scholars who Akyol calls the ideological gatekeepers of Islam *because* he is maligning them. Distortions, either intentionally or carelessly, do not often endear one to one’s opponents. Assuming the correctness of Akyol’s thesis that Ash‘arīs are responsible for the loss of reason, freedom, and tolerance in the Muslim world, his malevolence toward them gives little reason to believe that his call will be heeded.

As a demonstration of these Ash‘arī failings, in the early chapters of the *Reopening Minds* Akyol accuses Ash‘arīs and al-Ghazālī of spreading an anti-intellectual culture by supporting divine command theory, known also as “voluntarism.”² After maligning Ash‘arīs and praising St. Thomas Aquinas for his embrace of the notion that God’s commandments are undergirded by objective moral values, he states, “This view, in contrast to voluntarism, became known as *intellectualism*, implying that God’s commandments are intelligible. Intellectualism led to the concept of ‘natural law,’ which presumes that there are

2 ‘Divine command theory’ is the theory that what makes something morally right is God command, and what makes something morally wrong is God prohibition of it. See John E. Hare *God’s Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

inherent ethical qualities, and also ‘rights,’ in nature that are knowable by human reason” (31).

Any Ash‘arī theologian or trained Muslim jurist intuitively from this statement that Akyol is operating under faulty premises and assumptions. He conflates Ash‘arī theology with Sunnī legalism and fails to see the complementarity between the Islamic disciplines (theology, law, and ethics). Ash‘arī thought is a theological school, while, in terms of praxis, Ash‘arī—and Mu‘tazilī—theologians historically adopted one of the four Sunnī schools of law. Sunnī scholars differentiated between creed and praxis, acknowledging that all of God’s actions and commandments are, in fact, intelligible. For this reason, Sunnī-Ash‘arī legal theorists posited that no commandment of scripture can become an analog for any new law until the former’s *ratio legis* is discerned. The *ratio legis* (*‘illa*) is a clearly defined characteristic shared between the subject of the original scriptural commandment and the novel action for which God’s judgment is sought. This presumed intelligibility of the divine commandments is what guided scholarly endeavor (*ijtihād*) and is also the reason “Ash‘arī” jurists eventually articulated the theory of the *maqāṣid al-sharī‘a* (goals of the *sharī‘a*) and peoples’ inherent rights to bodily integrity, faith, sanity, property, honor, and family.

That notwithstanding, Ash‘arī-Sunnī jurists also stated that the intelligibility of God’s commandments is not always discernible. Only a law with a “discernible” *ratio legis* is suited for analogy, while the indiscernible are simply to be acted on faithfully without question. The most reliable *ratio legis* is one that is expressly stated by God or His emissary. Others can be extrapolated through scholarly endeavor (*ijtihād*) if the *ratio legis* can be “reasonably” defined. By contrast, a commandment with an indiscernible *ratio legis*, like the obligation of the five canonical prayers or the fast of Ramadan, is not a suitable analog. Hence, one cannot claim that a sixth canonical prayer or fasting another month beyond Ramadan is obligatory by arguing that they share the same *ratio legis* as the other two pillars of worship.

Akyol and others miss this subtle distinction: while Ash‘arī Sunnīs *actually did* consider God’s commandments to be intelligible, their intelligibility was not something one could intuit without God’s aid. That is, even if one could provide strong evidence that an action is

good, evil, beneficial, or harmful, one could never *definitively* prove that the judgment coincides with the divine intent without being one of God's emissaries. In other words, Sunnī theologians and jurists all acknowledged that only God knows with absolute certainty how God evaluates a given belief or act under debate. This is the reason exegetes validated the stop in Q 3:7 after "...And no one knows its [true] meaning except God. But those firm in knowledge say..." and those deeply rooted in knowledge" since it can be said that the profoundly learned (*al-rāsikhūna fi-l-'ilm*) know the meaning of the ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*) of the Qur'ān, but *inconclusively*, because they cannot say for certain which of the many figurative possibilities was God's specific intent. Muslim jurists did not consider themselves legislators, but merely tools for uncovering the "probable" divine intent which is ever-present in God's mind. This is reflected in the etymology of the word *muftī*; namely, "to make plain" or "clarify," not "to make law." The same is said of the etymology of the word *mufassir* (exegete), which is "to disclose something hidden."

Furthermore, that "reason is a foundation for transmitted knowledge" (*al-'aql aṣl li-l-naql*) is axiomatic to Ash'arī thinking. By "transmitted knowledge" they meant scripture in the form of the Qur'ān and the prophetic utterances. This function of reason was so prevalent among Sunnīs that even the Ḥanbalī Ibn al-Jawzī, a famous critic of Ash'arīs, conceded that, "It should not be neglected by anyone that the principle by which the faith is established is reason, and it is by way of this [reason] that we came to know and hold God to be Eternal without beginning."³

The foregoing illustrates that, contrary to Akyol's claims, Ash'arīs support both voluntarism *and* intellectualism, voluntarism in the realm of theology and intellectualism in the field of law. Akyol incorrectly assumes that a skepticism about intellectualism in one field necessitates its rejection in another. This distinction between theology and law is logical considering that Qur'ānic law supersedes previously revealed law codes and endorses the doctrine of legal supersession, which Muslims typically refer to as *naskh*. Were we to accept the notion that scripture merely corroborates what natural law establishes, how would

3 Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, *The Attributes of God* (Bristol: Amal Press, 2006), 44.

we explain the introduction of different revealed law codes in that God declares an act to be moral in one century but immoral in another? The Qur'ān ascribes to Jesus the saying, "And [I have come] confirming what was before me of the Torah and *to make lawful for you some of what was forbidden to you*" (Q 3:50). If human reason is the primary arbiter of morality, what rational principle would corroborate the laws superseded and legalized by Jesus according to this verse other than a divine command? What rational principles aid us in concluding that fornication is immoral when it can be argued that God intended for men and women to copulate undeterred considering how their reproductive organs complement one another and aid in the perpetuation of the human species? With regard to divine command theory Akyol makes a rather damning claim when he states, "Finding divine command theory in the Qur'an would be indeed 'less than a half-truth,' arguably even less, because the Qur'an itself presents divine commandments with intelligible reasons" (35).

The assertion that the Qur'ān always attaches "intelligible reasons" to its commandments is the only "less than a half-truth" told here. There are numerous examples that contradict Akyol's claim. Among them, "It is not for a believing man or a believing woman, when God and His messenger have decided a matter, that they should [thereafter] have any choice about their affair. And whoever disobeys God and His messenger has certainly strayed into clear error" (Q 33:36). Another verse states, "But no, by your Lord, they will not [truly] believe until they make you [O Muḥammad], judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves and then find within themselves no discomfort from what you have judged and submit in [full, willing] submission" (Q 4:65). This includes the many verses that invite believers to, "Obey God and His messenger," none which provide permission for hesitancy or inaction.

The Qur'ān's first narrative concerning Adam and Satan, moreover, sets the tone of the entire book, in that Satan is cursed and cast out of the garden because of his disobedience to the Creator's command to prostrate, along with the angels, to Adam. When asked why he did not prostrate, Satan *reasons* that: "I am better than him. You created

me from fire and created him from clay.⁴ Satan, rightly, believed that God issues commands with intelligible reasons but Satan erred in his assumption that God's commands must always have an intelligible reason. And apparently, Satan believed that God's command to have him and others prostrate to a new creature was due to his physical composition. What other reason could there have been, since Adam's distinctiveness had not yet been demonstrated? One would, then, need to conclude that God had overlooked the putatively "objective fact" that fire is better than clay.

We cannot sufficiently underscore the absurdity of this reasoning. However, this demonstrates what undergirded Ash'arī-Sunnī reluctance to afford reason the kind of authority that Mu'tazilīs traditionally did. Adam was similarly disobedient to God but there were two essential differences between Adam and Satan. The first difference is that Satan's disobedience was through omission, while Adam's disobedience was through action. Second, Satan's inaction was in defiance of God's commandment and wisdom, while Adam's action was a result of weakness and a lapse of memory. A third difference relates to how the two responded. Satan responded with anger and petitioned God to grant him respite and the authority to beguile Adam's progeny to prove their unworthiness of this honor. By contrast, Adam responded remorsefully, by accepting accountability and asking for God's forgiveness. We also cannot ignore the fact that according to the Qur'ān it was Satan's "intelligible reasoning" that led to Adam and Eve's fall, "Your Lord did not forbid you this tree except that you become angels or become of the immortal" (Q 7:20). Nowhere in the Qur'ān does God explain to Satan why he was obligated to prostrate to Adam. Nor does it He explain to Adam why he was not allowed to eat from the forbidden tree. Both were punished for violating a divine command.

Akyol, clearly, does not appreciate the strength of the Ash'arī appeal. The spread of Ash'arī thought was not simply due to, as Akyol claims, government support and normalization, rather it relates to its persuasive reconciliation between reason and revealed knowledge. The key to understanding al-Ash'arī's claim of embracing Aḥmad b.

4 The response from Satan is mentioned in later *sūras* (Q 7:12; 38:76), not in the verses of *Sūrat al-Baqara*.

Ḥanbal's school is al-Ash'arī's conversion to Sunnī thought. Like his fellow Mu'tazilīs, al-Ash'arī himself similarly viewed reason as the regulator of scripture. This was true to such an extent that, like his fellow Mu'tazilīs, al-Ash'arī rejected *ḥadīths* whenever he could not reconcile apparent contradictions between reason and revelation. Despite Ibn Ḥanbal's resistance to the Mu'tazilī *miḥna* ("inquisition"), the conviction that Mu'tazilī theology represented Muslim orthodoxy continued to increase. In fact, it was only after al-Ash'arī's defection *from* and refutation *of* Mu'tazilī hyper-rationalism that his school became popular because they championed the prophetic traditions. Thus, they found a lasting home in the lands of Islam, while Mu'tazilī thought waned significantly.

The other important consideration is that Ash'arīs sufficiently answered important questions, such as, "whose theology and ethics are more rooted in the Qur'ān?" "Who knows more about God than God?" "Who knows more about the cosmos than the creator of the cosmos?" "And what is a greater source of information about God and the cosmos than the one who revealed His message to humanity through His emissaries?" Scholars have long maintained that it is one issue to present persuasive rational support for one's beliefs, but it is another matter to prove that it originates from and is corroborated by scripture. No amount of rationalism will ever substitute for knowledge that comes directly from the creator of rational creatures who are incapable of rationality without His nurturing and creation of the very universe on which they build their rational conclusions. Akyol is not correct, the Qur'ān, and Islam more generally, are built on divine command theory. This is precisely why the Qur'ān describes the appropriate response of "believers" when "...they are called to God and His messenger to judge between them is that they say: We hear and we obey! And those are the successful" (Q 24:51).

In chapter 4 entitled "How We Lost Morality," Akyol alleges that Ash'arī theology "...equates morality with religious law" (46). Here, he fails once again to comprehend the interdisciplinary nature of the Islamic sciences. No single science is comprehensive of all religious concerns. Hence, what one lacks, another completes. For example, were one to rely solely on how Muslim jurists define marriage, one

would likely mistake marriage for nothing more than an exchange of mutual benefits wherein the husband enjoys intimacy with his wife in exchange for a *mahr* and regular maintenance. This, however, obfuscates the more affective aspects of the marriage relationship emphasized in the Qurʾān and prophetic tradition such as, “And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy” (Q 30:21). In addition, the Prophet Muḥammad said, “Marry affectionate women of child-bearing age.”⁵

Similarly, the *shariʿa*, especially through an Ashʿarī lens, encompasses both morality and religious law. It is much more a moral than a legal code; this is best underscored by the relatively few Qurʾānic verses that pertain to law, when compared to those of moral encouragement. The Islamic discipline of behavioral refinement (*ihsān*) resembles virtue ethics (e.g., “take a *fatwā* from your heart”) more than pure deontology (e.g., “Ask no questions, and do as I say!”). Deontology is a starting point for morality, since there can be no morality without law and the immutable prescriptions without which Islam would not be Islam. It does not matter if those immutables have a discernible *ratio legis* (e.g., the prohibition of wine drinking) or not (e.g., why four prayer cycles are prescribed for the *zuhr* prayer). Thus, formal Islamic law also endorses a consequentialist ethics (e.g., “choose the lesser of two evils”).

Another source of Akyol’s confusion is his adoption of the Muʿtazilī conflation of “evil” (*sharr*) with “illicit” (*ḥarām*) and *vice versa*. That is, he equates the “illicit” with the consequence of what is categorized as a “repulsive” (*qubḥ*) or “evil” (*sharr*) action. According to Muʿtazilī doctrine, objective “good” and “evil” can be discerned rationally. And since God commands only good and forbids evil, one may discern God’s expectations with and without scripture. In cases when reason cannot independently discern the inherent goodness or evil of an act, like the prayer or pilgrimage, Muʿtazilīs concede that the revealed law should be followed without question. The Ashʿarī argument, by contrast, maintains that there is no objective standard for determining an action

5 Muḥammad Ashraf b. Amīr al-ʿAzīm Abādī, *ʿAwn al-maʿbud ʿala Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Amman: Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawliyya, n.d.), 910 (hadith no. 2050 from *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*).

to be *inherently* good or evil. The good or evil imparted to actions is determined by *contingent*, not inherent, factors connected to each action and thus depends on consequentialist notions that result from human social interactions. So, it is false to allege that Ash‘arīs deny that a given action may be characterized as good or evil based on independent human reason. They merely refuse to concede that reason alone can *definitively* determine God’s law and other moral expectations. This same presumption predominates in Islamic jurisprudence and explains why scholars say, “Jurisprudence is from the speculative realm” (*al-fiqh min bāb al-ẓunūn*). One of the great Ash‘arīs of the twentieth century, Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti (1929–2013), stated,

Verily, the upholders of the prophetic way and the collective (*ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā‘a*) [i.e., the supermajority of Muslims] do not object to characterizing things as beautiful or repugnant as determined by reason and the demands of [human] nature, aims, and interests, without reference to the revealed law. However, they do reject substituting reason, aims, and interests for the revealed law inasmuch as tying reward for good deeds and punishment in the afterlife for committing bad and repugnant acts to reason alone. This is because convictions resulting from reason are not suited to override the revealed law and its commandments. Rather, the opposite is true. And nothing transforms “good” to “repugnant,” in God’s revealed law, other than God threatening with punishment the one who does it after promising a reward to him who performs it. And there is nothing problematic in that as long as the point of departure for the decision made by the upholders of the prophetic way and the collective not be that the evaluation of “good” or “evil” originates from the *inherent* nature and identity of the thing but rather from a *contingency* emerging outside it.⁶

6 Muḥammad Sa‘īd Ramaḍān al-Buṭī, *al-Insān musayyar am mukhayyar? Dirāsa ‘ilmiyya shāmila li-mas‘ala al-taysīr wa-takhyīr wa-l-qadā’ wa-l-qadar wa-mā yata‘allaqu bihā min dhuyūl wa-mushkilāt* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1997), 166.

In chapter 5 “How We Lost Universalism,” Akyol avers that the supposed “communalistic school” of Ash‘arīs undermined an alleged “universalistic school” preserved only among Ḥanafīs. Accordingly, the potential basis for a pre-Enlightenment humanism among Muslims was thwarted because of the Ash‘arīs’ insistence on assigning greater value to Muslim citizens than to treating all citizens equally and granting them full rights. Had this universalist impulse been allowed to flourish, Akyol suggests that Muslims likely would have abolished slavery even prior to the Europeans. After discussing this purported “universalistic school” promoted by the Qur‘ān and how Ash‘arī orthodoxy undermined it, he states, “Accordingly, humans had rights only if they were Muslims, or if they were granted ‘protection’ by Muslims as subdued *dhimmi*s or contracted *maahids*. Other non-Muslims counted as *kafir harbi*, or ‘enemy infidel,’ who had no inherent rights thanks to their mere humanity” (59).

Akyol’s religious commitment to classical liberalism and European Enlightenment and his advocacy for “personal autonomy” is admirable. It is his misreading of Islamic orthodoxy, however, that undermines his pursuit of the unrealizable goal of moral objectivity. One cannot speak of Ḥanafīs without speaking of al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), given the latter’s strong theological influence on Ḥanafī thought. And to speak of al-Māturīdī is to speak of Ash‘arīs, since both theological schools validate the conclusions of the other, but clash with respect to thirteen matters of secondary importance. Voluntarism, fideism, and occasionalism are not among the points of dispute between these two schools. The same can be said of the acknowledgment of the inherent worth of all human life.

Akyol suggests that Ḥanafīs, (supposedly) unlike Ash‘arīs, held that non-Muslim and Muslim citizens should be treated equally in both rights and obligations. Nothing could be further from the truth. No legal school emphasized the clear division of territories into *dār al-ḥarb* and *dār al-salam* more than the Ḥanafīs.⁷ Consequently, they ruled that the scriptural penalties (*ḥudūd*) for crimes like theft, fornication, and calumny committed in *dār al-ḥarb* should be suspended. Championing

7 By contrast, Shāfi‘īs and Mālikīs did not support such a division with respect to the application of the *sharī‘a*.

a *ḥadīth* of disputed authenticity, they also insisted that usurious loans (*ribā*) and other prohibited transactions were lawful for Muslims to undertake in *dār al-ḥarb*.

The Ḥanafī view and treatment of non-Muslims was not essentially different from that of the other legal schools. One might conclude otherwise given Akyol's attempts to paint them, the Mu'tazilis, and scholars like Ibn Rushd and Ibn Khaldūn as pre-enlightened thinkers among Muslims whose views were simply drowned out under Ash'arī tyranny. If what he says about Ḥanafīs is true, why have they not created this more enlightened "universalistic" and ideologically welcoming Muslim culture he envisions, especially given that they represent a numerical majority of today's scholars and Muslims worldwide? We might further inquire, has the world ever witnessed completely equal treatment between all citizens, regardless of sex, race, or class? Is this even possible considering societal divisions (throughout history, in the premodern and modern world)? No civilization has ever made a legitimate claim to this; thus, equal treatment remains an ideal that has yet to be realized.

After quoting French abolitionist Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, Akyol laments the fact that Muslims failed to demand the general emancipation of slaves prior to the West, saying,

So, the problem wasn't the Qur'an, but a certain mindset that couldn't imagine the Qur'an's praise of manumission, or "freeing a neck," as an inspiration for universal emancipation. It was a mindset that also stuck to tradition and couldn't imagine a new world where all human beings could be free. And when such a new world was presented by the West, the same mindset rejected it on principle. Because non-Muslims, by definition, couldn't have any moral wisdom. (64)

One might ask, if the Qur'ānic "God" praises manumission, why did He not abolish slavery? Indeed, God would know better than anyone that slavery was an *objective* evil, right? Surely, Akyol cannot be alleging that God is guilty of a "mindset that also stuck to tradition and couldn't imagine a new world where human beings could be free." This is the

logical consequence of his reasoning on this point. Nowhere in the Qurʾān does God order Muslims to enslave people. Rather, manumission is the Qurʾān's standard prescription in specific contexts. But, if God's acts and commandments are inherently wise, just, and intelligible, would not His omissions be likewise? The absence of an injunction against enslavement is, perhaps, a profound omission. Akyol seems to overlook this fact and assumes, like so many Muslim apologists, that "God *intended* to prohibit slavery" after the revelation of the Qurʾān was completed. He does not entertain the possibility that God's tolerance for the enslavement of Muslim enemies by Muslims was due to an *intelligible reason*: Is it not possible that God considered enslavement a fitting recompense for a crime committed against Muslim populations? Whether the offender's crime was murder, attempted murder, pillaging, attempted kidnapping, or another violation against Muslim populations, it is clear that premodern people unanimously viewed enslavement as part of a mutually acknowledged moral order. Islam, however, limited the avenues to enslavement—it was allowed only as a consequence of losing in war—and Islam was meant to apply this rule universally without consideration to race or color.

To be clear, there is little reason to expect that Muslims, like most people today, will ever embrace slavery as an international norm again. However, the notion that one can know that God "intends" to abolish or abrogate something especially after He declared "Today I have perfected for you your religion..." a declaration made about a book that did not include the abolition of slavery among its "perfected" injunctions, gives one significant pause about the claim that God wanted something other than what He delivered to humanity. That is, a finalized revealed law lacking a clear abolition or condemnation of slavery. Is there evidence of other practices tolerated by the Qurʾān that were denormalized with the passage of time and then declared no longer admissible by Muslim jurists? Akyol's aversion to divine command theory and verses like "Judgment is solely for God" unwittingly led him to play God.

Throughout the book, Akyol often overlooks the fact that most of the "civilized" world prior to the campaign of abolition, similarly neglected to advocate for the abolition of slavery prior to the British.

Despite this, one might think that Muslims alone and “Ash‘arī” fideism were unique in their late embrace of this new *weltanschauung*. If all human beings have within themselves the capacity for naturalistic thinking that leads them to know that something is objectively good or evil, then why has it taken people so long to come to this conclusion? That is because there is no objective basis for judging slavery to be intrinsically evil. Rather, we only judge it to be evil because of how savagely European slavers treated slaves and the fact that its most familiar and most recent form restricted slavery to one race of people.

The idea that for most Muslims, non-Muslims “by definition, couldn’t have moral wisdom” is patently false. A widely-known prophetic tradition states that wisdom is “the lost camel of the believer.” Muslims have long benefited, both scientifically and morally, from the wisdom of their predecessors. And while some Muslims believe that there is no value in anything originating among non-Muslims, Akyol places too much onus on Muslims and too much trust in the superiority of Western “arguments” and ignores historical colonial confrontations. As I stated in an earlier publication,

Conservative pundits, similarly, ignore Islam’s contributions and Muslim’s role in strengthening America, claiming that concepts like “secularism,” “individualism,” and “free-market capitalism” are the exclusive proceeds of Judeo-Christian philosophical influence. They claim that, besides their respective religions, these three ideas are what made the West great. What this view ignores, however, is the fact that Western civilization did not win supremacy due to a simple “conversation” between the Old or New Worlds. Many lives had to be lost, enslaved, and physically dominated in the process.⁸

The West did not “win,” or advance, merely by presenting its philosophical arguments against those of Muslims in a debate judged and moderated by the greatest moral minds on the planet. Rather, much

8 Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, “A New Political Vision for Muslim America” (8 August 2020), online at Lamppost Education Initiative: https://lamppostedu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/vision5_compressed_1.pdf, 4.

of the Western victory came by violently compelling the concession of the conquered.

Akyol's argument is further undermined by the Qur'ān itself, which clearly places greater value on Muslim lives than those of non-Muslims. This is not to say that the Qur'ān allows for a non-Muslim life to be taken without cause. The very purpose expressed for man's creation is to serve God. Muslims are called to be witnesses to humanity and are declared the "best nation brought out for humanity." In addition, many verses explicitly or implicitly underscore the fact that a believing soul is more valuable to God than a non-believer. That notwithstanding, equal treatment in cases of accidental loss of life only applies to tribes with which Muslims have treaties, such that, if a Muslim accidentally kills a friendly non-Muslim, he must free a slave and pay a restitutive indemnity to the victim's tribe. If there is no treaty, the Muslim merely frees a slave (Q 4:92–93).

In summary, Akyol's claim of a lost Islamic "universalism" due to Ash'arī ascendancy and influence, like many other claims, lacks grounding in fact. The Qur'ān says, "The believers are but brothers" (Q 49:10), and "Indeed this, your nation, is one nation, and I am your Lord, so worship Me" (Q 21:92). The Qur'ān diversifies its pleas, sometimes addressing its audience as "O you who believe," "O mankind," "O Sons of Adam," "O People of the Book," "O Prophet," "O Messenger," etc. The Qur'ān offers both a universalistic and communalistic appeal. The communalistic form is not restricted to Muslims. Akyol seems to believe that the "universal" appeal cancels the "communalistic" appeal, though he offers little justification for why this might be the case.

In addition to many factual errors, Akyol includes (in chapter 6, "How the Sharia Stagnated," which concerns the theory and exercise of jurisprudence), another misleading claim. For him, one must "... look deeper into God's commandments by bringing more *reason* into the process of understanding and interpreting them" (73). Rather, the theory of *maqāṣid al-sharī'a*, though limited, serves as fertile soil for expanding our understanding and interpretation of the divine intent. So, after enumerating and discussing "corporal punishments such as flogging, stoning, amputation of hands..." and attempting to reform

the unequal treatment of women—in certain cases—in inheritance laws, he states that

The Mu'tazila approach to the Qur'an would allow such a rational interpretation. In fact, it would even require it. Mu'tazila scholars such as Abd al-Jabbar and his student Mankdim had argued *tafseer*, or exegesis of the Qur'an, should not be done by one who does not have the prior knowledge of the justice of God through reason. Yet this was precisely what the Ash'arites would not concede. For them, there was no justice that stood outside of the Sharia and that humans could know through reason. For them, the Sharia came first, and justice followed—not the other way around (76).

Once again, Akyol fails to appreciate the difference between theology and law, God and humanity, and the fact that the radical theology of Ash'arīs places the eternal God beyond the judgments of mortal men. The Qur'ān says of God, "There is nothing like unto Him" (Q 42:11), "Nor is there to Him any equivalent" (Q 112:4), and "So do not assert similarities to God. Indeed, God knows and you do not know" (Q 16:74). It also says, "Indeed, God does what He intends" (Q 22:14), "He is not questioned about what He does but they will be questioned" (Q 21:23), and "But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And God knows, while you know not" (Q 2:216). All such verses reinforce the fact that God transcends human "justice" and He cannot be held to any human standard. As stated before, it was this constant appeal to scripture that made the Ash'arī position so persuasive, not state appropriation.

Human reason has a limited ability to comprehend the divine intent. Ash'arīs—and Sunnīs more generally—do not claim that God's commandments lack wisdom or intelligibility. They simply state that God's actions do not *require* purpose or direction toward a final cause. God acts freely without anything dictating or restraining His will. In support of this view they present the words of God Himself, "God is over all things competent" (Q 2:284) and "But God is not to be caused failure [i.e., prevented] by anything in the heavens or on the earth" (Q 35:44).

And while the Mu'tazilīs and Ash'arīs differed theologically in crucial ways, these differences had no bearing on their understanding of jurisprudence. So, while Akyol presents the Mu'tazila on his side, in fact they do not corroborate his suggestion that corporal punishments or unequal inheritance laws were or would be different today if the Mu'tazila had prevailed over the Ash'arīs. Rather, we find no major difference in understanding of the *sharī'a* between Ash'arīs and the Mu'tazila, especially in the areas of major concern for Akyol; namely, slavery, women's rights, apostasy laws, blasphemy laws, or corporal punishment. This fact undermines his thesis, which demands a return to the rationalism of the Mu'tazila and Ibn Rushd to "restore" enlightenment to Muslims. We cannot put our faith in Mu'tazilī rationalism any more than we can trust in the intelligence of Akyol to deliver us to this promised revival of natural law. The idea that two different people claiming objective morality can be led to two different moral conclusions is precisely why Ash'arīs opposed rational claims determining the legality or illegality of certain actions on the strength of reason alone. It is also why Sunnī jurists tolerated disagreements in the realm of jurisprudence and acknowledged the impossibility of definitively disclosing God's intent without the mediation of revelation. And since the Prophet—upon him God's blessing and peace—is no longer in our midst, the best we can do is rationalize, speculate, and draw analogies.

One of Akyol's most absurd assertions appears in chapter 7 entitled "How We Lost the Sciences." The very title suggests that throughout much of our history Muslims have been anti-science. The absurdity deepens as Akyol once again blames Ash'arī occasionalism for Muslims falling behind the West. His failure to see the inherent Ash'arī distinction between the demands of theology and those of reality skews his perspective. Had he and the anti-Ash'arī sources he relies on carried out a proper and thorough study of Ash'arī theology they would know that the Ash'arī concern is theological, not scientific in nature. That is, Ash'arīs do not grant created things inherent capacities to operate independently of God's will and control. This viewpoint is rooted in the Qur'ān which tells us, "God is the Creator of all things, and He is, over all things, Disposer of affairs" (Q 39:62). Another example is in the Prophet Abraham's statement to his people, "Do you worship that which

you [yourselves] carve, while God created you and that which you do?" (Q 37:95–96). Never does the Qurʾān state that human beings "create" their own actions. Most verses say that people "earn" (*kasb*) or "acquire" (*iktisāb*) their actions. Others state that they "do" (*ʿamal*) actions that will be morally evaluated. So, the insistence that Muslims accept that God alone controls life and death, health and sickness, does relate to the scriptural mandate. Who knows more about God than God? And who knows more about God's creation than God? Whatever objections Akyol and his ilk may have against voluntarism, one cannot deny that the Qurʾānic teachings are strongly voluntaristic and occasionalist.

Another glaring flaw in Akyol's claim is his inability to establish a direct line of causation between the abandonment of "science" and Ashʿarī occasionalism. He simply does not prove that science was ever abandoned. So, while he praises the past contributions of Muslim astronomers, physicians, mathematicians, and scientists, he provides no evidence that Muslim scholars ever stopped studying and teaching these topics after the eleventh century, which he marks as the start of the Muslim decline in scientific discovery and innovation.

In the following chapter, Akyol presents perhaps his greatest champion in Ibn Rushd (known in the West as Averroes). Ibn Rushd is significant not only because his theological roots can be traced back to the Ashʿarī school but also because he was the main Sunnī defender of philosophy. In his *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* he challenged al-Ghazālī's thesis and came to the defense of Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) and al-Fārābī (d. 339/950). Philosophy, however, was not Ibn Rushd's only forte. He was also an accomplished jurist known best by Sunnīs for his important work on comparative law, namely, *Bidāya al-mujtahid wa-nihāya al-muqtaṣid*. Akyol imparts to Ibn Rushd a type of cultural progressivism with respect to women in society. He says,

For instance, he [Ibn Rushd] argues that a woman cannot be forced to marry against her wishes and that she can contract her own marriage independently of a male "guardian." He also says that a wife has a right of divorce equivalent to that of the husband. He does his best to argue that women can lead prayers, at least in a household, and in all matters as well. He takes a bold step against polygamy, arguing that a

bridegroom must fulfill the demand imposed by his wife, such as not marrying another woman. As for women's dress code, he advises "modesty" but not the face veil. (123)

One could only hope that these misapprehensions about the views of Ibn Rushd originate from Akyol's lack of specialization rather than disingenuousness and intentional obfuscation. The fact is that Ibn Rushd was a Mālikī jurist and one of the major voices of the Mālikī school. While he had some unique opinions, none of those listed above by Akyol belong to Ibn Rushd. As already stated, Ibn Rushd's work is dedicated to comparative law between the Sunnī schools. And as any honest scholar, Ibn Rushd held himself to the highest standard, and he accurately reported the viewpoints of the major voices of Islamic law. Akyol concludes that the mere mention of an opinion he finds particularly favorable therefore means that Ibn Rushd believed it to be strong, valid, and preferred. All the same opinions listed above can be found in similar comparative legal works like *al-Qawānīn al-Fiqhiyya* of Ibn Juzayy and *al-Ma'ūna* of Qāḍī 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Baghādāī, both Mālikīs as well.

This pattern of obfuscation, confusion, and misapprehension runs throughout Akyol's work. As noted, he imparted views to the Mu'tazilīs that they simply did not hold. Here he does the same with Ibn Rushd. It seems that Akyol is more committed to finding information that supports his thesis and bias than to sincerely seeking the truth. If neither the Mu'tazila nor Ibn Rushd support Akyol's legal conclusions, one must admit that there is little to no evidence corroborating the assertion that natural law theory appropriated from the Muslim past would yield the stated outcomes implied. More importantly, if the Mu'tazila and Ibn Rushd agree with most Sunnī jurists with respect to the normative legal tradition, how can Akyol claim that the Ash'arī school is the cause of the lack of civilizational progress that led to the ascendance of the West and descent of Muslims? This latter question is an extremely important point because it underscores Akyol's misplaced nostalgia about the Muslim past to which he desires to return. But, that desire clashes with his earlier claim of cosmopolitanism and universalism which he believes must overcome "communalism." This aspiration is made even more clear when he says,

Today, many Muslims are aware of this Jewish accomplishment in the modern world, which looks painfully tragic when compared to our own record. For example, among the nine hundred Nobel Prize laureates over a century, there are more than two hundred Jews. In contrast, as of 2019, there were only twelve Muslim Nobel laureates. And that is despite there being a hundred times more Muslims than Jews in the world. (133)

Akyol does not seem to realize that the world is not only made up of Muslims and Jews. He fails to mention the members of numerous other nations. Additionally, Nobel Prize laureates are outliers among their various populations. To highlight their race or religion is misleading since it suggests that there is something inherent to each group, biological or cultural, that guarantees that they will excel over the members of other groups. This is an exercise in biological or cultural determinism that plants the roots of a fruitless jingoism.

In chapter 9 “Why We Lost Reason, Really,” Aykol offers some of his most absurd assertions, along with a revisionist reading of Mu‘tazila history. First, he endorses the claim made by the Catholic critic of Islam, Robert R. Reilly, that the absence of the *imago dei* or the biblical teaching that man is “made in the image and likeness of God” in the Qur‘ān made orthodox Islam less rational and more dogmatic than Judaism and Christianity. If Akyol were more knowledgeable about the hadith, he would know that the belief in *imago dei* has been a common articulation in Islam from its establishment. The Prophet Muḥammad said, “Verily, God created Adam in his image.”⁹ Muslim commentators and polemicists have long debated the meaning of this. Therefore, the claim that the absence of this statement or belief from the Qur‘ān makes a difference in Islamic history is baseless, especially since Muslims took the Prophet’s words just as seriously as they took the words of God.

9 See the *ḥadīth* “Allāh created Ādam in His Image . . .” as cited in [Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī] *The Translation of the Meaning of Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, trans. Muḥammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997) 8:138, no. 6227 and “. . . for Allāh created Ādam in his image.” in Imām Abul Hussain Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj, *English Translation of Sahīh Muslim*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007) 6:476, no. 6655 (115).

The issue of how the belief or idea of *imago dei* makes someone more rational goes unanswered.

Akyol further proposes the absurd claim that Ash‘arīs were pro-establishment while Mu‘tazilīs were anti-establish anarchists. As with Ash‘arīs, according to Mu‘tazila orthodoxy, electing someone to lead the community was an obligation. The two sects only differed with respect to the source of this requirement. The Mu‘tazila teachings held that reason obligated Muslims to choose a political leader, while Ash‘arīs believed that revealed law, not reason, led to this obligation. As highlighted, Ash‘arīs rejected the notion that reason has legislative authority.

In support of his false claim about the Mu‘tazilīs, Akyol says,

As a testimony to their rationalism, they asked the magical question that did not occur to most Muslims: Is the imamate really necessary? Do Muslims, in other words, really need a state? Some Mutazila scholars—such as al-‘Asamm (d. ca. 816), al-Nazzam (d. ca. 840), or Hisham al-Fuwat (d. 840)—gave a negative answer: no, the state wasn’t necessary. The law was certainly necessary, but the law could exist without the state (140).

While it is true that such Mu‘tazilī scholars held this view, to present this as the viewpoint of “the Mu‘tazila” is misleading and disingenuous. Dissenting and minority views have never constituted the orthodox view of any sect, group, or faction. As in other cases throughout his book, Akyol appropriates and conflates minority or heterodox opinions to corroborate his thesis.

This is precisely what Akyol does when he speaks of the Qādirī creed as if it is an Ash‘arī document. The Qādirī creed introduced by the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Qādir bi-Llāh (r. 381–422/991–1031) was used to persecute Mu‘tazilīs after their influence waned. Highlighting this creed, Akyol attempts to downplay the well-known *miḥna* (inquisition) the Mu‘tazilīs imposed on the Muslim population when they had power under the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma‘mūn and his immediate successors. Reading Akyol one would think that the Qādirī creed was an Ash‘arī document and that its ‘Abbāsīd ruler al-Qādir was an Ash‘arī himself.

This oversight further underscores Akyol's lack of specialization in theological doctrine and early Islamic history.

The Qādirī creed is a Ḥanbalī formulation of Sunnī creed. Those familiar with the Ash'arī school know that such a formulation could never win their endorsement considering statements in the creed like, "He created the Throne, not due to His need for it. He then mounted it as He desired and willed, not an establishment of rest as created beings rest," also "And every attribute by which He characterizes Himself or by which His messenger characterizes Him is a literal, not a figurative, attribute."¹⁰ Another example that negates the creed's Ash'arī ascription is the caliph al-Qādir bi-Llāh's statement about the Qur'ān, "Whoever says that it is created under any circumstance is an unbeliever lawful to kill after being called to repent."¹¹ The supermajority of Ash'arīs do not consider Mu'tazilīs to be unbelievers despite their disagreement about the matter of the createdness of the Qur'ān. Finally, the Ḥanbalī origin of this creed is clear from its author's statement, "No one is deemed an unbeliever due to the abandonment of any compulsory act other than the canonical prayer. For anyone who abandons it without an excuse and is healthy [and] unpreoccupied until the time of the next [prayer] is an unbeliever even if he does not deny its obligation."¹² The other three Sunnī schools (i.e., Ḥanafis, Mālikīs, and Shāfi'īs) where Ash'arī and Māturīdī influence prevailed held that one only becomes an unbeliever when he/she abandons the prayer because he/she believes that it is not compulsory.

Perhaps the most absurd accusation Akyol makes against Ash'arīs is his statement, without evidence, "On top of all this nexus between Islamic theology and Muslim politics, there is one more layer to add: Ash'arism didn't merely justify earthly despots. It also projected, arguably, the traits of those earthly despots on God" (152). He also says, "Ash'aris referred to earthly despots also to illustrate occasionalism—that there are no laws of nature but only the 'habits' of God" (153).

10 Al-Qādir bi-Llāh, *al-Itiqād al-qādirī*, compiled by Abū Ya'la al-Bayḍāwī. Available online: <https://ia903404.us.archive.org/7/items/doctrine01001/doctrine01626.pdf>, ¶¶ 19, 31–32.

11 Al-Qādir bi-Llāh, *al-Itiqād al-qādirī*, ¶ 36.

12 Al-Qādir bi-Llāh, *al-Itiqād al-qādirī*, ¶ 51.

We might be inclined to ignore such absurdities had Akyol's work not received the endorsement of prominent Muslim academics. The truth about Ash'arī political ideology can be easily apprehended from Ash'arī theological manuals, in which such idolatrous comparisons asserted by Akyol and his ilk are nowhere to be found. We can find an emphasis on the importance of compliance with the "valid" commands of governors and overseers; this simply reflects the divine command in the Qur'ān, "Obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you" (Q 4:59). Again, who knows more about what God expects from us than God? "Say: Are you more knowing or is God?" (Q 2:140). The Sunnī viewpoint emphasizes the public interest, the preservation of life, and does assign greater moral value to the lives of Muslim citizens. These accommodationist politics conform with the goals of the *sharī'a* that Akyol seems to admire.

In chapter 10, entitled "Back to Mecca," Akyol asserts that prior to Ash'arī ascendancy, Islam was a more universalistic religion and Mecca was a cosmopolitan pseudo-paradise. None of this is supported by the Qur'ān or the historic record: The Qur'ān expelled idolaters from the city "... the idolaters are unclean, so let them not approach al-Masjid al-Ḥarām after this, their [final] year" (Q 9:28); The Prophet Muḥammad smashed the idols worshipped in the Ka'ba on the day of the Meccan conquest. Akyol anachronistically asserts that Islam was a philosophical precursor to Western Enlightenment. In this sense, he shares the nostalgia, not the vision, of today's Islamists. However, unlike them, he is disingenuous about his desire for a return to communalism. Consequently, he expects "Muslims" to "reopen" their minds to "reason, freedom, and tolerance"? It would seem that if Islam is universal for everyone, without any distinction between one person or another, that a book like Akyol's would be unnecessary.

Perhaps, Akyol's argument related to freedom and tolerance, discussed in his concluding chapters, is the most persuasive. Yet even these chapters contain multiple factual errors in his reports on the opinions of Muslim jurists. That notwithstanding, I share his caution about accusations of unbelief (*takfīr*), especially when these accusations are used to justify sectarian bloodshed and executions. Akyol says, "Any attempt at religious policing is nothing other than the imposition of the

Islam of whomever has power in any given territory. What is imposed is not ‘God’s law,’ in other words, but the law of Wahhabi clerics, Shiite ayatollahs, or Shafi’i jurists” (192).

This point cannot be overemphasized, since *takfir* carries with it a threat of violence by vigilantes or state action. This is not to say that the state has no right to regulate and enforce the mores of its citizens. The problem is that *takfir* has been used by the ruling elite to silence its opponents and this has led to unjust executions.

After berating Sunnis and extolling the virtues of the Mu‘tazilis and their intellectual heirs among the Shi‘a once again (219) and listing some of the atrocities that have unfolded as a result of ideological intolerance in Muslim lands, Akyol states, “The self-righteous zealotry here is not just about judging ‘acts’ in order to question ‘faith.’ It is also about classifying the faith itself into one true branch versus many heresies” (220). Rather, the problem is the belief that dissenters and heretics must be killed. There is absolutely nothing wrong with upholding and promoting a theological orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Isn’t that precisely what Akyol is fighting for when he speaks of formulating an objective morality based upon natural law? Isn’t his appeal to have Muslims reopen their minds and return to reason, freedom, and tolerance a call to promote his vision of Islamic orthodoxy? Why else direct this call to Muslims when the claim is that Islam’s message is universal for all humans with no concern for the “community”?

While I agree that what is called “apostasy” needs to be reimagined and redefined according to its proper historical application, I cannot bring myself to support Akyol’s radical reevaluation of the *shari‘a*, because his reevaluation results in the cancelation of many commandments endorsed by the Qur’an and the Sunna of the Prophet Muḥammad.

With respect to tolerance, it is not clear why Akyol takes aim at Islam’s “big tent” theological school. The Ash‘aris have been the most inclusive of all theological schools that uphold the *shari‘a* as conveyed in the Qur’an. Historically, both Kharijīs and Shi‘īs have denied Sunnis the right to claim true faith. For Kharijīs, this is because Sunnis believe that committing a major sin does not make a person an apostate. For Shi‘īs, it is because Sunnis do not embrace the doctrine of the infallible

Imam. Despite this, from the earliest period of Islam, Sunnī/Ash‘arīs accepted the validity of Kharijī and Shī‘ī claims of faith. Even Murtaḍā al-Muṭahharī (1919–79) tried his best to craft an argument to validate the Sunnī claim to Islam according to Shī‘ī doctrine. Akyol believes that the teachings about tolerance which refuse to impute unbelief to Muslims who commit major sins originated with the Murjī. In fact, this tolerance is an Ash‘arī doctrine, that is, a doctrine of the very people he believes are responsible for Islam’s civilizational demise. Imām al-Ṭahāwī’s creed properly represents Sunnī belief in general (this includes Sunnī Ash‘arīs and Māturīdīs, and Ḥanbalīs). Al-Ṭahāwī states, “We do not ascribe to unbelief any one from the People of the Qiblah due to sin as long as he does not deem it to be lawful.”¹³

Lastly, to disabuse us of the notion that occasionalist beliefs necessarily lead to inaction and decline, consider the following: Once a man asked Prophet Muḥammad, “O Messenger of God! Should I release my camel and put trust [in God] or should I tie it and put my trust [in Him]?” The Prophet responded, “Tie it and then trust [in God].” Akyol’s thesis that Ash‘arī occasionalism led to an abandonment of scientific discovery and innovation misapprehends what it means to have a “belief,” just as it misunderstands the fact that not every belief places a practical expectation upon a person. The belief that heaven exists might motivate a person to work diligently to reach heaven after death, but a belief that the angel of death is called Izrā‘īl does nothing to prevent death when it comes. Believing that God is the agent who materializes human actions from the realm of non-existence does not lead to binding fatalistic consequence on human will, aspiration, or ambition. The human being has no knowledge of what God plans for him. He only knows what God will create once his will moves to effectuate his will in God’s dominion. “And you do not will except that God wills...” (Q 81:29). Akyol misses this subtlety, as the accomplished Ash‘arī, al-Buti said,

The proofs that clarify the baselessness of the Mu‘tazilī view are: First, (1) just as God is the creator of the actions issuing from agents and creator of all other things, He is

13 Al-Qādir bi-Llāh, *al-Itiqād al-qādirī*, ¶ 57.

the creator of whatever may be characterized as good and evil. This means that the essence of a thing differs from its attribute. And an attribute is not a part of the essence or quiddity in any case since had it been thus, the distinction between the essence and attribute and the essences of things and their contingencies would be void; Second, (2) once it is established that God is the creator of all actions and the creator of their attributes of beauty and ugliness or good and evil, there is no doubt that the characterization of beauty and ugliness have thereby become a contingent matter, i.e., they are liable to removal, survival, and change from one to another state. And the only one intervening into that is God, Mighty and Majestic.¹⁴

He further says,

Hence, the upholders of the prophetic way and the collective (Sunnīs) have unanimously agreed upon the fact that the attribute of beauty or ugliness in acts and behaviors is a description that presents itself from outside the essence of those acts... And that regardless of that external source, be it nature and temperament or the effects and results of unmediated reason. Similarly, the upholders of the prophetic way and the collective have unanimously agreed upon the fact that this contingent description, whatever it may be and whatever its source, does not constitute a scriptural judgment from God, Mighty and Majestic, i.e., without relying upon divine revelation from Him, Glorified and Exalted. Rather, in order for the ruling to constitute scripture upon which reward and punishment are premised, [that ruling] must rely upon the report of a messenger or prophet who conveys that report from God, Mighty and Majestic. And that is because of the many preceding reasons and explanations.¹⁵

14 Al-Buṭī, *al-Insān musayyar am mukhayyar?*, 166–167.

15 Al-Buṭī, *al-Insān musayyar am mukhayyar?*, 177–178.

Conclusion

While voluntarism, fideism, and occasionalism are theological and legal theories, Akyol demands that his reader blindly accept each of them in their secular manifestations. Readers are expected to uncritically embrace Western philosophical assumptions regarding humanism, individualism, and autonomy. These assumptions are not scrutinized. Rather, they are made the criterion for determining authentic civilizational progress. Among Akyol's many claims, the most significant one holds that reason, science, and freedom were eclipsed under the theological dominance of the Ash'arīs. And while he insists that Ash'arīs did not embrace secondary causation as a theological and scientific fact, he applies his own occasionalist theory in claims against the majority of Muslims without proving any causal link. That is, Ash'arīs are obligated to extrapolate cause, reason, and wisdom to explain all of God's commandments, but somehow, Akyol is not required to disclose a clear causal link between Muslim decline and Ash'arī influence. In conclusion, *Reopening Muslim Minds* fails in its stated claims and can only persuade uninformed readers. If Akyol's overly general reference to "Muslim minds" is meant to refer to the minds of Ash'arīs, no "reopening" is needed because their minds have not been closed.