

Book Review: Why Muslims Lag Behind Their Western Counterparts

Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance.

Mustafa Akyol. St. Martin's Essentials (2021)

A'an Suryana

Faculty of Social Sciences,

Universitas Islam International Indonesia (UIII), Indonesia

Visiting Fellow at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

E-mail: aan.suryana@uiii.ac.id

This book explains why Muslims lag behind their Western counterparts, arguing that Muslim backwardness is due to deep-seated religious discourses that are detrimental to Muslim progress. These adverse discourses, such as anti-science stances, narrow views on jihad, and ongoing discrimination against women, are prevalent in many Muslim countries because they are sustained not only by religious authorities but also political ones. This results in mainstream practices of Islam that hinder development, such as the failure of Muslim societies in promoting common sense and reason that are crucial in spurring, for example, social and economic innovations that support progress.

To address this problem, **Mustafa Akyol's** *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance* argues that reforms are needed to counter these adverse traditions in Muslim countries. Although mainstream traditions should not be suppressed, Muslims must allow for the diversity of ideas to flourish, so that different camps of Muslims can learn from each other and refine their respective views and beliefs. Akyol argues that some oft side-lined ideas and visions are important to ensure the presence of healthy debates among different camps of Islam, which he hopes can contribute to progress in Muslim countries. For example, the **Murji'a vision** can give a basis for Muslim scholars to co-exist with their differences, by leaving the ultimate verdicts to God, while the **Mu'tazila vision** reminds all Muslim scholars that "God blessed us with not just revelation but also reason". The book also argues in favour of a key role of *falasifa* (philosophy) because

it encourages Muslim scholars “to be open to all the intellectual achievements in humanity” in that Muslims also need to study discoveries by intellectuals and scientists from non-Muslim civilizations, including Western ones.

This is a gripping book. Akyol provides strong evidence in some areas where he believes the wrong interpretations and practices of Islam have obstructed progress, such as the loss of reason and discrimination against women. He argues that reason is particularly important because freedom in using it encourages discovery, which is crucial for human progress. The author demonstrates that Muslims were once more advanced in science than other civilizations when freedom in using reason flourished in Muslim civilizations. Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī wrote an important book in AD 825 that contributed to the systematized study of algebra and algorithms. Muslim physicians found how blood circulation works. But this progress stalled, and Muslim civilizations even started to go backwards after adverse religious discourses, such as Ash’arite doctrine, killed progress. Ash’arite doctrine promotes ‘occasionalism’, which means that God creates and re-creates things as He pleases without reason. This argument is in line with another Ash’arite doctrine on predestination. This ‘occasionalism’ discourages Muslims to seek for new findings in science, among other fields, for the fear that they will be labelled apostates. As result, Muslims nowadays contribute little to progress in the world’s science.

On the role of women in public affairs, Akyol shows that several Muslim countries, including Afghanistan, “still keep downgrading their women”. This practice slows progress because it results in the significantly lower contribution of women to the economy of Muslim countries. Although some progressive Muslim scholars, including thinker Ibn Rushd, have criticized this practice, this reform-minded idea has largely failed to resonate in Muslim countries due to opposition from mainstream Islamic authorities that tend to strengthen orthodoxy. The author’s evidence on the absence of reason among Muslims and the discrimination of women in Muslim countries are just two among several factors that he argues have contributed to Muslim countries’ current backwardness. Others include incorrect interpretations of jihad, the lack of freedom of expression, the lack of respect for human rights, and the lack of tolerance of people with different ideas or beliefs.

This book aims to reach a global audience, hence it tends to be overarching. It tends to generalize phenomena, giving much reference to the often medieval

practices of Muslims in the Middle East. Thus, this book fails to take into account progress that Muslims have made in promoting, for example, the rights of women in countries outside the Middle East. Akyol discusses hindrances that Muslim women face in travel, while in fact Muslim women in many countries, including in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey, no longer face such problems.

Reopening Muslims Minds is a semi-academic book. Hence, it does not discuss narrow topics as academicians would probably expect. It is also less rigorous in comparison to academic books in the discipline of political science or sociology. However, it is still worthwhile reading given the excellent capacity of its author in persuading readers on the factors that lead to the prevailing “crisis in Islam.”