

Cato scholar offers personal statement on faith and freedom

The Muslim Case for Liberty

Cato senior fellow Mustafa Akyol is one of the world's most widely recognized scholars on issues of freedom and tolerance in the Muslim world, with a column in the *New York Times* and previous books that have been banned by several authoritarian governments. Once, he was even detained by Malaysia's religious police on charges of violating that nation's religious censorship.

In a new book for *Libertarianism.org*, *Why, as a Muslim, I Defend Liberty*, Akyol explores both his own faith and the history of Islamic thought to make the case for freedom. Muslims currently account for more than one in four people on Earth, and most Muslim-majority nations suffer under repressive illiberal regimes, many of which are grounded in a belief in Islamic theocracy.

But it wasn't always this way. During the Middle Ages, liberal thinking and scientific innovation thrived in the Muslim world, while Europe stagnated under feudalism and illiberal religious authoritarianism. Even throughout the 19th century, liberal reformers were a prominent presence in the politics of nations such as the Ottoman Empire and Iran. One of the ironies Akyol notes is that Islamic fundamentalism, far from being ancient, is to a large degree a modern phenomenon, in many instances fueled by anti-Western and anti-colonial backlash.

Across eight chapters, Akyol addresses the need for liberty across the entire spectrum of personal and economic freedoms and takes on misconceptions that Islam is inherently intolerant and oppressive. First, he addresses the misconception that forced conversion and piety enforced by the states are Quranic mandates. He points to the much stronger scriptural case against such laws, citing the verse "There is no compulsion in religion." (2:256)

Akyol further addresses the need to update conceptions of sharia, or Islamic jurisprudence, with the understanding that medieval precedents need not be taken as binding or among the core principles of the faith as outlined in the Quran. Another chapter takes on the case for tolerance of non-Islamic speech, even when it is seen as blasphemous or profane, a key issue in contemporary politics in the Muslim world.

The book also traces the history of a Muslim case for economic liberty and makes the case for reclaiming a heritage of free markets and property rights in Muslim societies. Lastly, he addresses the widespread misconception among Muslims that liberty and democracy are Western conspiracies or impositions rather than being grounded in universal truths.

As the Muslim world continues to grapple with the scourge of authoritarianism, Akyol offers a glimpse of a better future, one where rights are respected and moral and material progress can be made without any need to jettison faith in one of the world's great religions. ■

WHY, AS A MUSLIM, I DEFEND LIBERTY IS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE FROM MAJOR BOOKSELLERS AND AT [CATO.ORG/BOOKS](https://www.cato.org/books).

Cato News Notes

THE ROAD TO THE BENCH

Clark Neily, senior vice president for legal studies, testified in March before the House Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on courts about his research into the back-



ground experience of federal judges and the overrepresentation of former prosecutors and other advocates for

the government. His study on this problem was also cited in a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing by its chairman, Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL). In May, President Biden notably nominated three former public defenders to serve as federal appellate judges.

RECOMMENDED READING

The *Financial Times* included *Economics in One Virus: An Introduction to Economic Reasoning through COVID-19*, by Ryan Bourne, R. Evan Scharf Chair for the Public Understanding of Economics at Cato, on its recommended summer reading list, compiled by Martin Wolf, the magazine's chief economics commentator.

ISLAMIC FREEDOM

Cato senior fellow Mustafa Akyol, whose work focuses on freedom in the Muslim world, was selected by the UK's *Prospect Magazine* as one of "The World's Top 50 Thinkers"—alongside Chinese entrepreneur Zhang Yiming, American entrepreneur Elon Musk, and Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.