



## LIBERTY WAS ISLAM'S FIRST CALL

*This month's Liberty Matters is another in our occasional series in which we ask notable thought leaders what liberty means to them. In this edition, [Mustafa Akyol](#) reflects on the relationship between liberty and Islam, posing some critical questions about Islam's history which to date have been little considered- by Muslims or others. For example, was the marriage between Islam and the state unavoidable? And even more critical, What was the first political principle that Islam called for? For Akyol, the answer is simple. Liberty.*

### LIBERTY WAS ISLAM'S FIRST CALL

by Mustafa Akyol

As we Muslims believe, some world-changing story began in the Arabian city of Mecca in the year 610 CE. [Muhammad ibn Abdullah](#), a prominent merchant and trusted notable of the town, began hearing angelic voices, which first shocked him to his core, but soon convinced him of a mission: God had chosen him as a messenger to his people, to warn them against the idols that filled Mecca's ancient pantheon, the Kaaba. All these man-made deities were false gods, Muhammad was told to preach, while there was only one true god: the God of Abraham, which Arabs also knew as *Allah*, or "The God."

In the first three years of his mission, Prophet Muhammad carried out this monotheist campaign secretly, gaining converts from first his family, beginning with his wife Khadija, as well as close friends and relatives. Then, when they were about some thirty "believers," a new revelation told the Prophet to go public: "So proclaim openly what you have been commanded, and ignore the idolaters."<sup>1</sup>

Yet the idolaters themselves would not ignore this challenge. The open proclamation of the new religion soon brought on it an age-old trouble: religious

persecution. The prominent members of Quraysh, Mecca's ruling tribe, first tried to convince Muhammad to give up his uncompromising preaching. But when the latter didn't give in, they began punishing his followers.

Their first victim was Sumayyah bint Khabbat, a female slave who had been the seventh convert to Islam. In 615, she was tortured to death by her owner, Amr ibn Hisham, who would go down in Islamic history as an archenemy called Abu Jahl, or "Father of Ignorance." Another slave, Bilal ibn Rabah, the black Ethiopian who would later be the first person to recite the call to prayer, was also

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tortured. Free people from powerful tribes, including the prophet himself, were protected from such wanton violence, but none of them felt safe. Hence the most vulnerable fled to Ethiopia, whose Christian king was seen as — and would prove to be — a savior. Those who remained faced a boycott, cutting them off from all business and marriage ties. In one instance, a group of idolaters even came close to lynching the Prophet, as his

close companion Abu Bakr cried: “Woe to you! Do you slay a man just for he says that my Lord is Allah?” [\[ii\]](#)

Finally, in 622, Meccan tribes united for a plot to assassinate Muhammad, which is why he finally fled his hometown. This was his historic *hijra*, or emigration, to Medina, a city in which Islam would establish a political order and a military force — an “Islamic state,” as some Muslims today see it.

So far, all this is a story well known by most Muslims, and others who have examined the birth of Islam. But there are two questions that have not been pondered enough.

The first is: what was it about Islam that alarmed the Quraysh so much? Were the tiny group of Muslims threatening their security by acts of violence? Were they building a militia to conquer the city by force? Or were they asking from Mecca to accept Muhammad as its ruler?

#### A Non-Coercive ‘Warner’



The answer to the queries above must be clearly negative, as we understand from the Qur’an — the “Recitation” that is made up of all the verses the Prophet received in his 23-year-long mission. These verses rather show that the new faith propagated by Muhammad was emphatically non-violent and non-coercive. Muslims were preaching monotheism and defying the idols as false gods, but they were not attempting to win anyone by force. An early Meccan revelation made it quite clear that Islam just asked for a space for itself:

*O unbelievers: I do not worship what you worship, [and] you do not worship what I worship... You have your religion and I have mine.* [\[iii\]](#)

Another Meccan verse declared a similar principle of non-coercion:

Now the truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so. [\[iv\]](#)

The rest of the verse above, like various others passages in the Qur’an, threatened unbelievers with hellfire, or supernatural disasters, but not with any earthly punishment by Muslims themselves. Because only God had the authority to punish people for their disbelief. Muhammad himself was only a “warner” — a term repeated more than twenty times in the Qur’an — as well as a “witness,” and a “bearer of good news.” [\[v\]](#)

One of the prominent Western experts of early Islam, the late Montgomery Watt, had stressed this point in his seminal book, *Muhammad at Mecca*. The Meccan Qur’an, he observed,

insists again and again that [Muhammad] is only a warner. His function is simply to warn people that there is a Judgement followed by eternal reward or punishment. How they respond to the warning is their own responsibility; they have been warned! In one passage it is expressly stated that Muhammad is not a musaytir, that is, a person who has some sort of control over other people. [\[vi\]](#)

The Qur’an even offered a theological rationale to this preach-but-let-live attitude. “Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed,” as a verse told the Prophet, “so can you compel people to believe?” [\[vii\]](#) This point was repeatedly made by God to curb His own messenger’s passion to convert the people of Mecca: “God could bring them all to guidance if it were His will, so do not join the ignorant.” [\[viii\]](#) Yes, the idol worshippers of Mecca were in deep error, but, “if it had been God’s will, they would not have done so.” [\[ix\]](#)

The Qur’an even embraced the “turn the other cheek” attitude of Jesus of Nazareth, which is reported in the [New Testament](#), but often criticized by contemporary Islamists as too meek. [\[x\]](#) “Repel evil with

what is better,” a verse advised, “and your enemy will become as close as a warm friend.”<sup>[xi]</sup>

In other words, in Mecca, nascent Islam was a theologically ambitious but politically peaceful movement. The first Muslims, to draw an analogy, were like religious preachers in modern-day open societies who show up in the public space to proclaim, “Fear God,” “The End is Near,” or “Repent.” They were also condemning societal evils such as infanticide, the exploitation of orphans, or the mistreatment of women and slaves. But they were not doing anything more than that.

So, what was the problem? Why did polytheist Mecca not tolerate peaceful Islam?

### A Trouble with Offense

For long, some have found an answer in the economy, arguing that nascent Islam threatened Meccan trade, which benefited from pilgrimage to the Kaaba. But the Quraysh’s own accounts suggests nothing of that sort, as a contemporary scholar of early Islam, Gabriel Said Reynolds, notes. With reference to both Islamic and non-Islamic sources, Reynolds gives a different answer: that the real issue was “not Meccan trade, but Meccan pride.”<sup>[xii]</sup>

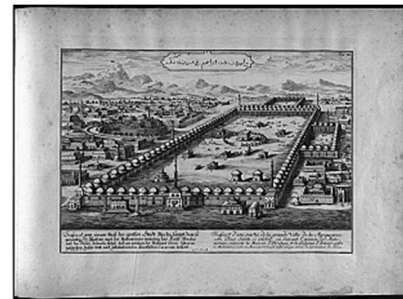
That is because Muhammad and his believers were offending that pride by defying both the Arab gods and the much-revered Arab forefathers who worshipped them. One of the early revelations named the three major Arab idols — al-Lat, al-Uzza and Manat — only to assert, “These are nothing but names you have invented yourselves, you and your forefathers.”<sup>[xiii]</sup> Another verse, quoting Abraham, declared: “You and your fathers are in manifest error.”<sup>[xiv]</sup>

For the conservative notables of Quraysh, these were unacceptable insults, as they made clear: “We cannot endure that our fathers should be reviled, our customs mocked and our gods insulted.”<sup>[xv]</sup> Early Muslim historian Ibn Ishaq, who quotes that statement, also reports the ultimatum the Meccan notables gave to Abu Talib, the powerful uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, who protected his nephew as much as he could:

Your nephew has cursed our gods, insulted our religion, mocked our way of life, and accused our forefathers of error; either you must stop him or you must let us get at him.<sup>[xvi]</sup>

The same point would be made centuries later also by Imam [Al-Ghazali](#) (d. 1111), the towering theologian of Sunni Islam. The polytheists of Mecca attacked the Prophet saying, “Is it you who say so and so?,” Al-Ghazali noted, because of “his disgracing their gods and abusing their religion.”<sup>[xvii]</sup>

So, we can say that, in today’s terms, early Islam was guilty of “offensive speech” and “blasphemy,” that Mecca could not tolerate. (And what an irony, we can add, today quite a few Muslims also [cannot tolerate](#) “offensive speech” and “blasphemy.”)



### What if Mecca was tolerant?

Now, let’s come to the second question about early Islam, which also has not been much pondered, by Muslims or others: What would have happened if Meccans were civilized enough to accept the Qur’an’s sensible call: “To you your religion, and to me mine”?

Only God would know. But it is a fair guess that the mission of the Prophet, and the content of the [Qur’an](#) which guided this mission interactively, would be quite different than what we know today. Because if the Meccans tolerated Islam, there would be no hijra to Medina. Prophet Muhammad and his followers would continue to live in Mecca, to practice and preach their faith, without being a “guardian” over others. Probably, the appeal of monotheism, and the moral imperative of the Qur’an, would attract more and more people, and Islam would gradually grow, perhaps to ultimately win over the whole city. But this would be a

totally peaceful conquest — just like Christianity’s gradual conquest of Rome. Therefore, there would be no battles between Muslims and Meccan polytheists and the latter’s allies. Not being the founders of any state, Muslims would not have needed much legislation, either.

Surely, history followed a different route. Muslims, fleeing Mecca, established an armed polity in Medina. The polytheist hostility, which included plundering the homes and properties of the Muslims they expelled, initiated a decade of war. There were many “raids” against or battles with the Meccan polytheists and their shifting allies, including the armed (yet largely bloodless) conquest of Mecca in 630. There was even a conflict with forces of the Byzantine Empire. The short version of the long story is that Muslims had founded an armed state, and they kept fighting for its survival, doing whatever was “necessary if the Islamic state was to survive.”<sup>[xviii]</sup>

### The Marriage with the State

Then, after the Prophet’s passing in 632, Muslims elected a “successor,” or caliph, Abu Bakr (d. 634), who continued the armed struggle to suppress revolts and secure the nascent Islamic state. Caliphs who followed him began conquering new lands in historical Syria, Iraq, Egypt and beyond. In a century, Muslims established a huge empire, stretching from Spain to India.

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In the meantime, Islam became, in the words of Pakistani intellectual Shabbir Akhtar, “an imperial faith rooted in a tradition of legal coercion.”<sup>[xix]</sup> It was a legal coercion that flogged Muslims for drinking wine or giving up prayer, executed “apostates” or “blasphemers,” and preached obedience to Muslim rulers who implemented such practices that jurists defined as parts of the Sharia, i.e., Islamic law. The system also tolerated most non-

Muslims, but only as subdued communities with lesser rights.

Moreover, many Muslims saw this marriage between religion with state as a divinely preordained destiny, which made Islam blessedly special. “Because religion, kingship and ruling were combined to our Prophet Muhammad, he was the best of all the Prophets,” wrote al-Ghazali. “Sword and kingship were given to none other than him from among the Prophets.”<sup>[xx]</sup>

But wait... Was the Prophet not only a “warner,” and not a musaytir, a person with power over people? What happened to that civil Qur’anic teaching in Mecca?

That teaching has remained in the Qur’an, and it stills inspires Muslims of the more liberal persuasion — those who believe that religion should be based on liberty, not coercion. But the coercive jurisprudence — interpretation of Sharia — that took shape under the imperial conditions bypassed that Meccan teaching with the doctrine of “abrogation.” Accordingly, later verses of the Qur’an abrogated the earlier verses, if there appeared a contradiction between them. And since the Qur’anic verses about war were all late commandments in Medina, they canceled out most of the peaceful ones from Mecca, or even “early Medina.”

Possibly the most dramatic abrogating verses were two “verses of the sword” in “Repentance,” one of the very last chapters of the Qur’an, which reflected the harsh peak of a prolonged war with the polytheists and other hostile groups among “the People of the Book,” meaning Jews and Christians. The first verse, 9:5, gave Arab polytheists two options: either convert, or be fought.<sup>[xxi]</sup> The second one, 9:29, gave “People of the Book” three options: either convert, or be fought, or accept Islamic supremacy by paying tribute.<sup>[xxii]</sup>

Notably, these verses could be taken as limited commandments against those who attacked or betrayed Muslims in the first place. But, instead, they were taken as the basis of Islam’s relationship with all other religions. It is with this doctrine that Muslim empires kept conquering new lands and establishing Islamic supremacy over non-Muslims.

By the standards of that pre-modern age, there was nothing unusual in this Islamic imperialism, because that is what virtually everybody did at the time. Christianity had long been transformed by the “Constantinian revolution” and its “marriage of empire and monotheism,” which similarly employed “state power to promote right belief and purge wrong belief.”<sup>[xxiii]</sup> The Sasanian Empire of Persia, whose political culture seems to have influenced that of Islam, also saw “kingship and religion” as “twins.”<sup>[xxiv]</sup> In fact, compared to other Empires, Muslims ones were often more tolerant, as they allowed Jews and Christians to preserve their faith. No wonder Jews at times fled Christendom, including 15th century Catholic Spain, to Islamic lands such as the Ottoman Empire, where they found incomparably more religious freedom.



Yet the world changed dramatically in the past few centuries. The Constantinian Revolution in Christianity was pushed back by the [John Locke](#) revolution, which redefined the mission of the state as the protection of natural rights, not the saving of souls — and the suppression of heretics. This liberal philosophy first transformed Christendom — ending its long history of religious wars and persecutions — then the broader world with “universal human rights.” These included values such as that nobody should be compelled to practice a religion, nor should not be punished for being its “infidel.” Or that everybody should be equal before the law, regardless of faith or gender.

Today, the great trouble in the Islamic civilization is that this liberal evolution in the world is categorically rejected by a wide range of strict conservatives and Islamists. They are loyal to the medieval imperial jurisprudence, seeing it as God-given and eternally valid, while also embracing the modern centralized state and its sweeping powers, creating a deadly mix. (The educated among them sometimes borrow from post-modernism, and its cultural relativism, to justify their rejection of “Western liberalism.”) The most strident among them — such as the Taliban — also take up arms, to establish theocratic states where they will impose their view of Islam on everybody, to be musaytirs over them.

### From Mecca to Today

The better news is that since the late 19th century there emerged Muslim reformists, broadly called “Islamic modernists,” who have challenged this orthodoxy within. One of them was the Egyptian scholar Abd al-Raziq who wrote a book in 1925 challenging the religious belief in the caliphate. He insisted that Islam is “a religion, not a state; a message, not a government” — only to face heated reactions.<sup>[xxv]</sup> Since then various Muslim modernists questioned key doctrines of the traditional jurisprudence, such abrogation within the Qur’an, the authenticity of canonized hadiths (reported sayings of the Prophet) which really are the main sources of religious coercion, and the much-downplayed epistemological authority of reason. Some also rightly noted that the modern context, including the nature of the modern state, is remarkably different from the pre-modern context in which Islam developed.

A summary of Islamic modernism would take volumes, but I believe much can be elucidated by going back to the very birth of Islam, and asking a simple question:

What was the first political principle that Islam called for?

The Meccan Qur’an, as I argued above, suggests a significant answer:

The first political principle that Islam called for was liberty — the liberty to preach and practice one’s own beliefs. All the later drama — hijra, raids, battles,

conquests, and ultimately empires — came because this liberty was not granted in the first place.

Islam’s marriage with the state, in other words, was not a divinely preordained destiny but a historical contingency.

Therefore, today, in a radically different historical context, where liberty is already established as a universal principle, Muslims should not seek “Islamic” states anymore — which, in fact, always prove to be the tyranny of a particular Muslim group over others, let alone non-Muslims.

What Muslims should rather seek is the global advance of liberty, so what Islam called for in Mecca in the early 7th century can flourish everywhere, for everyone, in the modern world.

[i] Quran, 15:94

[ii] Narrated by Al-Ghazali in his *Revival of The Religious Sciences*, vol. 2, p. 585

[iii] Qur’an, 109: 1-3, 6

[iv] Qur’an, 18:29

[v] See: Qur’an, 2:119, 7:188, 11:12, 13:17, 15:89, 22:49, 26:115, 27:92, 28:46, 29:50, 33:45, 34:28, 35:23, 35:24, 38:65, 37:80, 41:4, 46:9, 48:8, 50:2, 53:56, 67:26, 79:85

[vi] Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 130

[vii] Qur’an, 10:99

[viii] Quran, 6:35

[ix] Qur’an, 6:107

[x] For an example, see: Hayrettin Karaman, “Sol Yanağını mı Çevireceksin?” [Will You Turn the Left Cheek], *Yeni Şafak*, October 12, 2012

[xi] Qur’an, 41:34

[xii] Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (Fortress Press, 2012), p. 23

[xiii] Qur’an, 53:19-23

[xiv] Qur’an, 21:54

[xv] A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 119

[xvi] Ibid.

[xvii] Imam Abu Hamed Al-Ghazali, *Revival of The Religious Sciences*, (trans. Mohammad Mahdi al-Sharif) Beirut: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, 2011, vol. 2, p. 585

[xviii] Fred Donner argues that from all the battles of Prophet Muhammad, one can not infer an intention of conquest beyond Arabia, but one can map out a strategy for survival. (Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 102.)

[xix] Shabir Akhtar, *Islam as Political Religion: The Future of an Imperial Faith* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 221.

[xx] Imam Abu Hamed Al-Ghazali, *Revival of The Religious Sciences*, (trans. Mohammad Mahdi al-Sharif) Beirut: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, 2011, vol. 4, p. 154

[xxi] The verse 9:5 reads: “When the [four] forbidden months are over, wherever you encounter the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every lookout post; but if they turn [to God], maintain the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, let them go on their way, for God is most forgiving and merciful.”

[xxii] The verse 9:29 reads: “Fight those of the People of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice, until they pay the tax and agree to submit.”

[xxiii] The description of the “Constantinian revolution” is from Christian C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World*, Princeton University Press, 2018 p. 23

[xxiv] Sherko Kirmanj, “Challenging the Islamist Politicization of Islam: The Non-Islamic Origins of Muslim Political Concepts,” in *Political Islam from Muhammad to Ahmadinejad: Defenders, Defractors, and Definitions*. (Joseph Morrison Skelly ed), Praeger Security International, Santa Barbara, CA, 2009. P. 42

[xxv] The name of Raziq's book was *al-Islam wa 'Usul al-Hukm* (Islam and the Principles of Governance) and its main thesis was that the caliphate is a historical institution, not a requirement of Islam. The phrase, "a religion, not a state" is repeatedly used in the book, and has become the title of a book about Raziq: Ali, Souad Tagelsir, *A Religion, Not a State: Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's Islamic Justification of Political Secularism*, The University of Utah Press, 2009.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Mustafa Akyol](#) is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, where he focuses on the intersection of public policy, Islam, and modernity. Since 2013, he has also been a frequent opinion writer for the New York Times, covering politics and religion in the Muslim world. He is the author several books, including: *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance* (2021), *Why, As a Muslim, I Defend Liberty* (2021), *The Islamic Jesus: How the King of the Jews Became a Prophet of the Muslims* (2017), and *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty* (2011). His books have been translated into many languages, and praised in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, The Economist, Financial Times, and many publications across the Muslim world. Meanwhile, *Islam without Extremes* was banned in Malaysia, for challenging the authority of the "religion police." "The Thinking Muslim," a popular podcast, recently defined Akyol as "probably the most notable Muslim modernist and reformer." And in July 2021, the Prospect Magazine of the UK listed him among "The world's top 50 thinkers."

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