



The Role of Rationality and Reason: A Critical Study of the Thought of Mustafa Akyol

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Abstract

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In response to the challenges of modernity in the Muslim world, Mustafa Akyol, a prominent intellectual, has called for a revival of rationalism within Islam. This study offers a critical analysis of his intellectual vision. Two of Akyol's works, *Reopening Muslim Minds* and *Islam Without Extremes*, are examined in this article using a qualitative literature review method with a historical-philosophical analytical approach. The study situates Akyol's ideas within the broader trajectory of rationalism, tracing its development from classical Islamic theology (the Mu'tazilites and Ibn Rushd), Greek philosophy, and the Western Enlightenment. The findings indicate that while Akyol successfully revitalizes discourse on the importance of reason, freedom, and tolerance in Islam through a compelling and accessible narrative, his thesis contains several fundamental weaknesses. These include historical reductionism in portraying the theological contestation between the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites, misrepresentation of Ash'arite theological doctrines—one of his primary targets of critique—and a tendency toward uncritical acceptance of classical liberal frameworks. Critical analysis further reveals that Akyol's failure to operate within an epistemological framework recognized by orthodox Islamic tradition renders his reform project less persuasive for the very audience he seeks to engage. The article concludes that Akyol's most significant contribution lies in his role as a catalyst for public discourse; however, the effectiveness and diagnostic accuracy of his work as a coherent project of theological reform remain highly debatable.

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to present a critical examination of the intellectual project of Mustafa Akyol, a Turkish journalist and public intellectual who consistently advocates the urgency of reviving rationalism within Islam. Through a historical-philosophical approach, this research seeks to evaluate the effectiveness and accuracy of Akyol's diagnosis regarding the compatibility of Islamic teachings with the values of classical liberalism, such as reason, freedom, and tolerance. Furthermore, this study investigates the extent to which Akyol's proposed "Islamic Enlightenment" offers concrete solutions to the crisis of modernity in the Muslim world without compromising the integrity of core Islamic values.

The research problem centers on the epistemological and historical validity of Akyol's central theses. First, it questions whether Akyol's diagnosis of "the closing of Muslim minds" is grounded in an accurate reading of history or instead reflects a simplification of the complex dialectic between Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite theology. Second, it examines how methodological weaknesses in Akyol's works—particularly his reliance on sharp theological binaries—affect the reception of his ideas among orthodox religious authorities, who are in fact his intended audience. Finally, this study interrogates whether his proposed reform represents an authentic internal enlightenment within the Islamic tradition or merely an externally imposed interpretation shaped by Western liberal frameworks.

In his argument, Mustafa Akyol contends that the contemporary Muslim world is trapped in stagnation due to the dominance of a voluntaristic theological paradigm that has marginalized the role of reason since the medieval period. He asserts that the decline of Islamic civilization is not caused by religion itself, but rather by the triumph of dogmatic paradigms that restrict free will and scientific inquiry. Through works such as *Reopening Muslim Minds*, Akyol calls for a revival of rationalist traditions by revisiting the thought of figures such as Ibn Rushd, while emphasizing the principle of "no compulsion in religion" as a foundation for a modern and democratic Muslim society (Akyol, 2011, 2021).

A review of the existing literature indicates that most previous studies on Akyol have focused on legal applications or practical political implications. For instance, (Bazikh, 2024) examines Akyol's views on apostasy laws through a framework of negotiative hermeneutics, while (Amir & Rahman, 2025) emphasize the compatibility of democracy with the principle of *shura*. However, critical academic works by (Ali, 2021; Zacky & Ilyas, 2024) have begun to highlight Akyol's tendency toward historical generalization and his neglect of primary sources within traditional Islamic theology in constructing his narrative. Although these studies provide an important foundation, they leave a significant gap in terms of a deeper philosophical analysis of the nature of rationality itself.

The novelty of this research lies in its genealogical approach to rationality, which traverses multiple intellectual traditions. It does not limit itself to Islamic texts but also connects them to the metaphysical roots of Greek philosophy and the concept of reason's autonomy in the Western Enlightenment. Unlike previous studies that are largely descriptive or normatively supportive of Akyol's thesis, this research offers a critical analysis of the "unexamined modernity" underlying

his reform project. This contribution is realized through an evaluation of whether Akyol's epistemic framework genuinely resonates with the Islamic intellectual tradition or instead creates methodological barriers that hinder the acceptance of his reformist message among traditional Muslim audiences.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literature review method with a critical and historical-philosophical analytical approach. The primary sources of analysis are the works of Mustafa Akyol, with particular emphasis on *Reopening Muslim Minds* and *Islam Without Extremes*. Secondary sources encompass a broad range of books and journal articles that examine reason and rationality across intellectual traditions. The scope of the study includes tracing the genealogy of rationalism within Greek philosophy, particularly the thought of Plato and Aristotle, as well as the Western Enlightenment, with specific reference to Immanuel Kant.

Furthermore, the study explores the tradition of rationalism in classical Islamic thought, focusing on Mu'tazilite theology and the philosophy of Ibn Rushd. It also presents and analyzes Akyol's central theses, followed by a critical evaluation based on scholarly reviews and critiques from experts in Islamic studies and philosophy. Accordingly, this article seeks to provide a comprehensive, balanced, and nuanced assessment of the position and significance of Mustafa Akyol's thought within contemporary Islamic discourse.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Genealogy of Rationalism: Tracing Reason in Islamic and Western Traditions

To critically understand the intellectual project of Mustafa Akyol, it is essential to first map the historical and philosophical landscape of the concept of "rationality" itself. Akyol often employs terms such as reason, rationality, and enlightenment as if they were monolithic concepts. However, tracing their development from ancient Greece, through classical Islam, to the Western Enlightenment reveals fundamental differences in meaning, scope, and their relationship to revelation. Rationalism is not a single path, but rather a crossroads of diverse intellectual traditions.

Western philosophical tradition frequently situates debates about the sources of knowledge as its starting point. In this regard, two major Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, offer fundamentally distinct epistemological trajectories that have resonated throughout history. Plato's rationalism is idealistic and transcendental. For him, the physical world perceived through the senses is merely a realm of shadows—constantly changing and unreliable. True knowledge (*epistēmē*) can only be attained through pure reason, which grasps the "World of Forms," an eternal, universal, and perfect reality beyond the material world (Vezina, 2007; Zannat et al., 2020). Thus, for Plato, reason functions as an instrument to transcend the sensory world and attain higher truth.

In contrast, Aristotle, Plato's most distinguished student and sharpest critic, advances a more immanent and empirical approach. He rejects the notion that "Forms" exist independently of particular objects. For Aristotle, true reality

lies in individual substances within the sensory world, composed of matter (*hylē*) and form (*morphē*). Knowledge begins with observation of the physical world. Although he acknowledges the role of reason in abstracting universal concepts from sensory data, his epistemological starting point remains empirical reality (Zannat et al., 2020). This distinction—between a “heaven-oriented” rationalism (Plato) and an “earth-oriented” rationalism (Aristotle)—gave rise to two intellectual trajectories that would later be adapted and reinterpreted within Islamic philosophy.

Centuries later in Europe, the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) marked a new phase in the history of rationalism. This movement emphasized the autonomy of human reason as the ultimate authority in evaluating all claims to truth, including those derived from tradition and religious authority (Kusmawati et al., 2023; Solehah & Hairunnaja, 2008). Within this intellectual climate, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) undertook a monumental effort to reconcile rationalism with religious belief, as well as individual freedom with political authority. In his famous essay *What Is Enlightenment?*, Kant introduced a crucial distinction between the public use of reason and the private use of reason. The public use of reason refers to the freedom of individuals, particularly as scholars, to express arguments and critiques before the wider reading public; in this domain, reason must be entirely free (Abror, 2018). Conversely, the private use of reason pertains to an individual’s role within institutional or civic functions—such as a soldier, tax official, or cleric—where reason may be constrained by duty and institutional rules (Perov, 2023; Royal, 1999). This distinction is significant because it provides a model in which critical freedom of thought can coexist with social order, a framework that resonates with Akyol’s arguments regarding secular governance.

Taken together, these traditions present distinct models of rationalism. Greek rationalism is metaphysical-epistemological, seeking to understand the nature of reality independent of revealed authority (Walfajri, 2013). Enlightenment rationalism is critical-autonomous, positioning reason as the ultimate judge of truth claims while clearly separating the free public sphere from the duty-bound private sphere (Zifeng, 2022). As will be discussed, classical Islamic rationalism differs from both traditions.

Unlike Greek rationalism, which emerged from mythological contexts, rationalism in Islam developed from the outset in dialogue—and at times tension—with sacred texts believed to be divine revelation. It is fundamentally theological-hermeneutical in nature, wherein reason (*‘aql*) is understood as a divine gift essential for interpreting, understanding, and harmonizing revelation, rather than rejecting it (Ramadhana et al., 2024; Walfajri, 2013). The Qur’an itself repeatedly encourages humans to think (*ta‘aqqul*), reflect (*tafakkur*), and exercise reasoning (*i‘tibār*) (Ahemad, 2019; Tbakhi & Amr, 2008). From this foundation emerged various intellectual traditions, among which the Mu‘tazilites and Muslim philosophers—particularly Ibn Rushd—stand out for placing reason at the center of their theological and philosophical frameworks.

The Mu‘tazilites: Rational Theology and Free Will

The Mu‘tazilite school, which flourished in Basra and Baghdad between the 8th and 10th centuries, can be regarded as a pioneer of systematic speculative theology (*kalām*) in Islam (Putri et al., 2025). They are well known for their intellectual boldness in challenging established theological views and for employing logical reasoning to defend Islamic doctrine against external philosophical influences (Amir & Rahman, 2025; Khan, 2017). Their thought is encapsulated in five foundational principles known as *al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah* (The Five Principles):

1. Al-Tawḥīd (Absolute Divine Unity): The Mu‘tazilites strongly emphasized the absolute oneness of God, rejecting all forms of anthropomorphism. To preserve the purity of *tawḥīd*, they interpreted scriptural descriptions of divine attributes (such as “hand” or “face”) metaphorically (*ta’wīl*) and rejected the notion that God’s attributes exist as entities separate from His essence (Muhyidin & Nasihin, 2020).
2. Al-‘Adl (Divine Justice): This is the most fundamental principle underlying their rationalism. The Mu‘tazilites argued that God is perfectly just, and from this justice it logically follows that God cannot commit evil or compel humans to act unjustly (Muhyidin & Nasihin, 2020). A direct consequence of this principle is the doctrine of human free will (*ikhtiyār*). They maintained that human beings are the creators of their own actions—whether good or evil—and are therefore fully responsible for them. Without free will, the concepts of reward and punishment would be unjust and meaningless (Amir & Rahman, 2025; Khan, 2017).
3. Al-Wa‘d wa al-Wa‘īd (Promise and Threat): As an extension of divine justice, the Mu‘tazilites believed that God will unfailingly fulfill His promises to reward the obedient and His threats to punish sinners, without exception (Amir & Rahman, 2025).
4. Al-Manzilah bayna al-Manzilatayn (The Intermediate Position): This principle, from which the school is said to derive its name, holds that a Muslim who commits a grave sin is neither a true believer nor an unbeliever, but occupies an intermediate status as a *fāsiq* (grave sinner).
5. Al-Amr bi al-Ma‘rūf wa al-Nahy ‘an al-Munkar (Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong): This is an active principle obligating Muslims to uphold truth and justice in society, even if it entails opposing unjust rulers (Amir & Rahman, 2025).

For the Mu‘tazilites, reason serves as the primary instrument for recognizing the existence of God and for distinguishing between good and evil in a universal sense, even prior to revelation (Khan, 2017; Putri et al., 2025). Revelation, in their view, functions to confirm and further elaborate what human reason is already capable of discerning.

The Mu‘tazilites and the Mihna Inquisition

The narrative advanced by Mustafa Akyol often portrays the Mu‘tazilites as champions of rationalism who were ultimately defeated by state-backed traditionalists (Akyol, 2021). However, historical evidence presents a far more

complex—and ironic—picture. During the reign of the Abbasid caliph Al-Ma'mun (d. 833 CE), Mu'tazilite theology was adopted as an official state doctrine (Agustiansyah et al., 2023). Al-Ma'mun subsequently institutionalized an inquisition known as the Mihna (trial), in which scholars, judges, and officials were compelled to affirm one of the most controversial Mu'tazilite doctrines: that the Qur'an is created (*makhlūq*), rather than eternal (*qadīm*).

Those who refused—particularly hadith scholars led by Ahmad ibn Hanbal—were imprisoned, tortured, and in some cases executed. The Mihna, which lasted for approximately fifteen years, ultimately proved counterproductive. Rather than consolidating the dominance of rationalism, the alliance between Mu'tazilite theology and coercive state power significantly undermined their credibility in the eyes of the public. The steadfast resistance of Ibn Hanbal elevated him as a hero and martyr of Sunni orthodoxy, while the Mu'tazilites came to be perceived as an arrogant group imposing their theological views through force. The later triumph of Ash'arite theology—founded by the former Mu'tazilite theologian Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari—was largely enabled by widespread anti-Mu'tazilite sentiment shaped by the trauma of the Mihna (Febriani, 2023). This reverses Akyol's narrative: it was not state patronage that secured the victory of Ash'arism, but rather the failure of the rationalist–state alliance that paved the way for its opponents.

Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and the Harmonization of Reason and Revelation

If the Mu'tazilites represent rationalism within the domain of theology (*kalām*), then Ibn Rushd (1126–1198 CE), known in the West as Averroes, embodies the peak of rationalism within the domain of philosophy (*falsafa*). As a chief judge and court physician in al-Andalus, Ibn Rushd devoted his life to producing extensive commentaries on the works of Aristotle, aiming to purge them of dominant Neoplatonic interpretations and restore their original philosophical intent (Tbakhi & Amr, 2008). In his concise yet highly influential work *Faṣl al-Maqāl* (The Decisive Treatise on the Relationship between Law and Philosophy), Ibn Rushd articulates one of the most compelling arguments in Islamic intellectual history regarding the harmony between reason (philosophy) and revelation (religion) (Kosasih & Fahmi, 2024; Rusyd, 2023). For him, no contradiction can exist between the two, since truth cannot oppose truth; rather, it must correspond with and affirm it. Philosophy—defined as the study of being in order to know the Creator—is not only permitted by the Sharia but is in fact mandated by the Qur'an.

However, it is crucial to recognize that the harmony envisioned by Ibn Rushd is not grounded in egalitarianism. He advances an intellectually elitist framework, arguing that human beings possess varying levels of cognitive capacity, and therefore the Sharia provides different methods of engagement (Rusyd, 2023):

1. Demonstrative Method (*Burhānī*): The most rigorous and valid form of logical reasoning, which produces certainty (*yaqīn*). This method is accessible only to a small intellectual elite, namely philosophers (*ahl al-burhān*) (Komarudin et al., 2024).

2. Dialectical Method (*Jadalī*): A form of argumentation employed by theologians (*mutakallimūn*), based on widely accepted premises, though less rigorous than demonstrative reasoning.
3. Rhetorical Method (*Khīṭābī*): A persuasive approach relying on analogies and emotional appeals, intended for the general public (*al-jumhūr*) (Rusyd, 2023).

Based on this classification, Ibn Rushd establishes strict rules regarding allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*). When sacred texts appear to conflict with demonstrative philosophical conclusions, such texts must be interpreted allegorically. However, the authority to perform such interpretation is exclusively reserved for philosophers. They are strictly prohibited from disseminating these interpretations to the public, as doing so would generate confusion and potentially undermine the faith of those who can only grasp literal meanings (Rusyd, 2023).

Thus, portraying Ibn Rushd as a precursor of modern liberalism or unrestricted freedom of expression—as Mustafa Akyol tends to do (Akyol, 2021)—constitutes an anachronistic reading. Ibn Rushd's project was not aimed at promoting universal interpretive freedom, but rather at safeguarding the autonomy of philosophical inquiry from theological and popular interference, while simultaneously protecting the faith of the general public from the complexities of philosophy. His framework is inherently hierarchical and restrictive—a crucial nuance often overlooked in popular interpretations.

Akyol's Diagnosis and Prescription for Islam

The intellectual project of Mustafa Akyol can broadly be understood as a modern variant of the *Decline Thesis*, a genre of thought that seeks to answer a fundamental question: why has Muslim civilization—once at the height of its intellectual and cultural achievements—come to lag behind the West in science, freedom, and economic prosperity? (Akyol, 2021). Akyol's answer centers on internal ideological factors, particularly the triumph of a theological paradigm he considers anti-rationalist and deterministic, which has effectively “closed” Muslim minds for centuries.

According to Akyol, the primary cause of intellectual stagnation in the Muslim world lies in the dominance of Ash'arite theology, which since the medieval period has become the orthodoxy of the Sunni majority. He argues that the victory of Ash'arism over its main rival, the Mu'tazilites, was not due to superior theological arguments but rather to political patronage from authoritarian Muslim states and sultanates (Akyol, 2021). Two key Ash'arite doctrines are the central targets of his critique: voluntarism and occasionalism.

Voluntarism, or the divine command theory, posits that good and evil, right and wrong, possess no intrinsic value accessible to human reason. Something is good solely because God commands it, and bad because God forbids it (Ali, 2021). Akyol views this doctrine as deeply problematic. By denying the existence of objective moral laws accessible to reason, voluntarism opens the door to authoritarianism. Tyrannical rulers can legitimize their actions as manifestations of divine will, beyond rational scrutiny. In Akyol's view, Ash'arite

political theory has historically legitimized *taghallub*—the right to rule based on sheer domination through military power (Ali, 2021). This stands in sharp contrast to the Mu‘tazilite position, which affirms that reason can objectively discern justice and morality, thereby enabling rational critique of political authority.

The second doctrine, occasionalism, is a metaphysical view that denies inherent causality in nature. According to this perspective, events—such as fire burning cotton or a stone falling to the ground—do not occur due to natural laws, but because God directly and continuously creates each event independently. Akyol argues that such a worldview undermines the spirit of scientific inquiry. If there are no consistent natural laws to be discovered, then the pursuit of scientific knowledge becomes futile. This, he contends, explains why scientific development in the Muslim world stagnated after its classical golden age, whereas in Europe, belief in divinely ordained natural laws encouraged the rise of the scientific revolution (Ali, 2021).

Having diagnosed the problem, Akyol proposes a clear and radical prescription: the Muslim world must undertake a historical reversal by reviving its long-suppressed rationalist tradition. He calls for an “Islamic Enlightenment” that reclaims the values of reason, freedom, and tolerance from within the Islamic intellectual heritage itself, rather than importing them from the West (Akyol, 2021).

The primary theological foundation for Akyol’s project of freedom lies in his interpretation of Qur’an 2:256, “*lā ikrāha fī al-dīn*” (“there is no compulsion in religion”). For him, this is not merely a prohibition against forcing non-Muslims to convert, but a universal principle rejecting all forms of coercion in matters of belief, especially by the state. The implications are far-reaching: apostasy laws, blasphemy laws, moral policing, and physical punishments for personal sins should be abolished, as they contradict this foundational principle. He goes further by advocating what he terms the “freedom to sin.” This does not justify sin itself, but emphasizes that genuine moral choice can only arise from individual free will, not from coercion or the absence of alternatives (Akyol, 2011).

From this theological basis, Akyol arrives at an inevitable political conclusion: only a secular state can guarantee such freedom. Importantly, secularism in Akyol’s framework does not imply hostility toward religion, but rather state neutrality—where no single interpretation of Islamic law or ideology is imposed on citizens. He rejects both secular authoritarianism (such as historical Kemalism in Turkey) and Islamist authoritarianism (as seen in Iran or Saudi Arabia), arguing that both rely on coercion. In his view, only within a liberal secular framework can Muslim societies genuinely flourish, innovate, and practice their faith authentically without compulsion. Akyol often links this rationalist vision of individual freedom to economic prosperity and free-market capitalism, reflecting the influence of libertarian thought (Akyol, 2011, 2024).

Critical Analysis of Akyol’s Reform Project

Despite its clarity and appeal, Akyol’s narrative has been subject to significant scholarly criticism. These critiques highlight several fundamental weaknesses in his arguments, ranging from historical simplification and

theological misrepresentation to deeper epistemological concerns. This critical engagement does not aim to dismiss Akyol's call for reform, but rather to test the robustness and accuracy of its intellectual foundations.

One of the most common criticisms is that Akyol presents Islamic intellectual history through an overly simplistic binary framework: a dramatic struggle between "rationalist heroes" (the Mu'tazilites and Ibn Rushd) and "dogmatic villains" (Ash'arism and Al-Ghazali) (Zacky & Ilyas, 2024). While rhetorically effective, this black-and-white narrative overlooks the internal diversity of each tradition and the socio-political contexts in which they developed. It tends to idealize the Mu'tazilites while downplaying episodes such as the Mihna, and caricatures Ash'arism as purely anti-intellectual.

A more substantive critique targets Akyol's representation of Ash'arite theology. Scholars such as Abdullah Bin Hamid Ali (Ali, 2021) argue that Akyol's account contains "unfounded claims, half-truths, and misunderstandings," often relying excessively on modern secondary sources without engaging primary Ash'arite texts. Ali notes that Akyol fails to distinguish between theology (*'aqidah*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). While Ash'arite theologians affirm revelation as the ultimate source of law, they do not necessarily deny the role of reason in recognizing moral values (*ḥusn wa qubḥ 'aqliyyayn*). Moreover, many Ash'arite scholars adhered to established Sunni legal schools, indicating a complementary rather than antagonistic relationship between theology and law.

Similarly, the role of Al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE) is often oversimplified in Akyol's narrative as a figure who "closed the door" to philosophy. This overlooks the scholarly consensus that, despite his critique of certain metaphysical doctrines in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers)*, al-Ghazali played a crucial role in integrating Aristotelian logic into Islamic intellectual disciplines, particularly *uṣūl al-fiqh* (Aini, 2016). His engagement with philosophy was complex—simultaneously critical, selective, and incorporative.

Another fundamental critique is that Akyol, in his critique of Islamic tradition, fails to apply the same level of scrutiny to Western modernity and liberalism (Zacky & Ilyas, 2024). He tends to treat Enlightenment values—such as rational autonomy, individual freedom, and tolerance—as universally valid and unproblematic, without engaging with internal critiques of the Enlightenment, the destructive legacies of colonialism, or philosophical tensions within liberalism itself.

As a result, Akyol's project sometimes appears less as an effort to rediscover liberal values within Islam, and more as an attempt to reinterpret Islam through the lens of classical liberalism. Critics argue that he effectively detaches the concept of freedom from its theological and moral grounding in Islam, aligning it instead with liberal notions of individual autonomy. This is particularly evident in his defense of the "freedom to sin," which reflects the liberal principle articulated by John Stuart Mill—that individual freedom should only be limited to prevent harm to others. In contrast, within classical Islamic thought, freedom (*ḥurriyyah*) is not an end in itself, but a means toward a higher purpose:

servitude (*'ubūdiyyah*) to God. Freedom is understood as liberation from base desires in order to achieve moral and spiritual fulfillment.

Perhaps the most pragmatic—and potentially most consequential—critique concerns the epistemological disconnect between Akyol's framework and his intended audience. Scholars trained in classical Islamic disciplines argue that Akyol's approach is unlikely to persuade orthodox or traditional Muslim audiences, precisely because it does not operate within their recognized epistemic framework (Akyol, 2021). In Islamic scholarly tradition, the validity of religious arguments depends on mastery of interpretive methodologies—such as *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *uṣūl al-dīn*—and engagement with authoritative textual sources.

By grounding his arguments in simplified historical narratives and abstract liberal principles, Akyol effectively speaks in a different intellectual language from the scholars he seeks to influence. Consequently, his ideas may be dismissed as methodologically invalid or as products of uncritical Western bias. This suggests that meaningful and sustainable reform in Islam is more likely to emerge from within the tradition itself—through *ijtihād* conducted by scholars deeply rooted in its intellectual methodologies—rather than from external critiques that reject those frameworks altogether.

Finally, a critical reassessment reveals an internal tension in Akyol's conception of freedom. While he advocates for individual liberty from state coercion, his model ultimately depends on a strong secular state to guarantee and protect that freedom. This creates a paradox: freedom itself is not entirely independent of the state, insofar as it relies on the state's restraint. Traditional Islamic thought addresses this paradox by anchoring freedom in a transcendent source—God—enabling individuals to maintain moral integrity even under oppressive external conditions. In contrast, Akyol's emphasis on external political structures is seen as fragile, as it ties moral order to fluctuating political and economic conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

A critical study of the thought of Mustafa Akyol reveals an intellectual project that is complex, ambitious, and deeply paradoxical. He stands at the intersection of Islamic tradition, Western liberalism, public journalism, and intellectual activism. Evaluating his contribution requires a careful distinction between his popular impact and his academic robustness. His most significant contribution undoubtedly lies in his role as a catalyst for public dialogue. Through a clear and narrative writing style, he succeeds in bringing theological and philosophical debates—often confined to academic circles—into a broader public sphere. For many modern Muslims who feel alienated by rigid interpretations of religion, as well as for non-Muslims seeking to understand Islam beyond its often-problematic media representations, Akyol's work offers a much-needed intellectual foundation for envisioning an Islam compatible with freedom, reason, and tolerance. He provides both a language and a historical framework for those who aspire to reform.

However, this important contribution must be balanced with recognition of its significant academic limitations. As previously discussed, his thesis rests on

a fragile foundation: a historical narrative that tends toward reductionism and binary simplification, theological representations that many scholars consider problematic and insufficiently grounded in primary sources, and an epistemological framework that renders his arguments unpersuasive to the very traditionalist audiences he seeks to engage. By sidelining classical Islamic scholarly methodologies and instead adopting Western liberalism as his primary معيار (standard), his project risks becoming a monologue—appealing mainly to those already in agreement—rather than a genuinely transformative dialogue.

Within the diverse landscape of contemporary Islamic thought, Akyol can be situated within the broader category of “reformist” thinkers—those who seek to reconstruct Islamic intellectual heritage in response to modern challenges. Yet, he occupies a distinctive position within this spectrum. Unlike other reformists, such as Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri, who pursued an internal critique of Islamic intellectual traditions through complex methodological frameworks, Akyol’s approach is more heavily shaped by Anglo-American liberal-libertarian traditions. In this sense, he aligns more closely with the Islamo-liberal synthesis associated with thinkers such as Fazlur Rahman and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, though with a stronger emphasis on free-market arguments and a minimalist secular state.

Ultimately, the study of Akyol’s thought offers important lessons about the path of religious reform in the modern era. The future of revitalizing Islamic intellectual traditions is unlikely to lie in the binary opposition he often presents—between an idealized “rationalism” and a caricatured “traditionalism.” Rather, it requires a far more nuanced and demanding effort. First, it calls for intellectual honesty in acknowledging the complexity, diversity, and even contradictions within the history of Islamic thought, without reducing it to simplistic hero-versus-villain narratives. Second, it demands theological and philosophical sophistication grounded in deep and sincere engagement with primary sources from across the intellectual spectrum, both rationalist and non-rationalist. Third—and most crucially—it requires epistemological awareness: the ability to argue from within methodological frameworks that carry resonance and legitimacy for the communities one seeks to reform. The project of Mustafa Akyol has succeeded in opening an important space for conversation. Yet, the more rigorous, grounded, and substantive debate has only just begun.

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