

**“I BELIEVE IT’S VERY IMPORTANT TO TRY TO BRIDGE EAST  
AND WEST, TO BRIDGE MUSLIMS AND NON-MUSLIMS  
IN ORDER TO OVERCOME THOSE *CLICHÉS* AND TO  
HAVE A FAIR PICTURE OF THE OTHER SIDE”**

Interview<sup>1</sup> with Mustafa Akyol<sup>2</sup>

**Revista Malala:** Malala is discussing freedom of expression, criticism and religious freedom in and facing Islam. With that in mind I would like to start with a very generic question. When it comes to criticism and the cause of freedom, are Muslims more sensitive to criticism?

**Mustafa Akyol:** I see in the West now this phenomenon called Islamophobia which is a very negative view of Islam as a religion and of Muslims as people. We have seen violent acts, massacres. We saw that in Norway, in the U.S. Those are acts of hate against Muslims. That shows that Islamophobia is a reality and shows a bias in Western societies. And also there are extreme Right and Fascist parties in Europe, so that is a real problem. However, what I see, also as a Muslim myself, is that not every criticism against Islam and Muslims at the West are guided by Islamophobia. There are obviously violent movements acting in the name of Islam, such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS, Taliban, Boko Haram or Al Shabab, and although marginal, they create tensions. They create a lot of violence in the world and it’s very normal that some Westerners seeing this pose some questions about Islamic politics. And even where we overcome those extremist and terrorists groups, where we put them aside - even in mainstream Islamic societies such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or Iran, which are governed by Sharia, or other countries that somehow

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<sup>1</sup> Interview made by Skype by Ariel Finguerut (member of the Malala’s editorial board and research fellow of GTOMMM), on July 30, 2015. I thank Natalia Calfat for helping me revise the transcript.

<sup>2</sup> Writer with regular contributions to the The Guardian and Turkish newspapers. Author of *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty* (2011)

partly implement Sharia - you find human rights violations justified “in the name of Islam”. Islam cannot be defined by those extreme movements but it’s normal to question Islam about those issues. I’m not taking the extreme positions saying that either Islam has nothing to be criticized about or the other opposite islamophobic extremism saying that every criticism of Islam is Islamophobia. There are two extreme positions here, but maybe we can find an in-between position. When we talk of Islam as a religion, we talk of 1.6 billion Muslims with many interpretations and different outcomes, regarding whom we are very prone to make broad generalizations. As far as practices are concerned, defining “what it is to be a good Muslim”, like wearing a hijab, not drinking alcohol, or going to mosque, on all those personal observances, there is nothing to criticize, it’s just a matter of personal choice.

I think that on the Sharia issue criticism is legitimate. There is a lot of criticism there. There are sometimes clauses in the Sharia about blasphemy, apostasy and piety and so many other issues. So you have groups and regimes that put them in practice. Thus they create human rights violations in the name of Islam. They suppress women’s rights and also impose on civil issues. One extreme is to see all those thoughts as the only thoughts that represent Islam, it’s wrong to think that all Muslims are like that and feel they are required to act thus, that’s wrong - that would be Islamophobia. But also to say that any criticism of Islam is Islamophobia, that is another extreme. So what you have is two extremisms: on one hand Islamophobia and on the other hand to think that Islam can’t be criticized; it doesn’t help Muslims to improve the situation and sometimes this posture even blinds them to become self-critical about those issues.

**R.M.:** You mentioned Islamophobia which is a new concept or at least is a new idea that has been discussed for the last 10 years or so. How do you see the idea, the concept, and the meaning of Islamophobia? Is it correct to compare it with anti-Semitism?

**M.A.:** Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are not the same thing but there are similarities. Why are they different? When Anti-Semitism was on the rise on Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century, just before the era of Nazism, you didn’t have anything like a Jewish Al Qaida or a Jewish ISIS. So I have to admit that today there exist few groups in the Muslim world and maybe a few regimes that may create a negative image of Islam

and Jews didn't have that at time, so we have to point to a few differences. But there are also some similarities, in the sense that both ideologies represent a negative attitude towards the different community, especially when there is a racist aspect to it. We know that those islamophobic extreme Right movements in Europe, in the West, are actually against anybody who is different. They are racists, they don't want to have "brown people" in their societies, they think that they possess a superior culture and that the culture of these Eastern peoples are back-warded and corrupted. So when you look at their approach there is some resonance with anti-Semitism which has, of course, created horrible episodes throughout human history. There is the old medieval Christian anti-Semitism and the modern anti-Semitism, one was religious the other is racist. We have some parallels (with Islamophobia) such as when Jews were criticized because of their appearance in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, as can be seen on anti-Semite literature. Jews for the Nazis were "dark-skinned" in a beautifully blonde Arian nation. They wore "weird clothes" and slaughtered animals in weird and mystical ways. Today some Islamophobic and anti-Islamic manifestations echoes that and follow the same path. But there is one more thing which is key to define the contemporary debate about Muslims and the West, and that is that is actually about geopolitics. That defines a lot of this relationship.

When today Muslims criticize the West, they are not criticizing Christianity or Judaism or the Judeo-Christian values, but they are criticizing the West as a geopolitical entity. They are speaking about Western imperialism, Western support for Israel, the occupation of Iraq, of Syria, and the bombings. These criticisms may be partly legitimate. They are based on some historical reality. On the other hand, when you observe Western criticism or depiction of Islam, they speak of "Middle Eastern societies". However, these are not only defined by Islam but also by oil, by the historical relationship between East and West, and so on. Religion in many times is not the core issue, but just one factor. But we sometimes make the mistake of perceiving it as the core divide.

**R.M.:** Here in Brazil Edward Said's Orientalism thesis (from the seventies) remains quite popular. How do you see the actuality of Said's thesis? Also how do you see the discussion of Occidentalism, which is the idea of a stereotype view of the West?

**M.A.:** Orientalism and Occidentalism are real problems. Orientalism is a Western problem. Of course, I don't believe that every scholar in the West who studies Islam is an Orientalist in the negative sense. Said pointed out a key problem but at the same time there are in the West also genuinely, very creative, and curious scholars who really study the East to understand it, not only to depict it – who are not Orientalist in the negative sense. But yes, there have been cultural and imperialistic reasons and cultural bias guiding works and imaginative or negative depictions of Islam, and that's the sense of the negative idea of Orientalism and it is a real problem.

Occidentalism, on the other side, has been used a lot lately. I believe it's also a real problem. Here in Turkey I see a lot of Occidentalism around me. When you speak to some Turks who are skeptical of the West (and they can be either pious Muslims or Turkish nationalists) they share this image that the West always wants to plunder our resources, that they want to punish Muslims, taking pleasure almost in killing people in the Middle East, that they are morally corrupt (worshipping power, money, and nothing else, having no moral values): all this is a very common depiction of the West by Eastern societies, but it is full of bias and wrong ideas, based on *clichés* rather than on the actual truth. As an author and a journalist I have seen *clichés* about different people. In the West you have *clichés* about people who are not Westerns and in the East you have *clichés* about non-Easterns, especially against the West. Unfortunately those *clichés* are played upon by public intellectuals, writers and journalists from whom you would expect a cleared and more nuanced perspective. They are Orientalists or Occidentalists themselves. People want to hear the other side of the story, but sometimes when you paint the other side as evil that helps your own side to feel better and to look better. So what we have here is a propagandistic kind of journalism and commentary. Orientalism and Occidentalism are very powerful on both sides. That's why I believe it's very important to bridge between East and West, to bridge between Muslims and non-Muslims in order to overcome those *clichés* and to have a fair picture of the other side.

**R.M.:** How do you see the cases of blasphemy evolving Islam? Is it a recent phenomenon? Has it become more “popular” after the 1989 “Khomeini vs. Salman Rushdie” case?

**M.A.:** Considering apostasy and blasphemy as crimes that are punishable often by death is a problem of medieval Islamic jurisprudence. It's got more famous, or notorious if you will, in the past few decades, because regimes like the Islamic Republic of Iran began to implement laws that existed in buried medieval jurisprudence books, but surely were not put in practice. If you consider for example the late Ottoman Empire, those laws about apostasy and blasphemy were gradually becoming obsolete as the Empire liberalized, accepted the Western law and the constitutionalism. In the second half of the 20th century and specially in the past two decades, there has been a reverse type of movement towards the so called 'Islamization of laws' - for example in Pakistan, in Afghanistan under the Taliban, in Iran and in Saudi Arabia. So this is a problem that exists in the tradition, but has got amplified. And this too has another side: blasphemy against Islam is perceived as an attack on Islam, but by whom? By Westerns. So again this enters in the category of the "imperialistic West" - and with that comes the colonial legacy, and it turns into one big package or big narrative of the West - denigrating Islam, insulting, occupying and bombing Muslims. Whereas my position on those issues is that we have to reform our laws. In my book *Islam without Extremes* (2011), I point out that those bans on apostasy and blasphemy are not found in the Qur'an, but they are in the medieval Islamic law which is yes very much opened to interpretation.

There are actually later traditions that appeared after the Qur'an (like the hadiths) that are disputable. So we are arguing for a reform of these laws on issues such as human rights. Some are happy to have these reforms and implement them because Islam would otherwise be defenseless against the Westerns aggressions - as perceived by them.

**R.M.:** Is it possible to reform the Islamic law? How does that work? Do you have examples?

**M.A.:** It will not be me who will reform the Islamic law. I don't have the jurisprudential authority. But the thing is, nobody has jurisprudential authority. It's not like in Catholicism where the decision comes from the top and is valid and definite for all believers. In Islam, Sunnis and Shiites have their differences. Shiites have their living grand Ayatollahs who can make religious decisions (like calling for jihad) and may interpret some aspects of Islamic Law (ijtihad). Whereas in the Sunni world it is more

complicated because Sunni jurisprudence was created mainly in the Middle Ages by Islamic scholars like Abu al-Shafi'i or Maliki. Their writings became the basis of jurisprudential schools and that became stagnated in the time (we are talking here of debates from the 9th to 13th century CE). So, if we are talking about reform, about revision of those laws, somebody has to do it, but nobody has or takes the authority. You have individuals calling for change but the traditional people will retort to people like myself, that, you know, "who are they to change the law?". But they don't do the change. So these laws don't change and we end up in a vicious circle. One choice would be to recognize those laws as obsolete and not implement them. In Turkey we didn't reform Islamic law, we just didn't implement it, because Turkey wanted to be a secular country. I'm sympathetic to that solution as well. But others say they want Islamic law because "it's what God demanded in the first place" and they refer to these Islamic medieval jurisprudence texts. So, at the absence of anybody who could do the re-interpretation of the laws, this is the job for scholars, like Lessa, the Turkey Affairs or other working centers on the Sunni world. But we first need some consensus on jurisprudence regarding certain issues such as apostasy and blasphemy. For example, people cannot be killed because they left Islam, or because they are atheists. There are some efforts in that direction, in politics etc., but I think it's not enough.

**R.M.:** In your book you have a quite interesting discussion on the Lockean tradition and its influence in dialogue with Islam. How is Locke discussed in Islam?

**M.A.:** The liberal tradition in Islam is not powerful now. But I am trying to revive it. It's a good thing as an author, Muslim and intellectual, to try to offer new thoughts for whoever might be persuaded by it. My discussion is more on that path. It's academic journalistic writing, rather than of religious authority. What I tried to do was basically to show that a liberal view within Islam is possible. I'm not saying that Islam is all about a liberal view. I'm not arguing that all Muslims are already liberals, or even that Islamic thought is, by definition, liberal. What I say is that in this whole great diversity or pluriform universe of Islamic thought there are some basis for liberal thinking. By liberal what I mean is a political system and a culture in which non coercion would be the norm, we would never coerce people to be religious (or to be pious). Religion would be a matter of free choice, and piety would be a matter for free choice, so Muslims would be

free to evangelize their faith but they wouldn't use any form or methods of oppression. When you say all this, many Muslims will say "of course, the Qur'an says 'let there be no compulsion of religion' " and that makes sense. But once you enter the details of the discussion, you have to address issues like apostasy (to leave Islam), and there are several contrasting opinions about this among Sunnis and Shiites. Many of them consider apostasy a crime, punishable by death. In countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, or Afghanistan, if a Muslim becomes a Christian, he may go to jail and face death penalty; so there is obviously a matter of coercion involved.

So I go into the details of those jurisprudential traditions and discuss how to reform them, how to revisit them. But I also delve into the theology of these issues, and I dig to find basis for a liberal rethinking. For example, in my book and in my writings I point out one school that I believe is very important called the *Murji'ah*, or Murji'ites; in English they are called the Postponers. Why Postponers? Because basically they believe that "only God can judge", so in that sense, all Muslims would be part of the same community, but nobody could impose or force one course defining what is the "right conduct for a Muslim" or who would be an "infidel". Against them are those who claim the authority to declare others "infidels" (and with that they also claim the power to punish those infidels). Nowadays, we have ISIS or the tak'firis with a quite similar position, the idea to declare "jihad" as a fight against the infidels. This is the main problem in terms of authority in Islam. And in that sense there's room for debate in Islamic thought. The Murjites (the Postponers) took the very opposite way from the fanatics. They say "only God can judge people in the after-life", they say "we, the Muslims, can follow, we may be persuaded, but we don't have the authority, so let's postpone this judgment to the after-life, and it will be resolved by God". That's why they are called *the Postponers*, they refrain from giving a judgment on the fate of other Muslims. And that is a liberal base for Islam; it shows pluralism in Islam, and it has a theological base.

And I believe that John Locke brings a similar argument in his *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), which he wrote in the context of religious persecution in England. Locke was arguing for toleration among Christians.

So, in my book, with examples like those, I focus on the more pluralistic and rational schools of thought in Islam. By reviving them today, we can have a basis for dialogue with liberal political philosophy that is informed by Islamic Theology. So what I try to is not to persuade people, but to retrieve this liberal tradition in Islam to be discussed and studied.

**R.M.:** Could you tell us about the reception of your book “Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty”. How was the reception in Turkey? And in the Muslim world in general? And in the West?

**M.A.:** The book was published in the U.S. and sold in English-speaking countries, like in the U.K. It got very good reviews and a very positive response from people who read English. But most of them were Christians or let’s say “non-Muslims”. Many of the readers were “secular Westerners” who appreciate this balanced introduction to Islam and the liberal approach of my book. I also got some responses from liberal Muslims living in the West who agree that “we need a theory, a textbook for liberal thinking in Islam”. And they identify my book as being on that path and thanked me for that. So my book has been a guide for Muslims who are liberals by persuasion, or who are looking to reconcile religious tradition with a liberal point of view. My book would be a source for those in search of such reconciliation.

It also got published in Turkey and in Indonesia, and is coming out in Arabic soon. So far, I haven’t received much feedback from Indonesian readers. What I got came from people who read the book in English, in Malaysia, Pakistan and in other countries. In Turkey I got regular responses from liberal mindset Turks. I got some critics from others who claim that “you are trying to sell us those Westerners liberal ideas” or that in my book “I am diluting Islam”. But I didn’t get any apostasy claim or any threat. I think in Turkey we are a little bit better than that. Turkey has its own prejudiced and persecuted people but the kind of ideas that I put on the book wouldn’t put me in some kind of danger or in trouble with the authorities. That would be the case if I were in Afghanistan or maybe Saudi Arabia. In those countries the book would face several laws and I would be in trouble. But in Turkey many of the ideas from the book are already accepted by more

liberal theologians, at least they would be opened to accept these thoughts, they are not heretical; but certainly they are on the liberal edge of the Islamic spectrum.

**R.M.:** I would like to thank you very much for taking the time and talking to us. It has been a great pleasure and our conversation has been mostly interesting.

**M.A.:** Thank you for being interested in those issues all the way from Brazil. I am also glad we initiated a dialogue and for showing interest in my book. Brazil is an important country growing and rising and I appreciate that from a country with a democratic tradition being part of the 'rest'. I am happy to initiate that dialogue. It is also good to have those kinds of concerns and discussions from your end.

**R.M.:** Thank you very much

**M.A.:** Thank you