

# *Islam and Liberty: The Historical Misunderstanding*

by Mohamed Charfi, Zed Books, 2005, 186 pp.

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Since 1974, the absolute number of democracies in the world has almost tripled. Only in the Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa did this ‘third wave of democracy’ have little impact; these countries still include not one liberal democracy and have the world’s lowest average levels of freedom. [1]

Not coincidentally, the 22 member countries of the Arab League – with a total population of 300 million, a land area larger than all of Europe, and plentiful oil and natural resources – today have a GDP lower than that of Belgium plus Holland, produce fewer scientific publications than Israel alone, and translate fewer books than Greece. [2] Throughout most of the region, poverty and human rights abuses are common.

How did the Muslim lands, which a millennium ago were home to one of the most advanced cultures in the world, fall so far behind in their cultural, economic, and political development? How did their peaceful religion spawn a fundamentalism so extreme that it today is the main threat to international peace and stability? And, perhaps most importantly, how can this tide be turned?

*In Islam and Liberty: The Historical Misunderstanding*, Tunisian scholar Mohamed Charfi tackles the question of Islam’s compatibility with democracy and liberal values. In Charfi’s view, the fundamentalism, autocracy, and developmental lag we see in the Muslim world today are all closely related: they are the results of a historical evolution by which Islam has strayed far from its original spiritual message of peace and equality. The book offers a solid and compelling analysis of Islam’s politicisation and spiritual perversion, but it fails to propose equally compelling solutions.

‘Islam is a religion not a politics, a question of conscience not of belonging, an act of faith not of force,’ Charfi writes. What Muslims need is a ‘critical re-reading of their history in order to recover their religion in its original purity.’ By taking us on a tour of Islamic history, including the back rooms housing binge-drinking caliphs

and murderous mullahs, Charfi outlines the transformation of Islam from a religion and a moral code into a foundation for fundamentalism and political oppression.

Islam was born in the semi-desert of the Arabian Peninsula, then populated by polytheistic tribes and lacking any state-like structures – there were no courts, civil servants, or prisons. According to Charfi, the Prophet Mohammad's purpose in this context was only ever to end the permanent tribal warfare and form a community organized on a moral, not political, foundation; he never sought or established any political authority. In his own words: 'You know better than I the affairs of the world below' (p. 110).

While his accomplishment of appeasing Arabia's tribes surely made it easier for his followers to establish a state, 'only an excess of ideological enthusiasm could allow anyone to jump to the conclusion that Mohammed himself founded a state and acted as its head.' It is paradoxical then that the ulema (religious scholars) see the Prophet as the founder of the original Islamic state, and that fundamentalists today strive to 're-establish' such a state.

The Islamic empire, Charfi points out, from its founding shortly after the Prophet's death down to Atatürk's abolition of the caliphate in 1924, was 'essentially a profane rather than a religious creation' (p. 166). In his narrative, the political use of Islam started already with the first caliph, Abu Bakr, who assumed power through a coup and proceeded to unify and pacify Arabia by killing off opposing tribes on the basis of economic or political 'apostasy.' The empire thus founded has been sanctified by Muslim theologians, its thirteen-century-long history so embellished and idealized that today's Muslims see the Islamic state as God's will and creation.

To Charfi, the body of law that developed during the early years of the caliphate, the sharia, is as man-made and un-religious as the Islamic state itself. This at first appears a bit harsh. But in a thorough chapter on the relationship between Islam and law, Charfi compares Koranic verses with the principles of sharia, demonstrating the frequent discrepancies between the word of the Holy Book and the rules as laid down by the ulema.

For example, verse 69 of sura 5, states: 'Believers [Muslims], Jews, Sabaeans, or Christians – whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right – shall have nothing to fear or regret.' The *ulema* interpreted this to apply only to

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those who were Christians or Jews *before* the advent of Islam or who remained such as long as the message of Islam had not yet reached them. Charfi writes:

This human, all too human gloss, so restrictive as to deform the verse's meaning, expressed a wish to dominate others, an egoism of nations that has been common to all civilizations, virtually without exception. In several respects, then, sharia law was constructed by men against the principles of the Koran' (p. 45, italics in original).

The system of *sharia* law – which justifies corporal punishment, the subjugation of women, and slavery – appears unjust and extreme measured by today's standards, and some observers deem Islam irreconcilable with democracy based on that fact alone. But Charfi suggests that the apparent severity of traditional Muslim law merely reflects the circumstances of the time when those laws were written. From a twenty-first-century perspective, the seventh-century *ulema* appear fanatic, but compared to earlier or contemporaneous bodies of law, the one which they created was actually quite progressive.

Charfi explains that the word sharia, in its original sense, denotes the 'path' along which Muslims travel in accordance with their Ijtihad, their effort of reflection. Thus in drawing up the legal rules of their society, Muslims used to consider how best to adapt to the circumstances of their time. With the weakening of Muslim society in the thirteenth century, however, and fearing that Islam would lose its essence in endless interpretation, religious scholars decided to 'close the door on *Ijtihad*.' Since then they have limited themselves to 'almost slavish exposition of the ideas of their predecessors' (p. 87). This is why, while Europeans have discarded the conceptions of Roman law that are no longer suited to our times, Muslim law has gone through no such adjustment. As a result, the Muslim world has walked around for centuries with the ball and chain of a static, premodern legal system, making every small step forward a major struggle.

On the basis of Islamic law, innovation and renewal have been choked out of Muslim lands and Muslim reformers and thinkers have been quashed or persecuted as apostates, effectively blocking the reformation that would have accommodated the religion and its believers to modernity. [3]

This inability of Islam to modernise is central to the problems we see in Muslim societies today. While democracy and liberal values have spread across the globe,

the Middle East has remained wedded to the ideal of the Islamic state ruled by the principles of *sharia* law. Ordinary Muslims perceive this as a growing gulf between them and the outside world, pitting their religion and identity against modernity and the rest of the world. The resulting confusion, combined with underdevelopment and authoritarianism, has provided fertile soil for religious fanaticism. By blaming the ills of the Muslim world on the West, on Israel, infidels, and modernity as a whole, fundamentalists have won many discontented hearts and minds. This strategy, it appears, works well to distract from their own inability to provide or unwillingness to share power.

Such manipulation of Islam for political purposes would not have been possible today had it not been for what Charfi defines as a 'historical misunderstanding' – Islam's evolution from a religion and a moral code into a politics, a legal system, and a societal blueprint. This evolution was spurred by the *ulema* and by those who saw Islam as a political tool to acquire power and wealth. Because history has taken Islam so far from its original message of peace and equality, we find ourselves today asking whether it is really possible to reconcile the Muslim religion with the tenets of freedom and popular governance. In *Islam and Liberty*, Charfi makes a very strong case that Islam, in its pure, un-politicised form, is not only compatible with democracy, but in fact embraces it.

Charfi writes, 'Our main problem today, the powerful brake on our emancipation and development, is that we are still collectively chained to our past' (p. 55). How to cut that chain, I wonder? How to make Muslims from Pakistan to Mauritania understand that Islam as they know it is based on a historical misunderstanding? And, most importantly, how to contain the fundamentalism that is the progeny of this misunderstanding? Reading this book against the backdrop of the Taliban resurgence, I find myself yearning for profound answers. Unfortunately, this is where Charfi falls short.

Charfi's proposed solution is somewhat unsurprising coming from a former Minister of Education. To shed the yoke of history, he asserts, it is necessary 'to introduce a radical change in educational policy and to teach modern theories that reconcile Islam with modernity' (p. 13). He also speaks of the need to separate religion from politics by creating a fourth, religious, pillar alongside the legislature, the judiciary, and the executive. But he believes that this can only happen after deep changes take place in classrooms and lecture halls across the Arab world.

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There is some weight to this argument. All the Arab countries have, under the pressure of Muslim traditionalists, experienced ‘a manipulation of the educational system due mostly to demagogic policies or a lack of awareness of what was at stake’ (p. 150). A study carried out by the Tunis-based Arab Human Rights Institute shows that even today, education contrary to human rights exist in twelve Arab countries that have subscribed to international human rights conventions. School textbooks in these countries portray women as inferior to men, insist that Islam is the only true religion, and try to justify all the punishments prescribed under *sharia* law. State-run schools teach old traditions and principles often entirely contrary to the country’s legal code and official practice.

Moreover, the teaching of Islam is not confined to religious classes, but permeates all aspects of children’s schooling. In Morocco, for instance, the Arabic reader for the sixth grade of basic education, which is supposed to be a language book and not part of religious education, begins with the following lessons: 1) Koranic verses, 2) the Prophet’s Hadiths, 3) ‘I am a Muslim,’ 4) Islam and consultation, 5) Koranic verses, and 6) the most meritorious way of fasting (p. 152). Likewise, to become an English teacher in Afghanistan, you need to be well-versed in Islam.

In other words, schools across the Muslim world teach Islam not as a religion, but as an identity and a set of legal principles – thereby advancing Charfi’s ‘historical misunderstanding.’ Such Islamo-centric education has deep historical roots. Charfi explains:

During this time [16th century], the ulema abandoned all the profane sciences – the mathematics of Khawarizmi and the medicine of Ibn al-Jazzar were forgotten – and made do with religious knowledge that was ‘supposedly unchanging and, like a clone, could reproduce itself *ad infinitum* in a time outside history’ (Boiteveau, *A Propos des gardiens de l’Islam*). Those who held the reins of power let them get on with it for century after century (p. 136).

Religious institutions throughout the Middle East have long exercised significant clout in matters of educational policy; they have purported to be centres of enlightenment and learning while standing at the vanguard of intransigence and intellectual repression. They are still in the business of banning books, rescinding degrees of students-turned-reformists, and meddling in both politics and primary-school syllabi. Yet the graduates they generate are unskilled in all respects except in reading the Koran and reciting sharia law. Some of these institutions – like

Pakistan's infamous madrasas – even brainwash children, teaching them hatred and praising fanaticism. It strikes me that Charfi does not once address the issue of these terrorist factories, the closing of which seem to me a logical first step of any educational reform policy.

In some countries – notably Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco – governments instituted mass-education programs upon independence, recruiting teachers with a religious background because of a lack of personnel with modern training. Alumni of religious institutions educated the youth. Charfi argues that these teachers created in their students 'a split mentality that resulted from the gulf between the system of values and references taught at school and the social and political reality. In extreme cases, this led to the production of schizophrenics and terrorists' (p. 137).

In Charfi's narrative, it is this divorce between society and its educational institutions that led to the birth of the fundamentalist movement. The current crisis, he claims, 'will continue so long as a cure has not been found for this dangerous dysfunctionality, but it will go down in history as no more than a passing episode if the disease can be properly diagnosed and properly treated.'

Continuing Charfi's medical analogy, his general diagnosis is compelling (a historical misunderstanding of Islam) but I am afraid that his prescribed treatment (educational reform) is neither powerful enough to cure the illness nor possible to administer.

According to Charfi, Arab-Islamic countries must purge their teaching of all assertions contrary to human rights and the foundation of the modern state. They are further to broaden and revise curricula in order to reconcile Islam with modernity and liberal values, and to strengthen the general culture of young people to 'expand their knowledge of the world and of others.' Of course it would be a tremendous advance if all the illiberal Muslim countries introduced such reforms, but which of the Arab governments would ever do it? Unfortunately, Charfi does not explain how this educational reform policy is supposed to appeal to Muslim leaders.

There is a paradox in Charfi's line of reasoning, a paradox I find common among Muslim reformist thinkers. As my former *Journal of Democracy* colleagues put it in an edited volume on Islam and democracy: 'Real, lasting, and peaceful democratic

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change requires the state to implement far-reaching reforms, but for this to occur, the state must reform itself.' [4] In other words, each one of these countries *could* develop a strategy for educational – as well as political – reform, if only those in power harboured the will to do so. Though I am eager to be proven wrong, I remain convinced that the Middle East's non-democratic leaders find it in their best interest to keep their populations both undereducated and uninformed.

If change is not to be expected within the echelons of power, however, from where will it come? The obvious answer would be from below, through 'people power,' civil society or perhaps even revolution. But as long as leaders prevent people from organising or expressing themselves freely, this will remain an unrealistic option.

In *Islam and Liberty*, Charfi cites the family tree of Muslim reformers, from the Mutazilites to Abdou Filali-Ansary, concluding that their theories 'may enable Muslims in the third millennium to combine their religion with fully committed modernism in a life of peace and harmony – the peace of a clear conscience as well as social and religious peace' (p. 166). But for his and other liberal voices to be heard, those in power must first allow for at least a small political opening. Sadly, as Charfi himself points out, 'instead of being the bases for a social and political consensus, instead of being the object of systematic education and consistent political discourse, these elements and theories are both under attack from fundamentalists and lacking in defensive resources' (p. 166).

Charfi concludes his book by emphasising that 'Peace and harmony will prevail among individuals and among nations when we have clearly separated politics from religion and taught our children the principles underlying that separation.' These beautiful words, however, carry little value on the pages of a book that no Islamist fundamentalist or Arab leader will ever read.

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### Notes

[1] Freedom House 2005.

[2] Hariri 2004.

[3] Johnson 2006.

[4] Diamond, Plattner and Brumberg, eds. 2005: xxiv-xxv.



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