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## The Reason for Freedom in Religious Authority (A Study of Mustafa Akyol's Perspective in Contemporary Islam)

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### Abstract

*This study examines the issue of religious authorities issuing fatwas, which often have implications for restricting individual freedom. This problem arises because fatwas, which are supposed to serve as moral guides in practice, are usually used as tools of social control that limit the space for individual autonomy. This research aims to reveal freedom in the context of religious authority by focusing on the concept of freedom in Islam. This study uses a qualitative method grounded in literature, with a theoretical framework of individual freedom discourse and liberal Islam. Data analysis was conducted in a descriptive-analytical manner, with a philosophical and historical perspective. The results of the study show that freedom is a theological principle that limits the legitimacy of religious authority, so that the relationship between individuals and authority is understood ethically-normatively rather than hierarchically coercive. Religious intervention can only be justified to the extent that it protects individual rights and public safety. This study contributes to the development of normative political theology and Islamic moral philosophy. It offers a minimal and emancipatory model of religious authority, in which freedom is understood as a prerequisite for moral responsibility, social tolerance, and the progress of Islamic civilization.*

**Keywords:** *Freedom, Reason, Religious Authority*

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### Introduction

The relationship between individual freedom and religious authority in Islam has been tense from the beginning, especially after the death of the Prophet, when authority and power began to be contested, particularly during the *mihnah* between Ali bin Abi Talib and Muawiyah. Each Muslim group claimed to be the savior of the institution of authority from the threat of various models of tyrannical power. As Arkoun revealed, the root of political conflict in Islam lies in the separation and conflation of the concepts of authority and power (Arkoun, 1994). Basically, religious authorities play a significant role because their task is to provide religious guidance (*fatwa*) to the community. Abdulkader Tayob states that the critical role of religious authorities is to create, describe, and negotiate religion for modern Muslim communities (Tayob, 2010). Although the fatwas issued sometimes conflict with the concept of freedom and restrict individual thought (Assyaukanie, 2006). According to Rumadi, fatwas are often considered to represent God's opinion and must be issued by a legitimate authority; however, humans cannot fully represent God's will (Rumadi, 2012).

Restrictions imposed through fatwas violate the right to freedom and are inconsistent with the authorities' role, which should provide moral guidance

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and protect the public interest. Such restrictions hinder human autonomy and the ability to make informed and responsible choices. Abdul Karim Soroush asserts that every individual has the right to think rationally and critically, and to be open and pluralistic in the pursuit of knowledge (Bistara, 2023). Thus, the issue of freedom is closely tied to human reason, which serves as an instrument for seeking truth in both religious and social contexts (Soroush, 2000).

In practice, authorities often impose restrictions on freedom through the issuance of fatwas, which represent specific interpretations of Sharia law. Abdullah Saeed revealed that some scholars impose the death penalty on apostates, and some even refuse to allow them to repent. According to him, such attitudes restrict individual freedom, particularly the right to freedom of belief. These restrictions contradict verses in the Quran that affirm humans have freedom and accountability before God on the Day of Judgment (Saeed & Saeed, 2004). These restrictions extend not only to religious matters but also to freedom of expression and individual rights in a pluralistic society.

Many studies have been conducted on this topic. Riaz Ahmad Saeed and Hafiz Muhammad Naeem examined Maulana Ahmad Khan's views, which held that every individual must exercise freedom of expression and thought, as freedom is a right; however, there must be restrictions, namely, religious values (Saeed & Naeem, 2020). A similar study was conducted by Rohit Mahatir Manese, focusing on freedom in Indonesia, particularly freedom of religion and belief. Discrimination against indigenous religions has led to the development of intolerance towards minorities. Therefore, according to Manese, it is necessary to re-examine freedom of religion, particularly restrictions on religious freedom itself (Manese, 2021). Meanwhile, Badarussyamsi conducted a study on authority by examining Abdulkarim Soroush's thoughts. According to him, claims of absolute truth in religious understanding can trigger authoritarianism, especially when religion is de-ideologized and used as a political tool. Therefore, religious tyranny arises from the inability to distinguish between temporal religious interpretations and religion as an eternal and sacred reality (Badarussyamsi, 2015).

Previous studies have generally addressed religious freedom, freedom of expression, or criticism of religious authoritarianism without explicitly examining the relationship between individual freedom and religious authority. This study differs because it explicitly examines how Mustafa Akyol understands the relationship between the two in the context of contemporary Islam.

Based on the above discussion, freedom is a fundamental human right that every individual should enjoy. Therefore, this study is important to pursue because the polemic between freedom and authority remains a complex and unresolved issue. The relationship between the two depends heavily on whether authority is legitimized on traditional or modern grounds, and whether it is exercised within appropriate limits (Mill, 2003). This view aligns with Syafii Maarif's argument that the advent of Islam is essentially a force that opposes all

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forms of power that hinder human freedom. For him, a person of quality is a free person. Human independence is a manifestation of the principle of monotheism, alongside equality and brotherhood (Maarif, 1994).

The discussion of freedom is essential because freedom constitutes both the potential and the essence of humanity. Through freedom and the power of thought, humans can make autonomous decisions (Muqoddas, 1993). Thus, this study aims to re-examine the rationale of freedom within the framework of religious authority. This focus has received limited attention in previous studies, which tend to discuss freedom and authority as separate analytical categories.

### **Method**

This study uses a qualitative approach grounded in a literature review to analyze Mustafa Akyol's thoughts on religious freedom and authority, thereby enabling conceptual deepening. Primary data were obtained from Mustafa Akyol's works, *“Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance”* and *“Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty”*. Secondary data were selected based on their relevance to the theme of freedom and religious authority. The theoretical framework used consists of the discourse of individual freedom and liberal Islam. The data collection process included determining the object of study with a focus on the themes of freedom and religious authority, conducting an inventory of sources, and selecting relevant data. Furthermore, the data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method with a philosophical and historical approach.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Human Freedom and Intervention**

Human freedom often comes into conflict with the intervention of other parties. Meanwhile, the principle of *Hurriyyah* (freedom) is based on the essence of humans as free beings who must be free, both in terms of freedom of thought, religion, and expression. Without freedom, life and religion lose their meaning, because one of God's purposes in creating humans is for them to be free (Masmoudi, 2003).

This intervention in freedom creates a dynamic tension between individual autonomy and the limitations imposed by religion. Historically, interference with individual freedom has been criticized by Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly in relation to the church. He rejected absolute authority with the argument that “God is dead.” Nietzsche criticized the church's decisions that were considered sacred and absolutist (Purwanto, 2005). Freedom is a basic human right to choose and express one's beliefs.

As John Locke stated, human natural freedom is freedom from earthly powers and from being subject to the will of human authority. Freedom in society should not be subject to other legislative powers, except those formed through mutual consent. Freedom is not acting arbitrarily without law, but the freedom to follow laws agreed upon by society. Locke emphasized that natural freedom is the right of individuals to follow natural law without submitting to

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the arbitrary will of others. Therefore, freedom from absolute power is a fundamental aspect of protecting individual rights and ensuring protection against tyranny (Locke, 2016).

Thus, behavior carried out by individuals that is beneficial to themselves and others and does not violate the freedom or interests of others should not be restricted. Therefore, every individual has the right to their own life. In other words, the government or authorities do not have the right to intervene in or coerce the will of individuals (El-Droubie, 1996).

Locke's ideas later developed and became the basis of liberalism. This ideology reached its peak in the early twentieth century, with the implementation of democratic systems of government in several European countries and the enforcement of gender equality for women, especially in terms of freedom of expression. This freedom then expanded not only in the political sphere but also in economic, social, and religious spheres. The goal of this ideology is to emphasize equality and the protection of individual rights (Rosyidin, 2023).

In Islam, human freedom often clashes with rules or fatwas issued by religious authorities. This issue concerns the extent of human freedom in Islam. The Qadariyah argue that humans possess freedom and free will. This means that everyone has the freedom to decide what they want and is responsible for their choices. Meanwhile, the Jabariyah school of thought differs. According to this view, humans do not have freedom over their actions because everything has been predetermined by God. Thus, every human action is subject to divine determination (Manshur dkk., 2022; Nasution, 2008).

The Jabariyah view, which emphasizes God's absolute will in every human action, has contributed to the emergence of deterministic religious practices that limit individual autonomy. Intervention in individual freedom manifests in rules that tend to be coercive. As Mustafa Akyol argues, Muslims have long been confronted with rules that appear coercive. For example, every Muslim is forced to remain within their religion; if they violate this rule, they are considered apostates and punished by death. This punishment violates individual rights because everyone has rights over themselves, including the right to freedom to sin (Akyol, 2014).

The phenomenon of intervention in the lives of individuals is carried out by religious institutions. For example, in Saudi Arabia, the CRLQ (Council for Scientific Research and Legal Opinion) or *al-Lajnah al-Dā'imah li al-Buḥūth al-ʿIlmiyyah wa al-Iftā'* issues fatwas that highlight gender inequality, causing concern among Muslim scholars worldwide, especially in the West. One fatwa considered authoritarian is the prohibition on women traveling without a mahram (male guardian) (Faiz et al., 2023). The intervention in this case targets autonomous individuals and implies that women are incapable of managing their own lives.

A similar phenomenon occurs in Malaysia, where religious authorities such as the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) or the National

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Fatwa Council impose penalties on apostates. Individuals who leave Islam may be subject to fines, imprisonment, or flogging (Adil, 2007). The death penalty was also imposed on Muslim scholar Faradj Faouda in Egypt (Assyaukanie, 2006), as well as through Imam Khamenei's fatwa sentencing Salman Rushdie to death on 14 February 1989. According to Kamali, this fatwa represented a controversial procedure that denied normal legal process and violated individual freedoms, particularly freedom of religion (Kamali, 2013). These rulings signify direct interference with individual freedom, especially freedom of religion and belief.

Another form of intervention restricting freedom of thought occurred in Indonesia when the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued a fatwa prohibiting pluralism, liberalism, and secularism. The fatwa was issued at the 7th National Congress on 28 July 2005 as a response to the growing influence of the Liberal Islam movement since 1998 (Assyaukanie, 2009). Similar restrictions were also imposed by JAKIM in Malaysia. Such regulations restrict intellectual openness and contribute to intellectual stagnation. Meanwhile, according to Muhammad Abduh, freedom of thought and expression are rights inherent to every individual. He believed that freedom had enabled the West to achieve progress and global influence. Therefore, Muslims must learn from this experience to encourage intellectual advancement (Kaminski, 2021).

The phenomenon of intervention in freedom demonstrates that individual freedom remains contested in contemporary contexts. Freedom in Islam is often perceived as limited. Ma'ruf Amin, as quoted by Budhy Munawar-Rachman, stated that human freedom is limited to choosing a religion; once Islam is chosen, that freedom no longer exists.

Interventions against freedom are commonly justified by claims of preserving public benefit (*maṣlahah*) and preventing harm (*mafsadah*). However, such interventions often ignore the autonomous nature of human beings. Fatwas, religious rules, and social norms demand obedience and thus function primarily as instruments of social control.

The discussion above shows that humans are essentially capable of acting freely according to their will, particularly in matters of thought, belief, and expression. This freedom is a fundamental right of every individual and is reflected in international legal protections. However, in practice, this freedom is frequently constrained by religious authority interventions.

### **Religious Authorities and Fatwas**

In the context of social and intellectual life, authority is a determining factor that shapes human relationships and influences collective perspectives and behavior. Authority is a fundamental element in the complex web of human relations, as it exerts a formative influence on individual lives and character, including moral, religious, and political dimensions (Balázs, 2001). Authority usually involves a leader positioned at the top of a structure and a group that implements leadership policies. For Max Weber, authority represents legitimate control (Bartholomew, 1981). However, authority is not merely

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power, because it involves claims of legitimacy, namely the right to rule and the obligation to obey (Parsons, 1942).

According to Azyumardi Azra, as cited by Jinan, religious authorities must possess the ability to encourage and direct actions in accordance with the messages of Islam found in the Qur'an (Jinan, 2013). The role and function of authority can be realized when it is supported by strong personal character and social recognition. Meanwhile, Khaled Abou El Fadl distinguishes between two types of authority. The first is coercive authority, defined as the ability to direct others' behavior through persuasion, threats, or force. This form of authority is commonly associated with political power and state apparatuses capable of coercion and punishment. The second is persuasive authority, which refers to the ability to influence beliefs and behavior through trust. This type of authority is normative and usually derives from knowledge, charisma, or moral integrity (Abou El Fadl, 2004). Therefore, in the modern context, religious authority should be oriented toward ethical and persuasive functions to remain compatible with the values of justice and freedom.

As Budhy Munawar-Rachman argues, authority must be exercised with wisdom, tolerance, and openness, while prioritizing careful judgment, moral integrity, and persistence in ethical commitments (Munawar-Rachman, 2011). Fatwas function as engines of social change through the authority exercised by individual and institutional religious scholars. Their purpose is to shape, transform, and improve society based on interpretations grounded in authoritative religious sources (Fauzi, 2017).

Fatwas issued by religious authorities should therefore be wise, protective, and beneficial to all individuals, rather than intolerant or threatening rulings that generate harm. Authorities must exercise caution when issuing fatwas, given their social impact and normative influence on religious communities. As a result, fatwas require careful consideration and ethical responsibility.

Several Muslim-majority countries have established religious authorities as formal institutions, with muftis appointed or selected by the state. These institutions function to formulate and implement religious regulations in the form of fatwas, which in certain contexts may acquire binding legal force (Jinan, 2013). Hamid Ali notes that muftis do not consider themselves lawmakers, but rather interpreters who seek to understand and articulate divine intent. This understanding is reflected in the term *mufti*, which signifies explanation rather than legislation, similar to the role of a *mufassir*, who reveals hidden meanings (Ali, 2021).

Essentially, fatwas represent the intersection between Sharia norms and concrete social realities. They are not merely responses to hypothetical questions but emerge from specific historical and social contexts. Beyond serving as sources of religious guidance, fatwas also function as historical records that reflect the social dynamics of particular communities and periods (Fauzi, 2017). In some countries, such as Malaysia, fatwas may become legally binding after state approval and incorporation into positive law. In contrast, in

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Indonesia, fatwas acquire binding force only when incorporated into state law through legislation or judicial decisions (Hasyim, 2019).

According to Yusuf Qardhawi, fatwas play a crucial role in explaining and applying Sharia law, as they respond to questions raised by individuals or groups regarding religious practice. Fatwas also serve as a pedagogical method employed in the Qur'an and hadith to clarify moral and legal guidance. Because of this strategic role, muftis occupy an important position as mediators between religious norms and social issues. However, Qardhawi emphasizes that the authority to issue fatwas is restricted to individuals who possess deep religious knowledge and moral integrity (Qardhawi, 1997).

Abdul Aziz bin Baz emphasized the comprehensive application of Sharia, viewing it not merely as a moral or spiritual system but as a legal framework governing all aspects of life, including governance, criminal law, economics, dress codes, and obedience to political rulers. This view is grounded in the principle of obedience to *ulil amr*, even when rulers are perceived to deviate from Islamic ideals (Hearn, 1998).

In contrast, Mustafa Akyol offers a critical perspective on the culture of fatwas. He defines a fatwa as a legal opinion issued by a mufti in response to questions from Muslims. However, according to Akyol, the proliferation of fatwas aims to regulate every aspect of life in excessive detail, leaving little room for individual moral reasoning. In this context, the mufti is perceived as providing definitive answers to all questions, thereby constraining individual freedom of thought and choice (Akyol, 2022). Akyol criticizes this tendency by citing the well-known death fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie in 1989 as an example of authoritarian religious intervention (Akyol, 2022).

Istiqamah similarly observes that Islamic culture has increasingly transformed into a legalistic culture that prioritizes moral behavior over moral belief. She argues that this shift is driven by a dominant fatwa culture that restricts individual freedom and fosters authoritarianism, particularly when reinforced by state power. In this context, Ihsan Ali Fauzi notes that religious authorities, often supported by the state, define what constitutes "true Islam," thereby suppressing critical thinking within society (PUSAD Paramadina, 2022).

Fatwas that restrict individual freedom often originate from religious authorities operating under state control. When religion becomes subordinated to political power, it risks functioning as an instrument of oppression, particularly in regulating thought and belief. Such conditions blur the distinction between moral guidance and coercive control, leading to violations of fundamental freedoms. As John Stuart Mill argued, the legitimacy of authority depends on whether it is exercised within appropriate limits and justified by the prevention of harm to others (Mill, 2003).

As Munawar-Rachman emphasizes, the integration of religious and state power, with the state holding power over its apparatus and religion also holding

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authority over its doctrines. If these two things are integrated, it will create a strong authority. As fatwas bridge religious idealism and social rationalism, they also serve as tools for social change through the authority of individual and institutional scholars. The goal is to engineer social change in shaping, changing, and improving the state of society based on the views of religious authorities grounded in authoritative religious sources (Fauzi, 2017).

Therefore, individual rights and freedoms must be guaranteed by the state with minimal intervention. The function of the state is limited to preventing violence, theft, and fraud, and to ensuring the enforcement of contracts. From this perspective, justice is achieved when the state respects individual freedoms and protects property rights (Yanni Cao, 2023). As Manfred Nowak and Tanja Vospernik stated, interventions that authorities may carry out are aimed at protecting legitimate public interests, such as safety, order, health, and public morals. Permissible restrictions include restrictions to protect public safety, restrictions to maintain public order, restrictions to protect public health, restrictions for the protection of morals, and restrictions to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of others (Nowak & Vospernik, 2010).

This discussion demonstrates that religious authorities play a significant role in shaping social, moral, and intellectual life. However, their authority must be exercised ethically, persuasively, and with openness to individual freedom. Fatwas, as expressions of religious authority, should be grounded in reason and public benefit, not deployed as instruments of domination. In the modern context, authority and freedom must be balanced, with intervention justified only to protect legitimate public interests. Under these conditions, ideal religious authority is rational, humane, and respectful of individual freedom.

### **Reinterpreting Freedom in the Space of Religious Authority**

Every individual must seek to reclaim their rights, including the right to life, freedom, property, and even individual rights. Freedom and equality are the natural state of every individual, which must be recognized. Islam teaches its followers to respect and uphold the rights of others, and that no one has the right to deny others their rights. Islam also guarantees the independence of every person and group. Therefore, Islam regulates the balance between individual interests and the respect and protection of the rights of fellow human beings, aiming to safeguard the safety of everyone, both in their own interests and in the public interest. Forcing religion upon others is thus counterproductive and contradicts divine intent (Faquhuddin, 2023).

Reinterpreting freedom requires the application of *ta'wil* and rational approaches to interpretation, as exemplified by Ibn Rushd's effort to harmonize reason and revelation by supporting *ta'wil* for the sake of philosophical study (Firdaus & Riyadi, 2025). Rational approaches are particularly applied to verses categorized as *ẓannī al-dalālah*, whose meanings are open to interpretation and not fixed by unequivocal textual evidence. Such verses are interpreted *majāzī*, including *mutashābihāt* verses, which should not be understood literally but contextually (Kiswati, 2015). The application of rational interpretation in legal reasoning promotes outcomes that are more compatible with freedom. As

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Abdulkarim Soroush argues, freedom belongs to rational human beings, and reason itself possesses an inherent claim to liberty. For Soroush, reason functions both as a source of truth and as a critical force (Soroush, 2000).

Interventions in individual freedom must be viewed in the context of social conditions. As Ibn Khaldun stated, historical events do not occur by chance but rather due to specific underlying causes (Abdurrahman bin Muhammad bin Khaldun, 2011). In this context, restrictions on individual freedom have existed since classical times, especially during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. Both dynasties used scholars as a tool to control society and legitimize their power. This led to the decline of Islam. As Ahmet T. Kuru argues, the decline of Islam was caused by an alliance between scholars and rulers, in which scholars depended on rulers and rulers used scholars to legitimize their power. This led to a loss of independent thinking. In other words, an authoritarian political system created a rigid and unfree climate for religious scholarship (Munawar-Rachman & Assyaukanie, 2025). Meanwhile, Syafii Maarif said that the decline of Islam was caused by the unfavorable political situation surrounding the Islamic empire and incompetent rulers who did not appreciate science, leading to the decline of Islam (Maarif, 1994).

Akyol expressed a different view. According to him, the decline in Islamic thought was caused by Muslims' choice of conservative interpretations and fatalistic theology, such as the Jabariyah school of thought. This means that Muslims themselves have chosen to be static and stagnant in their thinking about this decline. Akyol argues that the Asyariyah school has limited the use of rational thinking. He believes that this restriction on rational thinking has weakened *ijtihad* in determining Islamic law and led to a fideistic attitude, in which good and evil can be known only through revelation. Therefore, it is necessary to reopen Islamic thinking, especially regarding freedom and authority.

Akyol's statement was criticized by Hamid Ali, who said Akyol was merely accusing without considering the dynamics of Sharia thought. According to Hamid Ali, the dominance of Sharia thought was not solely due to political support, but because of Abu Hasan al-Asyari's success in convincingly reconciling reason and revelation. Departing from the background of the *Muktazilah* and then affirming the prophetic tradition in the style of Ibn Hanbal, the Asyari offers a middle ground between rationalism and textualism, so that his thought survives and is widely accepted, while the *Muktazilah* loses its influence (Ali, 2021). That is, the Asyari sought a way out of the conflict at that time through a middle path between the *Muktazilah* and the *ahl hadith*.

The historical understanding of the middle way of the Assyrian way is important because of its implications for individual freedom of thought today, where the dominance of literal understanding and the alliance of rulers and scholars has limited the ability of individuals to think critically and make rational choices, as seen in the birth of a fatwa prohibiting liberalism, secularism, and pluralism. Therefore, it is important to review the individual's thinking ability. This is because human ability and nature are the freedom to

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act and determine their will (Nasution, 2006), which is based on reason as a tool to consider causes and effects in making decisions and doing actions (Abduh, 1972). Reason functions as a thinking power to understand problems, and the Qur'an itself encourages humans to use it through words such as *nadzar*, *tafakkur*, *tadabbur*, *i'tibar*, *tadzakur*, and *tafaqquh* (Abbas, 2014). Rejection of reason means opposing the logic of the Qur'an itself (Yusufian, 2011).

The function of human reason is to understand revelation, ethics, and morals. Reason can also establish arguments that do not depend on revelation. People who fear common sense fear freedom. People who fear freedom have no alternative but to cling to outdated ideas and dogmas, and as a result, they tend to think in a closed-minded way (Hashas, 2014). In addition to being an absolute right, freedom of thought for Ahmad Wahib is the duty of every individual. This freedom of thought is driven by reason. Freedom has no limits, including the limits of thinking about God, even though reason and human freedom have their own limits, because no one knows those limits. Therefore, people who believe, even if the results are wrong, are still better than people who are never wrong because they never think (Wahib, 1981).

Freedom of thought is also related to freedom of expression. Through freedom of expression, everyone can convey their ideas. Therefore, every individual must have the right to express themselves. The right to freedom of expression is fundamental and highly valued in a democratic system. Democracy itself promotes a system that involves the community in determining the law. This means that everyone is entitled to speak in a democratic forum (Nasution, 2020). If this freedom is not realized and people cannot express themselves, the country's democratic system is damaged and could lead to an authoritarian system of government (Selian & Melina, 2018). Furthermore, freedom of expression is a fundamental human and religious value, serving as the foundation for all human, social, and intellectual development. According to Maulana Waḥīduddīn Khān, freedom of expression and speech are directly related to innovation and creativity. If humans limit freedom of discussion and thought, they limit innovation and creativity. This is because freedom of expression opens up new horizons for human physical and spiritual progress and development (Saeed & Naem, 2020).

In specific interpretations, Islamic teachings are viewed as a system that encompasses law, authority, public order, and government, so that rejection of politics is considered apostasy (Munawar-Rachman & Assyaukanie, 2025). This concept originated with the Riddah incident during the reign of Abu Bakr as-Siddiq in Islamic history, marking the beginning of interpretations that linked matters of faith with political interests, such that apostasy was considered an act of rebellion against the state. This gave rise to the interpretation that the punishment for apostasy should be transferred from the afterlife to the world. This concept proved politically beneficial during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties to discredit their critics by accusing them of apostasy (Akyol, 2014). The punishment for apostasy itself, if examined in Islamic jurisprudence, is death.

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Historically, the death penalty did not originate from Islamic teachings, but rather from traditions that were later adopted as law by Islamic scholars. The Qur'an itself states that "There is no compulsion in religion," but coercion still occurs frequently. It is essential to recognize that the worldly punishment for apostasy is not from the Qur'an but from post-Qur'anic sources. During the Sassanid and Byzantine periods, the death penalty was imposed on apostates. Meanwhile, converts to Islam (mualaf) did not face such treatment in the West because the West embraced religious freedom, which included freedom from their own religion as well. Muslims need to do the same by distinguishing between sin and crime (Akyol, 2022). Because not all sins can be viewed as equal in their legal consequences, some sins are considered violations of God's rights, while others are regarded as violations of human rights (Akyol, 2014).

Therefore, it is necessary to review freedom, particularly freedom of religion and belief, as well as freedom from religion. According to Djohan Effendi, religious freedom cannot be enforced. Everyone has the freedom to determine their own religion or choose not to have one. According to him, religion is a matter of individual belief, so there should be no coercion. The essence of religion is sincerity, not coercion, which cannot be justified, because the most fundamental enemy of religion is hypocrisy (Effendi, 2022). The prohibition of coercion is stated in the Qur'an, the Word of Allah, as found in Qs. Al-Baqarah (2): 256. "There shall be no compulsion in religion." (Saeed & Naeem, 2020) This verse underscores the fundamental principle that religion should be free from external pressure and coercion.

Within this framework, it is essential to recognize that the distinction between sins against God and transgressions against humans must be taken into account when establishing laws. This is because worship is a matter between individuals and God, which cannot be interfered with by anyone, including religious authorities. In contrast, human relationships involve social, political, and even economic dynamics, making them fluid and prone to conflict. Therefore, rules and social structures are needed to regulate these relationships and improve society.

Restrictions imposed by religious authorities will give rise to authoritarian attitudes that use all means to enforce adherence to their own understanding. Authoritarians tend to interpret verses from the Quran literally and ahistorically, resulting in a narrow and exclusive knowledge (Munawar-Rachman, 2011). Meanwhile, according to Kant, restrictions that are allowed to continue become obstacles to progress. One adverse effect of restrictions is the threat of social disintegration, including disharmony among religious communities. Kant believed that harmony between religious communities could be achieved if every citizen were given the freedom to use rational reasoning and freedom of expression (Abror, 2018).

The phenomenon of the intervention of religious authority, which is contrary to the function of authority itself, as expressed by John Stuart Mill, regarding the role of authority, is limited to limiting hypocrisy and crime (Pramana, 2023). A similar view was expressed by Robert Nozick, who stated that the role

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of authority is limited (Khakha, 2016). Meanwhile, the current reality has nothing to do with crime, but rather with freedom as the right of every individual. Therefore, there needs to be a reinterpretation of freedom, especially in the realm of religious authority.

Basically, Islam prohibits interference with individual freedoms, including the authority to restrict human rights, except in cases where individuals commit crimes or engage in hypocrisy. Therefore, any sin related to God cannot be punished in this world. However, the punishment must be handed over to Allah on the Day of Resurrection, as in the *Murjiah madhhab*, namely *Irja* (delay), which means that the punishment for sinners is left entirely to Allah in the hereafter, not to humans in this world (Akyol, 2022). According to this view, man has no right to punish others for these sins. If the punishment is still enforced, Islam will be seen as a harsh religion and may cause those who do not like Islam to tarnish the image of this religion further. On the contrary, Islam must present the values of *rahman* and *womb* as the core of its teachings.

By enforcing freedom, individuals can be considered whole subjects. According to Nozick, the goal of every individual must be to treat and be treated by others as autonomous beings who choose for themselves. This is because human rights derive from individuals' freedom to act consciously and choose among various alternatives. Free action is possible only if it is not entirely determined by factors beyond a person's control, such as the environment or life history. The goal is to save the concept of free will from the threat of determinism, because without freedom, humans cannot be responsible for their actions (Akyol, 2022). Furthermore, every human being belongs to themselves, meaning that humans are not objects or tools that others can use at will. Individuals have a high status as dignified subjects and have absolute rights over themselves (Nozick, 2013).

Therefore, there is a need to reinterpret the concept of freedom. A Muslim should not be forced to obey, because faithful obedience can only come from freedom of choice. Therefore, Muslims should not force others to avoid sin by banning alcohol, closing bars, or imposing strict dress codes. Instead, people need to encourage and advise one another. According to Akyol, the world is a place where humans are tested by God, presented with several choices, including the option to sin. If sinful acts are eliminated, humans cannot prove their piety. True piety comes from a sincere heart, not from external coercion. If someone obeys only because they fear state punishment or social pressure, their obedience does not reflect genuine faith, but rather obedience driven by fear of humans, not God (Akyol, 2014).

Akyol argues that religious restrictions and rules that force individuals to behave against their will are hypocritical. Regulations imposed by authorities in Eastern countries that force women to wear the hijab and in Western countries that prohibit the wearing of the hijab are coercive and contradictory (Akyol, 2021). This phenomenon shows that freedom is essential for every individual, institution, and authority. Every behavior must be based on sincerity and awareness. Therefore, Muslims need to be free from inner

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constraints that emphasize spiritual and physical freedom, or freedom from external coercion. Freedom is obtained so that humans can be free from restrictive authoritarian attitudes (Akyol, 2014).

Essentially, no individual is truly free without absolute freedom, which includes the right of every person to pursue their personal interests as long as they do not violate the rights of others. John Stuart Mill stated that true freedom is the ability to live according to one's personal desires, whether physical, mental, or spiritual, without being compelled to conform to others' ways of life. Humans benefit when they are allowed to live according to their own choices, rather than being forced to follow the views of others (Akyol, 2021).

The dynamics of freedom within authority, particularly in Islam, should not prohibit or interfere with individual liberty. Authority that is not under the control of a particular religion will embody authority that protects the weak, does not oppress thoughts or beliefs considered heretical by the religious elite, and does not restrict the right to practice other religions. This is a democratic system that places secularism as a necessity, while also providing space for liberalism and pluralism. Liberalism here is more related to the discourse of freedom of thought, especially in a religious context. Meanwhile, pluralism stems from the assumption that religions are not the same, while also responding to the reality of a diverse society, so it is necessary to be pluralistic, that is, to accept and respect differences (Akyol, 2022a, hlm. 269).

Fukuyama expressed a different view of liberalism, criticizing it for being practically enjoyed only by white elites, even though the theory emphasized the rights of all individuals. He emphasized tolerance and the right to belief. Still, liberalism fails if groups reject its principles or political conflicts escalate, as happened in the U.S. before the Civil War over slavery (Fukuyama, 2022). Yusuf Nebhan Aydin believes that Western liberalism fails to protect Muslim minorities from discrimination and Islamophobia, so he suggests a multiculturalism approach combined with liberalism and human rights, so that minorities obtain cultural recognition, legal protection, and equal economic and political opportunities (Nebhan Aydin, 2019).

Robert Nozick's view reinforces the perspective of individual freedom by affirming that everyone has rights that must be respected and should not be violated by other individuals or groups (Nozick, 2013). According to him, the individual is not an object to be used under certain conditions, but a subject with absolute dignity and rights. This means that humans are not tools to be used freely, and that they should not be used as tools under any circumstances. Every individual right needs to be respected absolutely, unlike tools that can be regulated or overwritten under certain conditions (Nozick, 2013). Like Iqbal Hasanuddin, this concept has become the principle of self-ownership. Nozick affirms that everyone is fully self-possessed, so that no other party has the right to use, control, or exploit themselves without consent. Thus, the concept of self-ownership affirms that everyone has the right to complete freedom in determining their life, without the intervention of other parties, both individuals and states (Hasanuddin, 2017).

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Group dominance, rigid interpretations, or socio-political discrimination often limit freedom of thought, belief, and participation. Liberalism, while promising equality, often fails to protect minorities and faces limitations when its principles are rejected or conflicts arise. This condition demands criticism of coercive authority, as well as efforts to strengthen mechanisms that guarantee individual rights and encourage pluralism, tolerance, and genuine participation in society.

The failure of liberalism underscores the need for a clear principle balancing freedom and authority to protect society's rights without arbitrary restraint. According to John Stuart Mill's idea, which reveals the relationship between freedom and authority, both play different roles. There is a need for principles that regulate the relationship between freedom and authority. Authority has the right to restrict society's freedom if its actions threaten others' freedom. This means that freedom is only limited for the sake of freedom, not for other purposes. Furthermore, violations of citizens' freedom occur when the use of power and the freedom of other members of society result in harm to certain freedoms. Mill emphasizes that interference with individual freedom can be justified only to prevent damage to others, and not solely for one's own good; there should be no coercion or detention (Pramana, 2023).

As Akyol pointed out, religious and state authorities cannot be combined because they have different roles (Akyol, 2014). By separating authority and religion, Muslims will no longer focus on political issues. To borrow Nozick's term, humans must be seen as the goal. Therefore, by making humans the goal, authorities need to consider factors that support human progress, especially for Islamic societies that are currently lagging.

State power should be grounded in legal human rights, not merely the ability to compel others to act (Marbun, 1996). Religious authorities cannot be separated from their essential role, especially in society, because they help people understand religion and offer guidance. However, in Akyol's view, religious authorities should not claim to have absolute power. What authorities need to understand is the rights of each individual and to respect those rights. In Akyol's view, authority is merely an advisory council that guides society without imposing its decisions, while still allowing individuals the freedom to think for themselves.

Thus, restrictions on freedom by religious authorities raise concerns about individual rights, especially within the domain of freedom of thought and religion. Restrictions through fatwas and religious institutions contradict the spirit of Islam, which places freedom as a prerequisite for moral responsibility. Therefore, a rational, contextual, and historical reinterpretation of Islamic teachings is required to harmonize revelation and reason, and to affirm Islam as a civilization that upholds freedom. Ideally, individual freedom should be guaranteed so long as it does not violate others' rights, and religious authority should not be used to suppress intellectual autonomy or to impose exclusive interpretations.

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Meanwhile, in this context, Tariq Ramadan emphasized the importance of a balanced Western Muslim identity. Muslims must be loyal to the teachings of Islam while participating fully in a secular society, respecting the principles of secularism if they do not conflict with the teachings of Islam, so that they can contribute significantly and spread Islamic values peacefully (Khirzul Haq dkk, 2022). Akyol emphasizes the limits and role of authority in protecting individual freedom. In contrast, Ramadan emphasizes the formation of a balanced individual identity to live in harmony in a secular society without losing religious principles. By understanding the roles and limitations of religious and state authorities and the importance of balanced individual identities, excessive interference by authorities can limit freedom of thought and religion.

In this regard, pluralism and liberalism are essential components in reinterpreting freedom within the sphere of religious authority and in sustaining diversity and human rights within a pluralistic society. This research adopts the intellectual position that a free, open, and critically engaged Muslim mind is necessary for the development of an Islamic tradition that is both faithful to its normative foundations and responsive to contemporary human rights standards. This stance aligns with the view that freedom is not antithetical to religion but an integral element that ensures the ethical maturity and moral accountability of believers.

### **Conclusion**

Reopening the case for freedom requires placing human beings at the center, not as objects or instruments for the benefit of others. Within this framework, freedom is understood not only as a moral value but also as a religious principle that defines the legitimate limits of religious authority in Islam. By recognizing human beings as rational and moral subjects, the relationship between individuals and authority shifts from a hierarchical and coercive pattern to an ethical and normative one, in which revelation and reason function as foundations of moral responsibility rather than as tools for restricting freedom.

This study contributes to the development of normative political theology and Islamic moral philosophy by clarifying the ethical boundaries of religious authority. Its findings suggest the need to reposition fatwa institutions and the Muslim state so that religious authority operates as a contextual and non-coercive moral guide, while state intervention remains limited to the protection of individual rights and public safety. In this sense, freedom is not positioned as a threat to religion but as a prerequisite for moral responsibility, social tolerance, and the progress of Islamic civilization. This study differs from previous scholarship by focusing on religious freedom within a specific social and intellectual context, rather than examining religious authority in abstraction. By explicitly analyzing the relationship between freedom, individual rights, and religious authority in Mustafa Akyol's thought, this research offers a more integrated understanding of how Islamic teachings can be reinterpreted to remain faithful to their normative foundations while responding to contemporary human rights concerns.

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