

Anarchy and Islam

Written by Davi Barker.

I've met Muslims of every school of anarchist thought from anarcho-socialists to national-anarchists. Prominent among them are Hakim Bay's "ontological anarchism" and Yakoub Islam's "post-colonial anarcho-pacifism" but this is my story.

Since about 2008 I've used the username "TheMuslimAgorist" on various message boards and social networking sites. Before that my anarchist leanings were largely private. It was a caller to Free Talk Live named "Gene the Christian Anarchist" who inspired me to come out. He expressed many of my own views on government, specifically that governments don't factually exist. They are just people doing things. I'm ambivalent about the word "anarchist" because of the associations it has for most people, so I briefly used the term "nonarchist" before settling on "agorist" which is essentially a market-anarchist, "agora" being Greek for "market." I like that it's a word that most people are unfamiliar with, so I am free to define myself on my own terms.

In some abstract sense I have been both an anarchist and a Muslim since I was child, though I was unaware of either. I was an anarchist in the sense that I have never accepted illegitimate authority. I was the kid in elementary school who would not stand for the pledge of allegiance and the teenager in the punk rock regalia. I was a Muslim only in the sense that I have always sought a direct connection with God without any intermediary. I believed in God as far back as I can remember, which is interesting because my parents were not religious at all, and I received no religious instruction. In those days my anarchism and my Islam were not philosophical. I didn't even know what to call them. They came from my gut.

This brings us to my first foundational concept. I believed this before I converted to Islam but I had no word for it. Muslims call it "fitra" which is the concept that we are born good. There is no doctrine of original sin in Islam. By contrast I call this concept "original virtue." Muslims believe in an innate predisposition to truth and virtue. So, part of preserving our original virtue is trusting our earliest preferences and natural instincts. To me this suggests that evil and corruption are not innate but behaviors learned through propaganda or aggression.

This concept perfectly compliments the science in the video series "The Bomb in the Brain" by anarchist philosopher Stephan Molyneux and leads inexorably to the parenting style he advocates. He argues that violence in society, including the state itself, is an expression of childhood trauma. In fact, he suggests that many social vices like drug abuse and promiscuity that religious conservatives think should be addressed with aggression are

actually caused by aggression against children. In other words, a society in which children were free to reach adulthood with their original virtue intact would likely exhibit the righteous conduct desired by religious people, whether it was religious or not. If you extrapolate forward and imagine a population composed of such adults you arrive at a society characterized by non aggression.

In college I was infected with many collectivist ideas, but I was also mildly obsessed with Ron Paul. There was a lot of contradiction in my thinking but it was invisible to me because I hadn't thought very critically about it. It was actually my conversion to Islam in 2006 that motivated me to begin a deeper intellectual inquiry to clarify my thinking about both religion and politics.

It's actually easy to find the non aggression principle in the Quran, "There shall be no compulsion in religion" (Quran 2:256). Scholars say this verse is only prohibiting forced conversion, but the surrounding verses concern creed not proselytizing, so I see no reason not to apply it universally. The Arabic word "din" actually means "complete way of life" not just "religion." It seems to me that a complete way of life with no compulsion means a religion, a family life and even a political order with no compulsion. Actions which are coerced have no moral value, and the aim of Islam is to place moral value in every action, so coercion can never accomplish this.

It's also easy to find the free market in the Quran, "Do not consume one another's property unjustly, except that there be trade amongst you by mutual consent." (Quran 4:29) "Thou shalt not steal" implicitly presumes property rights. Islam is a religion of commerce, in fact before Muhammad's prophethood he was a successful merchant. In early Islamic society the scales of justice were also icons of commerce, and the merchant was regarded as one of the most beneficial people in society, because it was recognized that commerce was the source of material wealth, including the wealth that people gave in charity.

As a Muslim espousing a liberty perspective I found a lot of hostility online from people insisting the Quran commanded violence against non-Muslims. The favorite of anti-Muslim demagogues and Islamic extremists alike is the so-called **Verse of the Sword** which reads, "Fight and slay the pagans wherever you find them" (Quran 9:5). It looks bad right? But the verse just before it reads, "Your peace treaties are not dissolved with those pagans who have not aggressed against you," and the verse just after it reads, "if one amongst the pagans asks you for asylum grant it to him and escort him to a place of safety."

If you read the entire chapter it tells the story of a specific pagan tribe that murdered a group of Muslims. Permission was given to retaliate against the aggressors, but no one else. This is what I found with every instance of violence in the Quran. It was always a defensive measure, which does more to confirm the non aggression principle than violate it.

During his life all prophet Muhammad's followers consented to his political leadership voluntarily and individually, face to face. He never claimed the authority to legislate over people who did not consent, and the Jewish and Pagan tribes of Arabia maintained their own independent legal systems. In other words, he never established a regional monopoly on law. But when he died a split occurred over who should be his successor. Those who followed Muhammad's cousin Ali became the Shiites, and those who followed Muhammad's closest adviser Abu Bakr became the Sunnis, but there was a third group which argued that they had only made oaths to Muhammad, so they would not follow either leader. They were the Kharijites. To them every individual was responsible for their own salvation, and they demanded complete political independence because they felt they should have no master but God. So there was a school of anarchist thought in Islam from the outset.

It's easy for me to romanticize about the Kharijites, but history remembers them as the fanatics of their day. Sunnis and Shiites traveling in Kharijite territories would actually wear Christian crosses because the Kharijites took seriously the Quranic injunction to respect People of the Book, but they would kill Sunnis and Shias as heretics. It's possible that they've been maligned by historians just as anarchists are maligned today, but there's no way to know and I'm not particularly interested in resurrecting some long dead minority sect of Islam. The fact remains that for most of Islamic history there has been an Islamic state. Even if I can find the seeds of anarchist and libertarian thought looking into the past is a bit like walking into a mirage. So, recently I've taken a more evolutionary approach.

It is reported in the Musnad of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, which is a compilation of widely accepted prophetic sayings that Muhammad said, "I will remain among you as long as God wills. Afterwards there will be my successors who follow my guidance... Then there will be a reign of oppressive kings... Then there will be a reign of despotic tyrants."

For non Muslims this likely means little more than the writings of Nostradamus, but for Muslims it is clear that it has already progressed to kings, and hard to argue it hasn't progressed to full blown tyrants. So, for Muslims who accept this prediction any attempt to reform government could only result in further tyranny. If rulers inevitably become tyrants, then the only acceptable course of action for people concerned with justice is to stop installing rulers and begin to explore stateless alternatives to social problems. The reality for Muslims today is that this is less an intellectual exercise and more a practical necessity, especially in light the tenuous hold the current tyrannies hold over their people.

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