

## Afterwords

### Does Islam Need a Reformation?

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One of the common refrains in commentary about the Islamic Middle East, especially in the decade since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, is that Islam needs a Reformation. This analogy with the Protestant Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe is intended to suggest that a similar movement within Islam would counter the fundamentalism of Islamic extremists, strengthen religious freedom, and lead to something like the separation of church and state.

Salman Rushdie, target of a death edict from Ayatollah Khomeini for his *Satanic Verses*, puts it this way: “What is needed is a move beyond tradition—nothing less than a reform movement to bring the core concepts of Islam into the modern age, a Muslim Reformation to combat not only the *jihadi* ideologues but also the dusty, stifling seminaries of the traditionalists, throwing open the windows of the closed communities to let in much-needed fresh air.”<sup>1</sup> Robin Wright, a journalist who writes frequently about the Middle East, describes Iranian philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush as the Martin Luther of Islam, “shaping what may be Islam’s equivalent of the Christian Reformation.”<sup>2</sup> Soroush rejects the fundamentalism of the ruling mullahs, advocating democracy and a fuller scope for reason in religion. Some Islamic reformers see themselves in the same light. Saudi activist Mansour al-Nogaidan, for example, says, “Islam needs a Reformation. It needs someone with the courage of Martin Luther . . . Muslims are too rigid in our adherence to old, literal interpretations of the Koran. It’s time for many verses—especially those having to do with relations between Islam and other religions—to be reinterpreted in favor of a more modern Islam.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, “Muslims Unite! A New Reformation Will Bring Your Faith into the Modern Era,” *The Times of London*, August 11, 2005, accessed online at: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest\\_contributors/article553964.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article553964.ece).

<sup>2</sup> Robin Wright, “An Iranian Luther Shakes the Foundations Of Islam,” *The Guardian*, February 1, 1995, quoted from *The Los Angeles Times*, January 1995, accessed online at: [http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/News\\_Archive/E-NWS-19950201-1.html](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/News_Archive/E-NWS-19950201-1.html).

<sup>3</sup> Mansour al-Nogaidan, “Losing My Jihadism,” *Washington Post*, July 22, 2007,

The historical analogy, in other words, is that modernist, tolerant, reformist Muslims are to the fundamentalists as the Protestants of the Christian Reformation were to the medieval Catholic Church. The call for an Islamic Reformation presumes that the theocratic rulers of Iran and Saudi Arabia—and the would-be theocrats in al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and the Muslim Brotherhood—are the counterparts of the medieval Catholic Church, and that reformers who oppose them are the contemporary equivalents of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Protestant reformers.

Such claims are nearly the opposite of the truth. In fact, it is the Islamists *themselves* who most resemble the early Protestants. Those who employ the analogy are seeing the Reformation through the lens of later developments: the growth of religious freedom and tolerance that culminated in the Enlightenment two centuries later. While the Reformation played a limited and indirect role in that development, it was certainly not what the Protestant leaders intended. They called for a return to the spirit and practices of the early Christian community, without the formal organization or intermediation of the Church—just as Islamists call for a return to the simple faith of Muhammad and the “rightly guided caliphs” who followed him in the seventh century. Like the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, Islamists today are fundamentalists. The Protestants wanted to abandon the edifice of scholastic thought, the efforts by Catholic theologians and philosophers to make sense of the religion, and return to a literalist reading of the scriptures—just as Islamists want to bypass the edifice of learned interpretation in “the dusty, stifling seminaries of the traditionalists” in favor of reliance solely on the Qur’an. In philosophical terms, both Protestantism and Islamism represent movements away from the values of reason, the pursuit of happiness in this world, and political freedom. In short, the Islamic world does *not* need a Reformation. The problem is that it’s having one now. What it needs is an Enlightenment.

On the eve of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church presided over the spiritual life of Western Europe. It had survived the fall of the Roman Empire and separated from the Eastern Orthodox Church. Its domain now included Spain, from which Muslims (and Jews) had recently been driven. The Church was a wealthy institution, owning vast properties throughout Europe. Though formally distinct from the political states, it wielded a great deal of de facto temporal power.

The Church also presided over the intellectual life of Europe. Its monasteries and universities were centers for education, preservation of manuscripts, and active debate on philosophical and scientific as well as theological issues. In the thirteenth century, scholars had rediscovered the works of Aristotle, thanks largely to Latin translations from Arabic versions. Aristotle’s views on nature, man, knowledge, and ethics were a massive

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accessed online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/20/AR2007072001808.html>.

intellectual challenge to Christians, since they were secular, based on reason, and man-centered, with virtuous happiness as the highest moral aim. Here was a thinker who was obviously capable of profound insight and powerful reasoning. Moreover, the Christian West had had Aristotle's logical works for centuries; they had learned their methods of analysis and disputation from him; and now they discovered that his vision of the world was radically different from theirs.

Though the Church was initially hostile, it did allow discussion of Aristotle's works. Thomas Aquinas put together a synthesis of Aristotelianism and Christianity that the Church could accept. Aquinas's outlook was a radical departure from the views of Augustine, which had previously dominated Christian thought. Whereas Augustine holds that all knowledge, even of the natural world, depends on trust in God, Aquinas holds that our faculties of sense-perception and reason are sufficient to give us knowledge of this world, and that philosophical reason is necessary as an independent adjunct to faith even in matters of religion. Whereas Augustine claims that life in this world is a vale of tears, a brutal initiation for entrance to Heaven, Aquinas holds that happiness in this life is both possible and worthy as a goal. Whereas Augustine teaches that human nature is inherently corrupt, and that we are totally dependent on God's grace for our salvation, Aquinas holds that salvation depends on both grace and man's free will to choose the good, act virtuously, and perform good works.

By the time of the Reformation, this synthesis had become a new orthodoxy within the Church. But the Church did not entirely suppress debate, at least within the universities, and some thinkers went even farther than Aquinas in defending reason over faith.<sup>4</sup> The Protestant reformers objected to every element of the Thomistic synthesis and sought a return to Augustine's outlook. The flash point of Luther's opposition to the Church was the sale of "indulgences," that is, payments to the Church to ensure a fate no worse than purgatory for oneself or one's loved ones. Luther's critique of indulgences, the main topic of his *The Ninety-Five Theses*, is normally interpreted as an objection to a corrupt practice, a kind of spiritual protection racket. But Luther's objection goes much deeper. He rejects the notion that any worldly power could affect God's choice to save or condemn people.

Luther's doctrine of *sole fides* holds that salvation comes solely through faith in God and Jesus Christ. As historian of religion David M. Whitford puts it:

Instead of storehouses of merit, indulgences, habituation, and 'doing what is within one,' God accepts the sinner in spite of the sin.

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<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, throughout this period, the Church *did* sanction punishment of popular heresies, and, in reaction to the Protestant Reformation, became much more intolerant, using the Inquisition and other means to inhibit dissent.

Acceptance is based on who one is rather than what one does. Justification is bestowed rather than achieved. Justification is not based on human righteousness, but on God's righteousness—revealed and confirmed in Christ . . . . For Luther the folly of indulgences was that they confused the law with the gospel. By stating that humanity must do something to merit forgiveness they promulgated the notion that salvation is achieved rather than received.<sup>5</sup>

In short, Luther opposes any notion of earning salvation by good works. Calvin goes even further. His doctrine of predestination holds that God has chosen the elect—those who are to be saved—regardless of merit, and that no human action can alter that choice.

Luther, Calvin, and other Protestants reject the notion that the Church must intercede between man and God. Luther holds that every man is his own priest, relating directly to God without any middleman. In aid of this view, Protestants supported the translation of the Latin Bible into vernacular languages so that ordinary people could read it, and some were burned at the stake for their efforts. This is one of the reasons the Reformation has been seen as a movement toward individualism. But the fundamental rationale was not to promote individual autonomy. It was to promote another of Luther's doctrines: *sola scriptura*. Luther and other reformers wanted to reject the interpretation of Christian doctrine by Catholic scholars and priests and return to the original scriptures as authoritative.

Even when it rests on faith-based premises, the interpretation of texts and the attempt to explain away apparent contradictions is an exercise of reason. That exercise was a hallmark of Catholic scholastic thought. The Protestants wanted to bypass reason and achieve a transparent understanding of scripture, based on a literal, fundamentalist reading. At its deepest level, this goal was motivated by hostility to reason. "Reason is the devil's greatest whore," Luther writes.<sup>6</sup> If one abandons reason, however, and relies entirely on faith and authority, there is no possibility of reconciling disputes. Inevitably, the Reformation produced a plethora of conflicting doctrines, which led to wars of religion in the century following Luther, Calvin, and their contemporaries.

These wars were one factor that led to the Enlightenment's spirit of tolerance. But the Protestants themselves were not advocates of tolerance. Luther sought to have the German princes in his region adopt his version of Christianity as a state religion. Calvin, in Geneva, instituted theocratic rule,

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<sup>5</sup> David M. Whitford, "Martin Luther," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, June 30, 2005, accessed online at: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/luther/>.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, "Last Sermon in Wittenberg," [January 17, 1546], cited in Martin E. Marty, *Martin Luther: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 177.

with Christian morality enforced by law and blasphemy a capital offense. While the wars of religion created an incentive for toleration as a way to end the bloodshed, it is unlikely that this would have led to any lasting condition of religious freedom without other, independent historical factors: the growth in individualism through trade, art, and other developments; the simultaneous development of science, which showed the power of reason; and the arguments of philosophers, like Francis Bacon and John Locke, who broke the hold of theology over secular thought.

Islam has never had a single institution comparable to the medieval Church. Its “clergy” were the imams in local mosques, judges of Islamic law, and scholars in universities such as al-Azhar in Cairo. Known as the *ulama*, they were steeped in study of the Qur’an, of the *hadith* (words and actions of Muhammad), and of the endless commentaries and commentaries upon commentaries produced by previous generations. They were the religious establishment against whom Islamists rebelled, as Protestants had rebelled against the Church. As Emmanuel Sivan notes, the leadership of Islamist groups is “composed for the most part of university students and modern professionals, autodidacts in religious matters.”<sup>7</sup> Osama bin Laden, for example, was certainly not of the *ulama*, yet he claimed the authority to issue *fatwas* (rulings on Islamic law), just as Luther claimed the autonomy to post his *The Ninety-Five Theses* against the Church. In recent decades, the Internet has made it possible for lay Muslims to learn and discuss Islamic doctrine outside the establishment in the same way the printing press enabled the spread of Protestantism in Luther’s day.

Islamists are not reacting against an Aristotelian strain in Islam. There has been no such strain since the days of Averroes in twelfth-century Spain. The Islamists are reacting against the Enlightenment modernism of the West, which they see as a threat to Islamic culture, but their call for a return to an imagined purer state of Islamic society is analogous to the Protestant goal of freeing Christianity from the worldly compromises and the scholasticism of the Church. The philosophical content of Islamist theory is likewise similar to that of the early Protestants.

There is, first, the opposition to rational inquiry. Islamists are happy to import Western technology, but not the underlying scientific spirit of open inquiry that produced it. Sivan reports that “the radicals voice the all-too-expected complaint that the teaching of science, though not openly critical of religion, is subverting Islam quite efficiently, precisely by being oblivious to it.”<sup>8</sup> Speaking of his opposition to the United States (the “Great Satan”), Ayatollah Khomeini said, “We are not afraid of economic sanctions or

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<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

military intervention. What we are afraid of is Western universities.”<sup>9</sup>

Islamists also oppose the worldliness of Western life, the pursuit of happiness, prosperity, and pleasure. Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian theorist of *jihad*, was repelled by what he saw as the materialism of American life during his studies here in the 1940s. “In what he saw as the spiritual wasteland of America,” writes Lawrence Wright in a *New Yorker* profile, “he re-created himself as a militant Muslim, and he came back to Egypt with the vision of an Islam that would throw off the vulgar influences of the West. Islamic society had to be purified, and the only mechanism powerful enough to cleanse it was the ancient and bloody instrument of jihad.”<sup>10</sup> Qutb became a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and was executed in 1965—but not before his works had made him one of the most influential Islamist thinkers.

Islam includes the doctrines of predestination by God’s will and man’s need to submit to God’s commands. Islamists, like the Reformation Protestants, typically hold extreme versions of these views. And the submission must be political as well as personal. The imposition of *sharia*, in order to enforce morality, as Calvin’s theocratic rule in Geneva sought to do, is a central goal.

Islamism is only the latest call for a return to the original vision and purity of Islam; there have been waves of such reform movements throughout the history of the religion. The same is true for Christianity; the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century had many predecessors. Both religions were predicated on faith in a transcendent God and the hope of salvation in a life to come. That mystical foundation necessarily conflicts with any effort to understand the world by reason, or to seek one’s happiness in the world, or to enrich the world with the secular values of civilization. In the nature of the case, “reform” will, by rationally defensible standards, be a regression. The most we can expect is that such movements will shake things up and inadvertently lead to progress.

Will that happen with Islam? Will Muslims find and embrace their Enlightenment? Let us hope that they will—and that their transition from Reformation to Enlightenment will be shorter and less bloody than it was in Europe.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, quoted by Daniel Pipes, “There Are No Moderates: Dealing with Fundamentalist Islam,” DanielPipes.org, Fall 1995, accessed online at: <http://www.danielpipes.org/274/there-are-no-moderates-dealing-with-fundamentalist-islam>.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Wright, “The Man Behind Bin Laden,” *New Yorker*, September 16, 2002, accessed online at: [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/09/16/020916fa\\_fact2](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/09/16/020916fa_fact2).

<sup>11</sup> This article was first published in a slightly different form in *The New Individualist* (Spring 2011), accessed online at: <http://www.atlassociety.org/tni/islam-reformation>.

