

Modern Islamic Views of Martin Luther and Protestantism

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Abstract

This paper looks at how prominent Muslim reformers of the 19th and 20th century treated Martin Luther and the Reformation in their books, articles, pamphlets and essays. In most cases, they wrote on them positively and as a model for reforms they thought the Muslim world needed. The author cites their views and opinions to demonstrate that Martin Luther's image in reformist circles in the traditional lands of Islam was as of a European reformer who drew upon Islamic sources. The paper also discusses the psychological reasons that contributed to the glorification of Luther's personality in books and articles by reformist Islamic and Muslim intellectuals of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Keywords: Modern Islamic Thought, Martin Luther, Reformation, Islamic Reformation, Protestantism

Introduction

Reformist and modernising texts written by Muslims from the turn of the 18th and through the 19th and 20th centuries frequently refer to Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the emergence of Protestantism on the social and religious scene of Europe (and throughout what came to be called the Western hemisphere). Muslim reformist circles included many who saw Protestantism as the key phenomenon that had allowed the concepts of "advance" and "progress" to take root in Europe and the West. In their diligence to apply the "concept of progress" in other parts of the world and so in the traditional lands of Islam, Muslim modernists and reformers found inspiration in the reforms of Martin Luther.

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The purpose of this short paper is to consider some of the more important Muslim authors, reformers and revivalists, active between the turn of the 18th and the first half of the 20th century and since, who advocated in the Arab and Islamic worlds for the idea that Martin Luther and Protestantism had been positive phenomena and that Muslims should emulate them if they wanted to achieve:

- a) a thorough reform of their own societies;
- b) renewal of their religious and social institutions;
- c) re-evaluation of their historical religious tradition; and
- d) separation of the “living” parts of that tradition from the “dead”.

This entails describing how those Muslim reformers referred to Luther’s mission, regardless of how superficially, inconsistently, generally and without the attention due to the need for a thorough analysis of the many religious, geographic, historical and social differences between the Islamic world and the West. This presentation also aims to reveal the psychological reasons that, often unconsciously, motivated the Muslim reformists to invoke Martin Luther and his “uprising” against alleged “Catholic backwardness” in 15th and 16th century Europe so eagerly. The Muslim reformist literature dedicates many pages to an “imaginary” or “invented” Luther, depicted almost as an “Islamic reformer” who had somehow transplanted Islamic patterns for the organisation of social, state and religious institutions to the heart of Europe.

It is also of note that many of these Muslim modernisers were familiar with the formal Protestant principle of “Sola Scriptura!” (*Scripture alone!*). Martin Luther ardently supported and promoted this principle, in the hope of reigniting religious fervour and distinguishing valid from “invalid” aspects of the religious traditions of Christianity. Thus, for example, *al-Manār*, the reformist Muslim journal launched by Muhammad Rashid Riḍā and Muhammad ‘Abduhū in Cairo in 1898, in response to an essay by Muhammad Tawfiq Sidqī (1881-1920), a physician by profession, published a series of texts on whether Islam should be based on the Qur’ān alone; Sidqī’s essay, entitled “Islam is the Qur’ān alone” (*al-Islāmu huwa l-qur’ānu waḥdahū*), was published in *al-Manār* in 1906.²

The entire ensuing debate on Muḥammad Tawfiq Sidqī’s “Protestant views” has recently been re-edited and re-published in Beirut by Hishām ‘Abd al-‘Azīz.³ The editor offers the following comment regarding Protestantism:

Martin Luther (...) and Calvin founded the Protestant school of thought (*maḍhab*) and by it they separated from the Catholic school of thought...⁴

I will consider this emphasis on the singular status of the Qur’ān, to the exclusion of other sources, so clearly visible in the formation of Islamic modernist

2 *Tāfīr al-Manar*, IX, Cairo (1324/1906), pp. 515–524.

3 Muḥammad Tawfiq Sidqī, Rashīd Riḍā, Ṭāhā al-Biṣrī, *Ḥiwār ḥawla: Al-Islam huwa l-Qur’ānu waḥdahū*, ‘Abd al-Azīz (ed.), (Jadāwal: Beirut, 2007).

4 *Al-Islāmu huwa l-qur’ānu waḥdahū* Hishām ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (ed.), p. 86.

thought during the 20th century, in a separate study in which I will offer a comprehensive account of the polemic and debates it generated.

In closing these preliminary remarks, I would like to note that I have been unable to identify a single author among the Islamic modernists and revivalists and particularly those from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, who engaged seriously with Luther's understanding of Islam and his, in fact, rather vehement invective against it, the Qur'ān and the Prophet Muhammad. More will be said on this later.

Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī – a Muslim Luther?

Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī (1839-1897) was the first Muslim reformer to speak openly about reform in traditional centres of Muslim learning such as Cairo, Istanbul, Teheran, and Delhi. In his reformist efforts, al-Afghānī often referenced Europe and Martin Luther and pointed to Protestantism as something positive. Indeed, al-Afghānī saw himself as the “Muslim Luther.” His *Ḥāṭirāt* (*Thoughts*) comprise debates and speeches from his Istanbul period, made in the years before his death in 1897 and collected later by Muḥammad Bāshā al-Maḥzūmī.⁵ It is almost entirely dedicated to his views on Europe and the West as the “advanced” part of the world and to the tasks Muslims had to undertake if they were to “reform” themselves. The *Ḥāṭirāt* (*Thoughts*) thus deserve special attention and study.

Al-Afghānī was also the first Muslim thinker to use the expression “Islam and the West” and appears to have been the first Muslim revivalist to deploy the terms “Islam” and “the West” as polarising concepts in his speeches, articles and pamphlets.⁶ The struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism in 15th, 16th and 17th century Europe, which he saw as a struggle between “backwardness” and “progress” within Christianity (and Europe), was a favourite theme. Nowhere in his writings did he clarify why he considered European Catholics in the time of Luther to be “the backward part of Europe.” He seemed to expect his readers simply to accept Protestantism as something positive and essentially in agreement with Islam, as against a Catholicism that was self-evidently retrograde, backward, and similar to *taqlīd* (blind, uncritical following) for Muslims. Al-Afghānī implicitly demanded that Muslims had first to think through “a Protestantism of their own” in order to become advanced and modern.

5 For more see: Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī, *Ḥāṭirāt*, edited by Muḥammad Bāshā al-Maḥzūmī (first edition Beirut 1931, reprinted in Alexandria/Cairo/Beirut: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2012).

6 “... he seems to have been the first Muslim revivalist to use the concepts ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ as ... antagonistic historical phenomena...,” Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, (Princeton: The New American Library, Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 55.

In a well-documented study, entitled *Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī, al-mi'awīyyatu l-ūlā (1897-1997)*, Ḥasan Ḥanafī⁷ provides a clear account of al-Afghānī's opus and ideas. It is worth briefly reviewing the passages in which he discusses al-Afghānī's enthusiastic invocations of Luther and Protestantism. Paraphrasing al-Afghānī's article on "Religious Reform" (*al-iṣlāḥu d-dīnīyyu*), which he supplements by reference to or direct quotation from other works, he sets out al-Afghānī's views on how Muslims should have approached reform and renewal at the end of the 19th century. In the end, what Ḥanafī demonstrates is that al-Afghānī wanted to carry out in the lands of Islam what Luther had achieved in Europe and the West. Al-Afghānī's "Lutheran" theses included the following:

- a) Religious renewal was one of the laws of rebirth and one of the means for overcoming backwardness and for accepting progress.⁸
- b) There would be no salvation from decadence and backwardness except by basing the revival and civilisation on religious foundations.
- c) The right path towards reform would be by way of a religious movement that would remove the wrong understanding of shariah and doctrine from the minds of common people and some of the elite.
- d) The correct teachings of the Qur'ān had to be propagated among the masses [and not just the *ūlamā*/the elect] and be explained to them so that they may lead to happiness, both in this world and in the hereafter.⁹
- e) From this there followed the necessity of studying modern science and restocking libraries again [i.e., so that they might be filled with reformist texts and literature] and of writing and distributing easily understandable books.
- f) That it was precisely by this path of reform that the West had moved from savagery to civilisation.
- g) The Reformation was a religious movement, launched by Luther after observing Europe's subjugation to (Catholic) priests and traditions that are "beyond reason and faith."
- h) Luther reformed morality, corrected wrong things, cleansed reason and drew attention to the natural freedom that is opposed to enslavement and oppression.¹⁰
- i) If we pursue al-Afghānī's description of Protestantism and Luther further, we may notice the emphasis he put on the emergence of the (Catholic) Counter-reformation and the ensuing competition or rivalry

7 Born in Cairo in 1935, Ḥasan Ḥanafī is a well-known university professor and social theoretician of Islamic and Muslim modernity.

8 Taken over with adaptation from Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī, al-mi'awīyyatu l-ūlā (1897-1997)*, (Cairo: Dāru Qibā', 1998), p. 187.

9 Taken over with adaptation from Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī, al-mi'awīyyatu l-ūlā (1897-1997)*, (Cairo: Dāru Qibā', 1998), p. 187.

10 Taken over with adaptation from Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī, al-mi'awīyyatu l-ūlā (1897-1997)*, (Cairo: Dāru Qibā', 1998), p. 187.

between Protestantism and Catholicism over power, honour, and domination in civilisation, in their attempt to outdo one another.

- j) Modern civilisation was born out of this competition between Protestants and Catholics.

In some passages, al-Afghānī did stress that “rebirth” in Muslim lands should not be pursued by aping the West, because that would lead to being dazzled by foreigners and so to being submitted to them and accepting their rule. (Even though it is evident that al-Afghānī was here rejecting “*taqlid*” towards the West, we will see later that he held a positive view of Luther’s rejection of the allegedly “retrograde” Catholic priestly tradition).

According to certain of al-Afghānī’s views, if Islam were to yield to imitation of the West, it would become transformed from being liberation and creativity into being apathy and so become used to foreign rule.¹¹

In Ḥanafī’s interpretation, al-Afghānī was, of course, aware that, even though there were two rival Muslim groups, the Sunnis and the Shi’is, their competition was not such as to not facilitate the creation of a challenge that would lead to civilisation, as had been the case with Protestants and Catholics in the West. Al-Afghānī argued that the Shi’is seemed more similar to Catholics in certain regards, given the importance they attached to the men of religion, tradition and history, while the Sunnis were more similar to Protestants in their respect for reason, individualism and freedom, but in other regards the Shi’is sometimes seemed more similar to Protestants in their opposition and resistance, while Sunnis resembled Catholics in their submissiveness. Having thus cited and paraphrased al-Afghānī’s views, Ḥanafī concludes “Al-Afghānī sees himself as another Martin Luther.”¹²

Many European and Western scholars of the modern history of Islam have noted how many Muslim reformist thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries mention Martin Luther and Protestantism as “the model” to be followed by Muslims in critiquing their “ineffectual” heritage, especially the “old *‘ulamā* tradition” and *taqlid*.”

In this regard, Western studies on Islam commonly mention al-Afghānī’s motto that the Muslim world needs “a Muslim Luther.” Leafing through just a few studies or authors makes clear the tendency not just to compare a person of the significance of Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī (1839-1897) with Luther, but how his work and activities have been placed at the very heart of the most important reformist and revivalist trends to emerge among Muslims in the 19th and 20th centuries.

According to Marshall Hodgson, al-Afghānī was “a violent advocate of all kinds of reform: political, religious, and social.”¹³ Indeed, “He denounced the

11 Taken over with adaptation from Hasan Ḥanafī, *Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī, al-mi’awiyayatu l-ūlā (1897-1997)*, (Cairo: Dāru Qibā’, 1998), p. 187.

12 Ḥanafī, *Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī, al-mi’awiyayatu l-ūlā (1897-1997)*, p. 187.

13 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, III, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1959, p. 308.

ṣūfī tradition for its quietism and the conventional *‘ulamā* for their obscurantism, calling for a ‘Muslim Luther.’”¹⁴

In his *Islam in Modern History*¹⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith offers a number of interpretations, views and assessments of al-Afghānī. Thus, he writes: “These two tendencies – internal reform, external defence – are typified and fused in a person whose outstanding figure is central to the nineteenth-century Muslim world, Jamālu-d-Dīn Afghani (1839-1897.)”¹⁶ Indeed, Cantwell Smith tells us, al-Afghānī “inspired political revolutionaries and venerable scholars. He advocated both local nationalisms and pan-Islam. A very great deal of subsequent Islamic development is adumbrated in his personality and career. In fact, there is very little in twentieth-century Islam not foreshadowed in Afghani.”¹⁷ Cantwell Smith argues that al-Afghānī “realised that the entire Islamic world, not just this or that part of it, was threatened,”¹⁸ and so he “fired audiences in one Muslim country after another to a reawakened consciousness of how they had once been mighty, but now were weak.”¹⁹ This assessment of al-Afghānī by so authoritative an author as Cantwell Smith reinforced his status as “another Muslim Luther.” Cantwell Smith stresses the versatility of al-Afghānī’s mission, as follows:

Further, Afghani exhibited a partial appreciation of intellectualism and of Western values and particularly Western science and techniques. He saw the West as something primarily to be resisted, because it threatened Islam and the community, but secondly, in part to be imitated.²⁰

Cantwell Smith continues:

Particularly, he [al-Afghānī] is illustrative as a man passionately concerned to defend and to reactivate the mundane aspect of Islam. It was his vision and his determination (...) that Islamic history shall once again march forward in full truth and full splendor.²¹

Returning to Marshall Hodgson, we note that he calls al-Afghānī “the most famous intellectual reformer of Islam of the time”²² and a man “who combined an ardent pan-Islamic vision with scorn for the doctrines of the conventional *‘ulamā* and zeal for the spread of the European sciences.”²³ According to Hodgson, “al-Afghānī had taught a revival of each Muslim nation internally as part of a general pan-Islamic movement in which the reviving nations were to cooperate.”²⁴

14 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, III, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1959, p. 308.

15 Wilfred Cantwell Smith

16 Wilfred Cantwell Smith 54.

17 Wilfred Cantwell Smith 54.

18 Wilfred Cantwell Smith 55.

19 Wilfred Cantwell Smith 56.

20 Wilfred Cantwell Smith 56.

21 Wilfred Cantwell Smith 58.

22 Hodgson, p. 255.

23 Hodgson, p. 255.

24 Hodgson, p. 255.

Al-Afghānī continues to attract the attention of today's scholars of Islam with undiminished intensity. Thus, Karen Armstrong argues that "...wherever he travelled in Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Russia or Europe he was aware of the ubiquitous power of the West, and was convinced that it would soon dominate and crush the Muslim world."²⁵ Armstrong describes him as having "anti-*‘ulamā*" views, which is to say that he argued "Islam itself must respond to the changed conditions and become more rational and modern. Muslims must rebel against the long closing of the 'gates of *ijtihād* and use their own unfettered reason, as both the Prophet and the Qur'an had insisted."²⁶

Rodney Wilson has noted that al-Afghānī eagerly occupied himself not only with theology, but also with the social sciences, history, and even economics. Just as Martin Luther counted on the support of local German rulers,²⁷ placing his reforms at least in part outside the purely theological dispute with Catholic clergy (or papist "*‘ulamā*," so to speak), so al-Afghānī demanded reform not only of the religious, but also of the cultural, political, economic spheres of life amongst Muslim peoples. In his analysis of the emergence of Islamic economics as a distinct branch of economics, Wilson therefore argues that it can be seen as a manifestation of the Islamic revival of the late 19th century. In his view, "al-Afghani, arguably the most influential pioneer of Islamic modernism and anti-imperialism from the 1880s, sought to change Islam from a religious faith into a politico-religious ideology."²⁸

Frequent references to Luther and Protestantism

The 20th century thinkers, ideologues and propagandists of "progress" in the Muslim world generally had Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī in mind in their references to Luther and Protestantism.

‘Abd al-‘Azīz Jāwīsh (1876-1929), born in Alexandria, but by origin from Benghazi in Libya, was well-known for his modernist pamphlets, essays and texts. His *Islam – the religion of nature and freedom* (*al-Islāmu dīnu l-ḥūrriyah*) was the textbook, practically the breviary, of all Muslim apologists of "pro-

25 Karen Armstrong, *Islam, A Short History* (London: Phoenix, 2004), p. 129–130.

26 Karen Armstrong, *Islam, A Short History* (London: Phoenix, 2004), p. 130.

27 Graham E. Fuller states explicitly that "The Reformation would never have happened if Luther had simply been one of a handful of dissident monks arguing theology; the success of his movement was due to the direct support of German princes who shared his desire to cut the power of the church..." Graham E. Fuller, *A World Without Islam* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010), p. 121.

28 Rodney Wilson, "The Development of Islamic Economics: Theory and Practice," in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer M. Nafi (eds.), (London/ New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), p. 195.

gress” for many years. The work was written after the generally accepted pattern of Muslim reformism, which was linked to both al-Afghānī’s school of thought and to the school of the Egyptian reformer Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905). According to Jāwīsh, the Qur’ān liberates minds (*harrara l-‘uqūla*). He mentions, for example, that Roger Bacon knew Arabic²⁹ and that people like Bacon “prepared Europe for reform.”

On many pages of his work, Jāwīsh offers a reading of the multi-layered history of Islam that depicts Islam as the “nursery of reforms” whose goal was “overcoming medieval Europe.” Thus, he writes how “priests” (*rijālu d-dīn*) in mediaeval Europe were challenged by the philosophers and thinkers educated on the works of Ibn Rushd (Averroes), etc. By (*rijālu d-dīn*) he means Catholic priests. On page 184, he explicitly mentions Martin Luther and Protestantism as the movement ultimately responsible for getting rid of the “priests.”

It was, however, an implicit intention of this reformist writer to demonstrate that, if modern Muslims (in the 20th century) were right to emulate “progressive and advanced Europe and the West,” it was because Europe and the West had become “advanced” by being inspired by Muslims in the mediaeval age (through Spain, Sicily, the crusades, etc.). Consequently, what Muslims were taking from Europe was hardly “European,” but in fact had been passed on to Europe a long time previously as something “Islamic and Muslim,” and was now only being restored to Muslims as their own, Muslim tradition. Of course, Jāwīsh does not ask whether mediaeval Islamic science and philosophy, including the tradition of *falāsifa*, had really produced or could have produced the modern secular sciences. Of course, few Muslim reformers of the late 19th or early 20th centuries did ask themselves this or similar questions.

The example and personality of Shakīb Arslān (1869-1946), also known as Amīr Shakīb Arslān (in Bosnian: Emir Šekib Arslan; French sources give his name as *Chekib Arslan*), cuts a prominent figure in the modernist Muslim debates on the understanding and interpretation of Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. His text “Why are Muslims backward, while others have developed?” (*Li maḍā ta’ahhara l-muslimūna wa li maḍā taqaddama gayrubum*), published in three parts in *al-Manār* in 1930,³⁰ is the most powerful Muslim discussion of and lament over “European progress” and “Muslim backwardness.”

Let me note briefly that Arslān developed his modernist projects and ideas mainly in relation to “advanced Europe.” According to Raja Adal,³¹ Arslān passed through several phases in his treatment of Europe. For him, Europe was sometimes

29 ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Jāwīsh, “Islam – religion of nature and freedom” (*al-Islāmu dīnu l-fīṭrati wa l-hurriyah*) (Aleksandria/Cairo/Beirut: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2011), p. 183.

30 The Cairo-based *al-Manār* first published *Li maḍā ta’ahhara l-muslimūna wa li maḍā taqaddama gayrubum* – in three instalments. The same magazine then published the text as a brochure in many later editions.

31 Raja Adal, “Shakīb Arslan’s Imagining of Europe: The Colonizer, The Inquisitor, The Islamic, The Virtuous, and the Friend,” in Nathalie Clayer and Eric Germain (eds.), *Islam in Inter-War Europe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 156–182.

“the colonizer,” sometimes “the inquisitor.” At other times, he described Europe as “Islamic,” and “virtuous.” He also described Europe as a Muslim “friend.” Arslān’s vision of Europe and its modernity and his see-sawing in his evaluation of Europe were influenced by the turbulent times of the Balkan wars, the First World War, the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, the Second World War, etc. (I will discuss Arslān’s attitude to Europe at greater length in a separate text).

As to Muslim “enthusiasm” for Reformation and Protestantism, we may observe that in many of his texts Arslān took the view that Europe had Martin Luther to thank for its contemporary “progress” (*taqaddum*). He expressed this idea most clearly in his text on *Why are Muslims backward, while others have developed?* (*Li maḍā ta’ahḥara l-muslimūna wa li maḍā taqaddama gayrubum*).³² In his fervent promotion of progress, Arslān argued that a religion is not and cannot be a source of backwardness. Christianity was not a source of backwardness. Therefore, Arslān pointed his finger not at Christianity, but at the (Catholic) priesthood, which he equated with the traditional Islamic class, the *‘ulamā*, as the main real source of *ta’ahḥur* or backwardness.

Arslān put forward several theses in the form of modernist slogans:

a) Europe’s backwardness, which the Europeans lived through in the Medieval Age, lasted a thousand years.³³

b) Protestant peoples consider the source of this backwardness to be the Popish church, not Christianity.³⁴

c) Protestant peoples take the view that Europe’s rebirth began precisely with the revolt of Martin Luther and John Calvin against the Roman Church.³⁵

Then, for reasons known only to himself, he cited Voltaire and those who, as he put it, held the place of pillars/*quṭbs* of atheism in Voltaire’s party, arguing that they [i.e. Voltaire’s atheists] did not distinguish Catholics from Protestants. For the atheists, all those beliefs [both Catholic and Protestant] were one and the same thing, obstacles to science and progress.

One of the messages of his text was that, by adopting the concepts of European progress, Muslims were also adopting industriousness, patriotism, the value of sacrifice for their country and their identity, and so on. And just as Luther had attacked priests, Arslān also spoke resolutely against *‘ulamā* circles.

Perhaps the most outstanding example of enthusiasm for Martin Luther after al-Afghānī is to be found in the person of Amīn al-Ḥūlī (1895-1966). This prominent Cairene professor wrote an entire book on “the connection between

32 Cited from the edition of *Li maḍā ta’ahḥara l-muslimūna wa li maḍā taqaddama gayrubum* published in Alexandria/Cairo/Beirut: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2012.

33 Cited from the edition of *Li maḍā ta’ahḥara l-muslimūna wa li maḍā taqaddama gayrubum* published in Alexandria/Cairo/Beirut: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2012. 108.

34 Cited from the edition of *Li maḍā ta’ahḥara l-muslimūna wa li maḍā taqaddama gayrubum* published in Alexandria/Cairo/Beirut: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2012. 108.

35 Cited from the edition of *Li maḍā ta’ahḥara l-muslimūna wa li maḍā taqaddama gayrubum* published in Alexandria/Cairo/Beirut: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2012.108.

Islam and the Christian reformation” (*Şilatu l-islāmi bi iṣlāhi l-masīhiyyah*).³⁶ The work as a whole is dedicated to the phenomenon of Martin Luther and Protestantism in Europe. Of course, al-Ḥūlī had his own (simplified) interpretation of the highly complex and knotty historical period that informed both the meeting and clash of Islam and Christian Europe. What al-Ḥūlī meant by “Christian reformation” (*al-iṣlāhu al-masīhiyyu*) is clear from the following:

By Christian reformation, I mean the material and spiritual actions invested for the sake of changing the system of the Roman Catholic Church over long centuries and many generations, until the advent of Martin Luther, that courageous man, who made this reform real...

In his approximately 100 page-long book, al-Ḥūlī then set out his understanding of the encounter of Islam and Christianity, dividing them into material (*al-ittiṣālu al-māddiyyu*) and spiritual (*al-ittiṣālu al-maʿnawiyyu*). Using very broad descriptions, he discussed the spread of Arabic and of the ideas of Islamic philosophy and Islamic religious sciences to Europe.

In his effort to understand the phenomenon of Protestantism (which he glorifies), al-Ḥūlī includes the following developments among the immediate results of Islam’s impact on Europe:

- a) the softening of church power,
- b) the limiting of Church influence on life, and
- c) the liberation of the intellect.³⁷

What followed, al-Ḥūlī argues, was a complete discarding of Church authority.³⁸ He gave Martin Luther the credit for all of this, insofar as he had been educated by Church philosophers, like William Ockham, who had acquired their learning from the books of Ibn Rushd (Averroes).³⁹

Al-Ḥūlī especially stressed Luther’s teachings on salvation. Salvation is a gift of God (*an-najātu minḥatun mina ʾllāh*),⁴⁰ which every man receives without intermediary act (*dūna l-ʿamali t-tawassuṭiyyi*), etc.⁴¹ It is not difficult to see that al-Ḥūlī thought Luther had lifted these two principles straight from Islam. At the same time, al-Ḥūlī did not offer any clear or unambiguous proof that Luther’s conception of redefining Christianity had been formed in relation to Islam or its sources. To the contrary, current research on Luther by such scholars such as Norman Daniel⁴² and Adam S. Francisco,⁴³ amongst many others, reveals that

36 This work of Amīn al-Ḥūlī was published in Cairo by al-Hayʾah al-miṣriyyah al-ʿammah li l-kitāb, 1993.

37 Al-Ḥūlī, *Şilatu l-islāmi bi iṣlāhi l-masīhiyyah*, p. 55-56.

38 Al-Ḥūlī, *Şilatu l-islāmi bi iṣlāhi l-masīhiyyah*, p. 61.

39 Al-Ḥūlī, *Şilatu l-islāmi bi iṣlāhi l-masīhiyyah*, p. 64.

40 Al-Ḥūlī, *Şilatu l-islāmi bi iṣlāhi l-masīhiyyah*, p. 65.

41 Al-Ḥūlī, *Şilatu l-islāmi bi iṣlāhi l-masīhiyyah*, p. 65.

42 For more on this see: Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West, The Making of an Image* (Oxford, US: OneWorld), 1993.

43 For more on this see: Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam (A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics)*, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007).

he was one of the fiercest European critics of Islam, the Qur'ān and the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.)

It is true that in some places Martin Luther wrote favourably of “the religion of the Turks or Muḥammad,” pointing out “the simplicity of their food, clothing, dwellings, and everything else, as well as the fasts, prayers, and common gatherings of the people.”⁴⁴ But, these statements are rare instances of “praise of Islam and Muslims/Turks,” expressed only as tools for his vehement and unrelenting criticism of the Pope and of Rome and “the ceremonies of Catholic piety.” By way of preliminary illustration, let us quote his strongly worded interpretation of the first part of the Words of the Witnessing (al-Shahādah: *Lā ilāha illā 'llāh* – “There is no god but God!”)

Who does not know that God is God and that he is great? Who has ever heard that God is not God or that he is powerless? [This: *there is no god but God*]... sounds as if someone said: 'There is no donkey but donkey', 'there is no cow but cow', 'there is no man but man.' Surely everyone knows that an ox or a dog is not a donkey, and also that man or angels are not God. Fools and unreasonable people like to talk like that [as do Muslims in their testimony of faith].⁴⁵

This is neither the occasion nor place to quote extensively from passages in which Luther refers to Islam as “a satanic kingdom” (*regnum Diaboli*) besieging “the kingdom of God” (*regnum Dei*).⁴⁶

Of course, it is necessary, in reading Luther's criticisms and attacks on Islam, to keep in mind the times in which he lived and the historical context in which he addressed the themes of Islam, the Qur'ān, the Turk, etc. We should not forget that Luther was a contemporary of the siege of Vienna in 1529. In his cycle of “apocalyptic writings”, he views the Ottoman Empire as God's punishment, not only on the Pope and priests, but on Christians “who fail to follow the true Christianity,” etc.⁴⁷

Norman Daniel quotes Luther's statement: “Turca et Papa in forma religionis nihil differunt aut variant, nisi in ceremoniis.” For Luther, there was no difference between the Turks and the Pope in the form of their religion. They differed only in their religious ceremonies.⁴⁸

Returning to our Muslim apologists for the Reformation, particularly al-Ḥūlī, it needs to be said that the key weakness in their arguments about the Reformation lies in their oversimplified and general character and in their being set out *a priori*, without due examination of the historical context. Al-Ḥūlī did not

44 Quoted after Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam*, p.1.

45 “Wer weis nicht, das Gott Gott ist, und das er gros ist, Wer hat je gehort, das Gott nicht Gott ist, oder das er klein sey... Es laut eben, als wenn einer spreche: 'Est ist kein Esel, den ein Esel', 'Est ist kein kue, den eine Kue', 'Est ist kein Mensch, denn ein Mensch'. Man weis wol, das ein Ochs oder Hund kein Esel ist, auch Mensch oder Engel nicht Gott ist. Narren und Wansinnige mügen so reden.” Ibid., p.122.

46 Ibid., p.149.

47 The author is planning a translation into Bosnian of Francisco's study on *Martin Luther and Islam*, which helps greatly in clarifying Luther's views on Islam by putting them in the context of his times.

48 Daniel, *Islam and the West*, p. 405.

attempt to undertake any deeper analyses of the real reasons for the emergence of Protestantism in Europe and so to research the “native” (European) causes and effects or factors that stemmed from the European soil itself and had the greatest impact on the appearance of Protestantism (like the rise of increasingly powerful rulers, the strengthening of the use of vernacular languages, etc.)

In saying this, I am not claiming for a moment that we should ignore Luther’s knowledge of Islam or even of the tradition of Arabic and Islamic philosophy that influenced Europe. Nor do I think we should ignore Luther’s knowledge of Islam’s spiritual and theological heritage. But, recent studies on this question do tell us that Luther was not well-disposed to Islam and that Islam quite simply could not have been an inspiration for his reforms. As mentioned earlier, the study by Adam S. Francisco documents this view with a wealth of evidence.

In any case, the name of Martin Luther did become short-hand for reform and progress in the texts written by Muslim reformers and revivalists of the late 19th and 20th centuries. The writings of al-Ḥūlī offer one of the more prominent examples. These texts also offer an emotional sub-text, which can be summed up as follows: “You see, Luther himself reached out for Islam and reformed Europe! So, why would not we Muslims reform ourselves with Islam today, in the 20th century!”

As we have already seen, even before al-Ḥūlī, there were claims that Protestantism was an “Islamic product” and even a direct consequence of Islam’s influence on Europe. For example, the well-known Turkish modernist Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924) argued that the Protestant reformation was “actually inspired by Islamic ideals.”⁴⁹ In his view:

When we study the history of Christianity, we see that, following the Crusades [eleventh-thirteenth centuries], a new movement started in Europe, which was then acquainted with Islamic culture. This movement aimed at imitating Islamic civilization and religion. It penetrated Europe with time, and finally culminated in Protestantism as a new religion entirely in contra-distinction to the traditional principles of Christianity. This new religion rejected the priesthood, and the existence of two kinds of government, spiritual and temporal. It also rejected the papacy, the Councils, the Inquisition – in short, all institutions which had existed in Christianity – as contrary to the principles of Islam. Are we not justified if we look at this religion as a more or less Islamicized form of Christianity?⁵⁰

Mūsā Jārullāh Bigi (1875-1949), a near contemporary of Zia Gökalp, followed in Gökalp’s footsteps in describing Martin Luther and Protestantism as “being responsible for the advent of civilisation itself.” According to Bigi,

...through reformers like Martin Luther, the Christian world entered on the path of progress; meanwhile, through religious scholars and leaders such as Ibn Kemal

49 Kurzman and Browers (eds.), *An Islamic Reformation?* (New York/Toronto/Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004), p. 4.

50 Kurzman and Browers (eds.), *An Islamic Reformation?* (New York/Toronto/Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004), p. 4.

[Kemalpashazāde, Turkish scholar, circa 1468-1534]⁵¹ and Abu al-Su'ūd [Ebussu'ūd Efendi, Turkish religious leader, circa 1491-1574],⁵² the Muslim world went into decline. That is, while the civilized world progressed through the freedom of reason, through the captivity of reason the Muslim world declined.⁵³

As already stated, Amīn al-Ḥūlī's study was written with a twofold purpose: first to prove that Islam, as a "progressive religion", was at the very roots of the Protestant reformation; and, second, to show that, if they wished to be "progressive", the Muslims of the 20th century had to reform, just as the Christians had reformed themselves. As a result, there emerged a plethora of Muslim modernist thinkers and writers who, like al-Ḥūlī, presented similar arguments and strongly advocated for the emergence of "a Muslim Luther" and a reformation like the Protestant one. It was in the wake of such ideas that Hadi Atlasi (1875-1940), a scholar from Tatarstan wrote about "the Muslim Luther" who had appeared in the person of Shihābuddīn Marjānī (1818-1889), a reformist scholar from Tatarstan.⁵⁴

There is neither need nor room to present all the many other Muslim scholars of the 19th or 20th centuries who held similar views or all the prominent Muslim personalities whom their contemporaries singled out as "Muslim Luthers." As we shall see at the end of this talk, even in such recent times as the last two decades the search for the "Muslim Luther" has continued.

More sober views on Luther's reforms and a call for re-examining "liberal" teachings

And now we come to Muḥammad Iqbāl (1877-1938), who engaged with Martin Luther and Protestantism in an interesting way. In a text published in 1909, under the title "Islam as a moral and political ideal," Iqbal writes:⁵⁵

Luther, the enemy of despotism in religion, and Rousseau, the enemy of despotism in politics, must always be regarded as the emancipators of European humanity from the heavy fetters of Popedom and absolutism, and their religious and political thought must be understood as a virtual denial of the Church dogma of human depravity. The possibility of the elimination of sin and pain from the evolutionary process, and faith in the natural goodness of man, are the basic

51 The object of his criticism is the Ottoman scholar Kemalpashazāde, who lived between 1468 and 1534. See *ibid.*, p. 4.

52 The object of his criticism is the Ottoman scholar Abu Su'ūd Efendi, who lived between 1491 and 1574. See *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

53 The object of his criticism is the Ottoman scholar Abu Su'ūd Efendi, who lived between 1491 and 1574. See *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

54 The object of his criticism is the Ottoman scholar Abu Su'ūd Efendi, who lived between 1491 and 1574. See *ibid.*, p. 5. The scholar and revivalist Marjānī is much praised as the founder of "Islamic modernism in Russia."

55 Muhammad Iqbal, "Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal," in *The Hindustan Review* (July 1909), no. 34. (quoted after Kurzman and Browsers, p. 3.).

propositions of Islam, as of modern European civilization, which has, almost unconsciously, recognized the truth of these propositions in spite of the religious system with which it is associated.⁵⁶

Iqbāl published these words of praise of Luther in 1909. About 20 years later, he returned to the theme of Martin Luther and the Reformation, dedicating two or three pages of his famous *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (*Tajdīdu l-fikri d-dīniyyi fi l-islām*) to the subject.⁵⁷ On the one hand, Iqbāl had strong reservations about any “progressive”, “liberal” or “emancipatory” movement (*ḥarakatu t-tahrīr*) in contemporary Islam that might be conceptualized and shaped after models from the West, writing at a certain point:

We salute the liberation movement in contemporary Islam from the bottom of our hearts. But, we need to recognise that the emergence of the ideas of liberation in Islam constitutes the most critical point in the history of Islam.⁵⁸

Iqbāl held that “emancipatory liberalism” (*al-libarāliyyah at-taharruriyyah*) tended to become “destructive by impact” (*ḍātu aṭarin haddāmin*).⁵⁹ Indeed, for Iqbāl, “emancipatory liberalism” was one of the “factors of decadence” (*‘āmilan min ‘awāmili l-inḥilali*).⁶⁰ Nonetheless, Iqbāl saw another danger in the emergence of modern liberalism, which is that liberalism could “overshadow the broad humanist outlook which Islamic peoples used to imbibe from their religion.”⁶¹

Based on his insights into anti-colonialist trends in Islamic world and his personal experience of the emergence and growth of Muslim and Islamist modernist (and “anti-traditionalist”) movements, Iqbāl argued that “we are now passing through a period similar to the period of Protestant revolution in Europe. We must not fail to learn the lessons from the formation of Luther’s movement and its results.”⁶²

Why did Iqbāl call on Islamic and Muslim reformers to be cautious regarding the reckless implementation of liberal reform projects in traditional Muslim lands? Clear he did so for a reason and consulting Iqbāl himself is the best way to discover it.

Firstly, he held the view that the reformist Protestant movement in Europe (the Reformation) was a political movement.⁶³

Second, according to Iqbāl, the ultimate outcome of the Protestant movement in Europe had been a gradual weakening of Christian ethics, with erosion by national ethical systems.⁶⁴

56 Muhammad Iqbāl, “Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal,” in *The Hindustan Review* (July 1909), no. 34. (quoted after Kurzman and Browsers, p. 3.).

57 Muḥammad Iqbāl wrote this work in English. See: *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (with an additional chapter seven: *Is Religion possible?*), London 1934/Lahore 1951. The Arabic translation of the work quoted here was made by Muḥammad Yūsuf ‘Adas and published by *Bibliotheca Alexandrina*, Cairo/Beirut, 2011.

58 Iqbāl, *Tajdīdu l-fikri d-dīniyyi fi l-islām*, p. 272.

59 Iqbāl, *Tajdīdu l-fikri d-dīniyyi fi l-islām*, p. 272.

60 Iqbāl, *Tajdīdu l-fikri d-dīniyyi fi l-islām*, p. 272.

61 Iqbāl, *Tajdīdu l-fikri d-dīniyyi fi l-islām*, p. 272.

62 Iqbāl, *Tajdīdu l-fikri d-dīniyyi fi l-islām*, p. 273.

63 Iqbāl, *Tajdīdu l-fikri d-dīniyyi fi l-islām*, p. 273.

64 Iqbāl, *Tajdīdu l-fikri d-dīniyyi fi l-islām*, p. 273.

Third, the result of all this was clearly to be seen in the First World War. Instead of reaching a practical harmonization of two mutually opposed ethical systems, conditions in Europe became unbearable.⁶⁵

Here it is worth mentioning a warning sounded by Iqbāl regarding the emergence of Protestantism and the Reformation in Europe. Iqbāl claimed that “it is the obligation of the leadership of the Islamic world nowadays to understand the true meaning of what happened in Europe...”,⁶⁶ and for it [i.e. the leadership] to “move ahead towards the goals of Islam...”⁶⁷

Iqbāl raised his reservations about the final outcome of Protestant reformation and its “rejection of tradition” as part of his general views on Western modernity and his critique of that modernity.

Authors such as Ahmet Davutoglu believe that Protestantism is a phenomenon that should be linked to Europe alone. Davutoglu argues that

The Protestant Reformation in the early modern era was another transformation of Christianity which accompanied radical changes in the social, political and economic structures in their development towards capitalism.⁶⁸

I shall address the question of Islamic and Muslim thinkers’ critique of “Muslim modernity” on another occasion. For the moment, I will simply mention in passing the most interesting person of the Shaikh Yūsuf al-Nabāhānī (1849 – 1932), a *sūfi* author from Haifa in Palestine (today under Israeli control), who “launched vicious verbal attacks on ... the reformists Afghani, ‘Abduh and Rida, all of whom he had personally encountered, and detested.”⁶⁹ He considered their reformist commitment too strong and ungrounded “in Islam.”

Concluding remarks

There is an ongoing debate on and continued interest in an “Islamic reformation.”

Sociologist Jose Casanova writes that there is a broad consensus “that the Islamic tradition in the very recent past has undergone an unprecedented process of pluralization and fragmentation of religious authority, comparable to that initiated by the Protestant Reformation.”⁷⁰

Just as one can speak today in the plural of “European reformations,” it is also possible to speak of many models of reform in the Islamic world.⁷¹

65 Iqbāl, *Tajdīdu l-fikri d-dīniyyi fi l-islām*, p. 273.

66 Iqbāl, *Tajdīdu l-fikri d-dīniyyi fi l-islām*, p. 273.

67 Iqbāl, *Tajdīdu l-fikri d-dīniyyi fi l-islām*, p. 273.

68 Ahmet Davutoglu, *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim World* (Kuala Lumpur: Mahir Publications, 1994), p. 31.

69 Elizabeth Sirriyeh, “Sufi Thought and Its Reconstruction,” in: Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer M. Nafi (eds.), *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century* (London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), p. 112.

70 Kurzman and Browers, p. 5.

71 Kurzman and Browers, p. 6.

Perhaps this is where we should look for the reasons why various Muslim thinkers of the younger generation, famous for their university credentials, writings or high media profile, are so readily declared the “Muslim Luther.” As Kurzman and Browsers note, “observers [have] identified a new crop of Muslim Luthers, as previous candidates failed to fulfil the role of generating a full-blown Reformation.”⁷²

The anthropologist Dale Eickelman has claimed that a book written by the modern Syrian author, Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, (Shahrou, born 1938), “may one day be seen as a Muslim equivalent of the 95 Theses that Martin Luther nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church in 1517.”⁷³ In 1995, the journalist Robin Wright reported that “both supporters and critics now call [Abdolkarim Soroush, Iran, born 1945] the Martin Luther of Islam.”⁷⁴ Tariq Ramadan (born in Switzerland in 1962) is a grandson of Ḥasan al-Bannā’, the founder of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. He has been dubbed a Muslim Martin Luther by the press.⁷⁵

The topic of the “Muslim Luther” should be understood, firstly, within the context of the widespread “mood of dejection and pessimism” in many Muslim countries at the end of the 19th and during the 20th century. There was a search for ideas of redemption that sometimes tended towards pleas for a “reformist personality” and were sometimes expressed as the view that, as a matter of fact, it is a movement or movements which should “deliver the Muslim world” from its crisis.

As Kurzman and Browsers show, “the famous Iranian reformer, ‘Ali Shari‘ati /1933-1977/, held that Islam ‘is living at the end of Medieval period,’ comparable to the position of Christian thinkers who ‘found their new destiny by destroying their old faith, and transforming traditional Catholicism to a protesting, world-minded, political, and materialist Protestantism.’ Shari‘ati urged Muslims to embrace ‘an Islamic Protestantism similar to that of Christianity in the Middle Ages, destroying all the degenerating factors which, in the name of Islam, have stymied and stupefied the process of thinking and the fate of the society, and given birth to new thoughts and new movements.’”⁷⁶

The so-called “Islamic movements” that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries will be the topic of a future presentation and discussion.

72 Kurzman and Browsers, p. 6.

73 Kurzman and Browsers, p. 6.

74 Kurzman and Browsers, p. 6.

75 Kurzman and Browsers, p. 6.

76 Kurzman and Browsers, p. 6. (“...”). Kurzman and Browsers quote from Shari‘ati’s book *Man and Islam*, published in Houston in 1981.