Contemporary Muslim Revival: The Case of "Protestant Islam"

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Islam is seen as problematic today because of the actions of a few people armed with an aberrant ideology and the moral support or sympathy of a constituency of angry and disaffected Muslims in various parts of the world, often provoked by what they see as hypocritical policies and actions on the part of the world’s powers. The problematic nature of Islam, however, was partly made possible by the centuries of conflict between Islam and the West. For the first few hundred years of its existence, Christianity was the only universal religion, both in theory and in practice. With the rise of Islam and its rapid spread beyond the Arabian peninsula to Christian lands in Palestine, North Africa and the Iberian peninsula, it must have come as a shock to Christendom that there was now a religion that could challenge it.

The Arabs were in Spain for almost eight hundred years and in Sicily for almost five hundred. There were two hundred years of wars between European Christians and the Muslims, which are referred to in the West as the Crusades. The Ottoman Empire controlled parts of Europe for centuries. The conflict took place when the Muslims constituted a superior civilization in economic and military terms. Even after this superiority became a thing of the past, during and after the colonial period, the main opposition the West faced came from the Muslims. The dominant forces that confronted colonizers were Muslim empires in India, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Today, particularly after the Cold War, the main challenge to the current order comes from a Muslim world that never seems to develop and modernize the way it was taught. It probably remains more resistant to a globalized culture than India and China.

The aim of this article is to discuss a particular intellectual response to the “problem of Islam,” that is, the advancement of the idea of Protestant Islam or Islamic Protestantism.
Islamic Protestantism, as it is variously known. The next section introduces the topic of Protestant Islam in the context of the discourse on Islam in the West as well as in the Muslim world. This is followed by an account of the precursor discourse to the idea of Protestant Islam. This refers to debates around the much-discussed Weberian thesis. The two sections after this are each devoted to discussing two versions of the Protestant Islam notion, that is, the characterization of contemporary Muslim revival as Protestant-like, and the call for a Protestant-type reformation in the Muslim world. Then turn to a discussion of a more general phenomenon, that is, the intellectual Christianization of religions, under which the particular case of Protestant Islam can be subsumed. The article concludes with the suggestion that the quest for reform in the Muslim world must take into account the self-understanding of Muslims about their problems.

The “Problem of Islam”

There is a range of opinion in the West and in the Muslim world regarding the fundamental problems that underlie the inability of the Muslim world to catch up with the developed nations of the world. Two, in particular, stand out. According to one view, the problem does not lie in Islam itself, but in what is called Islamism. Extremists such as Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb in the 18th century, and Sayyid Qutb and Osama bin Ladin in the 20th century created mutant ideologies and utopias founded on hate and intolerance and a lack of compassion for fellow human beings. Islamism, or political Islam, as it is often referred to, has to be marginalized by the majority of Muslims around the world who are peace-loving and “moderate.”

The second view, however, regards the problem as lying essentially within Islam itself. Islam is inherently irrational, much too politicized, legalistic and unable to evolve and adapt to changing conditions. This is believed to be so mainly because Islam did not undergo what Christianity did, that is, a reformation. They believe that the Muslim world is partially stuck within its own middle ages and must reform its religion in order for it to live comfortably in the modern world.

Proponents of both views have forwarded the idea of the Protestantization of Islam or Islamic Protestantism. There are two versions of Protestant Islam, each referring to two distinct phenomena. The first is the characterization of the existing Muslim revival movements as having Protestant-like features. Similarities and parallels are established between 16th century Protestant reformers and contemporary Muslim revivalists. Much of this literature appeared in the 1970s and 80s, but the notion of Protestant Islam was taken up again in the 1990s and 2000s by journalists and others. Parallels between the Protestant Reformation and contemporary Muslim revival are observed at
both the levels of institutions as well as theology. The second version of Protestant Islam is more prescriptive in nature, calling for a Protestant-like reformation in the Muslim world. The first version is represented by academic scholarship while the second is promoted by both scholars and journalists making calls for change in Muslim society and appealing to the Protestant Reformation as a model.

**The Precursor to the Protestant Islam Thesis**

Before we look at the two versions of Protestant Islam, it would be useful to have an understanding of the type of discourse that prepared the way for the introduction of such thinking. This discourse revolves around Weber’s discussions of Islam and the propensity for capitalist development.

Capitalism as an economic system requires an attitude that Weber called the spirit of capitalism. This attitude took its content from Protestantism. For Weber the “question of the motive forces in the explanation of modern capitalism is not in the first instance a question of the origin of the capital sums which were available for capitalistic uses, but, above all, of the development of the spirit of capitalism.”¹

The spirit of capitalism is a unique phenomenon that existed in a certain historical period in Europe. It has specific traits and characteristics whereby the acquisition of money was combined with the avoidance of spontaneous enjoyment of life. In other words, the acquisition of money is not for the satisfaction of material needs. It is for a higher reason, as is evident from a quote from the Bible: “Seest thou a man diligent in business? He shall stand before kings” (Proverbs 22:29).

Traditionalism, that attitude according to which man wants to live as he is accustomed to living and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose,² was backwardness from a capitalistic point of view. In the spirit of capitalism, on the other hand, the laborer and entrepreneur regard work as an end in itself, as if it were a religious calling.³ The attitude is one of commercial gain and profit based on rational calculation. As a result, the possibilities of overcoming the traditionalistic outlook were greatest where there was the Protestant religious upbringing. Protestantism opposed the traditionalism, which is expressed, for example, in Catholicism that “activity directed to acquisition [of capital] for its own sake was at bottom a pudendum which was to be tolerated only because of the unalterable necessities of life in this world.”⁴

Weber made a distinction between the Catholic and the Protestant worlds. In the successful mercantile centers of trade in Florence, Italy in the 14th and 15th centuries, the capitalist spirit was considered ethically unjustifiable. In 18th century Pennsylvania, where there were very small, poor enterprises
the same attitude was “considered the essence of moral conduct.”

Modern capitalism was to develop in those areas with the spirit of capitalism. Capitalism requires an outlook on life that makes acquisition of capital a religious calling. Only then can it become a systematic way of life. This is the effect Protestantism had. Weber asserted that the spirit of capitalism could originate only in the West and was a result of certain characteristics peculiar to the worldly asceticism of Puritanism, a Protestant movement in the 16th and 17th centuries derived in part from the doctrines of Calvin.

Puritanism, while not against wealth acquisition, morally objected to wealth on the grounds that it caused “relaxation in the security of possession, the enjoyment of wealth with the consequence of idleness and the temptations of the flesh, and above all distraction from the pursuit of a righteous life.” For Weber, modern capitalism was the result of the melding of capitalist enterprise and ascetic Protestantism, above all, the Calvinistic version. Economic activity as the pursuit of profit is seen as a spiritual end. The spirit of modern capitalism was influenced directly by Calvinism in which worldly asceticism was a means of salvation. The effect of this Protestant ethic was psychological — it freed the acquisition of wealth from the inhibitions of traditionalistic ethics.

It also drove its adherents to hard work, discipline, and frugality since the attainment of wealth as a fruit of labor in a calling was a sign of God’s blessing. The practical result of all this was an ascetic compulsion to work hard and save, and to avoid spontaneous enjoyment. As Turner says, there are some important points to note regarding this relationship between the Protestant ethic and the development of capitalism:

(i) There are differing views as to whether Weber took an idealist or psychological position with regard to the relationship between the religious ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Syed Hussein Alatas takes the view that Weber considered Puritanism as a “decisive cause” of the spirit of capitalism and understood Talcott Parsons, Pitirim Sorokin, and Reinhard Bendix as taking this position too. Turner noted that Weber had not subscribed to the causal theory, referring to such a thesis as “foolish and doctrinaire.”

(ii) On the other hand, Weber did say, "Where it [spirit of capitalism] appears and is able to work itself out, it produces its own capital and monetary supplies as the means to its own ends, but the reverse is not true."

(iii) Yet others such as E. Fischhoff, Peter Berger, Ferdinand Kolegar and John Clammer suggest that Weber meant to understand the relationship between the religious ethic and economics in terms of “elective affinity” or
“congruence,” or the “sociological (including systems of belief) circumstances in which the probabilities of certain courses of motivation and action are enhanced and others are reduced” and the “institutional restraints (in particular political and legal) which operate to constrain, express or channel these actions and motivations.”

(iv) Finally, there is the position that Weber sought to understand the subjective meaning of social actions as determined by the socio-economic setting. For example, the subjective meaning of Puritanism must be understood in order to explain the social action of Protestant merchants and traders in Western Europe. But the presence of these subjective meanings themselves can only be explained in terms of the socio-economic conditions.

It is not necessary for us to adjudicate among the four Weberian theses set out above. For our purposes, it is only necessary to present a picture of how scholars reflected on these theses when discussing the question of the relationship between Islam and capitalist development. First of all, there is the view that Islam is not a salvation religion and that, therefore, there is no equivalent or functional analogue to the Protestant ethic in Islam. On this, Syed Hussein Alatas points out that, in the case of Islam, it is not religion but other factors that are decisive for the emergence of the capitalist spirit. How else could one explain the fact of differing economic propensities between South Indian Muslims and Malays, both of whom belong to the Shafi'i school of thought? But others had suggested that instead of this ethic, Islam instills an attitude of fatalism, which explained the economic backwardness of the Malays. Weber himself held that Islam promotes self-indulgence by emphasizing “luxurious raiment, perfume, and meticulous beard-coiffure.”

Furthermore, Islam lacks some of the material pre-requisites for modern capitalism, such as calculable law. According to this reading, Islam lacks a universal legal code, is characterized by arbitrary lawmaking and is rigid in that it cannot easily be applied to new situations. Also, the lack of a capitalist spirit among Muslims can be explained in terms of the obstacles that the feudal system of the Muslim world (Weber was generally speaking of the Middle East) placed on the development of the capitalist spirit.

Weberian discourse, then, suggests that Islam has neither the right ethic nor the appropriate material conditions or pre-requisites for the development of modern capitalism. Regardless of whether Weber was right or wrong about such claims, the assertion that there is no bourgeois ethic in Islam resonates with the view that Islam needs a Protestant-like reformation in order that this ethic might develop. It is also compatible with the view that Islam has an ethic that can support capitalist development, if only Muslims are able to identify it and put it into practice. Hence, there has been a search for functional equivalents in Islam to the Protestant ethic, both among Western and Muslim scholars. To the extent that Muslim reformist thought in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was concerned with capitalist development, it was also concerned with a Muslim version of a Protestant ethic.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the concept of the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism revolved around the idea of a Westphalian consensus. Amir Arjomand neatly summed up this consensus: "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism is, in the broadest sense, a Protestant interpretation of the contemporary capitalist society. It assumes that the spirit of capitalism is entirely different and the role of religion has been rejected in the process. For example, the Protestant ethic is interpreted as a rejection of material and coeval worldviews, while its opposite appears to be the entire world of materialism and the role of religion. For example, the role of religion in the process of capitalist development has been entirely rejected."
early 20th centuries had internalized the values and aspirations of modern capitalist societies, they came to accept Western views on how that development could be achieved. The Protestant ethic element had entered Muslim thought.

**The Protestant Reformation and Muslim Revival**

In the literature that draws parallels between the Protestant Reformation and contemporary Muslim revival movements, the discussions generally revolve around questions of institutions and theology. Those who have drawn the parallels include Clement Henry Moore, Ernest Gellner, Fouad Ajami, Said Amir Arjomand and Ellis Goldberg. The parallels drawn in this literature are neatly summarized by Goldberg, as follows:

- Both movements emerged in opposition to state authorities that made absolutist claims to power.
- Both took the position that the monopoly of power by nominally religious state authorities constituted blasphemy.
- Both sought to transfer religious authority to interpret religious texts from official clerics to lay people.
- Both movements were founded on highly committed believers and were characterized by a great internal cohesion.

For example, according to Goldberg, there was a shift in thought among Egyptian Muslims represented by Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. They rejected the kind of socialization and education that created elites who interpreted texts in what they regarded as a compromised, Westernized and contaminated way. Goldberg reads this refusal to accept received interpretations as something comparable to Protestantism. While this may appear to be the case on the surface, in reality, the respective contexts of the Protestant Reformation and contemporary Muslim revival movements are entirely different. In the case of Protestantism, at issue was the right to refuse and the rejection of the papal church. In the case of Muslim revival, rejection has been exercised throughout history by Muslim individuals and groups. For example, 18th and 19th century Muslim revivalists practiced *ijtibād*, that is, the process of deriving a rule of law "by way of direct and unmediated access to the revealed sources."

Another parallel often drawn between the Protestant Reformation and contemporary Muslim revival movements is the stress on the direct, unmediated relationship between the believer and God. But this has always been a feature of Islam from its inception and is not associated exclusively with contemporary revivalist movements.

The parallels drawn between contemporary Muslim revival movements and the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century are often superficial. The Protestant Reformation was the rejection of the obedience to the Roman
papacy. It critiqued the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church and society, such as the sale of indulgences.

In the case of Islam, there is no such church from which to break. There was and is no central institution similar to the Catholic Church in Christianity that could be the object of reform to begin with. Rather, what Muslim revivalists have always sought to reform are what they have seen as misguided Muslim beliefs and practices, and not Islam itself. The distinction between Islam as din on the one hand, and the beliefs and practices of Muslims on the other has always been clear to Muslim revivalists. Muslim revivalists, for example, have never advanced any new theories of salvation.

Furthermore, many of the changes that the Protestant Reformation sought to bring about were already found in Islam to begin with. For example, the idea that Islam is both personal and experiential and, therefore, allows for the empowerment of the believer is nothing specific to contemporary Muslim revival movements and can be said to be a cornerstone of traditional understandings of Islam.

Yet Muslim scholars and activists such as Abdol Karim Soroush, Tariq Ramadan and Hashem Aghajari have been referred to as “Luthers of Islam,” as if they have proposed changes that parallel those of the Protestant Reformation.

The Call for Islamic Protestantism

The call for a kind of Islamic Protestantism was first heard in the 1900s and was made by Iranian activists in the context of the Constitutional Revolution (inqilab-i masbretah) of 1905. They argued for a Protestantized version of Islam that would challenge the power of the clergy over the masses and allow them to come to terms with modernity. The idea of Islamic Protestantism was also revived in Iran in the 1960s by Ali Shari’ati, who suggested that the masses had to be liberated from the hold of the clerical establishment. The notion of Islamic Protestantism did not emerge again until recently, when Hashem Aghajari in Iran called for the rescue of Islam from the clergy and stated that more than ever, Muslims needed the “Islamic humanism” and “Islamic Protestantism” that Shari’ati advocated. As Aghajari has argued:

The Protestant movement wanted to rescue Christianity from the clergy and the Church hierarchy — [Christians] must save religion from the pope. We [Muslims] do not need mediators between us and God. We do not need mediators to understand God’s holy books. The Prophet [Jesus] spoke to the people directly... We don’t need to go to the clergy; each person is his own clergy.

What many of these discussions gloss over is the fact that those who call for Islamic Protestantism or for the Protestantization of Islam do not suggest that

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Islamic theology should be reformed. They are more concerned with social and jurisprudential reforms. This includes the dominance of the clerics in peoples' lives. But the parallel with Christianity is superficial, as the “clergy” in Shi'ite Islam does not exist within a church-like structure. They do not call for the kinds of changes that Christianity underwent during the 16th and 17th centuries. Contrary to what is claimed, generally speaking, the Muslim world is not examining and debating the fundamentals of Islam, if by that is meant the *usul al-Din.* Aghajari, for example, wants to rescue Islam from Muslim clerics who dominate the interpretation of Islam. In doing so, he is actually calling for a return to the fundamentals.

Furthermore, a case can be made for the idea that Islam already has those characteristics attributed to a reformed Christianity. There is no equivalent to the papacy in Islam, not even in Shi'ite Islam. Whatever is said of the spiritual autonomy of the individual in terms of his or her relationship with God is as true of Sunni as it is of Shi'ite Islam.

Finally, it should be said that the reference to certain Muslim scholars and activists as the “Luthers of Islam” is inappropriate. Martin Luther (1483–1546) is not an appropriate model for Muslim revivalists for a number of reasons. For one, he was anti-Jewish. He referred to Jews as a “miserable and accursed people” and a “miserable, blind, and senseless people.” He advised Christians to be on their guard as the synagogues of the Jews house nothing but devils practicing conceit, lies, blasphemy, and defaming God. Contrast this with the relative harmony in which Jews and Muslims lived in the Muslim world during Luther's time.

Neither Aghajari nor Soroush are questioning the foundations of Islam itself. Wright wrote that Soroush and his contemporaries “are shaping what may be Islam’s equivalent of the Christian Reformation.” The parallels between the two are exaggerated.

**The Intellectual Christianization of Islam**

The statement of the problems concerning the revival of Muslim society in Protestant terms or viewing Muslim revival through the lens of 16th century Christianity is itself problematic. It is part of a larger problem of the intellectual Christianization of religions or what Joachem Matthes calls the “hidden cultural Christianization of religions.” To understand this, it is necessary to begin with the etymology of the Latin word *religio.* In the Roman Empire, *religio* was used to refer to the various cults that were being practiced in the regions under Roman rule. In the early years of Christianity, Christianity was seen to be merely one among many other cults. But when the rulers converted to Christianity in the 4th century, the center of the Roman Empire shifted to Europe and Christianity became dominant there. Other cults either
disappeared or became absorbed into Christianity; Christianity became a ‘universal’ institution for the church. As the centuries passed, the term religio came to be used more and more in reference to Christianity, as in the expression de christiana religione, which appeared in 1474.

But with the Reformation, religio began to refer to Christian beliefs and a way of life separate from the institution of the Catholic Church and even opposed to it. During this period, religio also began to take on broader connotations, approximating its contemporary meaning, that is, a system of ideas, beliefs, or doctrine. As the concept of religion came to refer to all belief systems, not just Christianity, and as Western scholars of religion turned to the study of non-Christian religions, what took place was an implicit or explicit comparison with Christianity, which results in problematic constructions, that is, constructions that assumed the Christian-like characteristics of these religions. To explain this, Matthes takes us through the logic of comparison.

Why does this happen? When Western scholars study Islam, for example, there is an implicit comparison with Christianity. In this comparison, both Christianity and Islam are subsumed under the third term, religion. The problem arises because the characteristics of the third term are derived from Christianity to begin with. The allegedly universal concept, "religion," is defined in particularistic, that is, Christian terms. The result is the construction of Islam in terms of Christian categories and concepts. This is what Matthes calls the "hidden" cultural Christianization of other religions. This is also what Syed Hussein Alatas refers to as "conceptual deflation," that is, the diminishing of the scope of a concept to the extent that the range of empirical reality that it can refer to is reduced.

The concept of religion, assumed to be universal, still contains within it characteristics that are specific to Christianity. When other belief systems such as Islam and HindUISM are thought of in terms of "religion," there is an unintended attribution of Christian characteristics to these "religions." A related aspect of the intellectual Christianization of Islam is the assumption that certain characteristics of Christianity, in terms of its concepts and experiences, are universal. This article has dealt with the assumptions that 16th century Protestant reforms are universal in nature. The hidden cultural Christianization of Islam is a special case of Orientalism. The critique of Orientalism mainly concerns the socio-historical and political context of Western knowledge. It implies the critique of concepts used in the social sciences to talk about the "Orient." This critique is rarely done. The suggestion of alternative conceptualization that should logically follow from the critique of Orientalism is also rare. Edward Said himself had suggested that the "most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a..."
The critique of the notion of Protestant Islam presented here implies the need for alternative conceptualizations of religion that take into account the concept of *din* in Islam as well as other related concepts. Furthermore, to claim that there are parallels between the Protestant reformation of the 16th century and contemporary Muslim revival movements is one thing. But to refer to Muslim movements as Protestant or Protestant-like is another, for that implies that there are types of change in religion that are at first peculiar to Protestantism and that these changes later became more generalized to cover other religions.

Alternatively, it can be claimed that what in fact took place was the “Islamization” of Christianity in view of the fact that Luther had read the Qur'ân and would have found certain attitudes and positions that resonated with his own with regard to his criticisms of Catholicism. A similar point can be made with regard to what has been referred to as “Islamic humanism.” One other similarity noted between the Protestant reformation and contemporary Muslim revival is that both were accompanied by the rise of a humanist tradition. One need not limit oneself to the statement of parallels but can go further to claim that it was Islam that influenced the rise of Christian humanism.

The similarities between the Muslim Ikhwan al-Safa (Brethren of Purity) and the European Christian Brethren of the Common Life, who came later, has been noted.

**Conclusion**

The dangers inherent in attributing Christian characteristics to other religions such as Islam is that it deflects our understanding of the problem from the point of view of Muslim experiences. What has been regarded as a parallel phenomenon to the Protestant reform, that is, Wahhabism or the movement of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, within the Muslim world are seen as extremist movements. For example, the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955), in an essay devoted to Ibn Khaldun, refers to Wahhabism as a form of Puritanism. Most Muslims understand genuine reform in terms of the empowerment of tradition, that is, the return to the vision and values of the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, as well as the centuries of tradition in thought and practice that followed. Both the modernist reformists such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Ridha as well as the modernist extremists (for example, Wahhabis, the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda) reject tradition to varying degrees, as did the Protestant Reformation. Therefore I believe that the progressive reform of Muslim society does not lie in its Protestantization.

As far as academia is concerned, the social scientific study of Islam and Muslim society should involve the formation of concepts derived from the
Islamic tradition itself in order to reflect the reality of things as thought and experienced by Muslims. At the same time, such conceptualization would contribute to the universalization of the social sciences. The more general lesson is that the Islamic heritage should be considered as a source of concepts for the social sciences and not merely as a source of data and information on which sometimes inappropriate concepts are imposed.

Endnotes
2. Ibid., 60.
3. Ibid., 65.
4. Ibid., 73.
5. Ibid., 75.
6. Ibid., 157.
7. Ibid., 128.
8. Ibid., 171.
32. Ramadan has been called a Muslim Martin Luther. See Paul Donnelly, “Tariq Ramadan: The Muslim Martin Luther?” *Salon.com* February 15, 2002.
40. Wright, *ibid*.
41. McDaniel, *ibid.*; Goldberg, *ibid*.
45. Matthes, *ibid.*, 98.