

Liberal Islam: The Reformation within the Reformation

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This presentation tries to link together my work on Islamic movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries ("Modernist Islam" anthology, forthcoming book titled "Democracy Denied") with my work on Islamic movements in the late 20th and early 21st centuries ("Liberal Islam" anthology, book in progress on "The Missing Martyrs").

The concept of "reformation" emerged as a key intellectual trope among Muslim intellectuals in the late 19th century, as comparisons between Muslim societies and European societies began to become salient through discussions of European imperial domination. The concept has significant Islamic roots in the pre-modern concepts of reform (islah) and renewal (tajdid), but took on new meaning at this time through comparison with the Protestant Reformation. At first, Muslim modernists suggested that the Reformation had brought Christianity closer to the spirit of Islam. Increasingly during the first part of the 20th century, however, Muslim intellectuals turned to the reverse argument, comparing Islam with Christianity rather than Christianity with Islam. In the new view, Islam itself needed a reformation in order to catch up to Protestant Europe.

The reformation theme played a role in the democratic revolutions that encompassed much of the Muslim population of the early 20th century: Tatar, Azeri, and Turki participation in the Russian Revolution of 1905, the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906, the second Ottoman constitutional revolution of 1908, and the failed reform movements of the following years in Afghanistan, Bukhara, and Khiva. Even many traditionally trained religious scholars agreed at this time with modern-educated intellectuals that the religious establishment had become too ossified and tyrannical, and that a return to the original spirit of the faith would require a thorough-going reform.

The failure of the democratic revolutions of the early 20th century did not, however, lead to a revival of the Islamic establishment. Instead, authoritarian state-builders sidelined religious scholars even more severely, removing them from public functions such as education, legal adjudication, and registration of births, marriages, and deaths. In the service of the post-colonial state, a new generation of Muslim intellectuals devised a novel approach to religious understanding. Instead of arguing that the original spirit of the faith was legible in the sacred sources, a handful of Islamic scholars began to argue that the sacred sources left certain important social functions, including governmental functions, to human devising. This argument, pioneered by al-Azhar scholar 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq in Egypt in the 1920s, became widespread during post-colonial constitutional debates in Pakistan, Indonesia, and elsewhere, where it was associated largely with pro-democracy movements. Authoritarian elites pursued their own versions of this approach, emphasizing the service of religious scholars to the goals of national development and social integration, as defined by the state.

Toward the end of the 20th century, a reformation appeared within the reformation. While earlier approaches to Islamic reformation continue, Islamic thought begins to take a form that is recognizable to the heritage of post-Reformation, post-Enlightenment Europe. Writing simultaneously, and independently, in numerous countries, various influential Muslim intellectuals began in the 1980s to relativize their own understanding of the sacred sources, arguing that human interpretation is necessarily fallible, plural, and contextual. This position became, within two decades, a mainstream ideology in many Muslim societies, according to surveys and election results. Religion is now commonly seen as a private choice, a personal statement of identity, not just among Muslims in the West and “Westernized” Muslims, but among large sectors of Muslim societies.

The relativizing aspects of identity politics are summoned on behalf of all sorts of Muslim movements, from liberal movements to revolutionary ones, each of which can claim that they are merely following the path that they consider right, even if others inevitably have a different idea of what is right. In the post-reformation world, religious authority is now an opt-in system, not an opt-out system. This system is more popular than it has been in recent generations, when religious authority was something that people seeking modern, individualistic self-actualization wanted to escape from, not escape to.

A variety of observers, Muslim and non-Muslim, have recently insisted that Islam needs to undergo a reformation. I propose that it has already undergone at least two of them: one that displaced religious establishments from their state-like functions, in the first part of the 20th century, and one that displaced religious establishments from their ideological authority, in the late 20th century.