

## Lessons from the Protestant Reformation for Today's Islamic World

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### Abstract

The Islamic world today faces multiple challenges, including political stagnation, religious authoritarianism, and societal inertia. Drawing on a historical-comparative approach, this article explores the Protestant Reformation as a case study to examine how religious renewal can emerge from within a faith tradition. The study employs a historical-analytical method, drawing parallels between key developments in the Reformation and current conditions in the Muslim world. By analyzing historical parallels, the authors argue that Islamic societies can benefit from lessons learned during the Reformation, particularly regarding the decentralization of religious authority, promotion of literacy, and critical engagement with sacred texts. The study finds that while the contexts differ, the need for internal reform and revival is shared. The article concludes that meaningful Islamic reform must originate from within Muslim societies and cannot be imposed externally. This analysis contributes to contemporary Islamic thought by encouraging critical reflection on religious tradition in light of historical experience, thus fostering a deeper understanding of reform in the modern Islamic context.

Keywords: Protestant Reformation, Muslim, Islam, Martin Luther, Religious Extremism

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### INTRODUCTION

The state of Muslim societies the world over is a cause of concern for Muslims firstly, but for the rest of the world as well. Economically moribund with high youth unemployment rates, the persistence of such socio-cultural practices like female genital mutilation and politically oppressive, there have been calls for an Islamic Reformation from Muslim scholars and politicians. Amongst these, Irshad Manji (2013:3), poignantly declared, *"Through our screaming self-pity and our conspicuous silences, we Muslims are conspiring against ourselves. We're in crisis, and we dragging the rest of the world with us. If ever there was a moment for an Islamic reformation, it's now. For the love of God, what are we doing about it?"*

Such an Islamic reformation would result in a reinterpretation of the faith, freeing it from the dogmatic constraints of the religious establishment's interpretation and allowing the faith to be infused with reason and to be reinterpreted given 21<sup>st</sup> century realities. The Protestant Reformation, beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, had a profound economic, political, socio-cultural and technological impact allowing Europe to dominate the rest of the world for centuries. The call for an Islamic Reformation raises interesting questions as to why the Protestant Reformation succeeded in Europe and what lessons this holds for Muslims today as they seek a Reformation of their own. What this paper seeks to do then is examine the underlying factors that contributed to the success of the Protestant Reformation and whether these factors exist in the Muslim world today.

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Whilst Islam is roughly the same age today as when the Protestant reformation began, critics might well challenge such a comparison given the fact that Islam never produced an orthodoxy in the Christian sense. As Bernard Lewis (1995:226) noted, *"In Islamic history there are no councils of synods to define truth and denounce error, no popes, prelates, or inquisitor to declare, test, and enforce correct belief"*. Whilst true, and whilst diversity of opinion was initially wide-ranging, the Muslim clerical establishment slowly constrained that diversity of opinion and by 900 CE clear parameters were put in place by Sunni *ulema* (clerics) regarding *ijma* (consensus of the believer). Thus an orthodoxy developed in the same way that the Catholic Church came to interpret and control what constituted the Gospel.

Go beyond the superficial differences, then, dig a bit deeper and great insights can be achieved from such a historical comparative. In that sense this paper subscribes to the position espoused by George Santayana that, *"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"* (Clairmont 2013:online). In similar vein, and perhaps more profoundly, Ronald Wright has stated that, *"Each time history repeats itself, the price goes up"* (AZ Quotes 2018:online). This latter quote is especially poignant if one consider one of the most pressing challenges confronting the world - that of religious extremism. The fact that there have been more than 27,000 terrorist attacks globally since 9/11 (or more than five per day) linked to radical Islam underlines the point (Solomon 2017:2). These figures highlight the need for an Islamic reformation but what is often forgotten is Christianity's own dark flirtations with extremism.

The German town of Munster was taken over by Anabaptist zealots on 25 February 1534. Their leader John of Leiden set up a vicious theological dictatorship. Those who refused to be rebaptised were expelled without food or belongings in the midst of a snowstorm. All books except the Bible were burnt. Blasphemy and adultery were sins punishable by death. A severe dress code was implemented stressing modesty. Polygamy was reinstituted. Unmarried women were compelled to marry the first man who asked them. Forty-nine women who refused to obey this order were executed and their bodies were horribly dismembered. It took sixteen months for the authorities to liberate Munster (Hashemi 2009:34,35). Munster 1534, could well have been Raqqa in Syria during the reign of Islamic State with self-style 'Caliph' Al Baghdadi playing the role of John of Leiden: enforced dress codes, women being forced to marry, Muslims being compelled to accept the extremist doctrine of Islamic State or face death and so forth. It was only in October 2017 when Raqqa was liberated from the hands of the extremists and its hapless citizens liberated from theological tyranny (Burke 2017: online).

The world, however, no longer speaks of Christian extremism. Developments in Munster have faded in history and lies on the pages of some esoteric book. How Christianity was reformed, then, and what lessons this holds for Islam confronting similar challenges that Christians were compelled to confront, then, is of crucial importance in the contemporary epoch.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Reflections on the Protestant Reformation

In 1517, Martin Luther sparked one of the greatest upheavals in Western society when he nailed his 95 Theses against the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral (Christianity in View 2018:online). Whether or not he actually nailed his 95 Theses against the door, which served as a traditional bulletin board during the time, is not the most crucial point, because all he essentially wanted to

accomplish was to evoke a discussion on some of the practices of the church he found problematic (Cary 2017:21-26). This challenge to the church would eventually lead to the end of the longstanding hegemony of the Catholic Church in Western Europe, while it simultaneously altered the fabric of social and economic life in Western Europe (Becker, Pfaff & Rubin 2016:13,16,1-53). The act of Luther, which was not truly an act of rebellion but instead the act of a dutiful servant of the church, is often cited as the start of the Reformation (Zondervan Academic 2017:online). The importance of the Reformation in Western society is posited by some as the most important event of the modern Western world and that the contemporary West cannot be fully understood without gaining some insight into what the Reformation was (Varickayil 1980:14-31). For the better part of the sixteenth century and for centuries beyond, Europe was to be influenced in various ways by the events that were triggered by the Reformers (Hillerbrand 1968:xi).

Prior to the 1517 event at Wittenberg and Luther's declaration against the Catholic Church to reform were centuries of preceding events throughout European society that created an underlying, latent demand for the church to reform. The pre-Reformation developments against the church that was, amongst other things, opposed to the church's wealth and power, indicate that the Reformation was inspired by more than just the 95 Theses, and that there had already been a need for reform (Becker et al. 2016:9). The undoubted uneasiness surrounding the church was evident across Europe, with pre-Reformation thinker activists like John Wycliffe in England, Jan Hus in Bohemia, and Brescia Flora and Savonarola in Italy who all called for reform in some sense, with many of their sentiments echoed in Luther's works (Varickayil 1980:18). The eventual result of Luther and his contemporaries' work was the split of Western Christendom into the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church, which had its own share of division with the denominational divide that included the Lutheran, Anglican, Anabaptist, and Calvinist denominations (Hillerbrand 1968:xxvii). While the Reformation cannot be cited as the sole cause for the denominational split in the Protestant faith, it gave it the context to enable the split because it removed the papacy as the sole organizing principle of the church, and allowed groups to congregate in their own capacity (Reeves 2015a:online). The major implication here was there was no one sanctioned doctrine or one official interpretation of the Bible.

Before Luther sparked the Reformation however, there were two centuries of perpetual crises across Europe which shaped the societal context of Luther's time and people's receptive attitude, and thus it is necessary to look into these events to comprehend what the region had gone through before Luther (Payton 2010:23). The crises that will be looked at include those relating to the church with its various structural and internal problems, as well as issues that affected society in terms of their quality of life, including weather patterns and agriculture, the Black Plague and wars and revolts.

The rebuilding of society in the aftermath of the fall of the Roman Empire gave rise to the development of Western Christendom and the fact that by the thirteenth century, the church had become the overarching, uniting force in Western European society which people were loyal to (Payton 2010:24-25). Essentially, then, following the vacuum created by the fall of Rome, the Church stepped in to create a new political structure based on ecclesiastical lines. During this time, and essentially the whole medieval period, the papacy in Rome had become the singular authority, both spiritual and temporal, and had powers that exceeded what the Roman Emperor had possessed (Southern 1990:26). Due to the mass conversion to Christianity throughout Western Europe, the church became the sole international actor on the continent, but by the thirteenth century the

papacy had been viewed with some suspicion (Payton 2010:29-30). The church and its clergy enjoyed positions of authority and a monopoly in society, and in order to maintain this position it had to ensure that people remained loyal. In order to remain its authoritative position, the church self-enforced the notion that people's salvation could only be gained through the church, which was further made credible by things like the clerical pledges to poverty and chastity, the distribution of charity and the cult of the saints (Becker et al. 2016:12,13). Structural fragmentation within the Catholic Church however, started to emerge in the fourteenth century and this would contribute to the rise of the Reformation. One of the internal problems was that of the Avignon Papacy, when the papacy moved to France from 1309-1377 (Walker 1985:372).

Due to tension and power struggle between the French King Philip IV and Pope Boniface VIII, the French Pope Clement V decided it would be safer for him to occupy the papacy outside of Rome, but eventually many Europeans simply saw the pope as the King's puppet (McGill 2009:online). Essentially, people started to doubt the spiritual authority of the pope, and across Europe the papacy was seen as a tool of the French King. The Avignon Papacy furthermore tarnished the pope and the church's reputation with its excessive and oppressive taxation (Walker 1985:374). This was accompanied by a vast increase of simony, which was the practice of selling ecclesiastical offices and privileges by the church in order to acquire more funds. The Avignon Papacy was furthermore highly criticized for its moral decay, as people across Western Europe held the expectation that the popes and cardinals as the leaders of the Catholic Church must abide by the ecclesiastical demands that was often ignored (Payton 2010: 31,32).

As the seventh and last pope of the Avignon Papacy Gregory VII moved the papacy back to Rome, a further internal problem arose in the church with the Great Schism, or the Papal Schism, that lasted from 1378 until 1417 (Reeves 2015b:online). Due to the public demands for an Italian pope, the cardinals elected Pope Urban VI in 1378, but due to his ascetic nature and putting limitations on the privileges of the cardinals, Urban VI was denounced as a false pope by the cardinals and thus they elected a new pope (Payton 2010:33). The new pope, Clement VII and his cardinals settled in Avignon, but due to Urban VI's refusal to accept his deposition there were now two popes in Western Christendom (Walker 1985:376). Both popes and their successors held allegiance from various European regions but essentially, the Great Schism of the church shattered the unity of Western Christianity and it divided the continent into papal allegiances (Rollo-Koster 2015:239). Rival papacies looked to gain support from civil rulers, who would essentially determine which papacy is deemed as legitimate because this would ascertain which papacy the people would then support. Another factor that complicated the issue of allegiance to the popes was the fact that monarchs could bargain for lower payments to the papal courts, and thus, whichever court could offer the better deal gained allegiance (Payton 2010: 33,34). As the cardinals of the Avignon and Roman papacies realized a resolution to the ongoing crisis of leadership within the church was needed, they met in 1408 at the Council of Pisa and elected a third pope, Alexander V, who was meant to replace the other two illegitimate popes but instead it resulted in three popes to claim that they are indeed the rightful pope (Walker 1985:387). This had resulted in a greater crisis as there were now three claimants to the papal seat, which created more division on the continent. The situation of three rival popes culminated in the Council of Constance, where the three existing popes were all deposed and a new pope, Martin V was elected as their successor in 1417, thus bringing the ongoing leadership crisis in the church to an end (Oakley 1990:23). In the process, however, the legitimacy and credibility of the Papacy was severely tarnished.

Despite the predicaments of the Avignon papacy and the Schism finally being resolved, other issues arose and took root during this time of chaos in the church. Due to the leadership crisis in the church, there was a rise of conciliarism, which was the notion that the papacy was the administrative head of the church, but that final ecclesiastical authority was held by the council, not the papacy (Payton 2010:34). The conciliar movement was what finally gave the cardinals enough authority to depose the three popes during the Schism, thereby creating a united papacy. However, having experienced such power the cardinals did not want to give up their power to the new pope, thereby initiating another schism in the Church at the Council of Basel in 1431 between council and pope (ibid 2010:39). For lay Christians these factional squabbles within the church created the impression that that the 'Holy Fathers' were more concerned about material wealth and position than spiritual questions. This, in turn, raised the question of why should they be regarded as different from other men and worthy of respect and obeisance?

Another issue within the church that had caused discontent was the wealth of the church and the means by which it obtained its funds. These means included the selling of indulgences, which was a way of paying the church to shorten the time spent in purgatory (Arnold 1999a:1,33). The selling of indulgences, along with the practice of simony and the taxation by the church on society to increase profit became normalized, but along with the increase of economic profit was the rise of spiritual corruption and anticlericalism (Arnold 1999b:1). The clergy's rising immorality in terms of abandoning the church law of celibacy as well as engaging in other immoral practices resulted in people seeing the clergy as living in "dens of corruption"(Arnold 1999b:1). The clerical abandonment of the law of celibacy can be demonstrated by the fact that certain diocese implemented fines that priests had to pay when they fathered children (Payton 2010:42). The anticlerical movement was given further impetus by the rise in absenteeism - where clergy members effectively avoided their church duties and pluralism - which was the practice of holding more than one church office. These added to the general trend of greed amongst the clergy and angered lay Christians (Reeves 2015b:online). Nepotism was rife, and bishops were wealthy and held political power (Hitchcock 2017:36). The demands for Church to reform grew more stride with each fresh abuse of power coming to light.

Another event that impacted the church, society, and the spread of the eventual Reformation was the Renaissance from 1300 to 1600. The humanists who led the Renaissance in a sense represented the general desire for the reform of society (Kittelson 1976:320). Although Florence was the central point of the Renaissance in Italy, it became highly influential across Italy and Europe, including Rome. During the Renaissance, the influence of the papacy reached new lows as the Renaissance popes failed to represent the real spirit or authentic religious life of the church and the people (Walker 1985:395,397). The Renaissance popes however, were staunch supporters of Humanism and were artistic patrons, which resulted in the commissioning of various artists, like Michelangelo. The Italian Humanists of the Renaissance paid renewed attention to biblical texts, including the New Testament, which they translated into Latin from its original Greek text and thus offered an alternative to the Vulgate which was the principal version of the Bible mainly prepared by St. Jerome in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Hitchcock 2017:38,40). Lorenzo Valla was an important player in the Humanist study of biblical texts, and he discovered that the Donation of Constantine, a document that was used to validate the church's temporal authority, was a forgery and thus completely irrelevant, which shed even more light on the corruption that the church was enveloped in (Reeves 2015b:online). It also served to challenge the church's temporal authority and provided

the impetus to create alternate temporal authorities. An important figure who was part of the Northern humanists was Desiderius Erasmus, who often questioned and criticized various aspects of Catholicism. As such, he was seen by some as a liberator from the tyranny of the church (Hitchcock 2017:40). The Renaissance furthermore posed a problem to the church as the arising middle class preferred to spend their wealth on education, art and literature rather than just the church (Arnold 1999a:1073-1517).

Along with the new translations of biblical texts and the interest in it by humanists, another critical moment occurred during this time of innovation with the development of the printing press in 1450 by Johann Gutenberg of Mainz (Walker 1985:394). This enabled the Renaissance's to access a wider field of possibilities in publishing ancient works, including Biblical texts – thereby ending the monopoly of the church (Payton 2010:69). This signals then, one of the developments that fuelled the spread of the Reformation, aside from the internal problems that caused people to be alienated from the church. With the development of the printing press, it became easier and quicker to print and distribute texts. It is often cited that without Gutenberg's moveable type printing press, the Reformation would not have had the impact that it did, or that it would not have occurred at all (Becker et al. 2016:18; Hillerbrand 1968:xxiv). For the first few decades of the printing industry, the Catholic Church was the most reliable customer to publishers, as the church printed sermons, devotional texts, liturgical books and most importantly, the various and most profitable texts that went along with the indulgence campaign (Pettegree 2017:981). Due to the printing press and texts becoming more readily available and affordable, the Reformation teachings spread quickly and widely, as there were over 200 presses established across Europe by 1500 (Walker 1985:394). The essential role of the printing press was acknowledged by Luther himself, who declared it to be the highest and ultimate gift from God in order to distribute the Gospel (Becker et al. 2016:18). The printing press also enabled the 95 Theses to be distributed widely. The first translation of the 95 Theses was in Latin, but after it was translated into German it was printed and distributed to the masses (Varickayil 1980:20). Due to the printing press, there was a mass distribution of the Bible across Europe, with 70 000 Bibles, including 10 000 New Testaments in 15 languages across the continent (Fanning 2009:29). The impact of the printing press is posited to possibly be the main reason for the success of the Reformation in Luther's time and the limited success that pre-Reformation reformers like Wycliffe and Hus achieved, as the sheer volume of Reformation propaganda printed made it impossible for the Catholic Church to contain (Varickayil 1980:20; Hillerbrand 1968:xxv).

In order to get an even more complete picture of the society that the Reformation took place in, there has to be a look at the general history of Europe in the preceding centuries. Along with the disastrous Great Schism in the Catholic Church there were various other calamities that occurred, namely the Black Death and the Hundred Years' War (Rollo-Koster 2015:239). Another disaster that will first be discussed is the vast agricultural failures that took place and caused such extreme devastation that by 1320, up to 25 per cent of Western Europe's population had died as a result of these failures (Payton 2010:26).

During the Medieval Warm Period in the early Middle Ages, Europe consisted of years of above average rains and crop yields, a larger population due to the food security and agricultural developments that made it more efficient and productive using horse-drawn ploughs (Reeves 2014:online). This was however, followed by a period of environmental calamity. By the late thirteenth century, the climate had become significantly cooler with higher rainfall and Europe was

on the brink of extreme environmental and consequential societal disasters (Campbell 2000:10,11). Society at this point was largely agrarian, and was characterized by subsistence agriculture (Lucas 1930:345). The torrential rains and lower summer temperatures made cultivation almost impossible and destroyed the minimal harvests there had been, and thus people were left without food (Saul 2000:38:39). Insufficient food supplies resulted in malnutrition and eventually famine arose (Payton 2010:26). The Great Famine that ravaged Europe between 1315 and 1317 was exacerbated by institutional factors as well, including a market failure, an unequal distribution of resources across social classes and continuous warfare (DeWitte & Slavin 2013:38). Britain specifically suffered yet another crisis as cattle herds and sheep suffered from disease. In fact, over 60 per cent of British cattle was eradicated by disease in 1319 and 1320, and recurrent outbreaks of disease among sheep continued for a further 30 years (DeWitte & Slavin 2013:38; Campbell 2000:11). There was therefore not just a shortage in grains but also the food items that was produced by cattle, like milk and cheese (Saul 2000:39). Famine across the continent lasted for practically a whole generation, and thus a general atmosphere of gloom and was present across the European continent as they tried to survive the abnormal climate and its consequences (Hay 2016:33).

To add to the already dismal situation, another devastating event would play out across Europe with the outbreak of the plague. With the outbreak of the Black Death, or Bubonic plague that devastated Western Europe between 1347 and 1351, up to one half of the population, those who survived the preceding famine, were killed (Payton 2010:26). This means that approximately 55 million people were killed across Europe by the plague (Getz 1991:265). The plague was brought into Europe sometime during the 1340s, and outbreaks of the disease continued across the continent until the mid-1400s (Saul 2000:39). The actual origin of the plague is largely undetermined, but the only explanation for the extensive dissemination of the disease is by ship, as merchants and sailors travelled along coasts and rivers across the continent (Byrne 2012:49). The spread of the Black Death followed trade and travel routes of the time, and as the disease first affected Florence and Venice killing up to 60 and 75 per cent of the cities' population respectively. From there, it dispersed across the rest of Western Europe. While the plague was originally transmitted by rats, it later developed an airborne strain which proved to be especially problematic given the very limited knowledge of disease, especially the pneumonic strain (Payton 2010:27). It is generally seen that the extreme weather patterns that directly caused the famine and animal deaths across Europe was also the cause of the extreme devastation caused by the plague, and that essentially all of these disasters were connected (Campbell 2000:11).

Additionally, another disaster that caused devastation across Europe was the numerous wars and conflicts that took place. Warfare across Europe in the 1300s was endemic and destructive, and included smaller yet destabilizing political rebellions (Van Engen 2008:271). Conflicts across the British Isles was prevalent in Wales and Ireland. The fifteenth century experienced great political volatility on account of the conflict. In Britain alone, three English kings and two Scottish kings died violent deaths in rebellion or assassination (Saul 2000:42,43). War and revolt was also pervasive in Italy and France and included events like the 1378 labour revolt in Florence (Van Engen 2008:271). Peasant revolts broke out in numerous places, including France, England, Germany and Spain as the decline in population left fewer peasants to work which resulted in attacks on nobles and severe repression and violence and more loss of life among the peasants (Payton 2010:29). In England and France, the peasant revolts negatively impacted on the already destabilising effects of the Hundred Years' War (1337 - 1453), that left both countries in danger of being invaded by the other,

and thus put people in vulnerable positions (Jones 2009:36). England also suffered political instability and division under the Wars of the Roses from 1455 until 1485, although the most persistent conflict during this time was the Hundred Years' War between England and France (Jones 2011:83). Aside from the fact that the ongoing wars and conflicts caused widespread instability and deaths, it also severely impacted the European economic system. Due to the high cost of waging war for decades upon end, loans taken from Italian merchant banks were defaulted on, which had various consequences including the collapse of the Italian merchant banks (Campbell 2000:17). The persistent instability caused by warfare and conflict thus affected more than just those actively involved in these wars and added to the struggles the European continent had been facing for hundreds of years. In all this, ordinary Europeans turned to the church for salvation, but no such salvation was forthcoming from a church, which were just as overwhelmed by calamity on calamity as ordinary people. In the process the esteem of the church was eroded in the eyes of ordinary people.

From this glance at the history preceding the Reformation sparked by Luther it is apparent that the continent of Europe had experienced much instability, within the church but also in their daily lives. The Catholic Church had many internal struggles which eventually caused the division of the church and of the continent. Corruption and practices like indulgences, which was Luther's main concern with the church, had caused the church to become commercialized and resulted in the over-exploitation of people who tried to buy their salvation from the church (Becker et al. 2016:13). The Avignon Papacy, Great Schism and its aftermath broke down the church and clerical authority especially as the moral corruption within the clergy caused concern among the people. These internal issues of the church which caused increased scepticism, was exacerbated by the external issues experienced on the continent that were unrelated to the church but still greatly impacted people's lives. The Renaissance and renewed interest in original biblical texts and the invention of the printing press enabled reformers to widely circulate the texts that criticized and questioned the Catholic Church. Against the backdrop of years of agricultural failures and famine, the Black Death and enduring war, conflict and revolts, Luther provided the laity a foundation on which they could base their grievances against the church that was only worsened by the external factors they had endured. The complex and multifaceted history of the Middle Ages in Western Europe creates the image of a continent that had been ravaged by external factors, exploited by the church who was supposed to provide guidance and support, and that was desperate for change that appeared in Luther's 95 Theses. Centuries of despair and struggle culminated with the charge against the Catholic Church and thus the Reformation burgeoned into a movement that would affect the entire Western civilization.

### **The Current State of the Islamic World**

As Imraan Buccus (2018:18) has noted, "The apparent ossification of self-critique within the Muslim world has damaged respect for differing views".

As we have seen in the case of the Protestant Reformation, one of major reasons for the success of the Protestant Reformation was because of the printing press. The publication of the 1,282-page Johannes Gutenberg Bible in 1456 was not merely a technological feat but a seminal event that had a major impact on world history. Rodney Castle (2011:137) commented, *"Until Johannes Gutenberg's time, bibles were handmade, scarce and expensive. Producing them, whole pages at a time on a press, made bibles cheaper and more accessible. Gutenberg's activity led to*



*the democratization of Christianity, the reduction of the power of the priests who recited and interpreted the bible for the rest of the community; and the consequent reduction of the power of the Church. The publication of the Gutenberg Bible led by a short route directly to the Reformation itself*". In a nutshell then the printing press stimulated literacy, broke the monopoly of the Church in knowledge production and served to get Luther's 95 Theses out to a much wider audience.

The Muslim experience thus far has been altogether different. Shortly after Gutenberg's invention, there were attempts to bring the printing press to the Ottoman Empire. This however, was, stymied by ulema who thought it was the devil's work. Nearly three centuries after Gutenberg, an intrepid businessman, Ibrahim Muteferrika brought the printing press to Istanbul in 1728. In his application for a business license, the far-seeing Muteferrika stated, "*It is vital for the Muslims, formerly in advance of the West in sciences, not to let themselves be eclipsed*" (Manji 2013:145). By 1745, this printing press had to close shop as the ulema once again forbid the printing press from taking root in Muslim society.

Decisions like this were to cast a long and malevolent shadow over the development of Muslim societies. Literacy plummeted across the Muslim world. Currently half of all Muslims – 800 million – cannot read and write (Saleem 2015:online). Under these conditions, how can the monopoly of orthodoxy be broken? How do Muslim Martin Luthers' disseminate their views? Even in this day and age of the internet, facebook and twitter, how are subaltern discourses to be accessed by ordinary Muslims when they cannot read and write, leave alone internalising and acting on these alternative discourses?

The current state of the Muslim world stands in marked contrast to an earlier period of Islamic history where Islamic states revelled in learning. In the ninth and tenth centuries, for instance, there were semi-public libraries scattered across the Islamic world containing not only religious books but works on mathematics, medicine, philosophy and music. Caliph Al-Ma'mun, meanwhile, founded the 'House of Wisdom' in early 9<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad which was the first of many academies of higher learning (Lewis 1995:190). Muslim Cordoba, meanwhile, had seventy libraries (Manji 2013:52).

The second reason for the success of the Protestant Reformation lay in the fact that dissident scholars and clergy like Martin Luther and John Calvin were protected by European kings from the Vatican not necessarily, because they agreed with their views but because they sought greater autonomy from Rome to run their own affairs. Political elites in Muslim countries far from providing protection to their religious and academic dissidents are siding with the conservative religious establishment against such dissidents. Note the Muslim political elites' silence when it came to the campaign of Pakistani teenager and Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Youafzai to educate Muslim women. In 2012, as a fifteen-year old teenager, she was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman for insisting that girls should also attend school (Biography 2018:online). Neither was this a unique occurrence in the Muslim world. In Bangladesh, secular Muslim writers are periodically killed. In April 2016, Nazimuddin Samad was hacked by a machete-wielding mob chanting 'Allahu Akbar' (God is Great). Then he was shot to death. He became the sixth writer over 14 months to be killed in such mob attacks in Bangladesh. Islamic State has also declared 11 Muslim clerics and scholars as apostates and 'obligatory targets' for death following their denunciation of the militant group (Solomon 2017:12). Neither is this a new phenomenon. On 14 February 1989, Iran's then Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, made the following religious ruling (*fatwa*), "*I inform the proud Muslim people of the world that the author of the Satanic Verses book, which is against Islam, the Prophet*

and the Koran, and all those involved in its publication who are aware of its content are sentenced to death" (Berkley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs 2018:online).

How is reform supposed to gain traction under these circumstances when the best and brightest are either being intimidated or killed? Knowledge in any society is advanced not by slavishly following the *status quo* but by disrupting existing ways of thinking through creative dissonance. Such a perspective is not anti-Islamic, in the same way that Luther's 95 Theses was not anti-Christian but sought to rescue Christianity from the corruption of the Church at the time. Indeed, there is an Islamic tradition of independent reasoning – *ijtihad* – which allows Muslims to evaluate their religious practice in the light of changing circumstances. *Ijtihad* is in keeping with a saying of the Prophet that, '*Difference of opinion within my community is God's mercy*' (Lewis 1995:229). Importantly, the Muslim holy book, The Qur'an which does not recognize a formal clergy provides this right of independent thinking to all Muslims. It was *ijtihad* that drove Islam's golden age from approximately 750 to 1250 CE. Here Muslim intellectual advances were to bequeath algebra, to cough syrup to the university to humanity. Under the auspices of *ijtihad*, 135 different schools of thought blossomed in the Islamic world (Manji 2013:50,51,143,144). But, Islam will never regain its Golden Age if dissonance is not celebrated and if dissidents are not protected and embraced.

The period running up to the Protestant Reformation and immediately after was a period of great conflict and violence filled with turmoil from food insecurity to the plague where people turned to the Church for solutions and no solution was forthcoming. Disenchanted with the Church, these conditions rendered Europeans receptive to the ideas of Reformists in their midst. The Islamic world is currently confronted with unprecedented conflict. There are no fewer than seven civil wars occurring in Muslim majority countries (Solomon 2017:13) today with the real possibility of war between Iran and Saudi Arabia igniting a broader Sunni-Shia conflagration across Islamic societies. Moreover, there is no indication that such turmoil will end in the short-term. Indeed, the Arab Spring may have been a dress rehearsal for further conflict as restless unemployed youth chafe at the authoritarian yoke placed on them by authoritarian political elites. Indeed, throughout the Arab world, the erosion of political freedom is palpable. In Freedom Houses' 2015 annual survey, ratings for the Middle East and North African (MENA) region were the worst in the world (Freedom House 2015:online). Worse, those countries that demonstrated so much promise suffered severe reversals in their democratic aspirations. Turkey's Justice and Development Party, widely known by its Turkish acronym AKP, which in its earlier incarnation bravely sought to marry political Islam with Western democratic principles, lost direction under the increasingly authoritarian yoke of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. His campaign against an independent press and civil society has seen hundreds arrested in his quest to centralize power (ibid 2015:online).

In Morocco and Kuwait, too, journalists and non-governmental organizations found themselves under siege from states refusing to accept the principle of legitimate dissent, whilst authorities in Bahrain sought to strip its leading critics of their citizenship. Under the circumstances and unsurprisingly the Freedom House survey of the 18 MENA countries, found that only one – Tunisia – to be free. Five others were partly free whilst the remaining twelve were not free (Freedom House 2015:online).

Repressive political conditions are also being accompanied with depressed economic conditions. Consider here the following: the combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 57 Muslim countries is under US \$2 trillion. By contrast the GDP for the United States is US \$10.4 trillion,

China US \$5.7 trillion, Japan US \$3.5 and India US \$3 trillion. To put it differently, whilst constituting 22 percent of the world's population, Muslims contribute less than 5 percent of the world's GDP (Saleem 2015:online). Ultimately, economic impoverishment and political repression are mutually reinforcing. Authoritarian political elites across the region used their exclusive access to the levers of power to amass great fortunes. Egypt's former president, Hosni Mubarak accumulated an estimated fortune of US \$70 billion (Acemoglu & Robinson 2013:3). Indeed, corruption has come to be institutionalized in Muslim societies. According to the latest Corruption Index, which measures 176 countries ranked for corruption, the ten most corrupt countries are all Muslim majority states. These include: Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Yemen (Khan 2017:online). As Liaquat Ali Khan (2017:online) has noted, *"Regrettably omnipresent corruption has corroded Muslim communities and cultures across the world. Ingest bribery, laundering money, selling fraudulent good, gaining advantage through nepotism, breaching trust, stealing public property, and engaging in similar corrupt behaviours are common among government officials, businesses, political parties, clergy, and even among the ordinary folk living in Muslim countries"*.

The involvement of the ulema in corruption as well as their serving as praise singers to often despotic and corrupt leaders have tarnished the reputation of Muslim clergy. As in Luther's day where the moral decadence of European societies also affected the men of the cloth in the Church, the same is true of Muslim clerics. Moreover, Muslim religious leaders, have no answers to today's pressing problems confronting the *ummah* (worldwide body of Muslim believers). Consider the following challenges confronting residents of Tehran: sickening air pollution, rat-infested streets, and spiralling drug addiction. However, the chief priority of the mullahs in the Iranian capital was none of these issues – rather their focus was on pet dogs regarded as impure in Islam. So, in December 2015, 32 parliamentarians introduced a bill in parliament that would penalize anyone who bought and sold pet dogs with a huge fine and 74 lashes! (The Daily Beast 2015: online).

Given the current state of affairs of the ruling clerical establishment in the so-called Islamic Republic of Iran, there has been strident criticism of theocratic rule by a growing number of *no-andish-an-edini* (New Religious Thinkers) from the 1990s. Consider the names of some of the books they have published, *Reason in the House of Religion* by Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari; *The Fascist Interpretation of Religion and Government: Pathology of Transition to the Democratic and Development-oriented State* by Akbar Ganji; *A Critique of the official Reading of Religion* by Mohammed Mujtahid Shabistari; *Crises of Religious Government* by Mohsen Kadivar; *The Tragedy of Democracy in Iran* by Emeddin Baghi; and *From the Sacred Witness to the Profane Witness: The Secularization of Religion in the Sphere of Politics* by Saeed Hajjarian (Hashemi 2009:91). These *no-andish-an-edini* were to play a key role in the so-called Green Revolution which witnessed peaceful protests across Iran in 2009. Unfortunately, these were brutally crushed by the Iranian authorities. Moreover, they received no international support from the United States and other Western countries as they sought to appease Tehran in an effort to secure Iran's support for the nuclear deal or in the official jargon – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Hoffman 2018:online). Reform withered in the immediate aftermath of 2009 and the ayatollahs strengthened their grip on the levers of power.

## CONCLUSION

Many of the conflicts that existed in the run-up to and during the Protestant Reformation exist in the contemporary Muslim world. These include: war and conflict, worsening socio-economic

conditions and political strife. European Christians at the time turned to the Church for assistance but no relief was to be found from the Church. Indeed, they were often part of the problem rather than the solution. Muslims today also see have turned to the ulema but they too have often been complicit in the worsening situation of Muslims from their rejection of technological advances like the printing press to their being obstacles to freedom and democracy as in Iran.

One of the major reasons that we have found for the success of the Protestant Reformation was the fact that dissident intellectuals and clerics were provided protection by European monarchs at the time. Closely related to this was the fact that with technological developments like the printing press, literacy rates grew phenomenally in Europe amongst ordinary people. In the process more people has access to the Bible as well as read such dissident tracts as Luther's 95 Theses. Taken together, these developments broke the monopoly of the Catholic Church and allowed Europe to develop in a secular direction – one that embraced rapid economic development and democratization. The same is not true of the contemporary Islamic world where Muslim intellectuals and clerics who think differently from the existing orthodoxy are routinely harassed, intimidated or killed. Think here of Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* against the author Salman Rushdie or, indeed, the mob executions of secular Muslim writers in Bangladesh. Moreover, given the low literacy rates amongst Muslims today, these dissident points of view are not finding traction amongst the masses of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims. Ironically, the Islamic principle of *ijtihad*, which allows for independent reasoning and could set the basis for a progressive reform agenda has been surrendered to a largely conservative *ulema* – a structure which is not even acknowledged by the Qur'an. Without the protection and celebration of dissident voices, without literacy increasing in the Islamic world, especially that of women, no Islamic Reformation will take route.

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