

## Reformation as a General Ideal Type: A Comparative Outline\*

Mohammad Nafissi

### Abstract

This article pursues two specific and entwined objectives. It accounts for the absence of a general concept of reformation in Max Weber's sociology of religion, and demonstrates the need for one and supplies it through a comparative analysis of Islam as a 'reform-prone' Abrahamic religion.

Keywords: Christianity, Democracy, Islam, Max Weber, Reformation.

Following the popular and scholarly consensus in western Europe, modernist Muslim reformers in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries drew on Protestantism as a source of inspiration and legitimation.<sup>1</sup> In recent decades, the quest for an Islamic reformation has

\* Part of a work-still in-progress, and based on the paper presented at Max Weber and the Spirit of Modern Capitalism – 100 years later conference, this article draws on an earlier version published as 'Reformation, Islam and Democracy: Evolutionary and Antievolutionary Reform in Abrahamic Religions', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, South Africa and the Middle East* 25 (2005), 408-38. Of the many from whose comments I have benefited, I am especially grateful to Sami Zubaida, Farhad Nourbakhsh, Sam Whimster, Simon Bromley, Tariq Modood, Ralph Schroeder, and the two reviewers of this journal.

1. See, e.g., M. Iqbal, *The Reconstitution of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1986), p. 129; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1930* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 122; N. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din 'Afghani': A Political Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 391-92; J. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 56. For more general accounts of reform and renewal, see H. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1945); F. Rahman, 'Revival and Reform in Islam', in P. Holt, A. Lambton and B. Lewis (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Islam*, II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1970); F. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1982), pp. 632-56 and J. Voll, 'Renewal and Reform in Islamic History', in J. Esposito (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983), pp. 32-47.

been turned on its head by two concomitant developments. First, the failure so far of a Muslim Luther and/or the Middle-Eastern middle classes to achieve the expected modernizing breakthrough. Secondly, the rise of what appears as an Islamic 'counter reformation' without a preceding local reformation, but apparently driven by opposition to the 'modernizing' consequences of its imported Christian variant. Understandably this has rekindled the interest in what may be called a post-modern Islamic reformation. The contributors to the ensuing debate seem generally comfortable with assuming that all concerned have the same operational concept of reformation from which an Islamic reformation may be unproblematically derived. In so far as that is the case, the concept in question is plausibly taken to arise from the experience of Protestantism. On closer scrutiny, however, both the nature of the Protestant case and the very usefulness of the concept of reformation for understanding old and new varieties of Islam remain in dispute.

Thus, on the one side, Robin Wright views Islamic reformation as over a century old and roughly similar to the Christian one in its motives and goals, and as attempting to 'reconcile Islam and modernity by creating a worldview that is compatible with both'.<sup>2</sup> On the other side, Abdou Filali-Ansary insists that

*the updating of religious conceptions should be understood not in terms of Reformation that occurred in sixteenth-century Christian Europe... The reformation is a singular event in history, linked to a particular environment... It cannot, as some observers are suggesting nowadays, be 'replicated' in the context of another religion and under twentieth-century conditions.*<sup>3</sup>

This debate is mediated by a broader one over the causes of underdevelopment and development. At the broadest and much polemically reduced approximation, the ideationalists, primordialists, 'orientalists' or 'internalists' explain the wretched conditions of the Middle East by emphasizing the role of Islam and its resistance to reform. For their materialist, instrumentalist or 'externalist' opponents, however, this is mistaking the effect for the cause. From this vantage point, Islam (or Islams) is essentially a dependent variable shaped or instrumentalized

2. R. Wright, 'Two Visions of Reformation', in L. Diamond, M. Plattner and P. Costopoulos (eds.), *World Religions and Democracy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 180-91 (183, 191).

3. A. Filali-Ansary, 'Muslims and Democracy', in Diamond *et al.*, *World Religions*, pp. 153-67 (163).