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Item Type	Journal volume
Authors	al-Qurtuby, Sumanto
Publisher	UIN Walisongo
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Download date	2026-06-30 18:01:14
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/154277

THE LUTHER OF SHI'I ISLAM

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Abstract

This paper examines socio-historical roots of the emergence of the idea of “Islamic Protestantism” within Iranian Shi'i tradition. The central focus of this study is to present thoughts and activities of so-called “Iranian Luthers” as the agents, actors, and prime movers of the birth of Islamic reformation in Iran. These actors whose ideas of Islamic reformation have had great influences and reached broader audiences beyond Iranian territory include Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Ali Shari'ati, Mehdi Bazargan, Hashem Aghajari, and Abdul Karim Soroush. There are a number of Iranian reformers deserve credits for their thoughtful, controversial ideas of Islamic reformations. These Iranian reformers are considered “the Luthers of Islam” for their deep admiration of Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation, and their calls for Islamic reformation just like Luther did in the sixteenth century Europe. By the socio-historical and descriptive analysis, this paper is not intended to compare two religious reformations in Iran and Europe, but rather to study and analyze their notions with regard to Islamic reformation.

Artikel ini membicarakan tentang akar sosio-historis munculnya gagasan “Protestanisme Islam” dalam tradisi Syi'ah Iran, dengan fokus kajian pemikiran dan gerakan yang disebut “Luther Iran” sebagai agen, aktor, dan penggerak utama lahirnya reformasi Islam di Iran. Ide-ide reformasi Islam memiliki pengaruh besar dan mencapai khalayak yang lebih luas di luar wilayah Iran termasuk Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Ali Shari'ati, Mehdi Bazargan, Hashem Aghajari, dan Abdul Karim Soroush. Sejumlah reformis Iran layak mendapatkan perhatian karena pemikiran, ide-ide kontroversial mereka dalam reformasi Islam. Para reformis Iran dianggap sebagai “Luther Islam” karena kekaguman mendalam mereka terhadap Martin Luther, dan mereka menghendaki reformasi Islam seperti yang terjadi pada masa Luther di Eropa abad keenam belas. Dengan analisis sosio-historis dan deskriptif, tulisan ini tidak dimaksudkan untuk membandingkan dua reformasi keagamaan di Iran dan Eropa, melainkan untuk mempelajari dan menganalisis gagasan-gagasan mereka mengenai reformasi Islam.

Keywords: Iranian Shi'i Tradition, Iranian Luthers, Islamic reformation, Islamic Protestantism

A. Foreword: Early Generations of Iranian Reformers

The idea of “Islamic Protestantism” has become a hot topic in many Muslim societies including those of Iranian Shiites. In Iran, for instance, Dr. Hashem Aghajari (b. 1957), a journalist and active member of the reformist Islamic Revolution’s Mujahideen Organization (IRMO), suddenly became an international celebrity after speaking on this issue in June 2002 on the occasions to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the death of Ali Shari’ati (b. 1933), one of the main ideologues of the Islamic Revolution. In his speech, besides criticizing Iran’s ruling religious institution, Aghajari, a disabled veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, presented the ideas of Islamic reformation. Built on the basis of Shari’ati’s legacy as an intellectual legitimacy, he specifically called for the need to rejuvenate Islam with the fresh notions of so-called “Islamic Protestantism”.

Aghajari used Shari’ati’s legacy to express his own criticism with regard to the hegemonic role and practices of clerical establishments in post-Islamic Revolution Iran. He saw religion in the Islamic Republic of Iran had become bureaucratized and hierarchical. Because of his strong criticism, he was arrested by the Iranian government in August 2002. No more than three months later, which was on November 6, 2002, he was sentenced to death by a Hamedan court for (the accusation of) being apostate, blaspheming the Prophet Muhammad, insulting the Shi’ite imams, and “mocking” top state religious authorities. In 2004, after domestic Iranian and international outcry, his sentence was reduced to time in prison. It is significant to acknowledge that Aghajari is not the first and the only Iranian thinker that advocates the idea of Islamic Protestantism. Additionally, such an idea is not unique Iranian Shi’a. The ideas of Islamic restoration have also been advocated by non-Iranian Muslim scholars, reformist ulama’, and activists across the Muslim world.¹

¹ See e.g. Arkoun, 2006; Bayat 2007; Kurzman, ed. 1998; Safi, ed. 2003; Abou El Fadl 2005; Esposito and Tamimi, eds. 2000; Noer 1973; Esack 1998. Another eminent Muslim thinker joins in this camp is Syrian author Muhammad Shahrour (b. 1938). Dale Eickelman in his article, “Islamic Liberalism Strikes Back,” states that a best-selling 1990 book by him, that is, *Al-Kitab wa l-Qur’an: Qira’a Mu’asira* (“The Book and the Qur’an: A Contemporary Reading”), “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” (Dale Eickelman, “Islamic Liberalism Strikes Back.” *MESA Bulletin*, No. 27, 1993, pp. 163-168). Through this book, Shahrour provokingly argues the need for reinterpretation of the Qur’an with new lens and modern social sciences such as linguistics and hermeneutics to grasp the whole picture of the Qur’an, and not through the prism of centuries of jurisprudence. In his other

The emergence of the notion of Islamic Protestantism was deeply rooted within Islamic history, especially since the late nineteenth century, when some Muslim modernists and Arab-the Middle East nationalist leaders called for Islamic reformation by referring the fifteenth Christian Reformation led by, notably, Martin Luther (d. 1546), to liberate Muslim societies from European colonial handcuffing and despotic Muslim empire.² However, although both camps—the modernists and the nationalists—shared the same fascination toward the Christian Reformation, they had different stand points regarding whether the Christian Reformation resembled Islam or the reverse: the developments in Christian history that resembled Islam. Thinkers like Muhammad Abduh of Egypt (d. 1905), Muhammad Iqbal of India (d. 1938), and Ziya Gokalp of Turkey (d. 1924), to name several Muslim modernists, tended to see the resemblance of the Christian Reformation to Islam. On the contrary, nationalist figures like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897) and other reformists such as Indian reformer Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) advocated the need for the spirit of the Christian Reformation and Luther to lead Islamic reformation. This call then was echoed by Fath 'Ali Akhundzadah (d. 1878) in the Russian Empire and Abdullah Cevdet (d. 1932) of Ottoman Empire, both of whom used the Christian Reformation analogy as a cover for atheism.³

book, *Dirasat al-Islāmiyya Mu'asira fi 'l-Daula wa 'l-Mujtama'* ("Contemporary Islamic Studies in State and Societies"), Shahrour also demands Muslims to not blindly follow the conception and thoughts of medieval jurists Muslims (Eickelman in Browsers and Kurzman, eds. 2004, p. 20). Sudanese Muslim academician and activist Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im (b. 1946) also has echoed the idea of Islamic reformation. However he stated that an Islamic reformation cannot be a belated and poor copy of the European Christian model of Reformation. Instead, it will have to be an indigenous and authentically Islamic process. By his book, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law*, al-Na'im is an important voice for calling Islamic reformation by reformulating the structure of "liberal shari'a" identified by granting civil liberties, respecting basic human rights, minority rights (particularly non-Muslims), equality under law, and so forth. In an attempt to reconstruct this "new shari'a," he evokes the use of Mecca verses of the Qur'an, which is, according to him, more liberal, plural, and democratic (see al-Na'im, 1996). Moreover, Ahmad Bishara, the chairman of the National Democratic Movement of Kuwait, can be regarded as the supporter of this movement when he said that the aim of the political party he established was to "reform Islam the way Martin Luther reformed the Catholic Church." Kenyan thinkers Ali Mazrui and Alamin Mazrui also pondered that "It would be particularly fitting if the Martin Luther of the Islamic Reformation turned out to be a woman, posting her 95 Theses of reform not on the door of a Wittenberg mosque but universally on the Internet" (cited from Michaëlle Browsers and Charles Kurzman (eds.), *An Islamic Reformation?* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004, pp. 6-7. cf. Sumanto al-Qurtuby, "Calling for an Islamic Protestantism: Toward Democratic and Pluralistic Islam." *International Journal of Islamic Studies* 2 (2). Forthcoming, 2008.

² I have explained elsewhere on this issue. See Qurtuby 2008; cf. Hourani 1962; Shadid 2002.

³ The call for the need of Islamic reformation goes further. Habib Allah Puri Riza (Iran) argued that Shi'i Islam needed a "sacred revolution" "with thinkers like Luther and Calvin; Muhammad

With regard to my purpose, I will limit this discussion only to that of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897). And indeed, he was the most prominent and leading advocate of the concept of Islamic Protestantism as a way to liberate Muslim societies and countries from Western imperialism and Muslim despots. Afghani's revolutionary ideas had influenced many notable Muslim scholars and activists, including Abduh (d. 1905), Rida (d. 1935), and al-Kawakibi. Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (born in Syria, 1849-1902) wrote *Taba'i al-Istibdad* ("The Characterization of Tyranny"), which was translated into Persian and had some influences on Iranian intelligentsia, particularly Sayyid Muhammad Tabataba'i at the time of Constitutional Revolution.⁴ Born in Iran as Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi, he then used and replaced his last-name to become "al-Afghani" in order to achieve broader acceptance and influence among Sunni Muslims in Arab and the Middle East particularly.⁵ Afghani perceived Islam not just as a religion but as comprehensive civilization. Albert Hourani noted that the idea of civilization is one of the seminal ideas of nineteenth-century Europe, and "it is through al-Afghani above all that it reaches the Islamic world."⁶

To Afghani, Islam was seen as profoundly activist and rational, influencing its believers to resist against colonialism and despotism. As well, he regarded Islam and its believers as the dynamic historical entities that always shifted from stupidity and brutalism toward a more advanced, learned civilization.

Rashid Rida (d. 1935) cited the need to merge "religious renewal and earthly renewal, the same way Europe has done with religious reformation and modernization;" Hadi Atlasi (d. 1940) claimed the urgent need for a Muslim "Luther" to save the Muslim world, and he considered Shihabuddin Marjani (d. 1889), the founder of Islamic modernism in Russia, as the "Muslim Luther" (see more at Browsers and Kurzman, eds. 2004, *ibid.*, p. 1-17; Hourani, 1983; Kurzman ed. 1998). In Indonesia, according to Deliar Noer in his *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia*, the call for Islamic reformation was advocated by Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah organization, Haji Miskin and Imam Bonjol in Minangkabau, the founders of Indonesian Wahhabism, and also Muhammad Natsir, "the opponent" of Soekarno, leading advocate of Indonesian secularism and nationalism, during the nationalist movement era (Noer 1978). This Islamic reformation movement, according to the secularist Syrian thinker Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm, had caused the establishment of a counterreformation movements led by the Ikhwanul Muslimin in 1928 (?) and similar movements (Browsers and Kurzman, eds. 2004, *ibid.*, p. 5). In the Indonesian context, the modernist movements had stimulated the founding of the Islamic traditionalist organization, *Nahdlatul Ulama* in 1926, led by Syeikh Hasyim Asy'ari, the grandfather of Gus Dur (cf. Qurtuby 2008).

⁴ Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2003), p. 102.

⁵ Nikkie R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani: a Political Biography*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), p. 11.

⁶ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 114.

According to him, Islam should be “divested of its particular political divisions, and should unite in one pan-Islamic movement against the West”.⁷ In particular, al-Afghani viewed Muslim rulers as weak, fragile, and susceptible to foreign (western) exploitation and manipulation. Accordingly, in his view, Islam should be freed from “the corrupt and deliberating accretions of the past centuries and return to the purity and strengthen of its early years of Islam”.⁸ Due to his desire to “purify” Islam with the lens of early Islam developed by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, Wilfred Cantwell Smith once noticed that Afghani was the first important Muslim figure with “nostalgia for departed earthly glory of pristine Islam. “Smith further notes that Afghani stressed both internal reform and external defense, encouraged both nationalism and pan-Islam, and advocated borrowing from the West and a new vitalistic activism.⁹ Although he did not present a detailed program of institutional change, he sought to inspire movements to restore the political institutions of Islam.

Afghani was a prototype of a rational Muslim thinker and activist, who utilizes Islamic philosophy as a means of “knowledge to transform Islamic society from the state of barbarism to scientific progress and from darkness into light”.¹⁰ Rejecting unthinking traditionalism and blind imitation of the West, Afghani began to reinterpret Islam by emphasizing “values vitally needed for life in modern world such as activism, the freer use of human reason, and political and military strength”.¹¹ Apart from the tradition of Islamic philosophy, al-Afghani’s passion in reason is in part due to the influence of the historical writings of the French historian Francois Guizot (1787-1847).¹² His lectures on the history of civilization (his work was translated into Arabic in 1877) had impressed Afghani.

Particularly, Afghani was inspired by Guizot’s concepts of reason and social solidarity as a basis of advancement within western tradition. Influenced by this idea, Afghani then suggested reinterpreting Islam in light of reason,

⁷ Vanesa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State...*, pp. 100-101.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁹ Smith, 1957, pp. 47-51.

¹⁰ Sukidi, “The Travelling Idea of Islamic Protestantism: a Study of Iranian Luthers.” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 16 (4), 2005, p. 403.

¹¹ Nikkie R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), p. 3.

¹² Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, pp. 114-115.

progress, and civilization rather than a set of religious teachings and doctrines. This appeal for reinterpreting Islam and the Qur'an with regard to these reason, progress, and civilization, has argued, could lead towards a Protestant-type of Islamic reform.¹³ Having learned from Martin Luther, who openly defied and resisted the dominant authority of Catholic religious establishments, Afghani began to challenge the hegemonic authority of conservative and traditional ulama' which he saw as the root causes of decadence and decline in Islamic civilization for centuries. Afghani's fascination towards Luther was indicated by his statements as follows:

"If we consider the reasons for the transformation in the condition of Europe from barbarism to civilization, we see it was only the religious movement raised and spread by Luther. This great man, when he saw that the peoples of Europe had declined and lost their vigor due to the long period that they had submitted to the heads of the church and to (religious) imitation, not based on clear reason, started that religious movement..."¹⁴

In short, it is obvious that Afghani was an admirer of Luther, and he often considered himself as a Martin Luther who learned from the "success" of Protestant Reformation as the point of reference for his notion of Islamic Protestantism. He strongly argued that Islam needed Luthers in order to attain a Protestant-style of Islamic reform.¹⁵ He, furthermore, proposed that the Islamic Protestantism should be based on two fundamental principles: (1) Muslim societies should directly return to the Qur'an as a primary basis of Islam; and (2) the significance of the revitalization of *ijtihad* as the main vehicle of achieving the advancement of Muslim societies, and of liberating them from backwardness and ignorance.

Afghani's progressive ideas of Islamic reformation based upon rational thinking and the spirit of freedom was continued by Ali Shari'ati (1933-1977), one of the main ideologues of the Iranian Islamic Revolution; albeit he died before the 1978-1979 Revolution took place. Born in Mazinan, a village near Mashad in northeast Iran, Shari'ati, whose life was under close surveillance of Iran's secret police and conservative clerics, was a complex figure combining

¹³ Nikkie R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism...* p. 38.

¹⁴ Nikkie R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani...* pp. 391-92.

¹⁵ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, p. 122.

a sociologist, "Islamic Marxist," public speaker, and devout believer of Shiism. He underwent the "same fate" with his father, Muhammad Taqi Shari'ati¹⁶, a respected reformist cleric, who, ironically, was labeled by his Shi'i fellows as a Sunni, a Bahai, and even Wahhabi. Indeed, Shari'ati himself proudly stated that his father, more than anyone else, had influenced his intellectual advance.¹⁷ Shari'ati prolific period did not last long, for in 1972 the secret police surrounded Houssein-e-Ershad Institute ceased his activities and arrested many of his followers.¹⁸ Intellectual hacks hired by the government accused Shari'ati of "leading youth astray with anti-clerical propaganda." Even Ayatollah Mottaheri, who was considered as a reform-minded cleric, viewed Shari'ati was too emphasizing sociology "at the expense of theology and borrowing too freely from Western political philosophy".¹⁹

Like his predecessors, notably Afghani, Shari'ati was an admirer of the Christian Reformation of the sixteenth century Europe. He argued that contemporary Iran (read, Iran under the Shah Pahlavi) was at a similar stage of development as pre-Reformation Europe; consequently Iran needed progressive figures such as Luther and Calvin to embark on Islamic reformation by promoting enlightening and liberating ideas for Islam and Muslim societies as a whole. Following Afghani's call for a return to the Qur'an through liberal and rational interpretations, Shari'ati also called for a return to a "true Islam" which he defined as an Islam that not only pros toward the oppressed, the exploited, and the marginalized people (*mustadh'afin*)²⁰ but also demands its believers to struggle against the oppressors for the sake of justice. He states:

It is not enough to say we must return to Islam. We must specify which Islam: that of Abu Zarr or that of Marwan the ruler. Both are called

¹⁶ Muhammad Taqi Shari'ati dedicated his life to both "defending Islam and defining the outlines of a 'revived' Islam compatible with modern conditions and responsive to the demands of an ever more socially conscious youth" [Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati*, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), p. 12]. His reform efforts were resisted by Iranian conservative clerics who still upheld traditional forms of Islam.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-22.

¹⁸ See the official website of Dr. Ali Shari'ati at: <http://www.shariati.com>

¹⁹ Ervand Abrahamian, "Ali Shari'ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution." *MERIP Reports* No. 102, 1982, pp. 25.

²⁰ It is important to note that the Qur'an mentions the term of *mustadh'afin* (the oppressed) seventeen times more than that of, for instance, *kubara'* (elites), *mala'* (noblemen, political leaders), or *mutrafun* (the greedy rich people) (see e.g. Rakhmat 1997). From this standpoint, Shari'ati's claim that Islam is the religion of the oppressed has found its relevance.

Islamic, but there is a huge difference between them. One is the Islam of the Caliphate, of the Palace, of the Rulers [read, Islam of Marwan]. The other [read, Islam of Abu Zarr] is the Islam of the people, of the exploited, and of the poor. Moreover, it is not good enough to say that one should be 'concerned' about the poor. The corrupt Caliphs said the same. True Islam is more than 'concerned'. It instructs the believer to fight for justice, equality, and elimination of poverty" (*Islamology*, Lesson 3, pp. 7-8).²¹

Based upon the above statements, Shari'ati evidently understood Islam as a religion that encourages and commands a sort of dynamism, resistance, and activism. He viewed Islam as a "liberating force" of human societies from despotism (*istibdad*), colonialism (*isti'mar*), exploitation (*istitsmar*) and so forth. He based this idea on the most fundamental concept within Islamic tradition: *tawhīd* (literally "oneness"). It is interesting to highlight that Bazargan also underlined the significance of *tawhīd*, verbally known as "There is no god but God" (*lā ilāha illa-Allāh*), as a foundation of "Islamic liberation." He even went further by saying that tauhid is the mission of the prophets that has been "to liberate human beings, not to enslave them".²²

For Shari'ati, moreover, *tawhīd* does not simply a statement of "oneness of God" (unity of Godhead) as Muslim communities commonly believe, but rather a declaration of unity of creation (*tawhīd al-khulq*), and finally, of unity of mankind (*tawhīd al-ummat*) based upon the precepts of justice (*'adalah*), equality (*musawah*), and liberty or freedom (*hurriyah*). Here Shari'ati contended that the concept of *tawhīd* is a mirror or symbol of struggle to accomplish what Marx called "classless society".²³ This theological awareness strengthens that Islam rejects all kinds of exploitation, discrimination, and oppression against human beings. Shari'ati continued to argue that Muslims are not truly considered to be "Islamic" (read, "true Islam" in the light of Shari'ati) if they still "worship" other objects or creatures like wealth and power, or "idolize" other entities rather than God, such as kings, the rich, political rulers, clerics, the shah and so on.

²¹ Ervand Abrahamian, "Ali Shari'ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," p. 27.

²² Mehdi Bazargan, "Religion and Liberty," in Kurzman (ed), *Liberal Islam: A Source Book*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 76.

²³ Shahrough Akhavi, "Shari'ati Social Thought." In Nikkie R. Keddie (ed), *Religion and Politic in Iran*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 125-144.

Shari'ati, considered by many as the ideological father of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, often stressed that the Prophet Muhammad had been sent down by God to set up not just a religious/Islamic community but an *ummat* (human societies) as a whole in constant motion towards progress and social justice. Moreover, he argues that the Prophet Muhammad's intention was to build not just a monotheistic religion but a unitary society (*nezam-i-tawhid*) that would be bound together by public virtue, by the common struggle for fairness, egalitarianism, and human brotherhood.²⁴ In order to achieve the Weber-borrowed "ideal type" of that "true Islam," Shari'ati has argued, Islam must be taught, raised and spread by the "enlightened thinkers" (*rushanfekran*) who, on one hand, opposed the corrupt clerics and the hegemonic role of clergy, and on the other hand, struggled for rational, modern, and dynamic views of Islam. Shari'ati regarded this *rushanfekran* as the real advocates of dynamic, vibrant, and revolutionary Islam.²⁵

Viewing the Iranian environment which was colored by social hierarchy, religious exploitation, and political mistreatment, Shari'ati seemed to argue that the *rushanfekran* could play a similar role to the Christian reformers Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564). Shari'ati, who keenly read the works of contemporary radicals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Franz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Roger Garaudy (a leading Christian Marxist intellectual), believed that Islam in general and Iranian Islam in particular required a radical reformation and fundamental restoration. Specifically, he insisted upon the need of the model provided by Luther and Calvin for transferring and transforming the establishment of the Iranian clerical institution (*rūhaniyyat*) to the leadership of those *rushanfekran*.²⁶

For Shari'ati, the *rushanfekran*, indeed have the task of creating an "Islamic Protestantism" for the sake of "cultural engineering, stimulating the political and class consciousness of the masses, building bridges between the intellectual stratum and the masses, defrocking false priests, and, in a word,

²⁴ See Abrahamian 1982; cf. Rahnema 1998.

²⁵ See more Ali Shari'ati, *What is to be Done? The Enlightened Thinkers and an Islamic Renaissance*, edited by F. Rajaei. Houston, TX: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986, p. 29-67.

²⁶ Sukidi, "The Travelling Idea of Islamic Protestantism... p. 406. cf. Rahnema: 1998.

ushering in a Renaissance".²⁷ The replacement of the clerics with the *rushanfekran* is critical since the clerics, Shari'ati maintained, had become an integral part of the ruling class, of "institutionalizing" revolutionary Shi'ism, and thereby betraying its original goals. He also blamed them for failing to carry on the work of such 19th century reformers as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani with regard to Islamic Protestantism. In his lecture at the Technical University of Tehran in November 1971, he began to call publicly for Islamic Protestantism as follows:

He [an enlightened person, the *rushanfekran*] should begin by 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 giving to the new thoughts and new movements.²⁸

By embracing the concept of Islamic Protestantism which underlines the pivotal role of rational, critical, and independent reasoning (*ijtihad*),²⁹ has argued, Iranian Muslims could liberate themselves from the destructive political intervention of the Shah's regime and the dominant role of the ruling clerics. In the hands of Shari'ati, who translated Guevara's *Guerilla Warfare* and Sartre's *What Is Poetry?*, the call for Islamic Protestantism had become a public statement compared with what Afghani had previously initiated in the late nineteenth century. His passion and vision to implement Islam as a "liberating force," a sort of the Christian Reformation, had succeeded to inspire and awake Iranian Muslims, regardless of their religious denominations and ethnic affiliations, in toppling the Reza Shah Pahlavi regime in a remarkable revolution in 1979. Iranian protestors during the historic event of the "Islamic Revolution" carried out the giant posters of both Imam Khomeini and Dr. Ali Shari'ati. Although he died prior to the Revolution, his ideas of "Islamic Protestantism" never die. In fact, present-day "Iranian Luthers," notably Hashem Aghajari and Abdulkarim Soroush, have persisted Shari'ati's concepts and struggle to implement the fresh ideas of Islamic reformation in post-"Islamic Revolution" Iran.

²⁷ Akhavi in Keddie, ed, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

²⁸ Ali Shari'ati, *What is to be Done? ...*, pp. 24-25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

B. Post-Revolutionary Iranian Luthers

Post-revolutionary Iranian Luthers include three well-known scholars and influential reformists, namely Mehdi Bazargan (1907-1995), Hashem Aghajari (1957-), and Abdul Karim Soroush (1945-). It is somewhat difficult to place Bazargan and Soroush in the camp of post-revolutionary Iranian reformers since they undergo and live in two different worlds of Iranian politics: during the Shah and the Mullah regimes. Furthermore, to some degree, Bazargan should be placed as one of the early generations of pre-revolutionary Iranian reformers, along with Shari'ati.³⁰ However, since he witnessed the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and became a strong critic of the Mullah-controlled Iranian regime, I position Bazargan in the cluster of post-revolutionary Iranian reformers. I will discuss Bazargan first and then followed by Aghajari and Soroush.

Born into a devout family of merchants, Bazargan was a French trained engineer, a lay Islamic scholar, and a long-time pro-democracy activist whose efforts in democratizing the Shi'i clerical establishment since the early 1960s led him as "a barely tolerated symbol of opposition to the radical-Islamic government".³¹ Bazargan was not only critical toward the Mullah regime of post-revolutionary Iran, but also prior to the historic "Islamic Revolution" took place in 1979, he strongly opposed to the Shah Pahlavi regime. It is obvious that Bazargan represented a critical voice against the shahs of Iran whose nonviolent opposition to them through groups he cofounded such as the Liberation Movement of Iran (founded in 1961) and the Iranian Human Rights Association (founded in 1977) led him to the jail during the 1960s and 1970s. When the shah was forced out of Iran in 1979 by people power, Imam Ruhollah Khomeini appointed Bazargan as provisional prime minister, but he resigned just within a year, complaining that conservative, radical clerics were destabilizing and opposing his rule. Harassed by his radical opposition, Bazargan then lived in a sort of political limbo until his death in early 1995. Abdulkarim Soroush, today's most liberal philosopher in Iran, gave several

³⁰ Note: Bazargan far older than Shari'ati but Shari'ati died prior to the Revolution so that he had no chance to witness the religious-political processes of post-revolutionary Iranian government, while Bazargan died in 1995.

³¹ cf. Kurzman (ed), *op. cit.*, p. 73

lectures about Bazargan after his death, praising him as a forerunner of Islamic reform.³²

This short description portrays Bazargan's commitment toward the ideas of Islamic reformation and fundamental changes within Iranian politics and Islam which in-line with the spirits of human's universal values and basic human rights. No doubt Bazargan was a central figure within the ranks of modern Muslim thinkers, well known as a representative of progressive Muslim thinkers who has emphasized the necessity of constitutional and democratic politics (cf. Barzin 1994). Bazargan's basic concepts and notions about Islamic reform-related issues and the need for change within Iranian politics can be found, among others, in his seminal essay, "Religion and Liberty".³³ In this fine piece, Bazargan responds a speech about the European origins of the notion of freedom delivered by Ezzatallah Sahabi (Iran, b. 1932), the son of Bazargan's long-time colleague Yadollah Sahabi (1905-2002), who was prominent Iranian scholar and reformist politician.

Ezzatallah Sahabi argued that the roots of modern liberalism lie in the 17th century, when the feudal rulers of Europe were struggling to liberate themselves from the hegemony of the pope and the Catholic Church. The movement culminated in the quest for social and political liberties demanded by the great French Revolution (1789-1799) and other democratic regimes, forerunners of which included Rousseau (d. 1778), Voltaire (d. 1778), Montesquieu (d. 1755), and other French philosophers of the eighteenth century (known Encyclopedists), who were typically anti-clerics, anti-church, and anti-religious. However, as Sahabi noted, the foundation of the European Renaissance was rooted in the religious reformation and Protestantism under the leadership of, notably, Martin Luther (d. 1546) and Calvin (d. 1564). Protestants aiming at returning Christianity to its pristine simplicity, spirituality, and liberty, rejected the superstitions and religious restrictions of Catholicism.

For Bazargan, however, freedom came at birth far before Martin Luther declared the "95 Theses" he nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church

³² Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, translated and edited by Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 200.

³³ Bazargan, "Religion and Liberty," in Kurzman (ed), *Liberal Islam*: pp. 73-84.

in 1517 to demand freedom from the monopoly interpretation and the supremacy of Catholic Church. More precisely, Bazargan has argued, Islam and Muslim societies underwent the “virtue” of freedom since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the “rightful caliphs” (*al-khulafā' al-rāshidūn*). Since the *al-khulafā' al-rāshidūn* (read, the reign of Abu Bakar, Umar, Ustman, and Ali) ended, Islam and Muslim societies underwent a new era under the system of despotic caliphate (beginning with the Umayyad Dynasty). Since then, freedom became an “expensive thing.” Bazargan states:

The caliphs were commanders in chief, supreme judges, and treasures. They considered themselves the embodiment of the Qur'anic verses: 'O believers, obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you' (QS. [4]: 62). They thus claimed to be absolute sovereigns and autocrats. The farther we get from the early days of Islam, the more we encounter this kind of tyranny. After the rightful caliphs [the first four caliphs of Islam], the rights of citizens to criticize and disagree with their leaders was abrogated".³⁴

Bazargan continued to argue that the Qur'an and Islam have lavished great respect and care on individual rights including freedom of expression and beliefs. The religious duty to “call others to virtue and warn them against vice” (*amr al-ma'rūf nahy al-munkar?*), to stand for justice and truth, Bazargan has asserted, assumes freedom of opinion and criticism. He said that Islam, as reflected in the Qur'an, grants different opinions even within the realm of the tenets of religion. For Bazargan, God has made freedom “in the very foundation of survival and revival in the world”.³⁵ God may excuse disobedience against His law but, He cannot “forgive people for transgressing the rights of people”.³⁶ Freedom, he added, “is not a luxury; it is a necessity. When freedom is banished, tyranny will take its place”.³⁷ Since God grants liberty, no one on earth, including religious scholars and clerics, has a privilege right to limit human's freedom in interpreting religious texts and teachings. Based upon the Qur'anic verses and Islamic mandate, he pointed out, the connection between God and the people is direct and unmediated. The role of the prophets, Imams, and '*ulamā'* (clerics), he said, is merely to call people toward God and to make them responsible before Him (cf.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 77.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 81.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 84.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 82.

Q. 12: 108; Q. 41: 5). There is no doubt that one should learn from those “who are better informed and more virtuous,” but this does not mean “relinquishing individual responsibility and freewill”.³⁸

It is central to bear in mind that for Bazargan, the difference of opinions is highly praised, referring the Prophet’s sayings: *ikhtilāf al-ummatiy rahmat* (“dissimilarity of pinions among Muslims is blessing”), not only within individual contexts but also in the political domain. The Qur’anic texts, Bazargan affirms, undeniably propose that the affairs and government be based on *ṣūrā* (consultation) which praise various and distinct opinions and views (see e.g. Q. 42: 36-38, 41-43). In supporting his ideas, Bazargan not only quoted the Qur’an, but also referred to the practice of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali ibn Abi Thalib (r. 656-661), who “consulted their disciples and followers and implemented the majority’s opinions, even where it was against their own convictions.” Such practice, according to Bazargan, is an evident illustration of the “Islamic system of government” which signifies the principle of people’s participation in their own affairs, their self-determination, and the “national sovereignty.” The hadith that states: “Every one of you is a shepherd [of the community], and all are responsible for their dependents and herd,” is considered to be an expression of a “reciprocal social responsibility and public involvement,” and the principle of democracy—“sovereignty of the people over the people” [*eleven centuries before Europe!*—emphasis added]. Islamic government, in the eyes of Bazargan, cannot help but be at once “consultative, democratic, and divinely inspired” (cf. Sachedina 2000). Thus, in the concept of Islamic government, Bazargan reasserts, the relations among individuals and rule are predicated upon “relative shared freedom and mutual responsibility”.³⁹

Bazargan’s viewpoints with regard to freedom and the “ideal type” of Islamic government as I illustrate above seem to criticize two camps: (1) post-revolutionary Iranian regime which overemphasize the role clergy within religious and political system, along with its Mullahs who have functioned as a “go-between” of God like Catholic priests; (2) those who advocated the need

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp 79-80.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 79, cf. Saeed Barzin, “Constitutionalism and Democracy in the Religious Ideology of Mehdi Bazargan,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21 (1), 1994, pp. 85-101.

for “importing” Christian Reformation of Europe within Islam and Iranian contexts (e.g. Afghani and Shari’ati). For Bazargan, since Islam is in inherently liberal, democratic, pluralist, and egalitarian, there is no need to mimic such Reformation. These Bazargan’s views, to some degree, resemble those of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), who has been considered to be the founder of Islamic modernism.⁴⁰ However, it does not mean that Bazargan did not agree with the ideas of Islamic reformation echoed by his colleagues and predecessors. In other words, for Bazargan, the call for, let’s say “Islamic Protestantism,” must come “from within” by reinterpreting the spirits of progressive and humanistic views of Islam and the Qur’an that has been hijacked by Islamist groups and undemocratic clerics.⁴¹

The arguments developed by Bazargan, especially with regard to the perspective of Christian reformation, slightly differ from those of Hashem Aghajari (b. 1957), another significant figure of Iranian reformers in the aftermath of the 1979 “Islamic Revolution” whose contributions to the notions of Islamic reformation have given major impacts on Iranian Shi’i communities. I will first briefly review Aghajari’s speeches⁴² I mention in the introduction of this article which has had a sort of “domino effects” with regard to the need of Islamic reform within Muslim world. There are several essential and “revolutionary” ideas delivered by Aghajari, a former history professor at Tarbiat Modares University, in his talks regarding the notions of Islamic reformation that provide a good introduction of analyzing the ground-

⁴⁰ cf. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, p. 130-160.

⁴¹ I have explained elsewhere my criticism toward the reformists’ or the modernists’ points of view with regard to their notions of Islamic reformation since the nineteenth century which basically their ideas of “reformation” mean “purification” and “perfection” of Islam. Here I call these “reformist groups” the “apologist Muslims” who defended the Islamic system of beliefs from the onslaught of orientalism, westernization, and modernity by simultaneously emphasizing the compatibility and supremacy of Islam. A large number of reformist groups responded to the intellectual challenges coming from the West by adopting pietistic fictions about the Islamic traditions. Such fictions avoided any critical evaluation of Islamic doctrines and traditions, and celebrated the imagined perfection of Islam. A common apologist argument was that any modern institutions and concepts including democracy, freedom, feminism, pluralism, and many more, were first and foremost invented by Muslims and had already existed within Islam (see more Qurtuby, 2008: cf. Khaled Abou el-Fadl, “Islam and the Theology of Power.” *Middle East Report*, No. 221, 2001, p. 28-33. and see also Khaled Abou el-Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2005).

⁴² For his complete speech see <http://news.gooya.com/2002/07/02/0207-22.php>. See also a brief summery of it in Ayelet Savyon, “The Call for Islamic Protestantism: Dr. Hashem Aghajari’s Speech and Subsequent Death Sentence,” *The Middle East Media Research Institute Special Dispatch Series*, 445, December 2, 2002.

breaking conception of Islamic Protestantism. One of the main ideas he proposed is the separation between “core Islam” and “traditional Islam.” Aghajari maintains that an essential element of the “core Islam” is the concept of Islamic humanism which grants equal rights of human beings regardless of their religious affiliations, beliefs, gender, races, countries, and so forth. Throughout his speeches he underscores the significance of human rights as an integral part of the “core Islam.” He said that the heart of Islam is the recognition that all humans have inalienable rights. While he urged Muslims to preserve the “core Islam,” he suggested them to set aside the “traditional Islam” which he defines as an outcome of Muslim experiences and engagements with particular localities, cultures, and traditions throughout generations and history after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). Since “traditional Islam” is a sort of historical additions to the “core Islam,” Aghajari has argued, Muslims are not supposed to obey it.

The “traditional Islam” Aghajari pointed out includes Islamic scholarly works or writings of previous/classical Muslim scholars (*ulamā'*) through which Muslims usually base their religious practices and thoughts. For Aghajari, each Muslim has the same right to interpret the Qur'an and Hadith, as well as to conduct *ijtihād* (“critical thinking”) toward particular Islamic teachings and doctrines. In other words, such *ijtihād* is not a monopoly or privileged right of one particular group or religious leader and scholar. Here he criticizes Iran's clerics which, according to him, have functioned as the “source of emulation” (*marja-e taqlid*) of Shiites, and as the mediators between God and Muslims. Aghajari maintained that a system of clergy is a politically constructed recent historical product (ca. 50 or 60 years ago) since such a clerical class was absent during the Safavid dynasty. He likened such clergy (more precisely echelon of clerics) with the (Catholics) Church hierarchy (pope, bishops, cardinals, and priests) which need to be abolished since it has blockaded direct communication between a Muslim with his/her God.

Besides criticizing a class of religious leaders (e.g. *hujjat al-Islām*, *mujtahid*, *ayatollah*) and clergy institutions, he also spoke against the principle of emulation (*taqlid*) through which Shiites have always been enslaved and “invaded” by the clerics' interpretation so that they have never built up independent thought. Aghajari proposed the ideal connection between the clerics and ‘ordinary’ Muslims resemble teacher and disciple, and not master-servant or leader-follower as it occurs in present-day Iran.

The most controversial idea he presented in his speeches certainly that of Islamic Protestantism. He described "Islamic Protestantism" as a type of Islam characterized by rational, scientific, humanistic, thoughtful, intellectual, and open-minded (Savyon, 2002). Just as the Protestant Reformation "wanted to rescue Christianity from the clergy and the church hierarchy," the call for Islamic Protestantism in modern Iran, as Aghajari has argued, wanted to release Islam and Iranian Muslims from the political domination and religious cooptation of the Iranian ruling clerics.⁴³ Aghajari, moreover, maintains that today's Iran's religious and political structures shared similarities with Christianity before the Protestant Reformation took place, i.e. the dominant and hegemonic role of clergy, and hierarchical, corrupt religious institutions. Charles Kurzman argue that the 1979 Iranian revolution "has had effect of transforming Shi'i religious scholars into a hierarchical institution with administrative authorities that even many Iranians regularly compare to the church and clergy in Catholic Christianity".⁴⁴

Indeed, as Kurzman correctly pointed out, the type of religious hierarchy in Iran was regarded by Aghajari as a "copy-paste" or perfect replication of the Church hierarchy in medieval Christianity prior to the Martin Luther-led Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century of Europe. Specifically, Aghajari accused Iranian Shi'i clerics wanted to construct Catholic-style religious divisions and hierarchies. Hence he argued that the Iranian clerical hierarchy resembles the Catholic religious systems rather than the Islamic creed. This is the reason why he proposed to "break the clergy's monopoly on Islam and Iranian Muslims".⁴⁵

Abdulkarim Soroush⁴⁶ his real name is reported to be Farajollah (or Hosayn) Dabbagh, is another leading spokesperson of the ideas of present-day Iranian Islamic reformation. He is also one of the most controversial thinkers and iconic intellectual in today's Iran. Born in Tehran in 1945, he grew up in a traditional religious family and then continued to study in England where he

⁴³ *Ibid.* cf. Sukidi, "The Travelling Idea of Islamic Protestantism..."

⁴⁴ Browsers and Kurzman, *An Islamic Reformation?* p. 11.

⁴⁵ Sukidi, *op. cit.*, p. 408. cf. Ayelet Savyon, "The Call for Islamic Protestantism: Dr. Hashem Aghajari's Speech and Subsequent Death Sentence." *The Middle East Media Research Institute Special Dispatch Series*, No. 445 (December 2), 2002.

⁴⁶ For more information about Abdulkarim Soroush, visit his official website at <http://www.dr.soroush.com>

had integrated the theories of Karl Popper, Willard van Orman Quine, Pierre Duhem, and many others into the framework of his enormous Islamic learning.⁴⁷ Once had been appointed by Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) to the Advisory Council on the Cultural Revolution whose main tasks were to “clean up” the universities of non-Islamic elements and then reopened them with the spirit of “Islamic Revolution,” Soroush resigned from the Council in 1984 out of displeasure with its work conditions and devoted his time solely to research and lecturing. “We no longer claim that a genuinely religious government can be democratic, but that it cannot be otherwise,” declares Soroush.⁴⁸

Since his resignation from the Council—actually since he spoke out of the Mullah-controlled Iranian reign—Iranian regime has harshly treated him, so do Iran’s traditionalist clerics. Since 1991, the attacks from influential right-wing governmental clerics on Soroush have increased in number and intensity, accusing him of spreading subversive ideas and falsities. As a result, Soroush lost the reputation as, to borrow Buchta’s term, “philosophical darling of the Revolution” that he had held in the 1980s.⁴⁹ Moreover, Soroush, studied chemistry at the University of London, is regularly threatened with murder and is infrequently roughed up by organized gangs of extremists known as Ansar-e-Hezbollah.

Indeed, Soroush was one of the main backers of the Iranian “Islamic Revolution,” and saw the Revolution as a vehicle of the “transition toward democracy.” Later he, also Bazargan, realized that the spirit of the 1979 Revolution was hijacked by the country’s own clerical establishment, who used their moral authority to gain absolute power. One of the central targets of his criticism is the concept of *velayat-e-faqih*, which Chehabi and Keshavarzian call “the lynchpin of Iran’s theocratic constitution”.⁵⁰ Literally means “guardianship

⁴⁷ cf. Muhammad Sadri, “Sacral Defense of Secularism: Dissident Political Theology in Iran.” In *Intellectual Trends in Twentieth-Century Iran*, edited by Negin Nabavi. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003), p. 181.

⁴⁸ Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and The Future of Islam*, (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), p. 253.

⁴⁹ See Buchta’s term on Wilfried Buchta, “The Failed Pan-Islam Program of the Islamic Republic: Views of the Liberal Reformers of the Religious “Semi-Opposition.” In *Iran and the Surrounding World 1501-2001: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, edited by Nikki Keddie and Rudi Matthee, pp. 281-303. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), pp. 294-295.

⁵⁰ H.E Chehabi and Arang Keshavarzian, “Politics in Iran.” In *Comparative Politics Today: A World View*, edited by Gabriel A. Almond, Russell J. Dalton, G. Bingham Powell, Jr., and Kaare Strom, (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), p. 463.

of the jurisprudence," the *velayat-e-faqih* was preserved in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, and Ayatollah Khomeini himself, the architect of the principle, became the ruling jurist. The constitution provided the *faqih* (at the time i.e. Khomeini, now Khamenei) with the power to appoint the head of the judiciary, to be commander in chief of the army, to dismiss the president, and to veto all laws created by the parliament.

Originally intended to reconcile popular and divine sovereignty, the *velayat-e-faqih* thus had suddenly paved the way for the institutionalization of absolute clerical control. What post-revolutionary Iran experiences is a transformation of a cleric as a symbolic moral authority into the supreme political authority in the state.⁵¹ Soroush has not only been critical of the system of *velayat-e-faqih* but also Iran's conservative clerics who have maintained undemocratic political systems. Once Soroush stated that no one should be paid for leading people in matters of religion; hence clerics must sustain themselves through other employment. His statement became too controversial, leading to angry denunciations of Soroush's proposal in the press and threats from the highest ranking governmental authorities including Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme religious and political leader, who publicly attacked Soroush's ideas and denounced him as the opposition of the clergy like Pahlavi shahs.⁵² Furthermore, Soroush, author of the great academic book entitled *The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Shari'a*, has criticized Islamic discourse which he sees as irrational and anti-secularism. In this arena, Soroush has emerged as the most influential representative of today's Iranian liberals who has advocated an important secularizing strain in present-day Iran's Islamic discourse. For Soroush, Islam is open to different interpretations and therefore cannot be and should not be made ideological because ideology can reduce (the meaning and values of) religion.⁵³ In this case, Soroush's position differs from Shari'ati. Soroush once stated:

⁵¹ cf. Martin 2003; Babashi 1989; and Chehabi 1991.

⁵² cf. Matin-asgari "Abdolkarim Soroush and the Secularization of Islamic Thought in Iran." *Iranian Studies* 30 (1/2), 1997, p. 113.

⁵³ Soroush's intellectual position is somewhat ambiguous here. While on one occasion he rejects an "Islamic ideology" (as Shari'ati did), at the other time he accepts the idea that religion (Islam) can be ideological since it can be enlightening and emancipatory, not merely justifying an oppressive status quo (for more detail, see criticism toward Soroush in Matin-Asgari 1997).

...a necessary prerequisite to democratization of religious government is to make religious thought more flexible by elevating the role of 'reason' in it; and that is not individual but collective reason, arising from the participation of all and benefiting from humanity's experiences; and this is possible only through democratic means.⁵⁴

The term 'secular' here does not necessarily mean 'rejection of religion' but rather signifies worldly orientation and a critical or rational attitude toward religion, particularly with regard to clerical authority. Soroush's focus on rational and critical philosophy is central to his contribution to the secularization of Islamic thought and a major step toward 'bridging the gap' between religious and secular intellectuals.⁵⁵ Moreover, Soroush's political philosophy remains close to the core of the liberal tradition, championing the basic values of reason, liberty, freedom, and democracy. Soroush continued to argue that these values should be promoted as "primary values" within Muslim societies and politics and as "independent virtues" not handmaidens of political maxims and religious dogma.⁵⁶

As I described earlier since Iranian regime has watched out his activities, it has been uneasy for Soroush to convey his critical messages with regard to changes within Islam and Iranian societies. Thanks to bimonthly journal of *Kiyan*. This journal became a crucial agent in spreading and breeding Soroush's critical and rational views. Lunched in 1991, the journal soon became a forum for discussion on Islam, politics, and cultures among religious and secular intellectuals. *Kiyan* featured Soroush's articles on secularism, democracy, freedom, individualism, civil society, clerical authority, religious pluralism, modern exegesis, literary criticism, and so forth.⁵⁷ Focusing on the ideas of justice, freedom, and human rights within the theoretical frameworks of Islam and western intellectual traditions, Soroush's enlightening articles have attracted and influenced many Muslim scholars, especially Iranian young generations. Freedom, for Soroush, is not merely an instrument of achieving the 'truth' but is itself a truth. In his "Reason and Freedom," Soroush states:

Those who shun freedom as the enemy of truth and as a possible breeding ground for wrong ideas do not realize that freedom is itself a

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 95.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 103.

⁵⁶ Sadri 2003, p. 182; cf. Vakili, 1996.

⁵⁷ Matin-Asgari, *op. cit.*, p. 100; cf. Vakili, 1996.

“truth.”....the world is the marketplace for the exchanges of ideas. We give and take, and we trust that the ascendance of the nobler truths is worth the sacrifice of an occasional minor truth: ‘As the barrel of wine shall last, let the occasional chalice break’.⁵⁸

Due to his passion on ‘rationalism’ and freedom of thought, many have assumed that Soroush is a neo-Mu’tazilite, a rational faction of Islam, with strong mystical tendencies. The American journalist Robin Wright even refers Soroush as the Luther of Islam (*Journal of Democracy*, January 1996) advocating “rational Islam” and Iran which free from religious cooptation, political tyranny, and clerical domination. Indeed, in the context of modern religious reform movements, Soroush’s approach is comparable to Martin Luther’s Christian Reformation (liberal Protestantism) in the way that both approaches have emphasized a non-clerical religion and rational re-interpretation of the religious tradition and scriptures.⁵⁹

C. Closing Remarks: Prospects for “Islamic Protestantism”

The idea of Islamic Reformation or more specifically that of “Islamic Protestantism” has been evidently advocated by those “Iranian Luthers:” Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Mehdi Bazargan, Ali Shari’ati, Hashem Aghajari, and Abdulkarim Soroush. Although they live in different socio-political settings and, at some point, differ in terms of religious thoughts and the detailed concept of Islamic reformation, they share the same ideas, namely the need to reform and “rescue” Islam and Iran from the “darkness” (*al-zulumat*) to the “lightness” (*al-nur*), from the authoritarian regime to the democratic one, for the sake of a better life which accordance with human’s universal values and human rights.

Among those Iranian reformers, to some degree, Soroush is quite different. Unlike Aghajari, who has produced little academic works, Soroush has written a number of enormous scholarly publications. Soroush also differs from his predecessors in the line of “religious superintellectuals.” The charisma of Mehdi Bazargan (also Yadollah Sahabi), for instance, emanated from their mastery of modern exact sciences while maintaining and revising their lay piety in the light of modern science. The vast fame of Ali Shari’ati was due to his powerful

⁵⁸ Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, translated and edited by Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. xiv.

⁵⁹ Matin-asgari, *op. cit.*, p. 113; cf. Soroush 2000.

synthesis of the Shi'ite tradition of resistance with the revolutionary ethos of the French left in the sixties. Although Bazargan, Sahabi, and Shari'ati were at home with Islamic knowledge and tradition, they were routinely dismissed by the conservative clergy as unschooled in scholastics of the seminary. They were also accused by old-fashioned clerics as Western-educated heretics. Soroush, by contrast, cannot be ignored by the Iranian clerical establishment since he was trained for a long time in Iranian traditional seminary, and has mastered the classical canon of Shi'i theology such as *usul al-fiqh* ("Islamic legal theory"), *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), and *falsafah* (philosophy). The ideologically correct scholars of the clerical institution "no longer challenge his scholastic credentials".⁶⁰

Furthermore, although Soroush, Afghani, and Shari'ati have had similar enthusiasm with regard to "Muslim unity" or the idea of "Pan-Islamism," Soroush strongly criticizes these two forerunners of Islamic reformation. Soroush, an admirer of the great poets Rumi and Hafiz, claims that both Afghani and Shari'ati from the bottom of their heart still saw the need "to convert Sunnis to Shi'ism in order to create an *umma* united under the Shi'i banner," albeit they campaigned the equality of all Muslims and their equal claim to the truth".⁶¹ Soroush calls Afghani and Shari'ati as the supporters of the "inner dimensions" of the Pan-Islamism meaning that the unification of all Muslims vis-à-vis outside foes is interpreted as the superiority of Shi'ites over Sunnis. Soroush, conversely, sees the significance of unity across the religious lines. Still, while Shari'ati was indirectly influenced by Afghani regarding his ideas of Islamic reformation (and Aghajari is influenced by Shari'ati), Soroush belongs to a new and sophisticated brand of Islamic reformation that has its origins in the works of Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938).⁶² Furthermore, Bazargan's standpoints, as I mentioned earlier, can be traced to early modernist thinkers, notably Abduh (d. 1905).

Apart from their differences, they have shared the same passion: the need for rational interpretations toward the Qur'an and for Islamic reformation by highlighting the significance of pluralism, secularism, freedom, and, above all, democracy. Additionally, they shared an enthusiastic approval of key features of

⁶⁰ Soroush, *Ibid.*, p. xii.

⁶¹ Buchta, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

⁶² Muhammad Iqbal, author of *The Reconstruction of the Religious Life in Islam*, was a Muslim poet, philosopher, and politician whose poetry in Urdu, Arabic, and Persian is considered to be among the greatest of modern era. See more on Sadri, 2003, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

“western traditions”: tolerance, citizenship cultures, freedom of expression, human and women’s rights, secularization, liberalism, and most importantly, democratic system.⁶³

Studying the shifting dynamics and transformation of the idea of Islamic reformation through the lens of those Iranian reformers’ thoughts and activities is fundamental since they have served as the carriers, transformers, and transmitters who functioned as an agent of knowledge and a vehicle of changing notions of “Islamic Protestantism” in Iran. By examining their thoughts and activities, we will know how the process of knowledge production and cultural reproduction of Islamic reformation takes place in different time and social settings. Anthropologist Dale Eickelman in his *Knowledge and Power in Morocco* calls this approach “social biography.” Such an approach, Eickelman has argued, allows a researcher to explore the themes of the study in contextual detail without losing view of more general issues of historical and social thought.⁶⁴

Somewhat different approach has been offered by Sukidi. Using Edward Said’s travelling theory, namely that the ideas and theories—like people and schools of criticism—travel “from person to person, from situation to situation, and from one period to one another,” Sukidi has argued that the notion of Islamic Protestantism has also travelled from Afghani to Shari’ati and finally to Aghajari.⁶⁵ He maintains that the travelling idea of Islamic Protestantism from Afghani, Shari’ati, to Aghajari, has pursued what Said called the phases of acceptance, modification, and a new interpretation.⁶⁶

Sukidi argues that the idea of a Protestant type of Islamic reform posed by Afghani first emerged as a response of European imperialism. Afghani called for the Islamic Protestantism merely as a way to unite the strength of the Muslim world (Arab and the Middle East societies in particular) within the banner of Pan-Islam in order to defeat European colonialism. Afghani’s

⁶³ cf. Keddie 1972; Kurzman, ed. 1998; Soroush 2000.

⁶⁴ Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992, p. 1-15. Eickelman uses an approach of “social biography,” focusing on a rural judge by the name of Hajj Abd al-Rahman (b. 1912), to analyze the shifting role and the transformation of an Islamic education from a mosque-based school to a religious institute—the Yusufiya—in Morocco.

⁶⁵ Sukidi, *op. cit.*, p. 401-412.

⁶⁶ Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 226.

concept of “Islamic Protestantism” had been continued by Shari’ati to react the increase of internalized colonial attitudes in the political leadership of the Shah’s regime. In the final phase, Aghajari built on the foundation of Shari’ati’s notion of Islamic Protestantism to counter the existing authoritarian Shi’i clerical establishments.

Unfortunately, in his article, Sukidi does not mention the significant contribution of two champions of Iran’s Islamic reformation: Mehdi Bazargan and Abdulkarim Soroush. As I explained above, Bazargan and Soroush—in addition to Afghani, Shari’ati, and Aghajari—have played a central role in the development of the idea of “Islamic restoration” in modern Iran advocating the form of Islam which is typified by rationalism, freedom, liberalism, equality, justice, and humanism. Both Bazargan and Soroush represent critical voices against the Shah’s regime and, most importantly, the Mullah’s authority in post-revolutionary Iran; consequently they deserve to be considered as the “Luther of Shi’a Islam” for their criticism toward Islam and Muslim societies in general and Iranian politics in particular.

As the Iranian societies and politics have been controlled by conservative, undemocratic clerics and opportunist politicians, reform-minded thinkers, *ulama’*, and activists like today’s Aghajari and Soroush have been facing serious challenges to implement their notions of Islamic reformation. However, it does not mean that the possibility of spreading such ideas has been closed. In an era in which societies have been more and more cognizant and clever, it is not impossible to bring such notions into reality. All will depend on how well those Iranian reformists in formulating, designing, and “marketing” such revolutionary ideas within Iranian marketplace. [w]

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