

# Explaining Martin Luther to an Arab Audience

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9 February 2021

## Introduction

The Arab quest for cultural renewal dates from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century about the time Napoleon made his expedition into Egypt to interdict Britain's activities in the eastern Mediterranean. Napoleon was accompanied by scientists like Champollion who deciphered the Hieroglyphics. He brought with him the printing press, the first in the Arab world.

The French presence in Egypt was brief, but it gave impetus to the work of three early reformers: *Jamal al-Din al-Afghani*, *Muhammad Abduh*, and *Rashid Rida*. They called for the adoption of a new hermeneutic of the Qur'an that would allow for allegorical interpretations of the sacred text. Their work was facilitated by Muhammad Ali Pasha's dynastical Pasha had been appointed by the Ottomans to govern Egypt and his dynasty lasted until 1952, when it was overturned by Nasser's coup d'état. Efforts for revival and modernization of Islam in Egypt and the Arab world, have continued during the last two centuries but have often been thwarted by military dictatorships in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Algeria.

On 22 October 2019, the German-Egyptian writer Hamed Abdel-Samad, posted on his website an article entitled, "The speech of Martin Luther That Changed History"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-YXeIjyfp>

خطاب مارتن لوثر أمام البابا الذي غيّر التاريخ

Abdel-Samad began his article by referring to the several factors that led to the success of Luther's Reformation without which, it would have failed.

According to Abdel-Samad:

"Luther's success in launching the Reformation was due to several factors that had been at work in Germany for centuries. One was the existence of a **Civil Society** independent of the Church and of the Emperor. As an example, note what took place at *Bamberg* in Upper Franconia, near the river Main. The population wanted to build a **Rathaus** (Town Hall) for their meetings, but the Bishop who owned most of the land refused to cooperate. So, they went ahead anyway and created a suitable place by digging into the river and built their **Rathaus!**

"Another factor was the existence of universities that produced an educated middle-class. A fact that dispels the notion of the existence of the Dark Ages. While those

institutions were founded by the Church to teach theology, they soon added faculties that offered several disciplines in the arts and the sciences. As a result, an educated Middle Class came into existence in Germany.

“Martin Luther was a professor at the University of Wittenberg in Germany. In 1517, he drew up the 95 theses condemning the Catholic Church for its corrupt practice of selling ‘indulgences,’ or forgiveness of sins. In 1521, Pope Leo X excommunicated him, he was called to appear before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms to defend his beliefs. Refusing to recant, Luther was declared a heretic. He burned publicly the Pope’s document of excommunication. He gave a lengthy speech about his position and ended by saying, ***‘If, I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons, I neither can nor retract anything; for it cannot be either safe or honest for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me! Amen.’*** “Luther’s Reformation taught that a believer did not need the priest’s mediation; he could go directly to God supported by his faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>i</sup>

As Hamed Abdel-Samad told the story of Martin Luther’s speech and its effects, he often referred to the utterly different conditions that prevailed in the Muslim world compared to Luther’s. Most importantly, no Civil Society came into existence in Islam. It is true that during the ***Abbasid Caliphate*** in Baghdad, a group of intellectuals known as the ***Mutazilites***, attempted to use reason in the interpretation of the sacred texts. Had they succeeded, that might have led to the rise of an educated following or a Middle Class. Unfortunately, the powerful opposition by Imam Al-Ghazzali (d.1111) to the ***Mutazilites*** closed “the Door of Ijtihad” (reasoning) for the next 1000 years!

The most important factor for the success of Luther’s Reformation was the support of the Bible for his movement. Luther used specific texts of Holy Scripture to prove that the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church about the forgiveness of sins were wrong. The New Testament (known in Arabic as ***Injeel***) teaches that forgiveness takes place by faith in Jesus Christ’s death on the Cross and His resurrection on the third day. (First Corinthians 15: 1 – 4) Another passage Luther used was Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans 8, where the apostle summed the Gospel with these words:

*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. 31-33. 35-39*

A would-be Muslim reformer cannot rely on the authoritative texts of his faith, the Qur'an, Hadith, and Sirat (Life of Muhammad) in support of his efforts to reform the faith. For example, **Surah 9 al-Tawbah** (Repentance) **Ayah 5** states:

*When the Sacred Months have passed, kill the polytheists wherever you find them. And capture them, and besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every ambush. But if they repent, and perform the prayers, and pay the alms, then let them go their way. God is Most Forgiving, Most Merciful.*

The ninth chapter of the Quran that contains 129 verses is one of the last Medinan surahs. In other words, it abrogates those Surahs that had “descended” on Muhammad in Mecca when his message was conciliatory (610 – 622.) However, when he migrated to Medina in 622, and gained both political and religious powers, the tone of the revelations changed.<sup>ii</sup>

Early during the twenty-first century, several Arab intellectuals called on Muslims to adopt new hermeneutics of the Qur'an. Here are excerpts from an article posted on the online journal, Al-Awan on 3 February 2018, calling for radical interpretation of the Qur'an:

“What’s Needed: Radical Reforms, Not a Revision of Public Discourse”

“A Call to Add Marginal Notes to Passages in the Qur'an”

(*Al-Islahat al-Jidhriyyat, La Tajdid al-Khitab al-Dini*)

[alawan.org](http://alawan.org) الإصلاحات الجذرية لا تجديد الخطاب الديني.. - جمعية الأوان

“The Qur'an declares that, *the only acceptable religion to Allah is Islam* (3:19) This *Ayah* implies that Islam is the most complete and worthy faith to follow. Islamists, most Muslims, even so-called ‘Moderates,’ regard all other religions as false.

“Can we claim then that Islam is a tolerant religion or, are its detractors right, when they assert that Islam, is the most intolerant faith? When Muslim radicals commit crimes against humanity, the conclusion is obvious: Islam is a violent and belligerent religion.

“On the other hand, when we study the early chapters of the Qur'an, we encounter *Ayas* that breathe a tolerant faith, with emphasis on freedom and mercy toward all human beings.

*Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold, that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things. 2:256*

*O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most*

*righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).*49:13

“Don’t these texts breathe a spirit of love and a view of a humanity living in harmony; where all people enjoy equal status; created to get acquainted with one another, and becoming friends, without reservation or preconditions, and regardless of differences in beliefs?

“However, it’s both painful and unfortunate when we encounter in the Medinan *Surahs* (622-630) *Ayas* that contradict the view of a peaceful Islam! Actually, the Qur’an reveals two ‘faces’ of Islam: an Islam of love, mercy, and tolerance as when the Prophet was at peace with the Jews. On the other hand, there is an Islam of murder and intolerance. As one *Hadith* recounts Muhammad as saying, *I’ve come to slaughter*; another *Hadith*, where he describes himself as *laughing while killing*; and that *Jihad is the apex of faith!*

“There are around 500 *Ayas* in the Qur’an calling for violence and intolerance vis-à-vis non-Muslims; while those calling for tolerance, have been marginalized in the religious discourse. In contrast, the violent *Ayas* are clear, detailed, and form an essential part of the regular *Khutbahs* (sermons) of the Friday services at the mosques!

“We urgently need radical reforms. To attain this goal, marginal notes must be added to the *Mus’haf* (the printed copy of the Qur’an) where combative and intolerant *Ayas*, are explained, and declared as no longer normative.

“As an example, we may refer to The First Chapter of the Quran, ***Al-Fatihah*** that constitutes the text for the five-daily prayers. The **seventh *Ayah***, as historically expounded by Muslim exegetes, refers to the Jews, *as being under the wrath of Allah*; and to the Christians, *as those who had gone astray*. This *Ayah* requires a complete re-interpretation.

“Arab intellectuals must learn from the Europeans who made radical reforms in their culture, when they discovered that the Bible taught a separation, or a distinction between the role of the Church and that of the State; each having its own sphere of authority. The distinction between religion and governance, secured the integrity of religion; and allowed the state to deal with the affairs of life in the here and now.<sup>iii</sup>

“It was Western scholars who initiated serious and scholarly research of the early manuscripts of the Qur’an. While they encountered opposition from certain academic circles, yet they persisted in their ventures. We may mention among them, Patricia Crone, Christof Luxembourg, and Tom Holland. Some were forced to hide their identities, lest the radical Islamic authorities might issue ***fatwas*** legitimizing their assassination! The discipline of ***Orientalism*** was depicted as a Western colonialist anti-Islamic plan to spread ***Islamophobia***, a term employed by Islamists, to silence opposition to their cause.

“As an example of this Islamist attitude, we may refer to the silencing of the documentary, ***Islam: The Untold Story***, by the British historian Tom Holland. It was

aired only once on the BBC Chanel 4 due to the pressure exerted on the channel by the Gulf States. In contrast, the same channel had aired programs critical of Christianity's basic beliefs; however, neither the Christian Church, nor Christian groups, attempted to stop their airing!

"Nowadays, Islamists have become a global active force, thanks to millions of dollars they receive from governments to spread their propaganda among the Muslim communities living abroad. Qatar is one of these states; its TV Station *Al-Jazeera*, works hard to stifle any reform movement in the Muslim world, while spreading archaic teachings about Islamist governance, and ethics. Its goal is to defend *Salafism*, based on the views of the late *Sayed Qutb*, the notorious ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood.

"For example, Kemal Ataturk's authoritarianism led to the rise of modern Turkey, where secularism pervaded every aspect of life. Turkey became one of the advanced societies in the world. However, this Kemalist renaissance began to decline and wither, when Erdogan's Islamist ***Justice and Development Party*** assumed the reins of government, and began a 'creeping Islamization' policy, as some Turkish intellectuals have called it. He has succeeded in striking at the roots of Turkey's secular tradition, by altering the Constitution through a series of plebiscites, the prosecution of journalists, and by weakening the two basic supports of Turkey's secularism: an independent Judiciary and the Army.

"In order to overcome the Islamist plague, with its debilitating illnesses, such as underdevelopment, and *Irhab*; it is necessary to embark on radical reforms. Now it's our responsibility as Muslims to undertake the required measures for the rise of a tolerant Islam, that's utterly distinct from the violent Islamism of the radical movements!"

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<sup>i</sup> The Reformer received the support of German princes. He left Worms on April 26th, 1521. On his return journey, he was taken into protective custody by agents of Frederick the Wise, who was concerned for his safety. Luther stayed at the Wartburg castle in Eisenach. It was a productive opportunity for the Reformer during which he produced by 1522, a new German translation of the New Testament within five months, one of the most important products of the German Reformation.

<sup>ii</sup> The ***Qur'an*** has 114 Surahs; they are listed according to their size, and not chronologically. Every Surah is designated as Meccan or Medinan, and the number of its **Ayahs**. The First Chapter, ***Al-Fatiha*** is Meccan, the number of its **Ayahs is 7**. The Second Surah ***Al-Baqarah*** has **280 Ayas**, was the first Surah that "descended" in Medina.

Glancing at my copy of the ***Qur'an***, I noticed that most of the large Surahs were Medinan, dating after Muhammad's migration in 622!

<sup>iii</sup> To learn more about this subject, consult these two articles "Modernity and the Qur'an," and "What is the Qur'an?" posted on Academia.edu

[https://www.academia.edu/13019668/Modernity\\_and\\_the\\_Quran](https://www.academia.edu/13019668/Modernity_and_the_Quran)

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