The Traveling Idea of Islamic Protestantism: a Study of Iranian Luthers

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ABSTRACT This article examines some religious ideas of three prominent Iranian intellectuals: Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Ali Sharīʿati, and Hashem Aghajari. They are considered Iranian Luthers for their deep appreciation of Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth-century in Europe, and their calls for Islamic Protestantism in Iran. However, this article is not intended to compare two religious reformation in Europe and Iran, but rather to study the traveling idea of Islamic Protestantism from al-Afghānī and Sharīʿati, to Aghajari in different situations and periods, and in response to different challenges. Edward Said's 'traveling theory' is used to analyze the dynamic historical movement of Islamic Protestantism 'from person to person, from situation to situation, and from one period to another'. The traveling idea of Islamic Protestantism from al-Afghānī, Sharīʿati, to Aghajari, then creates the chain of intellectual transmission from the old generation to a newer one. As with 'traveling theory reconsidered', however, there is also the possibility that the idea of Islamic Protestantism will be reinterpreted and reinvigorated by a newer generation.

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. (Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī; quoted in Keddie, 1972, pp. 391–392)

He [a progressive intellectual] 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. (Ali Sharīʿati, 1986, p. 25)

The Protestant movement wanted to rescue Christianity from the clergy and the Church hierarchy—[Christians] must save religion from the pope. We [Muslims] do not need mediators between us and God. We do not need mediators to understand
God’s holy books. The Prophet [Jesus] spoke to the people directly . . . We don’t need to go to the clergy; each person is his own clergy. (Hashem Aghajari, in Savyon, 2002)

The Protestant Reformation has held an inherent fascination for three Iranian Luthers, i.e. Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Ali Sharʿati, and Hashem Aghajari. Having been inspired by the sixteenth-century Reformation in Europe, they wanted to acquire the benefits of the Protestant Reformation for a similar reform in Iran. Martin Luther and his efforts towards reform have become a favorite theme for these Iranian Luthers since the late nineteenth century to present-day Iran. It was initiated by al-Afghānī and then adopted by Sharʿati, and eventually developed more systematically by Aghajari, the most outspoken of those calling for Islamic Protestantism in present-day Iran.

Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn ‘al-Afghānī’ (1838–97): an Early Iranian Luther

Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn ‘al-Afghānī’ was born in the month of Shaʿbān, 1254/October–November, 1838, in the village of Asadabad, close to the city of Hamadan, in northwestern Iran (Keddie, 1972, p. 10). He had an Iranian name, Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn Asadābādī, and his last name ‘al-Afghānī’ was used only in 1869 in order to achieve broader acceptance and influence among Sunni Muslims (ibid., p. 11). In Islamic countries, the first name ‘Sayyid’ indicates a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). A genealogy of Jamāl al-Dīn goes back to his father, Sayyid Safdar, who came from a highly respected division of Shīʿi sayyids and had a close connection with the Twelver Shīʿis, particularly the chief religious leader, Shaykh Murtazā Ansārī (ibid., p. 12). From his father, al-Afghānī received his early Islamic education, including Arabic, the Qurʾān, and Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). He also obtained an Iranian Shīʿi education in Qazvin, Tehran, and in the Shīʿi shrine cities in Iraq (ibid., pp. 15–16).

Living in an Iranian Shīʿi milieu with a strong tradition of Islamic intellectual thought, al-Afghānī became acquainted with the study of Islamic philosophy (falsafa), particularly of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā). In contrast with the Sunni Muslims, the Shīʿis in Iran still kept the Avicennian tradition alive. Having been influenced by the rationalist philosophical tradition of Avicenna and other Iranian philosophers, al-Afghānī defended a rationalist approach in Islam and regarded Islamic philosophy as the path to rationalism. Islam and reason, or modern science, may go together. In 1883, he wrote an article, ‘Answer to Renan’ in the Journal des Débats (18 May 1883) as a critical response to Renan’s lecture on ‘Islam and Science’ at the Sorbonne and its subsequent publication in the Journal des Débats (29 March 1883). In his article, Renan had argued that ‘early Islam and the Arabs who professed it were hostile to the scientific and philosophic spirit and that science and philosophy had entered the Islamic world only from non-Arab sources’ (ibid., pp. 189–190). Al-Afghānī rejected two important points: the first was Renan’s prejudice that [early] Islam is essentially hostile to science; and the second was the racist assumption that the Arabs are hostile to science and philosophy. In fact, as al-Afghānī argues:

one cannot deny that it is by this religious education, whether it be Muslim, Christian, or pagan, that all nations have emerged from barbarism and marched toward a more advanced civilization . . . I plead here with M. Renan, not the cause
of the Muslim religion, but that of several hundreds of millions of men, who would thus be condemned to live in barbarism and ignorance. (Keddie, 1968, p. 183)

Al-Afghānı regarded Islam and its believers as the dynamic historical entities that always moved from ignorance and barbarism toward a more advanced civilization and challenged Renan’s racist assumption as follows:

No one denies that the Arab people, while it was still in the state of barbarism, rushed into the road of intellectual and scientific progress with a rapidity only equaled by the speed of its conquests, since in the space of a century, it acquired and assimilated almost all the Greek and Persian sciences that had developed slowly during several centuries on their native soil, just as it extended its domination from the Arabian peninsula up to the mountains of the Himalaya and the summit of the Pyrenees. (ibid., p. 184)

This exchange with Renan is an example of a constructive intellectual debate between two renowned intellectuals. Renan honestly regards al-Afghānı as a fellow rationalist thinker, and al-Afghānı is indeed a defender of reason in Islam, who uses Islamic philosophy as an instrument of knowledge to transform Islamic society from the state of barbarism to scientific progress and from darkness into light (ibid., p. 46). Al-Afghānı explains his ambitions as follows:

[Philosophy] is the first cause of man’s intellectual activity and his emergence from the sphere of animals, and it is the greatest reason for the transfer of tribes and peoples from a state of nomadism and savagery to culture and civilization. It is the foremost cause of the production of knowledge, the creation of sciences, the invention of industries, and the initiation of the crafts. (ibid., p. 110)

Aside from the tradition of Islamic philosophy, al-Afghānı’s belief in reason is in part due to the influence of the historical writings of François Guizot (1787–1874) (Hourani, 2002, p. 114). Guizot was a French historian and the son of a Protestant family of Nîmes, France, who delivered a lecture on the history of civilization in nineteenth-century Europe (Guizot, 1997). His belief in reason and social solidarity as a source of progress and development in the West inspired al-Afghānı to reinterpret Islam as a belief in reason, progress, and civilization rather than a set of religious doctrines. As Albert Hourani states:

The idea of civilization is indeed one of the seminal ideas of nineteenth-century Europe, and it is through al-Afghānı above all that it reaches the Islamic world. It was given its classical expression by Guizot, in his lectures on the history of civilization in Europe, and al-Afghānı had read Guizot and been impressed by him. The work was translated into Arabic in 1877, and al-Afghānı inspired ١ Abduh to write an article welcoming the translation and expounding the doctrine of the book. (Hourani, 2002, p. 114)

Accordingly, the appeal for reinterpretation of the Qur’an in accord with reason, progress, and civilization could lead towards a Protestant-type of Islamic reform (Keddie, 1968, p. 38). Al-Afghānı is indeed influenced by Guizot’s emphasis on the Protestant
Reformation as a critical break leading Europe toward material reform and progress. As al-Afghānī recognizes:

It is no wonder that Guizot, the French Minister, who wrote the history of... civilization of the European peoples, said as follows: one of the greatest causes for European civilization was that a group appeared, saying: ‘Although our religion is the Christian religion, we are seeking the proofs of the fundamentals of our beliefs.’ The corpus of priests did not give permission, and they said that religion was founded on imitation. When the group became strong their ideas spread; minds emerged from their state of stupidity and dullness into movement and progress; and men made efforts to achieve the perquisites of civilization. (Keddie, 1968, pp. 171–172)

Similar to the body of the clergy in Western Christianity, al-Afghānī seemed to believe that the body of conservative ‘ulama’ had been a cause of decline in Islamic civilization for centuries. The right to follow Islam with demonstrative proof is not permitted by the authority of the ‘ulama’, because the door of rational interpretation is not open. The conflict between religious authority and reason is intensely at issue. Having learned from Martin Luther, who openly disobeyed religious authorities, al-Afghānī began to challenge the authority of the ‘ulama’ in favor of demonstrable proof of religious belief, maintaining that material reform and progress in Islam would not have been achieved if the ‘ulama’ had imposed their conservative outlook (Keddie, 1968, p. 62). Instead, al-Afghānī fought against such a conservative outlook, religious stagnation (jumūd), and blind imitation (taqlīd), which he strictly considered the enemy of true Islam (Hourani, 2002, p. 127). He regarded Islam as belief in reason and progress which could lead to a Protestant-type of Islamic reform. ʿAbd al-Qaḍir al-Maghribī, a man who recorded many of al-Afghānī’s talks with a circle of disciples and acquaintances in Istanbul (1892–97), asked him about the proper way to achieve progress and civilization in the West. Al-Afghānī then answered:

It must be a religious movement... 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... He reminded (Europeans) that they were born free, and so why were they submitting to tyrants. (Keddie, 1972, pp. 391–392)

Thus al-Afghānī regarded Martin Luther as his great hero, and he often saw himself as a Muslim Luther who learned from the Protestant Reformation as his point of reference (Hourani, 2002, p. 122). Al-Afghānī continued to argue that the outcome of the Protestant Reformation in Europe and its constructive competition with Catholicism had brought Europe towards material progress and reform (Keddie, 1972, p. 392). No material progress and reform in Islam was possible unless Muslims learned some lessons from the Protestant Reformation. Al-Afghānī strongly argued that Islam needed a Luther in order to achieve a Protestant-type of Islamic reform. In brief, the basic foundation of a Protestant-type of
Islamic reform included the principles that: (1) similar to Luther’s call for a return to the Bible, al-Afghānī’s Islamic reform was a return to the Qur’an alone as the progressive scripture; and (2) the door of rational interpretation of the Qur’an (ijtiḥād) should be reopened in order to reinvent the true spirit of the Qur’an in accord with reason, progress, and civilization. For al-Afghānī, the Qur’an was itself rational and progressive if interpreted rationally, freely, and progressively, and he emphasized that the proper interpretation of the Qur’an should be rational, progressive, philosophical, and scientific, to counter the static and fatalistic interpretations of the conservative ‘ulamā’ (ibid., pp. 388–396).

Ali Sharī’atī (1933–77): a Progressive Intelligentsia and its Call for Islamic Protestantism

Ali Sharī’atī was born on 3 December 1933 into a religious family in Mazinan, a village near Mashhad in northeast Iran. He received his primary and secondary education in Mashhad and earned his bachelor’s degree in Arabic and French in 1958 (Sharī’atī, 1986, p. xvii). Lauded as an outstanding student, he won a state scholarship in 1959 to study for his doctorate in sociology and Islamic history at the Sorbonne in Paris. There Sharī’atī studied with a number of Orientalists and Marxist professors, such as Louis Massignon (1883–1962), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), and Frantz Fanon (1925–61). He translated Sartre’s What is Poetry?, Guevara’s Guerrilla Warfare, and Fanon’s masterpiece The Wretched of the Earth and The Fifth Year of the Algerian War (ibid., p. xviii). In 1963, he submitted an annotated translation of the medieval Persian text Fada’īl al-Balkh (‘Les Mérites de Balkh’; ‘The Meritorious of Balkh’) as his doctoral dissertation and a year later, he returned to Iran with a doctorate. However, he was arrested at the border and jailed for six months for his political activities against the regime carried out from Paris (ibid.).

Upon his release, Sharī’atī returned to his native province of Khurasan. He held short-term teaching appointments in high schools and continued his work at Mashhad University. His reputation as a lecturer spread quickly after he moved to Tehran in 1969 and he regularly delivered lectures at the Husayniah Irshād, a well known progressive Islamic center in pre-revolutionary Iran (ibid.). Known as a great public orator, Sharī’atī appealed to the illiterate, to students, and to the Iranian peoples to unite themselves against the Shah’s regime. Fearing his political influence, the ‘untouchable’ Shah had him arrested and put in jail for eighteen months. Iranian historian Ervand Abrahamian argues that the conservative clerics may have played a hidden role in stopping his lectures, because the Iranian regime hired many intellectual hacks to accuse Sharī’atī of ‘leading youth astray with anti-clerical propaganda’ and ‘advocating Islamic Marxism’ (Abrahamian, 1982, p. 25). Many of the conservative Shiʿi clerics began to issue religious decrees (fatāwā) against him and forbade their followers to attend his lectures or read his books (Rahnema, 1998, p. 275). However, popular pressure and international protests forced the Iranian regime to release him from prison. Following his release, Sharī’atī remained under house arrest for two years (1975–77) until he left Iran for London. He mysteriously died at a relative’s home on 19 June 1977 (Sharī’atī, 1986, p. xvii).

Although Sharī’atī died before the 1978–79 Iranian revolution, he was an influential figure behind its success. During the revolution, most protestors on the streets who struggled to overthrow the Shah carried giant posters of two men: the Ayatollah Khomeini
and Ali Sharīʿati. Sharīʿati’s lectures were transcribed into more than 50 pamphlets and booklets. Tapes of his lectures and popular slogans were recorded and circulated at home and abroad. As such, he deserves to be considered the ideologue of the 1978–79 Iranian Islamic revolution (Abrahamian, 1982, pp. 24–28).

Following al-Afghānī’s call for a return to the Qur’an through rational and progressive interpretations, Sharīʿati also called for a return to a ‘true Islam’. However, the meaning of ‘true Islam’ has often been misinterpreted by conservative clerics as the static and silent religion of the Shiʿi regime. Sharīʿati blamed the conservative clerics for not continuing the project of Islamic reform introduced earlier by al-Afghānī (ibid., p. 28), and accused them of becoming active members of the ruling class whose main responsibility was to reinforce a religious and political justification for the unjust status quo. Thus, Sharīʿati distinguished the Islam that belonged to the oppressed people from the Islam that belonged to the conservative clerics and rulers. As he stated:

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 Islamic, but there is a huge difference between them. One is the Islam of the Caliphate, of the Palace, of the Rulers. The other 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, in Abrahamian, 1982, p. 27)

Sharīʿati continued to argue that the return to true Islam would be impossible as long as it was led by the conservative clerics, because they reduced Islam to a state religion and used it as a political weapon against the Islam of the oppressed people. Instead, the call for a true Islam must be raised and spread by the progressive intelligentsia (rūšanfekrān) who threatened the corrupt legitimacy of the clergy and struggled for rational, modern, and dynamic views of Islam. Sharīʿati regarded them as the genuine proponents of dynamic and revolutionary Islam (Sharīʿati, 1986, pp. 29–67). Additionally, he praised al-Afghānī alongside Muhammad ʿAbduh (Egypt, 1849–1905) and Muhammad Iqbal (India, 1877–1938) as the progressive and Islamic intellectuals who initially embraced Islamic reform in accord with the new sciences and outlook, as well as the new European civilization (ibid., p. 53). Looking at the Iranian milieu, Sharīʿati seemed to argue that the progressive intelligentsia could play a similar role to the Protestant reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. Believing that Islam and its Iranian clerical establishment required a fundamental reform, Sharīʿati insisted upon the need of the model provided by Luther and Calvin for transferring the establishment of the Iranian clerical institution to the leadership of progressive intelligentsia (Rahnema, 1998, p. 114). In a piece entitled ‘Mission of a free thinker’, Sharīʿati explicates his message:

What is important to us now are Luther’s and Calvin’s works, since they transformed Catholic ethics (which had imprisoned Europe in tradition for centuries) into a moving and creative force. For instance, Max Weber discussed the relationship between capitalism and the Protestant ethic. He argued that those predominantly Catholic countries such as Spain, France, and Italy were less progressive than England, Germany, and the United States which were predominantly Protestant.
So Weber maintained that there was a direct relationship between the Protestant ethic and capitalism. (Sharīcati, n.d.)

Sharīcati expected the progressive intelligentsia to play a similar role to the Protestant reformers and spearhead Islamic Protestantism in Iran. In his lecture at the Technical University of Tehran in November 1971, he began to call openly for Islamic Protestantism as follows:

He [an enlightened person, progressive intellectual] 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. (Sharī‘ati, 1986, pp. 24–25)

In the hands of Sharīcati, the call for Islamic Protestantism had become a public and sophisticated statement compared with what al-Afghānī had previously initiated in the late nineteenth century. Venturing forth with the project of Islamic Protestantism would enable the progressive intelligentsia to: (1) refine the vast resources of Iranian society; (2) bridge the ever-growing gap between elite intellectuals and the masses; (3) embrace the Islamic ‘renaissance’, ‘reformation’, and ‘enlightenment’ which could save the Iranian people from the destructive political intervention of the ruling clerics and the Shah’s regime; (4) fight against superstition (takhayyl), blind imitation (taqlīd), and obedience, which were generally considered the hallmark of popular Islam; and (5) promote the generous spirit of rational and independent reasoning (ijtiḥād) which could transform the Iranian people into more rational, independent, and revolutionary human beings (ibid., pp. 25–26). At this point, the progressive intelligentsia finally found their new destiny by threatening the static and silent faith of the Iranian ruling clerics and transforming their religion into a revolutionary, world-minded, political, and materialist Islamic Protestantism.

**Hashem Aghajari: an Advocate of Islamic Protestantism**

Hashem Aghajari, now around 48 years old, is an internationally renowned lecturer in history at the University of Hamedan, a journalist, and a social activist of the reformist Islamic Revolution’s Mujāhidīn Organization. He became an intellectual celebrity after speaking publicly on ‘the call for Islamic Protestantism’ on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the death of Sharī‘ati in June 2002 (for a translation of the speech see Savyon, 2002). He is indeed a prominent supporter of Sharī‘ati. ‘Today, more than ever’, he stresses in his message, ‘we need the Islamic Protestantism that Sharī‘ati advocated’ (Savyon, 2002). Aghajari clearly borrowed Sharī‘ati’s idea of Islamic Protestantism to express his own criticism of the existing ruling clerics and the clergy’s monopoly on Islamic interpretation in Iranian life. For him, an Islamic structure and life in Iran shared similarities with Christianity prior to the Protestant Reformation, i.e. the dominant role of clergy, and hierarchical and corrupt religious institutions. The sociologist of Islam, Charles Kurzman, argues that the 1979 Iranian revolution ‘has had the effect of transforming Shi‘i religious scholars into a hierarchal institution with administrative authorities that even many Iranians regularly compare to the “church” and “clergy” in Catholic Christianity’
(Browers & Kurzman, 2004, p. 11). Just as the Protestant Reformation ‘wanted to rescue Christianity from the clergy and the church hierarchy’, as Aghajari argued, the call for Islamic Protestantism wanted to liberate Islam and Iranian Muslims from the political and religious cooptation of the Iranian ruling clerics (Savyon, 2002).

In August 2002, however, Aghajari was arrested and was sentenced to death on 6 November by a Hamedan court for insulting the ruling Shi‘i clerics. This verdict provoked a massive demonstration by Iranian intellectuals and students. As Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei overruled the court’s verdict, and Aghajari was then sentenced to a five-year term at his subsequent retrial. After two years in jail, he was finally released on 31 July 2004.2

Aghajari’s call for Islamic Protestantism provoked a powerful reaction because it really threatened the existing authoritarian Shi‘i clerics who were the main target of its criticism. The type of religious hierarchy found in Iran was emphatically regarded by Aghajari as a perfect imitation of the church hierarchy in medieval Christianity prior to the Protestant Reformation. ‘The divisions and the hierarchies they wanted to create are Catholic [and not Islamic]’, he argued (Savyon, 2002). Aghajari jumped to his own conclusion that the Iranian clerical hierarchy is closer to the Catholic than to the Islamic creed. For this reason, he sought to break the clergy’s monopoly on Islam and Iranian Muslims.

Aghajari continued to challenge the misguided theological assumption that the Iranian clerics were holy and divine human beings, which was absolutely untrue. They were not divine beings, and as such, we should never grant them that status (ibid.). The rise of Iranian clerics in the course of Islamic history did not represent the core message of Islam, so they should not serve as mediators between God and Iranian Muslims. Aghajari seemed to be offering shock therapy by saying that there were no mediators between a Muslim and God in terms of worshiping Him. Following Luther’s belief in the ‘priesthood of the believer’, he then argued that each Muslim was his own cleric (ibid.).

Aghajari goes on to argue that each Muslim must be fully and freely granted direct access to the Qur’an. In contrast with the ruling clerics who have banned Muslims from adopting their own approach, his call for Islamic Protestantism encourages Muslims to embrace direct, rational, and independent interpretation of the Qur’an (ijtiḥād).

He continues his speech as follows:

For years, young people were afraid to open a Qur’an. They said, ‘We must go ask the Mullahs what the Qur’ān says,’ [since] it was used primarily in mosques and cemeteries. The new generation was not allowed to come near the Qur’ān; [young people] were told that [first] they needed [training in] 101 methods of thought and they did not possess them. Consequently, [the young people] feared reading the Qur’ān. Then came Shirā‘īati, and he told the young people that these ideas were bankrupt; [he said] you could understand the Qur’ān using your own methods—you could understand as well as the religious leaders who claim to have a ton of knowledge. The religious leaders taught that if you understand the Qur’ān on your own, you have committed a crime. They feared that their racket would cease to exist if young people learned [Qur’ān] on their own. (ibid.)

Following in the footsteps of Shirā‘īati, Aghajari’s call for rational and independent interpretation of the Qur’ān challenged the monopoly in Islamic interpretation by the ruling clerics. Iranian Muslims have the same rights to access to and interpretation of
the Qur’an as clerics have had for years. And there is no such a thing as a privileged status for clerics. The Iranian clerics wanted, in fact, to exercise both religious and political power together for the sake of their own personal interest. Aghajari praised Shari‘ati as a religious reformer who sharply criticized Iranian clerics as follows: ‘you are not imams, you are not prophets, [you] cannot consider the people a subhuman species’ (ibid.). Aghajari’s call for Islamic Protestantism regarded human beings as equal creatures of God. However, both the Iranian clerics and the regime had ignored the basic principle of human rights. In particular, the Iranian regime divided people into insiders and outsiders, and then fought against the outsiders. ‘Is this Islamic logic? When there is no respect for human beings?’, he asked (ibid.). Thus the project of Islamic Protestantism wanted to treat human beings as rational, human, and independent subjects. This is precisely what Aghajari means when he speaks of Islamic Protestantism as ‘logical, practical, humanist...thoughtful and progressive’ (ibid.). All these characteristics should be the guiding principle of Islamic Protestantism. Islam is no longer seen as the static and silent religion of the Shi’i regime, but as a very rational, progressive, and dynamic religion.

The Traveling Idea of Islamic Protestantism: Closing Remarks

Like peoples and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, and from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesome appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. (Said, 1983, p. 226)

A closer look at three Iranian Luthers—al-Afghānī, Shari‘ati, Aghajari—and their calls for Islamic Protestantism may provide a number of interesting findings and conclusions. First, these three Iranian Luthers can be considered as early pioneers of the creation of ‘communities of discourse’ in Iranian intellectual history. With their powerful words and speeches in the public sphere, they succeeded in appealing to a wide spectrum of audiences, while fulfilling their intellectual role as producers of ideas in the reform movement (Wuthnow, 1989, p. 2). Their ideas were transcribed and widely distributed in print. Such scholars of Islam as Kurzman, Eickelman, and Opwis have regarded the printing press as one of the most important factors in the success of the reform movement (Browers & Kurzman, 2004, pp. 1–53). And all these Iranian Luthers have used the benefits of the printing press to spread their ideas of Islamic reform.

Second, the idea of Islamic Protestantism travels from al-Afghānī and Shari‘ati, to Aghajari. There seems to be what Edward Said calls ‘a point of origin,...in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse’ (Said, 1983, p. 226). In the case of the traveling idea of Islamic Protestantism, the point of origin is found and invented in the religious thinking of al-Afghānī. Certainly he was not explicitly calling for the use of the term ‘Islamic Protestantism’, but nevertheless, al-Afghānī was an early Iranian Muslim reformer who had a deep admiration for Martin Luther and his Protestant Reformation. Seeing Luther as his great hero, al-Afghānī then saw himself as an Iranian Islamic Luther who had learned from the Protestant Reformation about the potential for Islamic
reform (Hourani, 2002, p. 122). The idea that ‘Islam needed a Luther’, according to the distinguished scholar Albert Hourani, ‘was a favorite theme of al-Afghānī’s and perhaps he saw himself in the role’ (ibid.). Al-Afghānī’s idea of a Protestant-type of Islamic reform can therefore be regarded as ‘the point of origin’, which in turn entered into public discourse from the late nineteenth century. For instance, al-Afghānī spent much of his time in Istanbul in talks with a circle of disciples and acquaintances to discuss such key themes as Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformation, the idea of reason and progress, Western civilization, and the Protestant-type of Islamic reform in Iran (Keddie, 1972, pp. 391–392).

The idea of Islamic Protestantism traveled from al-Afghānī to Ali Shariʿati. A number of his public lectures and writings seemed to support the idea that he followed al-Afghānī’s call for a Protestant-type of Islamic reform. In his public lecture at the Husayniah Irshād in the 1970s, he openly praised al-Afghānī as the progressive intellectual who had raised up and spread Islamic Protestantism (Shariʿati, 1986, p. 53). Compared with what al-Afghānī had initiated in the late nineteenth century, the idea of Islamic Protestantism had become a clear and refined discourse in the mind of Shariʿati. He began to introduce new thoughts and movements to Islamic Protestantism so that it was transformed into a world-minded, political, rationalist, and revolutionary Islamic Protestantism.

Finally, the idea of Islamic Protestantism traveled from Shariʿati to Aghajari, who was indeed under ‘the conscious influence’ of Shariʿati’s call for Islamic Protestantism. In his short speech, he mentioned Shariʿati’s name and thought about eleven times to express his own version of Islamic Protestantism. He did what Said calls ‘creative borrowing’ in the development of Islamic Protestantism and developed and interpreted the idea more systematically. For instance, he began to outline a number of key issues for his call for Islamic Protestantism, including, from the concept of Protestantism, the need to separate ‘core Islam’ from ‘traditional Islam’, the ruling clerics and their non-divine status, inalienable rights of non-Muslims, the need to respect the rights of all, equality between men and women, and the call for ijtiḥād (Savyon, 2002). Compared with both al-Afghānī and Shariʿati, Aghajari was relatively successful in bringing his idea of Islamic Protestantism into a more sophisticated and transnational public discourse. A number of intellectuals, insiders as well as outsiders, have eagerly engaged in such discourse. In the United States, for instance, the prolific writer Thomas Friedman wrote a column in the New York Times about Aghajari’s idea: ‘What’s going on in Iran today’, he said, ‘is a combination of Martin Luther and Tiananmen Square—a drive for an Islamic reformation’ (Friedman, 2002).

Third, the idea of Islamic Protestantism does not travel ‘from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another’ in a social–historical vacuum. It travels, as Edward Said has put it, in response to specific historical and social changes (Said, 1983, pp. 226–247). Certainly, we must bear in mind first that these three Iranian Luthers lived in different periods with different challenges. Al-Afghānī lived in the age when European countries reached the height of their colonial power in the Muslim world. Consequently, his idea of Islamic reform, particularly Islamic Protestantism, developed in response to a twofold challenge: to strengthen the Muslim world and to defeat imperialism (Keddie, 1968, p. 43). On the one hand, he appealed for Muslim unity and encouraged Muslims to believe in reason and progress for a better future. On the other, his idea is also advanced as a means of political and religious struggle against colonial
power and imperialism in the Muslim world. During his short life in Paris, for instance, he published the famous pan-Islamic Arabic newspaper Al-ṣurwa al-wuthqā (The Strongest Link) with his liberal disciple Muhammad ʻAbduh, as a form of sophisticated intellectual struggle in response to and against British imperialist policy in Egypt, India, and Sudan.

However, Sharīʿati’s call for Islamic Protestantism was less concerned about defeating European colonial power and imperialism. Instead, his idea is more directed towards the growth of internalized colonial attitudes in the political leadership of the Shah’s regime. A well-known ideologue of the 1978–79 Iranian Islamic revolution, he succeeded in fighting for the true idea of Islam that belonged to the oppressed Iranian people. Though he shared much in common with al-Afghānī’s Islamic belief in reason and progress, Sharīʿati is much more radical and revolutionary. This is perhaps because he was directly influenced by Marxist sociology, Fanon’s Third World theory, and the Islamic teachings of early Shiʿi martyrs too (Abrahamian, 1982, p. 24). He devoted much of his thought and activism to attempting to overthrow the Shah’s regime.

However, the end of the authoritarian regime would not in fact bring the dawn of a new era in Iranian culture, society, and politics. Aghajari’s controversial speech on the call for Islamic Protestantism is primarily a response to the ever-growing tendency toward a strong authoritarianism among the clerics who now served in powerful positions in the government. And this is the most challenging contrast between Aghajari’s and Sharīʿati’s call for Islamic Protestantism. In his speech, Aghajari focuses on such a challenge: ‘the difference between our time and Sharīʿati’s time is that then, the clergy did not have power. Today, Islam is in power; clerics are in the government. That is why Islamic Protestantism has become much more important today’ (Savyon, 2002). The clerics’ involvement in politics has obstructed Aghajari’s struggle to liberate Islam and Iranian Muslims from the political and religious cooptation of the ruling clerics.

In sum, the traveling idea of Islamic Protestantism from Afghānī, Sharīʿati, to Aghajari, has pursued what Said called the phases of acceptance, modification, and a new reinterpretation (Said, 1983, p. 226). The idea of a Protestant type of Islamic reform came to birth as a response in the religious idea of al-Afghānī to unite the strength of the Muslim world and defeat European colonial power and imperialism. In the subsequent travel, the idea of Islamic Protestantism became clearer and better accepted in the mind of Sharīʿati as a response to the growth of internalized colonial attitudes in the political leadership of the Shah’s regime. In the final stage, Aghajari built on the foundation of Sharīʿati’s idea of Islamic Protestantism to legitimate his own ‘modification’ and ‘reinterpretation’ of Islamic Protestantism. Soon after his controversial speech spread at home and abroad, the idea of Islamic Protestantism traveled and entered into a more sophisticated and transnational public discourse as a response to the existing authoritarian Shiʿi clerics in the government.

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Notes

1. In an introduction to this volume, the editors make a preliminary comparison of two religious reformations in Europe and Iran.

References

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