

## The Call to Reform in the World's Religions

(Summary draft)

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“Reformation” is a loaded word. What do you think of when you hear it? A sweeping program of change that rewrites the foundation of faith? I’m sure that most of you here think about the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, whose high point was the nailing of the 95 theses on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral by their author Martin Luther.

But that is a fiction. There was no nailing of the list of complaints on any door. According to historians, that was a legend concocted many years later, and enshrined centuries afterward in masterful artistic works.

The 95 theses were indeed written and circulated and did become the basis of Luther’s secession from much of the Catholic tradition as it had been built up over the centuries with beliefs and practices that he regarded as un-Christian and a complete departure from the plain truth contained in the scriptures.

But the Protestant Reformation, which we take as the ‘gold standard’ of religious reformation, because it did result in the creation of a new church, was not of course the intention of Luther. He hoped it would reform the Catholic Church from the inside instead of developing a new institution along side it. He died a Catholic.

Indeed, the Reformation would result in far more than one church establishing itself as the true faith. It unleashed hundreds of rival theologies, churches, sects and movements. The concept of ‘the holy spirit’ alone would become a highly contested and powerful force in the Protestant era, by which I mean the centuries that emerged after Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Wesley.

Was the Holy Spirit a force that spoke to each and every Christian, did it indwell in Christians themselves, as the Quakers believed, or did it aid in the right interpretation of scripture? Did it speak to the lowly and depraved or did it communicate only to the righteous?

In any case, what the Protestant Reformation suggests and as Protestants memorialize it today, is that the Holy Spirit moved great men to cleanse the Church of the evil beliefs and practices of corrupt men who had strayed far from God and brought his house into disrepute – indeed, had allowed it to slide into the grip of Satan.

This view is not untypical of all reformation movements, which are champing at the bit for change and which claim to represent populations who are aggrieved and feel downtrodden by the elite. This was certainly the way the German population felt, when the Holy Roman Empire regularly tapped them for taxes and expensive indulgences, which it used to build the extravagant St Peter's basilica in Rome.

Luther's theology swept away the need for priests, orders and their buildings and lands. A large hierarchy was dismantled, and the church no longer supported celibate populations of monks, friars and nuns. They got married, took real jobs, and some preached sermons in churches. A major reformation had been accomplished in parts of northern Europe.

This structural reformation, which incidentally would later spawn 'established churches' representing the official church of particular nations, is the kind of historic change that more easily etches itself in collective memory as 'momentous'. What does not make it into the popular mind is the simple fact that the Catholic Church was theologically not as monolithic as it seemed, and neither was it structurally uniform.

The orders of the Catholic Church were often rivals and sometimes mortal enemies, as were the Franciscan and Dominican orders. They viewed their role in the world very differently, driven by distinct theologies and 'callings' ('charisms') and they also developed distinct theologies and practices. Just think of the Jesuit missionaries to India and China who were driven by curiosity and fascination as much as by a desire to convert. They became the great conveyors of other cultures and beliefs to the West, which in turn helped us understand that the 'heathen' actually had some things to teach *us*.

But that is another story.

Reformation of a momentous kind had already occurred among the Jews in antiquity. It is perhaps the most impressive example of change that thoroughly altered the orthodoxy and orthopraxis of the Biblical religion of Israel. Not once but twice. Initially, with the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, a large population of Jews were removed to Babylon. There, amongst the Persian speaking peoples, they dwelt, absorbing the surrounding culture and language, and being the place where the Biblical texts were written.

Returning to Israel, the land of their forefathers, when the Cyrus King of Persia gave them leave, they rebuilt the Temple. The priestly class of the Kohanim and their assistants the Levites, were once again installed in the role of keepers of the priestly cult of the Second Temple.

But something had already begun to happen among the Israelites who had followed their Jewish tradition in the diaspora without the aid of a Temple priestly cult. They gathered for weekly readings of the scriptures in the synagogues – the places they met to recite the Torah.

Israel today has remarkable archaeological sites of ancient synagogues replete with mosaic floors illustrated in biblical and astrological motifs.

Moreover, Jews before the common era were already engaged in administering the law to a community who was now living in changed circumstances. Interpretations of the law were paramount and by no means self evident. Yet Judaism did not install a final adjudicator, like a pope or a counsel, since it was the Torah itself that was the voice of God, consequently no one could be elevated above it. It was for the people to discern it. And as some have argued, the scholars and teachers, called rabbis, followed the pattern of the Greek schools of philosophy, discussing and debating points of law and ethics, but leaving open ended the possible right opinion.

The Talmud was born. A commentary upon commentary of the Torah, containing a core legal text, the Mishnah, and discussions concerning it and other parts of the Bible, as well as some stand alone sections, like *Pirke Avot*, Sayings of the Fathers, an ethical treatise.

This formed the template of what was a reformation in Judaism. It was instigated, to be sure by Israel's conquest by other peoples, who

attempted to wrest their land and enslave them. But when the Temple fell for the second time in 70 BCE, under the Romans, the Jewish people had already undertaken major revisions to their religion. A further catalyst to change, however, was that the new class of scholars and rabbis accused the priests of the temple as corrupt puppets of a foreign power, who lived richly while the people were enslaved.

The destruction of the Second Temple was by no means welcomed by the Jewish people, since it was the House of God where the sacred Ark of the Covenant was held, and where precious symbols of their ancient faith were installed. However, Rabbinic Judaism was already standing in the wings, ready to take the people forward into a life that would unfortunately remain unstable and uncertain for almost two millennia. Nonetheless, their faith, the day to day structure of their lives and hopes for a return to Israel, their homeland, would remain alive in their books, in their scriptures that were read each week in the synagogue, and in their prayers recited each day at sunrise and sunset.

Jewish thinking and practice underwent many reformations in the diaspora, developing a strong mystical tradition in 13<sup>th</sup> Century Spain that spread throughout Europe and Israel, where Jews returned and established themselves in small towns, most notably in Sephad.

The Hasidic movement in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Lithuania and Poland had strong parallels to the Wesleyian Protestant movement; the Musar movement, was an ethical and educational movement that began in Lithuania in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century which had parallels in post Enlightenment England and Europe; and the Reform Judaism movement incorporated 19<sup>th</sup> Century scientific rationalism in its founding platform in the 1840s which had strong parallels in Unitarianism and other liberal Christian movements.

Islam also underwent a major reformation period in the 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries, when it was influenced by Greek philosophy. "Itchtihad", the term for 'reasoning' was championed by Muslim philosophers, such as the Neo Platonist Al Kindi, and the 10<sup>th</sup> C Al Faribi who had extensive exposure to Western thinkers, and translated their works into Arabic. (In fact, many of the translators were Arabic speaking Jews living in Muslim lands.)

The most famous Aristotelian, the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Muslim, Avicenna, founded a neoplatonic school of thought. Later, the influence of al-Ghazali, led to a decline in philosophical reform, due to his argument that religion was incompatible with philosophy. Averroes defended philosophy and had to flee Andalusia to save his life.

Islam's early division, however, into Shiism and Sunni traditions, meant that they developed quite different and separate responses to the great religious and philosophical questions, especially in the early modern period. Shiism became far more open to mysticism, essentialism, and the miraculous stories surrounding the lives of saints.

Today, some Muslims in the West are calling for a new reformation in Islam, and for those in the Middle East, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, their calls for reformation are largely met with censure and punishment.

Among the world's great religions, the major place of Buddhism, originating in the 5<sup>th</sup> C BCE in the North Eastern part of India, and with its spread across the Far East, experienced some of the most momentous reformations in its 2500 year history.

Buddhism's beginnings, recounted as the life of an Indian prince Siddharta Gautama from Lumbini, of the Shakya clan (which is why he is also called Shakyamuni) renounced his worldly life and discovered a spiritual path of simplicity and meditation that delivered a state of enlightenment or 'Buddhahood', and emphasized the need for compassion to all sentient beings.

Records of the First and Second Councils, held in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Centuries BCE respectively, reveal the institutional self organization of Buddhism. But in the 3<sup>rd</sup> C BCE under King Asoka, who converted to Buddhism, established a Third Council, and set about to spread the faith beyond the Ganges valley. His encounter with the Greeks, not only encouraged him to spread Buddhism among them and as far West as Macedonia, but under Greek influence, the Buddha was for the first time depicted and represented in sculptural form. Before that, only a footprint was allowed to represent him.

Buddhism would undergo a major reformation in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE, with the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism, in contrast to Theravada

Buddhism. Those names carry the triumphalist nature of that reformation, which deemed the new form of Buddhism, 'the Great Vehicle' and the earlier form 'the Small Vehicle'.

In a nutshell, the reform wrested away the hope of enlightenment and peaceful repose in heaven from the celibate ascetic monks and brought hope and salvation to the people. In this new dispensation, not only was it not necessary to become a monk to experience enlightenment, but monks were allowed to go into the world, and put off their own salvation or enlightenment, in order to help raise the spiritual merit of the people, who could thereby gain entry to heaven.

While some of the ideas may seem arcane to you, its impact was such that ordinary monks could become much more a part of the community, they could not only show compassion to people in various ways, most often in teaching them, but could also be the recipient of compassion or 'good works' as it were. This broke down the barrier that had grown up between the 'elite' self-serving monks of the Theravada tradition and the people.

These historical moments of 'reformation' in the world's religions have not gone unnoticed in the modern world. They remain influential today, and by their example, they have served as templates for further reforms in response to the changed circumstances of the 20 and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries.

Reformation however is not always undertaken for the right reasons nor does it always have the best outcomes. Historically, there have been some disastrous 'reformations'.

However, it is also true that 'reformation in religion' is neither as urgent nor as likely in our time as we might expect. This is because the necessity to reform religion is significantly reduced when the alternative is 'no religion'. Indeed, the default position, which is increasingly the case today, may well spell the end of real and serious reformation in religion.