Seeking the Muslim Martin Luther: Against Calls for an ‘Islamic Reformation’

Todd Green
Introduction

In the contemporary Western debate about Muslims, one often hears that the religion of Islam is in need of a reformation. It is a common trope that continues to be advanced in the public and policy debates about Muslim majority societies and Muslim minorities in the West. Many Americans are convinced that a key reason why the Middle East is in such turmoil today is precisely due to the absence of an “Islamic Reformation” and the non-existence of a Muslim Martin Luther. Terrorist attacks by Muslims in the West are often attributed to this factor as well.

It is beyond dispute that traditional Islamic orthodoxy is in need of a serious updating and reinterpretation to meet the demands of our modern age. As we recently saw with the rise of ISIS, extremist groups will draw upon outdated and pre-modern interpretations of Islam to justify their barbarism. Even within the mainstream teaching of Islam that is promoted in Muslim seminaries, there remains a wide chasm between normative Islamic orthodoxy and universal standards of human rights. This is particularly the case with respect to the status of women, religious and sexual minorities. An Islamic aggiornamento, along the lines of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican that updated Catholic doctrine in the early 1960s, would certainly be welcome. Proponents of an Islamic reformation, however, are not always advocating this position. There is sometimes a more sinister agenda at play by some of the most vocal advocates of this argument.

In this occasional paper, Todd Green, an Associate Professor of Religion at Luther College, takes on this subject. He uses the writings of the controversial author and polemicist Ayaan Hirsi Ali to make his case. He identifies several errors in her argument on the need for Islamic reform and her invocation of the model of the Protestant Reformation that Muslims are encouraged to emulate. Equally important, Professor Green asks the question: what function do calls for an Islamic reformation really serve? The answer he provides is nuanced, insightful, and critically informed. Any serious student of this topic would benefit from reading his argument.

We are indebted to Todd Green for allowing us to publish his paper as part of our center’s occasional paper series. It originally appeared in Mizan, an online journal that seeks to advance informed public discourse about Muslim societies. We would like to thank the editors of this journal as well.

Nader Hashemi
Director, Center for Middle East Studies
Josef Korbel School of International Studies
University of Denver
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Todd Green

The year 2017 marked the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s Reformation in Germany, a monumental event in Christian history that generated permanent divisions in the body of Christendom. As commemorations of Luther’s Reformation commenced throughout the world that year, some of Islam’s most ardent critics used the occasion to renew their calls for an “Islamic Reformation.”

Demands for an Islamic Reformation are nothing new, of course. They have fueled the careers of some of the most prominent anti-Islam activists in the West today. This is particularly true for “native informants”: current or former Muslims who use their personal knowledge of and experience with Islam to inform majority populations in the West that Islam really is stuck in the Middle Ages and in desperate need of its own Martin Luther.

The most recognizable voices in this category include Irshad Manji, Asra Nomani, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, all of whom believe Islam needs a Reformation. Reading these critics, one finds a common narrative: Islam is inherently violent; Islam is misogynistic; Islam is intolerant; Islam is irrational and dismissive of critical thinking.

In this essay, I will focus on Hirsi Ali’s calls for an Islamic Reformation, not so much because she is that distinctive in relation to other self-styled reformers on this issue, but because her criticisms of Islam and her assumptions regarding the purpose of Luther’s Reformation constitute a narrative that is widely embraced and echoed by many others. I will deconstruct two myths undergirding her call for an Islamic Reformation. The first myth is that Islam is a static religion that has witnessed no significant reforming movements in its modern history. The second myth is that Luther’s Reformation both liberated European Christians from an oppressive religion and sought to modernize Christianity. Once these myths are exposed, I will address the real function behind this demand for an Islamic Reformation: to re-inscribe a narrative of Western civilizational superiority over a backward, belligerent Islam, and thereby to distract majority populations in the West from engaging in any significant self-reflection or self-criticism concerning their own political, religious, and moral shortcomings pertaining to human rights and human dignity.¹

Reforming Trends and Movements in Modern Islamic History

“Unlike Islam, Christianity has never been a static religion,” writes Hirsi Ali in her book Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now? Islam, she believes, lacks the dynamic reforming tendencies embedded in the religious DNA of its Abrahamic cousin. She does manage to point to a few examples of Muslims in the twentieth century who tried their hand at reform, including Mahmoud Mohammed Taha (d. 1985) and Abdel Raziq (d. 1966). But for someone who is so insistent that Islam needs a Reformation, she demonstrates practically no knowledge of the many reforming efforts that have characterized Islam in its modern history.

¹ What I will not do in this essay is devote much attention to the various ways that “reform” (reformation, in Christianity, iṣlāḥ in Islam) has been defined and conceptualized by Christian and Muslim thinkers. Instead, I will take as my starting point Hirsi Ali’s own definition of reform as a modification of core beliefs and/or an adoption of flexible and tolerant attitudes that are in greater alignment with modern, pluralistic values. See Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now (New York: Harper, 2015): 25.

² Ibid., 115.
Even a cursory glance at this history is enough to fill in the massive gaps in Hirsi Ali’s narrative. A good place to start is with *ijtihād*—the use of independent reasoning and judgment when interpreting Islamic texts. Hirsi Ali decries the abandonment of *ijtihād*, commonly referred to as “closing the gate of *ijtihād*,” even though robust debates over embracing *ijtihād* have taken place throughout modern Islamic history.3 The most prominent example involves the jurist (and later Grand Mufti) of Egypt, Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905). Abduh, like his mentor Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), argued that *ijtihād* should be used more broadly by laypeople to allow them to read and interpret Islamic texts without the mediation of jurists. Abduh’s efforts to reform al-Azhar University focused heavily on this more expansive approach to *ijtihād*.4

But Abduh is far from the only advocate of employing greater independent reasoning in interpreting Islamic texts. From Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) in India to Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962) in Britain, modern Islamic history is replete with Muslim intellectuals and activists embracing and promoting *ijtihād*. It’s also worth noting that this tendency to encourage laypeople to use their own independent reasoning has even been embraced by violent extremists such as Osama bin Laden (d. 2011), a reminder that the promoters and the beneficiaries of reform are not always progressives out to reconcile their religious worldviews with a secular West.

In the realms of law and education, significant reforms emerged in the nineteenth century. The most notable example involves the Tanzimat reforms of the Ottoman Empire, initiated by Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839) and his son Abdülmecid I (r. 1839–1861). These reforms prohibited executions without a trial, provided more expansive property rights, and eliminated the *dhimmī* status of non-Muslim minorities so that they were promised equal treatment in military service, government employment, and education.5

Efforts to improve girls’ education and women’s rights took place around the same time. Rifaa al-Tahtawi (d. 1873) in Egypt made a strong case for providing education to both sexes, and he did so through recourse to Islamic traditions. Others made similar calls for expanding education to women, including Qasim Amin (d. 1908) and Muhammad Abduh.

This era also witnessed the emergence of feminist activists. Zainab Fawwaz (d. 1914), a Lebanese author, insisted that nothing in Islamic law prohibited women from engaging in otherwise male-dominated occupations. Other prominent feminists advocating for greater opportunities for women include Huda Shaarawi (d. 1947), who founded the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923, and the Turkish author Halide Ebid (d. 1964).6

Dramatic changes in the institution of slavery reflect the reforming spirit of the nineteenth century. The man who led the way was Ahmad Bey (d. 1855), the Ottoman governor general of Tunis. He abolished slavery in Tunisia in 1846, a good seventeen years before Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, and he justified the decision using Islamic legal arguments. His efforts paved the way for other Muslim-majority regions to abolish slavery in the late nineteenth century.7

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So much more can be said not only about reforming trends and movements within Islam in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also the ongoing work of Muslim reformers today. This includes a wide range of prominent women often dismissed or ignored by Hirsi Ali such as Mohja Kahf (b. 1967), Leila Ahmed (b. 1940), and Amina Wadud (b. 1952), not to mention Nobel Peace Prize winners Tawakkol Karman (b. 1979) and Malala Yousafzai (b. 1997). Perhaps it’s not too surprising that Hirsi Ali gives scant attention to these reformers. Most of them criticize Western imperialism and adopt nuanced, sophisticated interpretations of Islam, positions that are at odds with Hirsi Ali’s own career as a native informant serving Islamophobic interests.

None of this is to suggest that Muslim-majority societies are beyond critique or have no need for political or religious reforms. My larger point is that Islam is not the static religion that Hirsi Ali makes it out to be. Her calls for an Islamic Reformation reflect an imagined history in which Muslims have refrained from robust debates and efforts involving reform. This is hardly the case.

**Misunderstanding Luther’s Reformation**

The second myth to be addressed involves the assumption that Luther’s Reformation both freed medieval Christians from a repressive religion and infused Christianity with the principles of modernity. In Chapter 2 of Heretic, Hirsi Ali describes the Reformation as a movement that liberated the individual conscience from priestly authority, opening the door to critical thinking and modernity itself. Hirsi Ali, in other words, describes the Reformation in a manner reminiscent of old-fashioned Protestant apologetics: an event that unshackled Christians from a stifling, decaying Catholicism. In doing so, she demonstrates a shallow grasp of medieval piety and worship, the nature of Luther’s reforming project, and the continuities between Protestantism and medieval Catholicism. This is not too surprising given the poor research behind her writing on the Reformation. Not once does she cite a historian of the Protestant Reformation or a peer-reviewed article or book to substantiate her claims about it.

Since World War II, historians have increasingly debunked the idea that medieval Christianity was in grave decline or decay and thus in obvious need of a Reformation. Medieval Christians had their share of complaints about the church as an institution, but most did not feel oppressed or burdened by the church’s rituals and doctrines. Medieval Christians endowed masses, commissioned artwork, listened to sermons, prayed to saints, celebrated holy days, and sought solace in the church and its role in mediating salvation to believers. As the historian Euan Cameron notes: “The Christianity of the later Middle Ages was a supple, flexible, varied entity, adapted to the needs, concerns, and tastes… of the people who created it. It was not an inflexible tyranny presided over by a remote authority.”

The Reformation was not born out of widespread hostility toward a rigid, oppressive Catholicism, nor was it a movement enthusiastically embraced initially by many European Christians. In fact, much of

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8. Hirsi Ali offers a little praise for Yousafzai, calling her “the authentic voice of a Muslim Reformation” (Heretic, 229) in light of her efforts to promote girls’ and women’s education. But Hirsi Ali avoids any reference to Yousafzai’s criticisms of U.S. military engagement (particularly drone strikes) as exacerbating terrorism, nor does she acknowledge the degree to which Yousafzai finds inspiration for her gender advocacy work from Islamic texts.


Europe remained Catholic after the Reformation, while other regions that became Protestant did so only after overcoming significant popular resistance to the new teachings and practices introduced by the Reformation—resistance that lasted decades, if not more than a century in some instances.\(^{11}\)

To be sure, Martin Luther, in his capacity as an Augustinian monk, felt burdened by medieval Catholicism, particularly in regards to the penitential cycle and the emphasis on good works as necessary for salvation. By his own account, he was more meticulous and scrupulous in confessing his sins and seeking forgiveness than most monks. He once confessed for six hours straight.\(^{12}\) The anxiety he experienced in his quest to find a just and forgiving God took its toll both physically and mentally in the years leading up to the Reformation.

But Luther’s psychological and theological angst was much more the exception than the rule. Few medieval Christians seemed to be worried about their salvation to the degree that Luther did, and since most were not monks, they would have confessed their sins only once per year during Lent, a far cry from Luther’s endless cycles of confession. Luther’s crisis of faith would have a profound impact on the future of Christianity, but we must not conflate his anxiety and his efforts to alleviate this anxiety with the feelings and experiences of the vast majority of medieval Christians.

We also must be careful not to assume that Luther’s Reformation led to a new era in which people were allowed to choose their religious beliefs and practices according to the dictates of conscience. The Reformation simply marked a shift in which church had a monopolized religious authority in a given geographical region. It did not free Christians to believe and choose as they pleased. Protestants were just as insistent as Catholics that heresy had no rights. Both relied heavily on the coercive power of magistrates to enforce orthodoxy in their lands and to punish those who stepped out of line.\(^{13}\)

As for whether the Reformation modernized Christianity, a point Hirsi Ali is quite insistent on, it’s debatable whether the Reformation set in motion the historical, political, and economic changes that contributed to what we call “modernity.” Seminal social thinkers of the nineteenth century, including Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, first developed this idea. Some contemporary sociologists, including Peter Berger and Steve Bruce, have expanded upon their initial insights.

In this regard, Luther shares much in common with Wahhabism and the Salafi movement in Islam, both of which are reforming movements that hold the classic juristic tradition in suspicion and which seek to return to the sources of Islam—the Qur’an and the Sunnah. But none of these thinkers make the case that it was the intent of the Protestant reformers to modernize Christianity or European society. Modernity would have been an inadvertent side effect at best, if at all. This is a crucial point. Luther was not trying to innovate or bring the church into the modern world. Innovation was what he was trying to avoid. It was what he accused the Catholic Church of doing. The Catholic Church’s rituals, doctrines, and hierarchy were too infused with medieval additions that lacked a sound scriptural basis. That is one of the

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\(^{13}\) The one exception was the Radical Reformation, predominantly composed of Anabaptists who rejected the state’s role in enforcing Christian orthodoxy.
reasons he pursued his reforms. In the spirit of Renaissance humanism, Luther wanted to return to the sources (ad fontes), to go back to an earlier, more pristine era of Christianity before medieval scholastic philosophers and theologians introduced dangerous innovations. In this regard, Luther shares much in common with Wahhabism and the Salafi movement in Islam, both of which are reforming movements that hold the classic juristic tradition in suspicion and which seek to return to the sources of Islam—the Qur’an and the Sunnah.

It’s easy to forget that Luther and many of the other reformers were not modern people. Their beliefs were more indicative of the Middle Ages than the modern, secular West, among them the necessity of a strong alliance between church and state; the rejection of freedom of religion; the disavowal of democracy; and the subjugation of women within the social and political order.

The Protestant reformers were also strong believers in supernatural forces at work in the world. As the historian Matthew Lundin puts it: “The Protestant world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was no modern, disenchanted sphere of orderly natural law. Rather, it was a mysterious realm full of signs and omens, an arena in which God and the devil often intervened.”14 Luther himself firmly believed he was living in the Last Days, engaged in a very real and personal battle with the Devil.15 His world was an enchanted one, as is the world of many Protestants to this day.

Hirsi Ali’s account of the European Reformation traffics in crude caricatures that pit freedom-loving and forward-thinking Protestant reformers against repressive priests and popes. The Reformation represents tolerance and reason, Catholicism despotism and illiberalism (presumably after the fashion of Islam). In short, her account of the Reformation draws on shallow stereotypes, not sound scholarship. Her superficial grasp of the Reformation mirrors her poor apprehension of reforming trends and movements in modern Islamic history. It’s hard not to conclude that in both instances, willful ignorance and ulterior motives are at play.

**What Function Do Calls for an Islamic Reformation Really Serve?**

Hirsi Ali preys on widespread Islamic and religious illiteracy among majority populations in the United States and Europe to promote the two myths addressed above. She does all of this under the guise of a larger myth: Westerners don’t engage in nearly enough criticism of Islam. She believes we are too afraid to criticize Islam’s massive shortcomings and its perpetual intolerance because of our commitment to multiculturalism and respect for diversity. That is why we must hold Muslims accountable and encourage them to engage in the kind of self-criticism that drove the European Reformation.

The notion that Islam is not criticized enough in the West is preposterous. Critical media studies alone overwhelmingly point to a strong bias in the media against Islam. A study by 416 Labs published in 2015 revealed that the *New York Times* portrays Islam and Muslims more negatively than alcohol, cancer, and cocaine.16 Another study by Media Tenor found that close to three-quarters of all media coverage of Islam

in 2013 was negative. In 2017, a study from Georgia State University discovered that while Muslims committed 12.4 percent of all terrorist attacks on U.S. soil between 2011 and 2015, they received 44 percent of the media coverage. It certainly is not the case that the media is afraid to portray Islam in a critical light.

The same holds true for politicians. In Europe, virulent anti-Islam politicians such as Marie Le Pen and Geert Wilders managed to finish second in the elections of France and the Netherlands respectively this past year. In the 2015-2016 election cycle in the United States, we had one candidate who argued that a Muslim is not qualified to become president, another who proposed patrolling Muslim neighborhoods, and still another who demanded “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.” Criticizing Islam has become a prominent and effective campaign tool on both sides of the Atlantic.

When Hirsi Ali insists that we aren’t criticizing Islam enough, she couldn’t be more wrong. Criticizing, demonizing, and othering Islam has become a fixture in the media and politics.

But now we are closer to the truth behind the demand for an Islamic Reformation. This is not about a lack of reform efforts in modern Islamic history, nor is it about finding inspiration in Luther’s Reformation in Christianity. And it certainly is not about the need for majority populations in the West to criticize Islam more. This is about distraction. Demands for an Islamic Reformation function as a diversion, a way to occupy majority populations with all that is presumably wrong with Islam so that we need not engage in self-reflection or criticism regarding all that ails Western nations, including the significant damage inflicted by U.S. foreign policy in Muslim-majority regions.

We can see this play out by focusing only on the United States. Obsessing over Islam’s supposed tendency toward violence masks our own violent past and present. The genocide of indigenous peoples, the murder and exploitation of slaves, lynchings and Jim Crow terrorism, and atomic annihilation have all played a role in the nation we have become. More recently, the war on terror has cost over one million lives and the displacement of millions of people. It has also served as the occasion for massive human rights violations, from unlawful detentions to outright torture, with popular support for these violations in some instances. According to a Washington Post/ABC News poll from 2014, 59 percent of Americans believed that CIA-sponsored torture of suspected terrorists was justified, with white Christians more likely than other racial and religious groups to support torture.

Obsessing over oppressed Muslim women distracts us from the many ongoing challenges facing women in

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the United States. One in three women have been victims of physical assault, one in five women have been raped, while a woman is fatally shot by a current or former intimate partner every fourteen hours.23

Economically, women continue to earn only 80 percent of what men are paid, while women are more likely than men to live below the poverty level.24 If women do climb the business ranks, a formidable glass ceiling still awaits them. The percentage of female CEOs in Fortune 500 companies has decreased over the past several years. As of 2016, it was hovering at 4 percent.25

The glass ceiling applies to politics too. The United States has fallen in global rankings over the past 20 years in terms of the representation of women in government, from #52 in 1997 to #97 in 2016.26 Up through 2016, three states had never sent a woman to Congress: Delaware, Mississippi, and Vermont.27 And it goes without saying that no woman has yet ascended to the U.S. presidency, in contrast to several countries that have had a Muslim woman serve as president or prime minister, from Bangladesh to Pakistan to Mauritius.

Obsessing over intolerance within Islam prevents us from coming to terms with the rampant racism and systemic discrimination that plague our nation. Compared to whites, black Americans are more likely to be shot by police when unarmed, more likely to undergo non-consensual searches, and more likely to be subject to the use of force by police.28 In state prisons, black Americans are incarcerated at just over five times the rate of whites (ten times in states such as Iowa, Wisconsin, and New Jersey). Latinos are imprisoned at 1.4 times the rate of whites.29

In April 2017, while the unemployment rate in the United States dropped to 4.4 percent, the lowest in almost ten years, it remained much higher for black Americans and Latinos: 7.9 percent and 5.2 percent respectively.30 This is a typical pattern. There is also a racial divide when it comes to earned income. In 2014, the median household income for white Americans was $71,300 compared to $43,000 for black Americans.31

Racial hostility and hatred towards black Americans have often been translated into violence, even in the post-Civil Rights era. According to the Combating Terrorism Center, right-wing extremists, which

23. Data gathered by the National Coalition against Domestic Violence (NCADV) and available online at http://ncadv.org/.
27. In the 2016 elections, Lisa Blunt Rochester won Delaware’s at-large congressional district, making her the first woman and the first African American in the state to serve in the U.S. Congress.
includes white supremacists, carried out 337 attacks and killed 254 people in the decade after 9/11. That's far more violence and death inflicted by these groups than by Muslim extremists during the same time period. And it's not just right-wing groups. According to the FBI, in 2015, almost two-thirds of hate crime victims were targeted because of racial or ethnic bias.

We also should not forget that despite the incessant complaints about violent Muslims, Muslims themselves are increasingly subject to hate crimes. According to the FBI, anti-Muslim hate crimes are five times higher post-9/11 than pre-9/11, and in 2015, there was a 67 percent increase in hate crimes toward Muslims from the previous year. A more recent study reveals that anti-Muslim hate crimes rose 91 percent in the first half of 2017, likely as a result of Trump's election.

Finally, obsessing over the purported lack of intellectualism and rationality in Islam deflects attention from the strong currents of anti-intellectualism that run throughout the United States. Just 15 percent of Republicans trust climate scientists to provide full and accurate information, whereas 45 percent have little to no trust at all. On the origins of the human species, 42 percent of Americans believe God created humans in their present form less than 10,000 years ago. A surprising 26 percent of Americans believe the sun revolves around the earth. Regarding the value of higher education, a recent Pew study found that 58 percent of Republican and Republican-leaning independents believe colleges and universities have a negative impact on society.

All of these shortcomings are neatly encapsulated in our current president. Donald J. Trump is a man who threatens protesters with violence at political rallies. He flirts openly with deploying nuclear weapons in retaliation to terrorist attacks. He objectifies women as sex objects, brags about sexually assaulting women, and insults women (including his political rivals) whom he finds unattractive. He vilifies the Black Lives Matter movement and caricatures black neighborhoods as “ghettos” that have little more to offer than violence and death. He takes pride in leading the “birther” movement that questioned former President Obama’s citizenship. He instrumentalizes Islamophobia for political gain, surrounds himself with advisors and cabinet members who believe Muslims are a fifth column within American society, and routinely ignores the discrimination and violence experienced by American Muslims. He dismisses the challenges of climate change and once tweeted that global warming is based on faulty science and manipulated data.

In 2016, approximately 63 million Americans voted for a president who embodies all of the vices and non-

38. Scott Neuman, “1 in 4 Americans Think the Sun Goes around the Earth, Survey Says,” NPR, February 14, 2014, available online at http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/02/14/277058739/1-in-4-americans-think-the-sun-goes-around-the-earth-survey-says. The survey was conducted by the National Science Foundation.
pluralistic values that Hirsi Ali and other anti-Islam activists accuse Islam of representing: violence, sexism, intolerance, and anti-intellectualism. This begs the question of how such a large portion of American voters were able to reconcile Trump's immoral behavior with their own moral frameworks.

Given the many ways that the United States has failed to embrace tolerant, pluralistic values, why not forego all talk of an Islamic Reformation in Muslim-majority societies and shift the focus to an American Reformation? Because it doesn’t work politically. Asking many Americans, particularly white Christians, to reform their religious and political worldviews and to come to terms with their own sins of commission and omission will not boost your political or media career. Hirsi Ali knows this, as do many others who follow in her footsteps. Demeaning and demonizing Islam, on the other hand, brings with it handsome speaking fees, lucrative book deals, considerable media exposure, and significant political capital. It can even give you the keys to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Many demands in the West for an Islamic Reformation are little more than exercises in Islamophobia. They do not illustrate genuine engagements with Islam and its complex reforming history, nor do they reflect a fundamental understanding of the European Reformation Martin Luther set in motion 500 years ago. They are shallow attempts to promote Western civilizational superiority and to let those of us in majority populations off the hook concerning our own political, social, and moral shortcomings. Until we come to terms with these shortcomings and gain a better understanding of reform efforts both in Christian and Islamic history, we should approach any conversation about a reformation in Islam with far more caution and humility than we will find in the writings and musings of Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

In 2016, approximately 63 million Americans voted for a president who embodies all of the vices and non-pluralistic values that Hirsi Ali and other anti-Islam activists accuse Islam of representing: violence, sexism, intolerance, and anti-intellectualism.

About the Author

**Todd Green** is associate professor of religion at Luther College. He is also a former Franklin Fellow at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, DC, where he analyzed and assessed the impact of anti-Muslim prejudice in Europe on countering violent extremism initiatives, refugee and migrant policies, and human rights. His past work with the U.S. government has included lectures on Islamophobia to other federal agencies, including the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security. Green has been interviewed by a variety of media outlets on Islamophobia, including CNN, NPR, Al Jazeera, France 24, and Reuters. He is the author of *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (Fortress Press, 2015) and *Presumed Guilty: Why We Shouldn’t Ask Muslims to Condemn Terrorism* (Fortress Press, 2018).
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