

## Religious Reforms in Islam in Tariq Ramadan's Theology

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### Abstract

There has been much debate on many Islamic issues and concepts such as renewal, revival and reform from the early days. The divergent opinions on certain matters led to the birth of the first schools of law (*madhahib*), established between the eighth and tenth centuries. From then on, there has been a continuous effort of research, renewal and reform of Islamic sciences to deal with many contemporary issues. Those scholars, thinkers, and intellectuals who call for renewal and reform could be labelled "reformists." Tariq Ramadan is one of the most influential reformists whose ideas have gained much attention, especially in Western society. This article aims to discover how Tariq Ramadan balances his traditionalist and reformist tendencies when dealing with the issue of reform.

**Keywords:** Reform, Islam, Reinterpretation, Renewal, Modern Contexts, Traditionalist, The West.

### Introduction

Tariq Ramadan is possibly one of the most influential voices in Europe, especially amid increasing discussions and debates concerning the place and spiritual life of Muslims in the West. In fact, the name of the scholar Tariq Ramadan has been obviously imprinted in lists of contemporary luminaries by publications such as Time and Foreign Policy. During the last three decades, Ramadan has published several works concerning Islamic ethics and the identity of Muslims in the West. Also, he held tenure at Oxford as well as positions in some

universities in Europe and Asia. Tariq Ramadan's thoughts have been widely discussed and are considered as a way out for the contemporary problem of the relations of religions in the midst of globalization. He introduces himself as a "smooth talk and gentleman's beard" figure.

In spite of having a good reputation as a liberal reformist, Tariq Ramadan is still considered as a controversial figure. Indeed, some people think that he is a needed reformer, and they sometimes call him "a Muslim Martin Luther". They claim that he is "a man with a vision" who has the ability to bridge the gap between the secular lifestyle of the Western society and the traditional values of Islam. Ramadan is also known as a charismatic orator, especially among youth Muslim audiences. That is why his lectures usually witness the attendance of large audiences. However, there are many critics who argue that Tariq Ramadan has a plethora of detractors and accuse him of doublespeak. In fact, those who criticise him claim that Ramadan uses certain discourse when he talks to the Muslim audience, while at the same time, he uses a different language to address the West. While he tells Muslims one thing, he tells non-Muslim something else.

Other critics have accused Ramadan's thinking of merely repackaging the philosophy and the teachings of the Egyptian organisation Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, as mentioned in the second chapter, many of them are suspicious of Tariq Ramadan because of his origins. In truth, Ramadan has blood relations with the Egyptian founder of Muslim Brotherhood organisation, Hssan Al-banna. Also, his mother, Wafa Al-banna, was the eldest daughter of Hassan Al-banna, while his father, Said Ramadan, was a senior member in the organisation of Muslim Brotherhood, and that is why he had been exiled by the president Gamal Abdul Nasser from Egypt to Switzerland. Moreover, his brother, Imam Hani Ramadan, who is also a scholar, is described as "a radical bogeyman à la bin Laden or Khomeini (Kamrava, 2006). All this makes his critics always relate his thoughts to the teachings of Muslim Brotherhood.

Being a Western scholar who grew up in a Western secular society, Tariq Ramadan was familiar with the ideas of modernity. As mentioned earlier in the second chapter, Ramadan is considered by many as a good example of a person who has a mixture of two important identities – a Western Swiss and an Arab Muslim. He represents the meeting of traditional Islam with Western modernity. For this reason, the scholar tries to adopt the aspects and the norms of Western modernity. For the sake of this orientation, Ramadan's theology has received a great number of criticisms. As a matter of fact, he was criticized by many Arab and Muslim scholars such as Taha Jaber Al-Alwani and Ahmad Ar-Rawi, for destroying the legitimacy of the Islamic Sharia and trying to create "needless religious sedition" (Al-Alwani, 2005).

No one can deny the fact that Tariq Ramadan's theology has gained much attention during the last two decades. It has been clear from the discussions in the main chapters that Ramadan's rhetoric reveals a balanced model of thinking that aims at building a bridge between Islamic civilisation and Western civilisation. So, the message of his writings or his lectures revolves mainly around two major themes, namely renewing and reforming Islam; and the place of Islam and Muslims in Western societies. What makes Tariq Ramadan's theology more attractive is that the scholar never seems to preach of heaven and hell, death and doom, or tell youths that their ways are wrong, but rather he adopts soft and persuasive rhetoric that aims at creating an atmosphere of co-existence and tolerance. For this reason,

Ramadan suggests a reform that involves a holistic redesigning of methodological approaches to the interpretation of the Islamic jurisdictions and ethics in all aspects of life. The following statement by Mehran Kamrava (2006) summarizes Ramadan's purpose and goals:

*His primary goal has been to present Muslims with a set of analytical and reasoning tools, which he claims are inherent in their religious values and traditions, in order to deal successfully with the challenges of modernity, whether they find themselves in Muslim-majority societies or Europe. This line of reasoning is informed both implicitly and explicitly by the assumption that there is no inherent clash between the values of Islam and those that underlie Western civilization. The discrepancies and differences that historically have emerged between the two are due to their interpretations rather than their innate dispositions.(P.65)*

Therefore, according to Ramadan, using the reasoning tools to interpret the sacred texts might free Muslims both from the interpretations of established edicts and from cultural norms. In addition, these tools enable the believer to practice her or his faith through her or his own interpretation and introspection. However, this does not mean that the worshiper should create his own version of Islamic principles and teachings, but rather she or he is free to read and interpret the sacred texts (Quran and the Sunna) in the light of the context they live in.

The second promising element of Ramadan's approach is his rhetoric attempt at combining the principles of Islam and modernity. He claims that he aims to remain faithful to the principles of Islam and Islamic teachings, on the basis of scriptural sources, while taking into consideration the evolution of historical and geographical contexts. He tends to be against the literalists who only rely on quoting verses of the Quran or quoting Prophet's statements without taking into account the contexts. On the contrary, according to Ramadan, "reformists must take the time to put things in perspective, to contextualize, and to suggest new understandings."

In his book *"What I Believe,"* Tariq Ramadan tries to explain what he calls his reformist approach regarding the issue of reinterpretation of the scriptural sources. He says that when he wants to tackle an Islamic issue, he follows three different steps. In the first step, he quotes the sources which can be verses from the Quran or Prophetic traditions (Ahadith), and he looks at the literal meaning of those quotations. In the second step, he explains the different readings that are offered by other Muslim scholars. In the third step, Ramadan examines the various possible interpretations, and then he suggests an understanding that takes into consideration the context in which Muslims live. To make his approach clear to the readers, Tariq Ramadan gives an example of a controversial issue, namely the issue of striking one's wife. So, he admits that there are indeed texts in the scriptural sources that encourage husbands to beat their wives. To deal with this issue, Ramadan says that he has to quote these texts because the majority of Muslims and Muslim scholars read and quote them. Then, he presents the various interpretations of both literalists and reformists. He discovers that the literalists, who merely rely on quoting verses, justify striking women in the name of the Quran. The reformists, meanwhile, read the verse in light of the global message of Islam "and contextualise the verse and Prophetic traditions as well as taking their chronology into

account” (Ramadan, 2010). After analyzing those interpretations and considering the footsteps of the Prophet, who never beat a woman, Tariq Ramadan concludes that this act is domestic violence and contradicts the teachings of Islam, and therefore such abuse must be condemned.

Another favourable aspect of Ramadan’s approach is his insistence on taking a middle path to provide a more global understanding of harmonious Islam. Indeed, his speeches and lectures which always call for co-existence and tolerance are increasingly making Tariq Ramadan’s approach a magnet of attention. Growing up in the middle of a foreign modern culture and having an Islamic background make the scholar adapt balanced views. On one hand, he tries to show to the western society that Islam is a religion of peace, and it is mercy to the worlds (*rahmatan lil-’alamin*), and therefore he is trying to interpret the Islamic teachings in the light of our modern time to fit the context of the west. On the other hand, the scholar believes that to avoid a clash of cultures and civilizations, Muslims should not focus on the traditions that they had brought with them from their home country. Yet, they have to adapt to the social environment they live in, taking into account the cultural reality of the west. So, according to Ramadan, Muslims have no choice but position themselves in the middle of a very different society and get along with the principles of that society. In This context, Nor Faridah Mat Nong (2015) says that:

*“social impact Ramadan feels as a citizen of European minority in various forms of hardship, opens and develops his thoughts to be critical in raising the issues of Muslim communities in Europe in addition to changing the mindset of Muslims to be much more practical and sure to live life as a European Muslim. (P.37)*

Therefore, Tariq Ramadan, try to emphasize the fact that if Muslims did not adapt to the new social Western environment, they would face difficulties and challenges, especially in terms of integration. In other words, if Muslims want their Islamic identity to be preserved in a Western social environment; they need to make some changes and adjustments.

What makes Tariq Ramadan’s approach appear slightly different is that the scholar is a staunch supporter of the concepts “reform” and “renewal.” According to Ramadan, these two concepts are the key elements of rereading and understanding the sacred texts in light of various contexts. As has been discussed in chapter five, the scholar believes that the religion of Islam needs “renewal” and “reform” from time to time to cope with the different changes that occur in Muslim communities. He based his idea on the prophetic statement (hadith) which states that “*God will send this [Muslim] community, every hundred years, someone/some people who will renew (yujaddidu) its religion.*” According to the scholar, this Prophetic statement embodies an open call for Muslims, especially thinkers and scholars, to “regenerate” or “renew” the religion of Islam in order to meet the challenges of modernity. However, this doesn’t mean that they should change the scriptural sources (the Quaran and the Sunnah), principles and fundamentals of Islam, but they just need to rethink about the way the religion is understood, implemented and lived in different times or places. On the matter, Ramadan (2009), says the following,

*“this is precisely the point: scriptural sources (the Quran and the Sunnah) remain the primary references and the fundamental of faith and practice are left as they are, but our reading and our understanding of the texts will be renewed’ by the contributions of those scholars and thinkers who will point to new perspectives by reviving timeless faith in our hearts while stimulating our minds so as to enable us to face the challenges of our respective times.”(P. 12,13)*

In order to give his approach more credibility, the scholar argues that his reinterpretation is “anchored in the Islamic tradition and amplified from within it: in this sense it is both deeply classical and radically new” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 3). So, Tariq Ramadan wants to show - to those who accuse him of destroying the legitimacy of the Islamic Sharia and trying to create “needless religious sedition”- that he extracts his tools of reinterpretation from traditional Islamic *usul al-fiqh*. Therefore, he does not bring something new or create a new methodology, but he roots his tools within traditional Islam. Moreover, the scholar seems to choose the tools that are strongly connected with context and human reasoning such as *ijtihad*, *maṣlaḥa*, and *fatwa*. These tools “provide a way of making a connection between universal principles and social realities that change with the passage of time and cultures” (Ramadan, 2003, p. 37).

On the other hand, Tariq Ramadan vehemently criticizes the concept of “taqlid” which means the blind imitation of one’s legal predecessors. He argues that Muslims should not blindly follow the established legal edicts dictated by religious scholars, but they have to renew their reading and understanding of the scriptural sources in the light of their modern time. In this context, the scholar Ramadan says:

*[T]he awakening of Islamic thought necessarily involves reconciliation with its spiritual dimension on the one hand, and on the other, renewed commitment and rational and critical reading (ijtihād) of the scriptural sources in the fields of law and jurisprudence (fiqh)... [T]he luminous heart of Islam is indeed spiritual quest and initiation, and its universal dimension necessarily involves a continued process of reading and rereading, of faithful and innovative interpretation, leading to the formulation of adapted legal rulings (fatâwâ). (P.65)*

Therefore, Tariq Ramadan urges Muslims, especially Western Muslims, to use *ijtihad* as a primary tool of reinterpretation of Islamic sources so as to be able to contextualize Islamic jurisdiction. Elaborating, the scholar argues that sometimes the textual sources are unclear about certain matters, and sometimes they are silent. For this reason *ijtihad* “has been used to justify all kinds of new judgements” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 43). So, to face the challenges of modernity, Muslims has to analyze the sacred text in the light of circumstances and eras.

In addition to *ijtihad*, Tariq Ramadan proposes another practical tool of reinterpretation, which is named *maslaḥa*. According to the scholar this concept gives Muslims and Muslim scholars room “to use their own analysis and personal reasoning in order to formulate a legal decision in the light of the historical and geographical context” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 40). As its name implies, the notion of *maslaḥa* “means to seek something beneficial

[manfaa] or avoid something harmful [*madarra*].” According to the scholar, this tool enables Muslims to interpret the legal sources in light of a modern, Western context, especially where no text exists in the Quran or the Sunna to deal with some temporary issues. Therefore, using this tool of reinterpretations might allow the interpreter to find solutions to matters occurring as a result of a modern context. Since this concept is based on reason and rationality, it seems entirely consistent with Ramadan’s theory of reinterpretation. In fact, Ramadan argues that the notion of *maslaha* which he believes is deeply rooted in Islam “seek [s] for the good (*maslaha*) of man, in this life and the next, is the very essence of Islamic commandments and prohibitions” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 42).

Tariq Ramadan also suggests the use of *fatwa* as an essential tool of interpretation. He argues that when a text from the Quran or the Sunna is absent or open to various interpretations, “mufti must give a specific response in the light of both the objectives of the Sharia and the situation of the questioner” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 49). According to the scholar, the *fatwa* is very important in the life of Muslims, as it gives answers to many arising questions among Muslim community, and it also helps them to be able to deal with different current matters. For this reason, Tariq Ramadan believes that a *fatwa* should be as a part of the Islamic sources, “and the specific contextual situation in which it was revealed needs to be taken into consideration. Accordingly, muftīs and mujtahids must do their uttermost to reach good *fatwās* based on the context in which the question was put forward.” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 49)

By choosing the reasoning tools of reinterpretation mentioned above, Tariq Ramadan tries to provide a source of contextualization in the reinterpretation of Islamic jurisdiction. Although these tools are inherent in religious values and traditions, they might help Muslims find answers to various contemporary issues and deal successfully with the challenges of modernity. As a matter of fact, Ramadan claims that the lack of contextual flexibility in the definition of Muslim identity is due to the limited scope of the traditional scholars who give much attention to the literal meaning of the sacred text and neglect the social context. According to him, Muslim scholars, “*ulama*”, are unable or unwilling to provide contemporary relevance to Muslim identity. “It is Muslim thinking that is stalled these days: the tools are available, and the work to be done is the double task of reading the sources and interpreting the world” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 37). In *Radical Reform – Islamic Ethics and Liberation* 42 (2009). In this context, the scholar also says:

*Many reformists... believe that the fields of creed and religious observance are distinct from those of social affairs: in the former the prescriptions of the Qur’an and hadith are immutable; in the latter, they should work in tandem with human rationality.... [T]he results of reform in the past century have been unsatisfactory. By its nature, work that is oriented exclusively toward the texts struggles to keep pace with emerging situations. Our scholars lack the necessary deep understanding of the complex issues of the modern world.... Though they speak about economy, natural and social science, they have in fact little to offer in any of these fields. When they pronounce on current matters their rulings often contradict one another, and we are unable to decide which of them is best qualified.*

For this reason, Tariq Ramadan frequently criticizes the mentality of some scholars who fail to connect the universal message of Islam with social reality. This kind of opinion is perhaps what gives Tariq Ramadan his international appeal, and makes many followers academics, and thinkers care about his intriguing theology. This is simply because the scholar stresses the importance of looking at the scriptural sources in context, as opposed to a literalist interpretation which never takes into consideration the facets of our ever-changing society.

In addition to his proposition for the use of reasoning tools of reinterpretation mentioned above, Tariq Ramadan introduces the idea of context as an important revelatory source. In fact, Ramadan considers the idea of context, which he terms “Universe”, as a second revelation, and he adopts it as an essential element of his methodology of reinterpretation. In this context, he states: “Awareness that the Universe is in fact a Revelation that must be respected, read, understood, and protected should reform our minds and our attitudes” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 234). According to the scholar, since modern society has changed considerably, it would be impossible to read or interpret the sacred texts without taking into account the changes occurred in that given social context. He argues that the concept of context is changeable and heterogeneous, that is to say, each context differs in different times and places. Therefore, if Muslim scholars want to reinterpret the legal sources, they should take into account the context. He argues that “our relationship to the texts and to the Universe must be revisited: we are faced with two Revelations that need to be read and understood in parallel” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 315).

Another aspect of Tariq Ramadan’s theology that should be highlighted in this research paper is his attempt to adopt holistic approaches to the interpretation of the Islamic jurisdiction and ethics in all aspects of life. It seems that Ramadan tries to discuss so many different issues through his writings, lectures and debates. For example, he deals with a reform of Islamic education, Islamic ethics and medical science, spirituality and emotions, social commitment and political participation, Women’s rights, the cultural alternative, economic resistance, interreligious dialogue, ecology and economy, and so on and so forth. To justify this choice, the scholar claims that he aims at offering solutions to the problems facing Muslims today, and giving answers to the various questions raised Muslims, particularly Western Muslims. Therefore, his objective is “to enable European (and Western) Muslims to respond to the issues and challenges of their presence in secularized societies where religious reference plays a secondary role in public life” (Ramadan, 2009, p.2)

One of the most controversial issues that Tariq Ramadan has discussed in his theology is the issue of medicine and ethics. He chooses this social domain because it has to do with various disputed matters such as abortion, organ donations, the use of perception, cosmetic surgery, transexuality, euthanasia, and so on. These kinds of issues reflect the intersection between traditional values of Muslim identity and the values of the modernity embedded in the Western socio-political context. For this reason, Tariq Ramadan argues that it is important, today, to discuss these matters with Muslims in order to understand the various Islamic attitudes towards these issues. He also advocates the initiatives taken by some Muslim scholars in the sphere of medicine and ethics, and he considers that contemporary Islamic thought on medical ethics is an example of a successful fusion of modern sciences with traditional Islam. Here, the scholar refers to the first “International Conference on Islamic

Medicine” held in Kuwait, in 1981. According to Ramadan, that conference was successful and fruitful because it gave birth to an important issued document by Muslim physicians and fuqaha which is called “the Code of Islamic Medical Ethics”. He claims that this document is the “initial reference to the Creator [which] places the document within the Islamic Universe of reference” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 162).

While discussing some of these issues mentioned above, Tariq Ramadan tends to be more moderate. For example, although he goes back to the early views within Islamic jurisdiction concerning the issues of contraception and abortion, the scholar seems to develop his viewpoint in accordance with the values of modernity embedded in the Western socio-political context. He admits that some salafi scholars “continue to oppose all contraceptive methods except in case of extreme necessity” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 168). Still, there are some other Muslim scholars who “left room for a less rigid attitude about this issue” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 168). As far as the issue of abortion is concerned, the scholar claims that, according to the principles Islamic jurisdiction, abortion is illegal in that “abortion amounts to disposing of a human being’s life and is therefore forbidden unless the mother’s life is at risk” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 171). Although Ramadan admits that “abortion is a very serious matter and its excessive use is very real today, especially when abortion is considered as merely another method of contraception” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 172), he argues that it is the physicians who have to decide on this matter “through their expertise, [they] say how and at what point, (...) objectives and ethics could be lost, betrayed, or transgressed on” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 173).

Another essential point that should also be highlighted in Tariq Ramadan’s theology is his belief that Muslims should adapt to modernity’s value of critical reasoning and rational arguments in their educational systems. He argues that science has been neglected in the Muslim world, and that Muslims fail to establish a sustainable relationship between Islamic principles and human sciences. More than that, Tariq Ramadan claims that Islam has suffered from a lack of interaction with sciences since the Renaissance because, according to the scholar, the Muslim scholars “ulama” thought they had to choose between the norms of religion and hard science, and thus chose religion (Ramadan, 2004). Therefore, Muslims, today, are unable to know how to connect the norms of Islam with the modern experimental or human sciences. To deal with this problem, Ramadan suggests that Muslims should adopt the positives of scientific reason. He believes that the values of Islam would frame the Western scientific thought because “religion’s ethical teachings give science a dignified finality without perverting its implementation or impeding its advances” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 56).

Therefore, the aim of Tariq Ramadan is to connect experimental and human sciences to Islamic ethics and personal intellect because he does not see Western sciences as a threat to Islam or something harmful to Muslims, but rather he believes that all sciences are Islamic by nature. For this reason, he proposes that faith should be brought into the field of science and Islamic ethics: “it is the union of controlled scientific method and applied ethics that makes people faithful to the source at the heart of the various fields of knowledge” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 60). The result is that Muslims would feel comfortable with all experimental and human sciences, and this will help them to rethink their outdated and rigid views about so many different issues.



Ramadan also vehemently criticises the educational systems in Muslim majority countries. He claims that these educational systems are in crisis, and therefore need an urgent reform. He argues that “any opening or democratization project is bound to fail if populations are kept illiterate or functionally illiterate, or if their education is based on the lack of critical thinking, on reinforcing social divides” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 278). So, in his discourse, it seems that Tariq Ramadan always stresses the importance of education, human reasoning and critical thinking because he believes that these elements are the only weapons to revolt against some outdated thoughts that hinders development. In this context, the scholar also stresses the importance of the education of women, and he says, “one knows that women’s education more than anything else plays a regulating role in the management of families, family planning, social development, and the evolution of mind-sets in general” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 230). More than that, Tariq Ramadan argues that the Islamic educational systems should include modern, Western principles and values so as to bring the Muslim identity into accordance with the ideals of “personal development, welfare, developing critical thinking, creativity, solidarity, and the knowledge and respect of others” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 279).

Concerning the situation of Muslim children in the West, Tariq Ramadan suggests an educational system that takes into account the principles of Islam. He calls for a system of Islamic education that combines the teaching of Islamic principles and the scientific method and reason of Western modernity. However, the scholar seems to be optimistic about the Western public school system which adopts an approach that “teaches children to express themselves, give their opinions, and articulate their doubts and hopes” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 19) This of course, according to the scholar, would serve up an education that encourages human reason and intellect. Since modernity is based on subjective reason, it would be very important for Muslim kids to be equipped with this kind of education so as to be able to participate in modern societies.

## **Conclusion**

Although Tariq Ramadan has been described as a “global phenomenon” and as the most quoted widely circulated writer in Europe, he has received a lot of criticism. First of all, Tariq Ramadan is always criticized for his lack of Islamic scholarship. As mentioned earlier in the second chapter, Tariq Ramadan has no formal degrees or Islamic schooling theology. In spite of his moving to Cairo, Egypt, in order to undertake one-on-one intensive training in classic Islamic scholarship from Al-Azhar University, Ramadan is not qualified to be a mufti, imam, or any type of Islamic religious leader. In fact, to be a Muslim scholar “alim”, one needs to be fluent in Arabic language, and he/she should have knowledge of the texts of the Quran and the Sunna. Besides, the scholar should have knowledge of the different Islamic sciences, namely Islamic jurisprudence (*‘ilm al-fiqh*), the study of the authenticity of Prophetic traditions or hadith (*‘ilm al-ḥadīth*), interpretation of the Qur'an (*‘ilm al-tafsīr*, and so on and so forth. Tariq Ramadan masters none of these Islamic sciences. So, in his discourse, Tariq Ramadan tends to only discuss the philosophy of Islam and how Islam should be practiced by Muslims. He thinks that Islam is a religion revealed by God and it is a way why life; therefore, there is no need “for studies and diplomas, for masters and guides.”

Another concern that can be flagged up is the scholar’s concepts of “reform” and “renewal” which remain a matter of much debate in many Islamic societies. Indeed, a great number of Muslim scholars “ulama”, intellectuals and even ordinary Muslims oppose the use

of the term “reform”. Simply, they believe that reforming Islam automatically means changing the religion of Islam.

The significance of this research paper can be presented in three points. First, this study responds to the fact that there is a lack of academic research on the theology of Tariq Ramadan that engages more critically with his theories, thoughts, and propositions rather than his person and his original background. Second, this research paper will benefit not only researchers and academics interested in the study of Islam and Muslims but also the general readers, whether Muslims or non-Muslims, who are curious to know about the current progress in the theological reform of Islam. Third, since the Moroccan state has recently engaged in religious reform intending to modernise religious discourse, it is vital today to have academic research on the topic to keep up with this reform and to make valuable suggestions on the subject.

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