



## Who is the Real Tariq Ramadan?

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### INTRODUCTION

Anyone following the debate about Islam in Europe over the last decade has undoubtedly heard of Tariq Ramadan. They have also surely heard the question: 'who is the real Tariq Ramadan?' His detractors have described him as 'a wolf in sheep's clothing.' Those who see promise in the project he has undertaken have called him a Muslim Martin Luther. Popular accounts, portray him as either the head of a fifth column intent on transforming Europe into Eurabia, or someone whose effort to establish an authentically European Islam offers the promise of heading off impending cultural strife. In these respects he has become a symbol for people's hopes and fears. He is a bogeyman for those who see Europe's Muslims as a threat to the continent's enlightenment and Christian heritage. To others he is a symbol of hope; a hope that Muslims can one day

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fully assume their rightful place in European cultural and civic life without watering down their faith. So the question remains: who is Tariq Ramadan? The purpose of what follows will be to explore the thought of Tariq Ramadan, his status as a symbol of both European Islam and Muslims, and how what he represents may fit within a liberal political order. The exploration of political liberalism aligns closely to the conception of political philosopher John Rawls, along with an interpretation of Rawls offered by Andrew F. March as applied to Ramadan and his project.

### IDEAS OF TARIQ RAMADAN

Tariq Ramadan was born and educated in Geneva, Switzerland. His father, Said Ramadan, had immigrated there and opened the Islamic Center in 1961.<sup>1</sup> Tariq received his master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Geneva where he specialized in both continental European philosophy and Islam.<sup>2</sup> In 1992 he moved to Lyon, France where he quickly became an influential figure amongst Muslim activists.<sup>3</sup> From Lyon he moved to Leicester, England in 1996.<sup>4</sup> This simple chronology sounds somewhat unremarkable, and maybe Tariq Ramadan would be so, if it weren't for his lineage. To some, Tariq Ramadan poses a threat, not so much due to anything he has said or

done, but rather because of his pedigree. He is the grandson of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>5</sup> His father, Said, was also a formidable figure in the world of twentieth century political Islam. Ramadan's brother, Hani, is a well-known contemporary fundamentalist. These connections have cast a shadow over the image of a refined, yet pious, European Muslim that Tariq Ramadan has sought to project.

Yet his biography can only tell us so much. More importantly, we must ask: what does Tariq Ramadan stand for? What does Tariq Ramadan the thinker propose? What are his goals? How does he want us to perceive him? The answer seems to be that Ramadan is pursuing a rather simple yet undoubtedly challenging mission. He is laying the framework for an authentically European and Muslim identity. In his own words:

The aim is to protect the Muslim identity and religious practice, to recognize the western constitutional structure, to become involved as a citizen at the social level, and to live with true loyalty to the country to which one belongs.<sup>6</sup>

This vision brings with it a host of questions. What would a European or Western Islam look like? How will this Islam be created? What demands can citizenship in a liberal society reasonably place on faith groups?

To begin with, we must take a look at the religious worldview of Tariq Ramadan. First and foremost, Ramadan claims to employ a 'classical methodology' in terms of religious interpretation. For many conservative Muslims, this is the root of his appeal, an appeal of which Ramadan is acutely aware. His 'classical methodology' rests upon a rigorous engagement with the traditional sources: the Qur'an, the Sunna, and the methods of the traditional *ulama*.<sup>7</sup> Yet this methodology also exists within a modern interpretation of Islam. In Ramadan's 2004 book, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, he identifies six major tendencies in modern Islamic thought. Included amongst these is a tendency he labels *salafi* reformist, his religious and intellectual home.<sup>8</sup> According to Ramadan *salafi* reformism is an approach to Islam that seeks to bypass the

traditional schools of Islamic jurisprudence<sup>9</sup> while staying true to the "purpose and intentions of the law (*shari'a*)."<sup>10</sup>

Ramadan's approach to the *shari'a* is relatively flexible. This flexibility is derived from the fact that, "the *shari'a* teaches us to integrate everything that is not against an established principle and to consider it as our own."<sup>11</sup> It is with this fundamental adaptability in mind that Ramadan uses the legal concepts of *maslaha*, *ijtihad*, and *fatwa*. Taken in combination, they serve as tools used to understand the traditional sources of the Qu'ran and the Sunna.<sup>12</sup> He uses these traditional tools in service of harmonizing Islamic norms with modern Western life. These tools are meant to help Muslims determine what is within the public good (*maslaha*) and where appropriate adjustment is needed by using independent reasoning, *ijtihad*, and legal opinion, *fatwa*. It is Ramadan's hope that these traditional tools can help carve out an integrated and genuinely Islamic future for Muslims in the West.<sup>13</sup>

While Ramadan seeks to use traditional legal tools, principles, methodologies and sources, he does not necessarily align closely to traditional Islamic modes of thinking about the world. This is most notable in what Andrew March has dubbed Ramadan's "political geography of Islam."<sup>14</sup> It is here that Ramadan throws out some traditional Islamic concepts he believes are no longer applicable. These concepts are the standard binary division of the world into *dar al-harb* (the abode of war) and *dar al-Islam* (the abode of Islam). Ramadan claims he can do so because these ideas are human, they were erected contextually, and the rights-based experience of Muslims in the modern West does not fit into either of these categories. Ramadan is essentially

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making a claim that—because Muslims in the West are afforded the rights granted to their fellow residents and citizens—there is a need for a new conception of this type of religio-political domain. It ought to be distinct from the classical, and to many modern observers antagonistic, binary division. Ramadan believes that the foundation of this commitment lies in the contractual nature of the relationship between Muslims and their adopted societies. Since Muslim immigrant communities are given relatively secure lives in the West, they are obliged to abide by the laws that these societies set forth. Because of this Ramadan proposes a new abode, the *dar al-shahada*, or the “abode of witness.”<sup>15</sup>

So to what are modern Western Muslims to bear witness? In one sense they are to witness the fundamental tenets of their faith, the belief that ‘there is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger.’ This concept allows for the affirmation of Muslim identity within the West and, according to thinkers like Olivier Roy, amounts to “a theory of the legitimacy and practice of minority Islam.”<sup>16</sup> In a broader sense the purpose of bearing witness is not affirmation of a sectarian identity, but to offer testimony to the universal Islamic values of justice and equality.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, Ramadan has offered an understanding of Muslim minority status that affirms the value of traditional faith while affirming the duty of the Muslim community towards their fellow citizens.

Aside from simple affirmation of Muslim identity, it is important that we look at how Ramadan conceives Muslim identity in the West. For Ramadan the most important aspect of this identity is faith. This is a faith characterized by knowledge and understanding of the traditional sources. But it is also contingent on “a choice based on freedom”<sup>18</sup> and, as such, appears somewhat Lockean. According to Ramadan this faith will manifest itself not simply in the heart of

the believer but in his or her deeds as well. This manifestation is a concern for justice that does not shield the Muslim community from criticism. Ramadan seems to imply that Muslims who forgo their ethical obligations towards non-Muslims are deserving of censure. For Ramadan, it is important that Muslims seeking an Islamic identity keep in mind that their principal allegiance is not towards the *umma* but towards justice. This means that fellow Muslims in the West, and elsewhere, cannot be immune from criticism by their co-religionists because of a sense of sectarian loyalty. Part and parcel of this is the idea that Muslims living in the West owe civic allegiance to their states of residence and to their fellow citizens.<sup>19</sup> Again, this is based on a traditional religio-legal injunction to obey all

contractual obligations. It is also based on the demand that Muslims seek to abide by the universal commitment to justice demanded by their faith.

Moving beyond issues of identity, Ramadan is most interested in establishing an ethic of citizenship for Western Muslims. In his words, the call to civic activism is not based on a desire to advance the narrow interests of particular Muslim communities, but is based on “the universal message of Islam that should move Muslims’ civic conscience to promote justice, right, and goodness everywhere.”<sup>20</sup> Ramadan demonstrates concern about a strictly communitarian approach

to civic engagement, rejecting calls for a ‘Muslim-interest-based’ approach. Instead, he insists that it is the duty of Muslims to pursue principle rather than interest. Furthermore, he portrays an interest-based approach to civic engagement as responsible for the ghettoization of Muslim communities in the West.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, Ramadan’s call for active citizenship envisions that Muslim communities will represent the conscience of the ‘global south’ in their civic endeavors. In this respect, Ramadan

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offers a fairly conventional, though Islamically-flavored, Third Worldism replete with attacks on globalization, neo-liberalism, and an international economic system he believes is an assault on the world's poor. He goes so far as to characterize the prevailing economic order as a *dar al-harb* (abode of war), though he offers only a skeletal notion of how to address the system's inequities. For Muslims, escaping the system is impossible, but fundamental obligations to pay *zakat* and to avoid *riba* (variously defined as usury or interest) are of utmost importance.<sup>22</sup> Surprisingly, in *Western Muslims*, he offers no commentary on the increasingly complex, popular, and lucrative field of Islamic finance. One would expect at least a cursory discussion of these developments as they are increasingly important, accessible globally, and much of the current innovation is centered in Western financial capitals.

#### TARIQ RAMADAN AS INTERLOCUTOR BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND THE WEST?

What is clear is that despite conservative views on social issues and left-wing views on international and economic issues, Ramadan has sought to present himself as an appropriate interlocutor between Muslims and the Western state and society. He is a supporter of inter-religious dialogue<sup>23</sup>, as demonstrated by his participation in the first ever Muslim Catholic dialogue at the Vatican in November 2008<sup>24</sup>, and he does his best to come across as an acceptable moderate. Yet he has managed to arouse extreme hostility amongst his critics, along with suspicion and fear on the part of several Western nations. An example of this governmental hostility occurred in 2004 when the Department of Homeland Security barred Ramadan from entry into the United States. Initially the US government claimed that Ramadan was connected to terrorism, only to drop the charge while maintaining that he was a threat to national security. The result of this incident was that he was forced to cede a position that had been offered to him by the University of Notre Dame.<sup>25</sup> Yet, he has not always provoked such anxieties. Following the publication of his first book, *To Be a European Muslim*, he was something of a poster-child for Muslim integration. The book was even

praised by Daniel Pipes, a controversial American author and political commentator.<sup>26</sup> So what is the current controversy about?

As mentioned above, this is to some extent reflective of unease about Ramadan's biography in a world intensely focused on the threat of Islamic radicalism. This anxiety has been exacerbated by the rapid growth of Europe's Muslim population. For some this is about what they see as an approach to Muslim life in the West that is incompatible with the prevailing value system. This is particularly true in regard to women's issues such as the *hijab* and certain elements of *shari'a* sanctioned punishment. Others see duplicity in his public persona and lurking danger in a religious and intellectual worldview they believe helps justify radicalism.<sup>27</sup> He is often accused of double speak, of hiding his true views when it serves his attempt to appear moderate. He has also been accused of anti-Semitism and of justifying the most regressive aspects of *shari'a*-based punishment. In order to discern Ramadan's views from the hysteria surrounding him, let us examine some of the incidents that have raised the greatest outcry.

One of these incidents arose in 2003 when Ramadan publicly criticized a group of Jewish-French intellectuals for supporting the Iraq war. He went on to state that they had failed to support universal values instead of instinctually siding with Israel's interests. Ramadan also claimed that worries, expressed by some of the group, about anti-Semitism in France were overblown.<sup>28</sup> These assertions led to counter-charges from several of the accused that Ramadan was himself an anti-Semite. While Ramadan may have been unfair in attributing ethnic or religious motives to the men that he accused (in fact, one was not even Jewish), the labeling of Ramadan as an anti-Semite is inconsistent with numerous public statements and positions. Ramadan has posted prominently on his website several letters that he has signed encouraging improved dialogue between Jews and Muslims.<sup>29</sup>

Related to this accusation of anti-Semitism is concern that Ramadan has failed to condemn violence employed by Palestinians in their struggle with Israel. Again, this charge is in part based on Ramadan's familial history and his

relationships. People often refer to Hassan al-Banna's support of revolutionary violence in Palestine, and Ramadan's praise of al-Banna. Similarly, guilt is cast upon Ramadan because of the relationship he has maintained with Yusef Qaradawi. Qaradawi is an influential cleric associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, who has justified the use of violence in the context of Palestinian resistance. Again, charges against Ramadan in this regard are based on association. His more honest critics, Paul Berman among them, acknowledge the role his social network plays in their skepticism. Writing in *The New Republic*, Berman asserts that "the problem lies in the terrible fact that Ramadan's personal milieu... [is] the milieu that bears the principal responsibility for generating the modern theoretical justification for religious suicide-terrorism."<sup>30</sup> As usual, the charge is that Ramadan has displayed a Janus-faced duplicity: "The first message condemns terrorism. The second message lavishes praise on the theoreticians of terrorism."<sup>31</sup>

Ramadan's statements have drawn similar charges in the realm of women's issues. The best-known example of what has been deemed double talk on this issue occurred during a debate with then French Interior Minister Nicholas Sarkozy. During the debate, Sarkozy confronted Ramadan with his brother's support for the punishment of death by stoning for women who have committed adultery. Sarkozy asked him if he agreed with his brother, to which Ramadan replied that he believed there should be a moratorium placed on the practice so that a consensus could be reached amongst Muslims.<sup>32</sup> There are numerous conflicting interpretations of the significance of this exchange. For thinkers like Berman this is proof of Ramadan's dissembling. It was a "Qutbian moment"<sup>33</sup> where either political concern trumped morality or, more ominously, he revealed himself as a radical. Others have interpreted it very differently. In Olivier Roy's mind, what is happening here is actually indicative of the process of secularization occurring within European Islam. According to Roy, Ramadan is establishing a situation in which "the norm (stoning) is not abolished, but it is not practiced...the moratorium affects the public

space without touching dogma."<sup>34</sup> For Roy, this is the essence of secularization.

The irony in this situation was that—by demanding Ramadan personally renounce an element of religious dogma—the official representative of the supposedly secular French state, Sarkozy, eagerly stepped into the very territory that a strict separation of church and state is supposed to cordon off: the domain of personal and communal religious beliefs. During this exchange, Ramadan, the religious conservative, seemingly acted in a more secular fashion than his secular antagonist. Perhaps Ramadan did so in an attempt to straddle the fence, to preserve his status as an interlocutor with secular society while simultaneously preserving his authenticity with religious conservatives. To the degree that this is true, it would be accurate to describe Ramadan as immensely self-serving. However, the fact remains that Ramadan's formulation does its best to maintain the secular status quo. He effectively pledges to respect the domains of secular French law—no women will be stoned for adultery—while leaving the religious validity of this injunction in the hands of religious thinkers and leaders. The answer Ramadan offered may be unsatisfying but he certainly does not make the claim that an understanding of religious law can trump civil law.

## TARIQ RAMADAN AND POLITICAL LIBERALISM

What is the answer then? Do these exchanges reveal something about the core of Tariq Ramadan? Or is the real question about 'what is the place of (possibly illiberal) religion in a liberal society?' In the case of Tariq Ramadan, the question can be put thusly: "(w)hat constitutes a loyal affirmation of citizenship, and what positions cross boundaries of reasonableness?"<sup>35</sup> In relating these questions to the thought of Tariq Ramadan, it is important that we consider what constitutes a liberal society and the place of religious communities within them.

In Europe, liberalism often amounts to more than strict political liberalism. What is expected of people is that they will also subscribe to what political philosophers call "comprehensive



liberalism.”<sup>36</sup> Andrew F. March describes this as a system that values rational autonomy, critical scrutiny of tradition, skepticism, and experimentation. Comprehensive liberals “make truth claims for these values and do not seek to disguise their incompatibility with ways of life based on...deference to established authority.”<sup>37</sup> Parallel to this is John Rawls’ much narrower concept of “political liberalism.” As an organizing principle, Rawlsian political liberalism seeks only to elucidate the means by which a reasonable public order can be established in a world of divergent conceptions regarding the ultimate nature of truth.<sup>38</sup> The principle goals of political

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liberalism lie in freedom from coercion in belief and equal access to the rights and benefits of citizenship in a liberal society. The modern western world, particularly Europe, includes both comprehensive and political

liberals. Part of the reason that there has been such a backlash against Tariq Ramadan is that he clearly is not what one would call a ‘comprehensive liberal.’ This does not mean that his project is incompatible with the broader agenda of political liberalism as it has manifested itself in the West.

What then can a political liberal demand of believers, and does Ramadan’s project meet these demands? For both Rawls and March, liberal societies can make fundamental demands about justice and citizenship.<sup>39</sup> The liberal notion of justice apportions rights equally amongst citizens, a fact that is an issue when these rights conflict with the religious worldviews of orthodox Muslims living within liberal societies.<sup>40</sup> Citizenship in turn requires that loyalty be to the state that one lives in, again an issue for some Muslims convinced of the importance of the

classical division of the world into *dar al-harb* and *dar al-Islam*. The question according to March, should be “is (Ramadan) endorsing the liberal terms of social cooperation on principled grounds or not?”<sup>41</sup> For critics, and Paul Berman would likely fall into this category, the concern seems to be that Ramadan’s endorsement of the civic compact for Muslims in the West is predicated on their community’s relatively small size.<sup>42</sup> The charge is that the commitment to the liberal order is, at best, ephemeral, and would fade if demographic ascendancy were to be gained.

Ultimately at issue here is the relative weakness of political liberalism in its ability to elicit a firm commitment to the prevailing liberal order. This is because political liberalism, in its attempt to ensure civic unity, is highly elastic.<sup>43</sup> This elasticity is an essential reason that political liberalism has proven adept at ensuring a reliable civil peace, but it can be stretched thin. Problems can occur when citizens’ “deepest beliefs do not provide them with a full justification for liberal institutions.”<sup>44</sup> For our purposes, we must ask if Tariq Ramadan is offering a full justification for liberal institutions. Of additional relevance is the question of whether he is offering an Islamically-convincing justification.

In light of these questions, it is important to look at Ramadan’s prescriptions in three areas: *shari’a*, the concept of *dar al-shahada*, and notions of contractual obligation. In regards to *shari’a*, Olivier Roy’s observation regarding Ramadan’s approach provides useful insight. While Ramadan is not willing to discard classical methodology, he does recognize the difference between religious and temporal authority and has shown that he is more than willing to submit to the latter. Building upon this *de facto* acknowledgment of the prevailing secular order, Ramadan’s redefinition of the political geography of Islam seems to make an argument for the acceptability of Muslim minority status in the West on principled religious grounds. Lastly, by invoking the demand that Muslims obey their contractual obligations, he is taking a stab at religiously legitimizing adherence to western social contracts. It is in this last attempt that Ramadan comes up short. Could basing solidarity with one’s fellow citizens on something as legalistic and dry as a contractual obligation,

even if it be religiously based, convince traditionally-minded Muslims that bonds of citizenship are more important than bonds of faith with Muslims elsewhere?<sup>45</sup> While Ramadan has connected notions of citizenship to those of justice, it is clear that the demands of justice know no boundaries.

For elements of Europe's Muslim minority, the circumstances of their lives in Europe, geopolitical conflict in the wider world, and a sense that the West in general has conspired to oppress Muslims, have all contributed to a sense of grievance and demands for justice that have at points spilled past the lines of acceptable activity. Some of these instances, like the murder of Theo Van Gogh by a disaffected Muslim youth on the streets of Amsterdam, amount to an indistinguishable combination of political and religious fanaticism with run-of-the-mill criminality. Other manifestations of grievance and the demand for justice take the form of organizations that explicitly reject the liberal political order, such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, which stake claims to substantial membership on European soil. While Ramadan may make an earnest attempt at imbuing the notion of a contractual obligation to the extant political order with religious significance, it amounts to fairly weak tea.

## CONCLUSION

It does seem that much of the criticism of Ramadan is based on a combination of 'guilt by association' and discomfort with his truly conservative understanding of Islam. It is true that Ramadan is a religious conservative and that his approach to Islam fails to affirm many of the values that some believe constitute the essence of the modern West. Whether these values are women's equality, gay rights, or scientific rationalism, the real issue is whether or not his principles contribute something valuable to the

cause of Muslim integration within western liberal democracies. What we need to ask is, 'can Tariq Ramadan convey a convincing argument to European Muslims that pushes them towards full civic engagement?' If he can, he must be able to do so in a fashion that leaves the core characteristics of a liberal European society intact. This will mean a respectful acknowledgment of the rights and preeminence of Europe's comprehensive liberals, while prodding the continent towards a more thorough and genuine acceptance of a liberal political order that remains neutral towards conceptions of the ultimate nature of the good. In so doing, Ramadan would help secure a better existence for his co-religionists in Europe while helping the people of Europe achieve a more perfect political and social order.

Though the debate is muddled, for many it has come down to the competing liberal values of religious liberty and absolute equality. These are not the terms on which a reliable social peace can be settled. We must be more pragmatic. As long as Ramadan does not seek to undermine absolute equality under the law, and can reliably convince conservative Muslims that there is a role for them as citizens in Europe, his contributions may prove invaluable. Nevertheless, it is important that leaders in the West not turn to Ramadan as the principle interlocutor with their respective Muslim communities. It is the liberal state's duty to stay neutral towards conceptions of the good. It should also stay neutral towards conceptions of religious authenticity.

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*The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.*

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- <sup>26</sup> Berman, 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Paul Berman takes particular issue with the idea of *salafi reformism*, seeing in this mode of modern Islamic thought the roots of al-Qaeda.
- <sup>28</sup> Berman, 17.
- <sup>29</sup> <http://www.tariqramadan.com/spip.php?article1369>.
- <sup>30</sup> Berman, 23.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 26. It would seem that in this instance Ramadan is indeed paying deference to classical methodology and the legal principle of *ijma*.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 27.
- <sup>34</sup> Roy, 44-45.
- <sup>35</sup> March, 400.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 402.



<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 401

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 403.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 404.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>45</sup> This being said, the same dilemma exists with literally minded members of any faith group in liberal democratic societies.