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Who is Tariq Ramadan?

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Abstract

Nobody can deny the fact that Tariq Ramadan's theology has gained much attention in the world. His thoughts have brought about much debate and academic discussion. In fact, he is a controversial thinker, admired by some for his defense of a reformed Islam, and criticized by others for being the acceptable and media-savvy spokesperson for radical Islam. Since academic research is primarily about objectivity and providing strong evidence for what one puts forward, it is important to frame this paper accordingly. Therefore, this paper neither praises the scholar nor undervalues his work, but rather it delves into the intricacies of his thinking and his propositions.

Keywords: Tariq Ramadan, European Islam, Scholar, Leader

Introduction

The name of Tariq Ramadan is increasingly referred to as one of the most influential voices of Europe, particularly amid increasing discussions concerning the place and spiritual life of Muslims in the West. He is not the only Muslim scholar with modern views on the subject of Islam in the west; nonetheless his theological ideas have gained a public attention all over the globe.

Among the reasons why I have chosen this scholar as a case study of this research paper is because Tariq Ramadan is a good example of a person who has a mixture of two important identities. In many ways, Ramadan embodies the meeting of traditional Islam with Western modernity. In fact, Ramadan has a unique background in the sense that he boasts of Arab descent and at the same time is also proud to be a European citizen. Both the identities integrated in him to form a new identity as a European Muslim. He has experienced the clash of two civilizations, the Western culture and the Eastern one, Islam and a secular society. Therefore, it would be valuable to shed light on Tariq Ramadan's ideas, thoughts and propositions to better understand the alleged "identity crisis" among "Western" Muslims, and the dilemma they face when it concerns the most controversial common issues such as sexuality, individual freedom, religious freedom, women's rights, Islamic inheritance system and equality debate, human sciences (such as organs donation, and cloning) and so on. They are struggling to adapt to a modern secular society without diluting their Muslim identity and the following statement, by Tariq Ramadan, illustrates the situation.

"I say for example when I am asked about my identity that I am a Swiss by Nationality, Muslim by religion, European by culture, Egyptian by memory or heritage, universalist by principle, and more than that, I am

also Moroccan by adoption. These are six aspects of my identity. It is really important to understand this because it helps a person to be part of a pluralistic society". (Tariq Ramadan, 2007)¹

Education and Experience

In his book «What I believe” which was published in 2009, Tariq Ramadan points out that the virtual encyclopedic entries are riddled with, biases, factual errors and wrong information about him. For that reason, Ramadan devotes a chapter, in this book, exclusively for recounting a brief story about his life. However, he started the story from the age of eighteen excluding the part of his life when he was a child; therefore, there is very little, if any, information about Tariq Ramadan’s early years growing up in Geneva. So, the chapter mentioned above, is considered the only reliable resource that one can depend on to discern the key factors and the main events in the scholar’s personal life background that have contributed to his intellectual development.

Tariq Said Ramadan is a Muslim theologian and contemporary scholar of Egyptian origin born in Geneva, Switzerland on 26th August 1962. He is a grandson of Hasan al-Banna the founder of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt. His father, Said Ramadan, ended up in exile in Switzerland and founded the Islamic Centre in Geneva. Tariq Ramadan grew up speaking both Arabic and French. His family gave great importance to humanitarian concerns, that’s why, in the early 80s, Tariq Ramadan travelled to many third-world countries in order to give assistance and also to raise global awareness of many endemic social issues such as: illiteracy, corruption, poverty and domestic violence.

The scholar received his early education in his hometown of Geneva. He was interested in philosophy and literature since childhood. Then, he undertook his tertiary education at the University of Geneva, where he completed his postgraduate studies in philosophy, French literature and social studies. He got his MA in philosophy and French literature, and later his PhD in Arabic and Islamic studies. After his graduation, he worked as a teacher at a high school in the city of his birthplace, Geneva, and then he became the dean of the school. After few years, Ramadan decided to quit his job to seek a change and return to the fundamentals of his faith, having been spurred by the predicament befalling the image of Islam following a series of Muslim-related controversies and events such as the Iranian Revolution (1979), the Rushdie Affair in Britain (1989), and the Headscarf Affair in France (1989) (In 1989, three teenage girls of North African origin arrived at school in Creil, France, wearing veils that covered their hair. Despite warnings to remove them, they refused and were eventually expelled. This incident commonly referred to as “Headscarf Affairs”). These events turned Ramadan’s attention to contemporary Muslim issues and shifted his priorities to defending Islam against misconceptions and prejudices, trying to show that there are many common universal values espoused by Islam, Christianity, Judaism and other secular groups and social activists such as humanists, atheists and agnostics.

To be equipped with a detailed knowledge of the Qur’an, tools of reinterpretation, “Hadiths”, the biographies of Hadith narrators, the fundamentals of jurisprudence, Arabic grammar and eloquence, and logic, Tariq Ramadan moved temporarily with his family to Cairo, Egypt, to undertake one-on-one intensive training in classic Islamic scholarship from Al-

¹Tariq Ramadan: “*Europe and Its Muslims: Building a Common Future Japan*) 2/3” *Tariqramadan.com*, July19, 2007. <http://www.tariqramadan.com/spip.php?article1149>.

Azhar University. There, he received fast track courses designed to allow him to complete an equivalent of a five-year university program in less than two years through a private tutoring arrangement.

Tariq Ramadan is currently a professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at the Oxford University, teaching in the two Faculties of Oriental Studies and Theology & Religion. He is also a visiting professor at the College of Islamic Studies, Hamad Bin Khalifa University (Doha, Qatar), Director of the Research Centre for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE) (Doha, Qatar), President of the think tank European Muslim Network (EMN) in Brussels and a member of the International Union of Muslim Scholars.

Ramadan has penned a number of globally-read books on the issues of Islamic legislation, politics, ethics, Sufism and the Islamic contemporary challenges in both the Muslim-majority countries and the West. He is also an active scholar at both academic and media levels. He has extensively given media-circulated lectures throughout the world on theology, ethics, social justice, and interfaith as well as intercultural dialogue. His thoughts launched him into the international spotlight. So, he was acclaimed by the Time Magazine in 2000 as one of the seven religious innovators of the 21st century and in 2004 as one of the 100 most influential people in the world and by Foreign Policy readers in (2005, 2006, 2008-2010, 2012-2015) as one of the top 100 most influential thinkers in the world and Global Thinkers.

Ramadan a Contemporary Muslim Religious “Leader”

Studying the theology of Tariq Ramadan is pretty meager, and large part of the few existing studies conducted on the topic is of biographical, historical and illustrative nature. Much effort has been invested just to investigate whether Tariq Ramadan is a liberal reformist or a fundamentalist “extremist”. As a matter of fact, there are very few studies and articles which try to shed light on Ramadan’s thoughts and to delve into his philosophy. While reading these few existing studies done on the topic, it is easy to identify that there are two different views about the man. The first one of his opponents is “skeptical”, because they think that he is a double-faced, slippery, media savvy and dangerous fundamentalist. The second view, on the other hand, is “supportive” in the sense that his admirers see him as courageous reformist, brilliant, a bridge builder and a Muslim Martin Luther.

In many occasions, Tariq Ramadan has been accused of using “doublespeak” and conveying different messages to different types of audience. In her book, *Brother Tariq: the Doublespeak of Tariq Ramadan*, Caroline Fourest vehemently criticizes Tariq Ramadan and his political and religious project of enhancing fundamentalist Islam. She claimed that she analyzed about 15 books of Tariq Ramadan, 1500 pages of his interviews, and about 100 cassettes, and she concludes that Tariq Ramadan is “a pure product of Al-Bannas’s ideology” and he is just repeating the same discourse that his grandfather had at the beginning of the 20th century in Egypt. She also accuses Ramadan of using ambiguous language because, according to Fourest, he preaches fundamentalist values hidden in a modern, Western language. She claims that “Ramadan’s rhetoric is so complex that it cannot be decoded without supplying the context and filling in the illusions, which are often fleeting” (Caroline Fourest, 2008, P.19). She goes further to argue that “Tariq Ramadan is “slippery”. When he speaks to his faithful Muslim followers, he says one thing, but when he addresses the Western audience, he says something else.

These claims are advocated by Tarek Heggy, the Egyptian intellectual. He also accuses Tariq Ramadan of saying two different things to two different audiences. Heggy argues that

“Like a number of Muslim Brothers, Mr. Ramadan has two messages: one for the non-Arabic speaking audience (such as his views about the physical punishments) and different messages in Arabic. The difference between the spirit of these messages is enormous ... one would realize the dangers of this phenomenon only if equipped with good command of Arabic and good knowledge of Sharia”.

The scholar tries to rebut these accusations in many places, most identifiably, in his book “What I Believe” in which he argues that the accusations are based on no clear evidence. According to him, these accusations are easy criticism which “is often unverifiable (and unverified) argument of those who have no argument and have verified nothing”. He also claims that the accusations of “doublespeak” leveled at him were just an outcome of “double hearing”. Ramadan also points out that his alleged “doublespeak” is not to misguide different audiences and to hide his true aim, but rather a pedagogy used to reach different audiences with what he claims is an unambiguous message. He argues that his use of different rhetoric is legitimate because the underlying message remains the same.

On the other hand, some academics consider Tariq Ramadan as a student of the “Nahda Movement” - the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth-century Arab cultural movement that includes several of the most famous Islamic modernists and reformers, including Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Muhammad Rashid Rida, Muhammad Iqbal, and Hassan al-Banna-. He is often criticized for his familial ties to the “Brotherhood Organization”, but he denies being connected or involved with the organization. Indeed, on multiple occasions, Ramadan, states he is proud of his origin, his family and his heritage, but at the same time, he confirms that his father and his grandfather’s actions and views are not representative of who he is and where he comes from.

Additionally, Tariq Ramadan has been accused of allying his thinking to the radical ideologies of terrorist groups and secretly forging ties with terrorists. Some claims blame Ramadan for supporting Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement) by his contribution to the funding of the organization through a Palestinian charity and other extremist groups through a Al-Taqwa Bank (a bank which was considered by the United States as a major sponsor of Osama Bin Laden and his associates). Others go further than that to doubt his attitude toward violence. When Tariq Ramadan is asked whether he is willing to condemn terrorism, he answers, in many occasions, “Of course we condemn terrorism,....but we support the resistance (muqawama). These accusations come with upsetting consequences for the scholar and his family. In 1995, he was banned from entering France because of the terrorist attacks in Paris which were carried out by an Algerian-Islamist movement and Ramadan allegedly had a hand in the matter. He was also banned from entering United States of America on the grounds of national security and public safety. Additionally, Ramadan was later declared persona non grata in many Arab countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia. According to him, this ban was due to his criticism to the Arab regimes which were based on lack of democracy and dictatorship. In 2009, he was dismissed from his teaching post at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam because of his chairing a program on Iran’s state television and that could be construed as advocating the Iranian regime.

Notwithstanding all these controversies and accusations, some Western intellectuals have praised his efforts and significantly likened him to Martin Luther King. Indeed, to some he represents the ideal reformer, a needed Muslim scholar and a man with a vision who does his best to bridge the gap between the secular lifestyle of the Western society and the traditional values of Islam. For Muslim youth audiences, he is known to be a charismatic orator and his lectures often witness large audiences. He is also esteemed by many as a voice

of moderation and he is commonly characterized as an active needed academic professor due to his many posts teaching and lecturing at various compasses throughout Europe. Therefore, many people suggested that Tariq Ramadan could be the leader of an “Islamic Reformation”, and after the July terrorist attack on London, in 2005, Ramadan was appointed to Blair’s Muslim taskforce attempting to root out Islamic extremism.

Andrew F. March is one of the intellectuals who defend Tariq Ramadan’s theology. In his book, *Reading Tariq Ramadan: Political Liberalism, Islam, and “Overlapping Consensus”*, which is a brief analysis of one of the most popular Ramadan’s books, *To Be a European Muslim: A Study of Islamic Sources in the European Context*, March points out that the aim of Tariq Ramadan is to show how Muslims can (and should) find a balance of adhering to their Islamic beliefs and fulfilling their European commitments (March, 2007). The objective of Andrew F. March’s study is to examine whether Tariq Ramadan’s views are compatible with the core element of political liberalism, especially in terms of individual freedom and universalism. March tries to compare Tariq Ramadan’s views with the ones of the more radical Islamist in contemporary Islamic thinking, particularly those of the Muslim Brotherhood. March finds out that Tariq Ramadan does not only distance himself from the most conservative Muslim scholars, but he also offers a form of European Islam that is ‘fully supportive of a liberal political order’ in the West (March, 2007, p.412). March has a positive reading of Tariq Ramadan’s thinking because he bases his analysis on the scholar’s main enlightened ideas: First, Ramadan’s understanding of Muslim political participation is premised on the duty to protect and serve the welfare of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Second, Ramadan argues that Western Muslims can be Western and Muslim at the same time, and that they need to actively participate in Western societies. Third, he bases his argument on the universality of Islam that enables Muslims living in different contexts to practice their faith in harmony with the broader socio-political context they operate in. Moreover, Ramadan promotes the value of “freedom of choice” in the sense that the new generations of Muslims should be free to abide by religious prescriptions as they wish. Furthermore, Ramadan rejects the idea of Islamization in favor of giving people the freedom to embrace the religion of Islam based on informed choice.

In this study, March concludes that Tariq Ramadan’s main beliefs show that his thinking is centered on the values of mutual recognition and individual freedom that are compatible with the essence of political liberalism.

Another study conducted by Gregory Baum’s shows that Tariq Ramadan really channels bright and fresh ideas. In his book, *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan: a Catholic Perspective*, which is a critical analysis of Tariq Ramadan’s religious thoughts on the issue of reform, Baum advocates many ideas of Tariq Ramadan. To conduct his study, Baum read the books and articles of Tariq Ramadan, watched his TV interviews, and listened to his lectures. He also read the published works of Tariq Ramadan’s critics and found out that those who criticize Tariq Ramadan have not read his scholarly works. Baum’s critical analysis of Ramadan’s religious thoughts is centered on three main thematic issues: The universal message of Islam, Sharia as way of life and its hermeneutics, and the situation of Muslims in Western societies. He agrees with Tariq Ramadan on the idea that the universality of Islam is adaptable to every context, even modern Western context. Accordingly, Muslims need to find universal Islamic principles to integrate in Modern context. So, his (Ramadan) aim is to “understand the universality of the message of Islam and to highlight the means we are given to help [Muslims] live in our own time, in the West, with respect for ourselves and for others” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 3). Baum also gives special attention to Ramadan’s position on the

reinterpretation of Sharia in light of modern context. This, according to Baum, will enable Muslims to integrate in modern, Western context as the same as the Jewish communities “who are perfectly integrated and also able to preserve their religious identity and traditions.”

²

In his comparative approach of the reformist Catholicism of Vatican II and the reform movement in Islam which is exemplified by Tariq Ramadan, Gregory Baum also manages to highlight several points with respect to Ramadan’s reformist theology and the situation of Islam and Muslims in the West. First, “Baum notes that he has great sympathy for Ramadan’s attempt to allow a critical Islamic openness to modernity” (Robert Burns, 2011, P. 84). Second, Baum points out that Tariq Ramadan has managed to find a balance between reformism and conservatism in the sense that he advocates the values of religious pluralism and freedom of worship, but at the same time, he disagrees with many ideas presented by liberal Muslim thinking. Third, Baum supports Ramadan’s belief that the religion of Islam is capable of flourishing in any given society because of its universality and flexibility in reshaping its prescriptions that deal with social relations. Fourth, Baum also highlights Ramadan’s argument that there is no problem for Western Muslims to be Western and Muslim at the same time, and to participate in society in pursuit of the common good. Fifth, Baum believes in Ramadan’s idea that Sharia is not applied by the authoritarian regimes because it calls for social justice and observance of Muslim social ethics. Finally, Baum claims that Tariq Ramadan is mistakenly perceived as fundamentalist and anti-Semitic because of his disagreement with some academics of theological liberalism and because of his opposition to Israel’s militant policies against Palestinian people.

In his comparative study, *Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Tariq Ramadan on Secularisation: Differences and Similarities*, Larson Göran also claims that Ramadan has no problem with secularism since it does not affect Muslims’ adherence to Islamic principles, and because of the freedom of beliefs which is guaranteed in the western societies and enables Muslims to practice their Islamic teachings. Larson also appreciates the idea of Tariq Ramadan that urges Muslims to develop their own “Western identity” without depending on what is imposed on them by scholars from Muslim-majority countries. Larson concludes that it is difficult to compare the two theologians (Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Tariq Ramadan) because they think from two different cultural perspectives (that of Yusuf al-Qaradawi who lives in a Muslim-majority country in the Middle East and that of Tariq Ramadan who belongs to Muslim minorities in the West).

Tariq Ramadan and “European Islam”

It is crystal clear that the scale of Tariq Ramadan’s contributions to the issue of European Islam and contemporary Muslim issues is too massive to be covered in this short biography. However, most of his thoughts about these issues seem to be principally presented in his few books that center particularly on Islam and the situation of Muslims in Europe and in the West in general. His engagement with the sub-field of contemporary Islam started in the late of 1980s, but his popularity as a thinker and a scholar began until the following decade, especially with the release of his book *Les Musulmans Dans la Laïcité* (Muslims in Secular Society). Then, in few years later, Ramadan published other two books which ultimately brought his thinking to international attention, namely, *To be a European Muslim* and *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*.

² <http://iqra.ca/2010/a-catholic-perspective-on-the-theology-of-tariq-ramadan/>

In these publications, Ramadan's complex and extensive arguments revolve around the same core idea that it is possible to be both European and Muslim without a disabling sense of inner conflict in the combination. Instead of dividing the world into "two hostile camps Islamic vs. non-Islamic abode" (Tariq Ramadan) and instead of isolating themselves, Muslims are urged by Tariq Ramadan to adapt to the social context they live in. Ramadan introduces himself as a contemporary Muslim religious leader who claims to have the solution to solving the identity crisis of Western Muslims. He proposes a reform project of contextual reinterpretation of Islamic sacred texts in light of social context. This project is based on many methodological approaches which aim at rereading the Muslim juridical sources, the Quran and the Sunna and reinventing the tools of reinterpretation.

The philosophy of Tariq Ramadan comes out of the idea that Muslims are facing a lot of challenges concerning the incompatibility of some Islamic teachings with modernity and the values of human rights. There are many controversial issues that have been recently raised in the Islamic society, such as women's rights, individual freedom, freedom of expression, religious freedom, sexuality, Islamic inheritance system and equality debate, human sciences (such as organs donation, and cloning) and other problematic issues, and Muslims, today, have a lot of serious questions about these matters and they need clear answers to many contemporary issues. However, since the existing religious discourse is primarily rooted in the Islamic law, "Shari'a", it seems that most part of this discourse is incompatible with modernity and the core values of human rights. Ramadan delves into many complicated and controversial issues such as the reinterpretation of the Quran, the reform of Shari'a, and other societal taboos. Tariq Ramadan is generating enormous intellectual curiosity as to whether Islam is compatible with the ideals of modern society and human rights. One of the fundamental questions that Tariq Ramadan raises in his reform project is that "Can the Muslim world accede to modernity without denying some of the fundamentals of the Islamic religion?"³

It is obvious that the issue of Muslim identity is considered as an obstacle for many "European Muslims" to integrate into the social context they live in. In fact, "Islamic identity is taken to mean a comprehensive set of beliefs, practices and ideologies"⁴ being formalized through the Quran, the Sunna as well as the juridical principles in the Islamic law, and these sources define what it means to be a Muslim, including the ways how a Muslim should live and behave. However, there are many traditions in the Islamic society, today, have nothing to do with the Islamic principles. Some of these traditions were formalized in the middle ages by scholars who, according to Ramadan, misinterpreted the text. Unfortunately, some of these traditions are still shaping the Muslim identity in our modern time. This is what makes the reform of the Muslim identity very complicated and challenging. Here, again, Ramadan proposes an intriguing reformed vision of Muslim identity in modern context based on what Ramadan defines as a "radical" reinterpretation of Islamic jurisdiction. Accordingly, He argues that any reformation of modern Muslim identity should be based on interpreting Islamic sources in light of modern context.

As a matter of fact, many Western Muslims find that their traditional Muslim identity conflicts with the modern Western socio-political context which they operate in. Millions of Muslims, both immigrants and converts, live today in many Western countries. The majority of this Muslim population is still loyal to their religious principles, and they try to preserve and

³ (p.423, *Islam, the West, and the Challenges of Modernity*).

⁴ <http://www.usislam.org/IslamicYouth/IslamicIdentity.htm>

protect their Muslim identity. Since the latter has been formalized in the Islamic principles, it is very stable and rigid social identity. The strength and rigidity of the traditional Muslim identity hinders any kind of adaptation to modernity in the Western socio-political context which is based on principles of secularism and rationalism. This makes Western Muslims face difficulties aligning their Muslim identities with the modern social context in which they live, simply because "Islam as it is literally practiced or interpreted by its adherents may not readily allow them to assimilate into non-Muslim societies" (Karim, 2009, p. iii)

What makes many Western Muslims appeal for Ramadan's theology is his positive reading of Muslims making a home and being at home in the western society as rightful citizens. In the midst of globalization, the profound Muslim identity crisis and the controversies that have been raised in the West, the scholar's ideas and propositions have come to stand as a beacon of hope for many Muslims who live in the West and want to coexist in a pluralistic society.

In spite of the criticism that surrounds Ramadan's theology, the scholar has managed to have a very successful career and to attract a large following. His reputation as a needed academic scholar enables him to serve as Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies in the Faculty of Oriental Institute at St Antony's College of the University of Oxford, and he is also a visiting professor at many faculties in many countries. Besides, he is regularly invited to give lectures, to participate in debates and to attend conferences so as to share his philosophy about different issues concerning Islam, modernity, ethics and so forth.

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