

CONSERVATIVE REFORM IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN ISLAMIC THOUGHT:  
TARIQ RAMADAN, A CASE STUDY

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Tariq Ramadan is one of the most controversial Muslim intellectuals in the Western world. For some observers he represents the ideal reformer, for others he speaks with two voices and must be unmasked. A British government strategy paper suggested he could be the leader of an 'Islamic Reformation' in Europe, and after the July attacks on London he was appointed to Blair's Muslim taskforce attempting to root out Islamic extremism in Britain. On the other hand, he was temporarily banned from the US and France on suspicion of endorsing terrorism – while an Arab debater on his website felt it was necessary to clear him from the suspicion of “selling out” Islam to the West by advocating some sort of “Islam light"... So who is this man whose mere name sparks heated arguments at the drop of a hat?

Tariq Ramadan is a grandson of Hasan al-Bannâ', the founder of the Muslim Brothers, the youngest son of his favourite pupil, Said Ramadan, who ended up in exile in Switzerland and founded the Islamic Centre in Geneva. Tariq Ramadan was born there in 1962, grew up speaking both Arabic and French and is married to a former Catholic who converted to Islam. His political career began in a circle of Catholic and Protestant human rights activists. In 1993 he changed to Islamic activism, following a year of religious studies in Cairo<sup>1</sup>. He holds a master's degree in Philosophy and French literature, a PhD in Arabic and Islamic studies, and he is currently a visiting professor at St Anthony's College of Oxford University. In the past ten years Ramadan has become a leading voice of, above all, French Islam, through countless lectures, articles and books. He tries to reach more than one audience: the Muslim youth of the suburbs of Paris, Lyon etc. as well as left-wing intellectuals and anti-globalisation campaigners and possibly also a more pious and conservative constituency in the Arab world and beyond although his website is only in English and French and thus fails to address an Arab public. It is this extreme balancing act that gives him an equivocal quality. A controversy he instigated with Jewish intellectuals in France who he accused of 'communitarianism', or bias (in favour of Israel), and his prime time

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<sup>1</sup> He had 8 months of private lessons in Islamic law given by Shaikh Dr. Ali Jum'a who is now Grand Mufti of Egypt, see [www.tariqramadan.com/imprimer.php3?id\\_article=323](http://www.tariqramadan.com/imprimer.php3?id_article=323).

TV debate with French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy on the headscarf issue have confirmed him as a media star. The political scientist Gilles Kepel called Tariq Ramadan a preacher who is merely posing as a ‘universalist intellectual’. This is the jealousy of another star intellectual writing about Islam. But it also results from a widespread view of what kind of Islam would be acceptable in France: for Kepel, Caroline Fourest and many others, only a laicistically softened, entirely personal Islam restricted to the private realm is welcome.

When Tariq Ramadan is judged to be either a ‘reformer’ or a ‘softcore Islamist’ and ‘armchair Jihadist’ (JÜDISCHE ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG), this raises the question of what we actually want to understand by reform with regard to Islam. I don’t want to anticipate your answer; instead, I would like to report what Tariq Ramadan understands by reform. In his last major book, *Les musulmans d’occident et l’avenir de l’islam* (Western Muslims and the Future of Islam, 2003) he outlines a typology of the schools of thought in contemporary Islam (MO 49ff.). The crucial point is whether the balance between orientating scriptures and interpreting reason, i.e. the Koran and the Sunna on the one hand and *ijtihâd* on the other is kept or lost. So we have two extremes, the literalist reading of the text and the primacy of reason consulting the text only for individual spiritual and moral inspiration, and we have the middle way. Examples given for the literalist extreme are the traditionalist *Tablîghîs* and radical *Salafî* movements such as the *Hizb at-Tahrîr*; this is where I disagree, revolutionary Islam is not that literalist. The belief in reason is equated with liberal reformism, and that’s supposed to be a radical secularism à la Kemal Atatürk, restricting religion to the private realm of individuals, cutting it off completely from the public realm. That is the kind of Islam many Europeans - as opposed to Americans – would like best. The middle way is, in Tariq Ramadan’s model, a healthy balance between scripture and reason, and that’s *Salafî* reformism of a kind represented by al-Afghânî, Hasan al Bannâ’, Sharî’atî – and obviously also Tariq Ramadan himself.

So the basic insight is that the text must be interpreted through human reason so that the believers remain true to its spirit – that’s reformism. Only if the text is understood in its historical context we can deduce the principles that can then be applied today. The *‘ibâdât* or ritual duties may be timeless, but when it comes to the *mu‘âmalât*, or social issues, there is room to manoeuvre. The basic rule here is: everything is allowed which the text does not expressly

forbid! This opens the door for progress, for a reformist interpretation of the law that responds to modern times and circumstances. Just one telling example: In social issues, fidelity to the revelation according to Ramadan is not the slavish imitation of historically contingent models, such as the clothing of the Prophet; that's something he criticizes as childish attitude (IQ 268). He himself, being a Western Muslim, wears Western clothes and not some folkloric costume. In the West, Ramadan adds, all local characteristics that are not expressly forbidden are "not only acceptable, but by definition Islamic"! In other words, European culture should be adopted – selectively, of course. An earlier book, *To Be a European Muslim* (1999) calls for a creative self-invention as a European Muslim: One should neither remain a Turkish or 'Arab Muslim in Europe' nor become a 'Muslim without Islam'. So in the European context, reform is conceived of as a process of uncertain outcome, but with high potential for convergence. 'Uncertain outcome' means that until the inner-Islamic debate is concluded it is not certain what will come out of it with regard to each individual point. That is an element of resistance against the widespread desire on the part of the host society for complete assimilation. But in contrast to the anti-Western tendencies of the champions of Arab, Turkish or Pakistani ghetto-Islam, it is recommended that immigrants make a priority of adapting to the new environment they themselves have chosen.

So what innovations does Tariq Ramadan's reform programme offer? In individual legal-moral problems he generally espouses points of view familiar from the debates of Arab scholars of a cautiously updating sort. Possibly his most important contribution concerns the status of Europe and the West in Muslim legal thought. He vehemently rejects the traditional binary concepts, the opposition of *dâr al-islâm* and *dâr al-harb* cutting the world into two halves: Europe, he says, is of course not the 'House of War'; neither is it *dâr-al-'ahd*, that is, 'House of Contract', because that does not truly overcome the medieval scenario of geopolitical confrontation, and it would mean that Muslims in Europe could not feel at home. Instead, he endorses interpreting the West, in which Muslims are able to practise their faith freely, as *dâr ash-shahâda*, or 'House of Testimony': as a space in which Muslims bear witness to their faith - and thus proclaim the universalist values of Islam, in other words: they contribute to reforming Western societies!

Now one of the local characteristics is secular law, that is, law made in parliament, taking precedence over revealed law. This is a tricky issue. For it is precisely this concession that representatives of conservative reform in the Arab world are not prepared to make. For them the sharî'a should remain a - or the - most important legal authority even in a democracy. Therefore Tariq Ramadan does not categorically reduce the sharî'a to a mere source of moral guidance; instead he makes a local concession to the precedence of secular law in the diaspora. And he demonstrates how that can work in everyday life: The law, he says, can be developed to fit this context because a) the scripture very rarely sets limits in the form of express prohibitions and b) the permissive society actually leaves it up to the Muslim individual to simply avoid things forbidden by the sharî'a, such as the consumption of alcohol and extra-marital sex. As Ramadan promises the Muslims of the West a 'decisive role in the development of worldwide Islam' (MO 373), solutions suggested for the diaspora can also serve as a model for the Islamic world: they show an alternative way towards Islamic modernity even if for the moment other models prevail.

This shows that recasting the sharî'a as a moral codex or ethics can be legitimate, albeit initially in the diaspora, where secularisation has taken on the form of the complete separation of the two spheres of state and religion. The Islamic world on the other hand, he says, has learned to differentiate the two spheres without entirely separating them. He suggests that Muslims should allow themselves to be inspired – undogmatically! - in their social and political commitment by the principles of their scriptures. Muslim majority societies should therefore each invent their own individual model of democracy, appropriate to their specific historical and cultural characteristics, based on scripture-inspired democratic principles such as constitutional state, equality of citizens, elections and regular changes of political leadership; and it must be a model that can satisfy demanding pluralistic principles.

So who has the right to interpret the text for the present day for the purpose of such democratic inspiration? Here Ramadan comes straight to the point, explaining that the world has become too complex to leave this up to the specialists in religious law. He therefore calls for "equal councils uniting 'ulamâs and specialists in the various fields (human and natural sciences) in order to enable legal statements in keeping with the age in which we live". And he adds that, with regard to politics, each country should start a debate that brings together 'ulamâs,

intellectuals, and citizens to decide on how to guarantee faithfulness to Islamic principles and ethics (MO, 275). In other words, the lay intellectual – for from the point of view of Azhari scholars Tariq Ramadan is precisely that despite his year of religious studies! – challenges the monopoly of religious scholars on interpretation.

What about the rare cases of grave conflict in his diaspora model? In the instance of an unjust war the European Muslim can resort to conscientious objection. However, he can also follow his own individual conscience whenever his interpretation of Islam differs from interpretations suggested by the likes of Tariq Ramadan or Yûsuf al-Qaradâwî– and this, I think, is another significant innovation of his thought. He thus grants Muslims the right not to practise their faith, if they can reconcile this with their conscience (PV 92). Similar rules apply to the controversial ban on exogamy for women. Ramadan does explain at length, just as conservative as the late Pope, why Muslim women should not marry non-Muslims (PV 148). However, he also knows that an impressive quarter of French women of Algerian descent are doing precisely that, and so he adds: the freedom of the individual must be respected (IQ 282). The same holds true for the consumption of alcohol in private (PV 104).

So much for the cornerstones of this reform philosophy. Tariq Ramadan has made clear that he is not a liberal reformer. However, he is also not the reactionary Islamist that left-wing voices claim he is. He is simply a conservative. If the pro-abortion and pro-PAC activist Caroline Fourest has only just discovered that he does not share her political point of view (Frère Tariq, 2004), that is not his fault: he had already clearly stated his position on every single controversial point she raises in her ostensibly revelatory book in a 1999 conversation with Jacques Neiryneck (PV). What is exposed is therefore not his ‘duplicity’, but her ignorance - the ignorance of paternalistic left-wingers. Immigrants may be a welcome clientele for left-wing parties, but as Muslims from traditional rural backgrounds they have not that much in common with them as far as basic values, for example family values, are concerned. This discrepancy is currently manifesting itself and can be expected to lead to new political alliances.

Anti-Ramadan campaigns like the one led by Caroline Fourest shouldn’t mislead us. She hasn’t any scruples to use misrepresentation and insinuation to exclude her political opponent

from public discourse. If liberal reformers justify the right to apostasy by referring to the Koranic verse about 'no compulsion in religion', they are welcome. Not so a conservative reformer like Ramadan - although he demands this right by referring to freedom of conscience, and then explains, according to the traditional rules of law interpretation, that the majority of legal scholars demand the death penalty by referring to a hadith of the Prophet, but that this hadith is questionable and that therefore since the 8<sup>th</sup> century a minority wanted to leave the judgement to God – and he endorses this opinion because it respects the freedom of conscience (IQ 276ff.)! Fourest doesn't tell us these details. Instead she claims without page references that Ramadan's acceptance of apostasy is 'mere lip service' (FT 159ff.). Nay, it is something completely different, namely the only way of reaching the majority of Muslims where they currently stand! Anyone who argues as liberals do will not get attention from the Arab masses.

#### The Lutheran stance

Unlike Fourest in the arrogance of her power, Tariq Ramadan knows what he is doing. His 'Mind the gap!' discourse strategy builds a credible bridge from the narrow-minded, defensive way of thinking of the conservative majority to our present day; credible not least because as a descendent of the founder of the Muslim Brothers, he is a charismatic embodiment of the overdue succession of a new generation. He formulates possibilities of connecting with contemporary discourse for a clientele in need of an authority. And he unofficially introduces the authority of the conscience, which establishes the individual's freedom to dissent, the Lutheran 'Here I stand – I cannot do otherwise!' as the original scene of every reform. "What creates freedom is the true existence of the principles on which it is founded: an autonomous conscience choosing in the name of its convictions" (MO 243 on Islamic feminism). Ramadan would like to make Islamic thought more dynamic, but he insists on an 'endogenous development in the rhythms of internal progress in the thought and mentality' of the Islamic civilisations (IQ 181f.). So in the inner-Islamic culture wars about the two speeds of reform he sides with the people overtaken by change. That makes him a conservative reformer, but not a reactionary. He himself describes it as follows: 'Que faire pour faire évoluer les mentalités? Condamner les sources scripturaires et ne plus être entendu par le monde musulman? Imposer une opinion dite moderne en étant dans les faits perçu comme un "occidentalisé" ou, pire, un agent dévoyé à la cause de

“l’ennemi”? Être entendu de l’Occident ayant perdu l’écoute du monde islamique? Se faire plaisir dans sa modernité assumée en n’ayant plus aucun rôle à jouer dans un univers sombrant dans la répression et la légitimation religieuse la plus hypocrite?” (PV (2004), 22.)

[“What should be done to make mentalities evolve? Condemn the scriptural sources and no longer be listened to by the Muslim world? Impose an opinion described as modern, while being perceived by one’s actions as “occidentalised” or, worse, as an agent devoted to the cause of “the enemy”? To be listened to by the West, having lost the ear of the Islamic world? To delight in one’s assumed modernity while having no further role to play in a universe slumbering in repression and the most hypocritical of religious legitimisation?”]

This is a shorter version of the author's contribution to his forthcoming edited book DER ISLAM AM WENDEPUNKT: LIBERALE UND KONSERVATIVE REFORMER EINER WELTRELIGION (ed. with Katajun Amirpur, to be published in January 2006), based on a translation done by Charlotte Collins for FIKRUN WA FANN.

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[www.tariqramadan.com](http://www.tariqramadan.com)