Book Reviews


Tariq Ramadan, now teaching at Oxford, is an unusually versatile Swiss Muslim writer, excelling with publications on theology, history, politics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, mysticism, and—as with the present volume—Islamic law as well. He is convinced that a renewal of the *Ummah* necessarily requires both greater spirituality and legal reform.

Ramadan had already written three books touching juridical reformation: *To be a European Muslim* (1999); *Islam, the West, and the Challenge of Modernity* (2001); and *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (2004). In these books, like Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1357/1938) before, he still pursued revival through a reinterpretation of the scriptural sources of Islam.

No longer so. Ramadan now seeks radical re-adaptation by giving Muslim natural scientists (*ulamāʿ al-wāqiʿ*) at least the weight of doctors of law (*ulamāʿ al-nuṣūṣ*). He repeats the appeal made in 2005 for a penal law “moratorium” concerning capital and corporal punishment, including lapidation, for which he received much support—but only in private (see, pp. 356 ff.).

The text is so verbose and repetitive that without damage to content it could be cut down by half. The author admits this when injecting the phrase “as we have said already and repeat here” (p. 339). Verbosity might, of course, serve the purpose of camouflaging the book’s radical gist: relativizing the importance of the Madinan *shariʿah*, called Text, by giving more importance to the Context, i.e. the “superior universal objectives” of creation.

For Ramadan the Qurʾān only explains and illuminates the First Book: the Cosmos. This would be in consonance with Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). However, Ramadan would have surprised Kant with his insistence that the
universe and natural sciences must not only be taken into account as context, but should “imperatively be considered as objective sources of law and jurisprudence” (p. 148).

Giving cosmology a legal function, the author arrives at sidelining and even superceding the shari‘ah as we know it. Little does he seem to realize that all attempts have failed to construct a law of nations from observing nature. Nor does he concede that only al-‘aqídah could be derived from Being, but neither al-‘ibādah nor al-mu‘āmalāt.

The book cannot only be divided but virtually falls into three parts:

(i) Chapters dealing with radical reform (1, 7–10, Conclusion);

(ii) Analysis of classical Muslim jurisprudence, based on the Ḥanafi and Shāfi‘i schools (3–6), proving the author’s (like al-Shā‘ibs’) preference for the superior aims of the law (al-maqāsid) as well as Ramadan’s clear competence in ʿuss al-fiqh;

(iii) Case studies in fields requiring an innovative application of Islamic law, including modern medicine, Muslim women, ecology, economy, art and Sufism. Here, presenting more questions than answers, the author is particularly dismissive of the very concept of Islamic economics (pp. 154, 316).

Throughout one feels that the author is giving Reason—the basis of the “metaphysics of all sciences”—preference over Revelation, even treating Islam as mere particularism. This may come across as an Islamically flavoured Deism. Consequently he keeps voicing contempt for the Muslims’ idealization of their past, their “sacralization of ‘ulama thinking,” “immobilization in social and political matters,” and their inability to keep pace with the explosion and complexification of knowledge (p. 150).

Here he makes the point that the divine status of the Qur’ān does not exclude its contextualization. Valid. But it contains atemporal norms as well, and who is to draw the line?

Worse is the author’s untenable contention that the Qur’ān was revealed in urban Makkah and “simply applied” in rural al-Madīnah (p. 121).

The author leaves no doubt that for him Muslim adaptation to the new challenges of Occidental civilization is not enough; rather, Muslims are to “transform” the world. For this purpose Ramadan enlarges the circle of competences, drawing on “the universe and the human/social context” as legitimate legal sources. He assumes perhaps that these will be Universe and Qur’ān, not Universe contra Qur’ān. But that could well happen in reformist hands.
In such a scheme, the Qur’an must be “liberated” from the Sunnah which threatens to “lock the Qur’an into a particular application, historically dated and entirely unique” (p. 100). Rather Ramadan, here more moralist than Muslim, calls for an “ethics of living beings, the heart, and the sciences” (p. 176).

In short, the Muslims should hold on only to the superior objectives of their scriptural sources, considering the Universe as an autonomous, superior legal source (see, pp. 136, 404). This is what Ramadan calls a “new geography for the sources of Islamic law.” It is exactly what al-Shafi’i was afraid of: that the foundations of Islamic law will get lost when professors start taking liberties with the scriptural sources (p. 105).

The book ends somehow inconclusively with the author’s view of Sufism. While speaking out against the adoration of Shaykhs considered saintly, infallible, and exclusivist mediators, he defends orthodox Sufism as such (see, pp. 388 ff.).

Throughout framing his “visionary ethics” (p. 156) Ramadan willy nilly displays stupendeous erudition and literary skill. He condemns dogmatics that confuse the unity of truth with the illusion of possessing it (p. 400), illustrating that not only fiqh but science as well is constantly overtaken—so fast that “derogatory” moral answers are required. Flexibility unlimited.

Murad Wilfried Hofmann


*A History of Islamic Societies* gives a historical account of Muslim civilization, covering its myriad space-time contexts. The book analyzes the development of various socio-cultural, political and religious institutions of the Muslim societies, recording their gradual growth and change. Although the discussion of different periods and regions of Muslim history is brief, the study impresses the reader with its comprehensiveness.

Lapidus embarks on an ambitious exploration of the historical evolution of Muslim societies from their formative stage to the modern period. He