Book Reviews

Review Article:
Tariq Ramadan. To Be a European Muslim. Foreword by Jorgen Nielsen.

If there was hereditary nobility among the leaders of the Islamic Movement, Tariq Ramadan, a grandson of Hasan al-Bannā and son of the late Saʿīd Ramadān, could well claim it as a third generation Muslim activist. He is professor of philosophy at the College of Geneva as well as professor of Islamic Studies at Fribourg University, both in Switzerland. But the book under review grew out of a sabbatical he spent at the Islamic Foundation in Markfield, Leicestershire. Like all other works by Ramadan, it focuses on Muslim minority issues in Europe.

*   *   *

The author's starting point is that European Muslims tend to be reactive, considering themselves through the mirror of the very secular world they reject, and to define Islam negatively: by stressing what it is not rather than what it is. For him, this situation came about because the first generation Muslim immigrants mostly had a superficial knowledge of their faith while they were strongly attached to the cultural and social traditions, even superstitions, of their former homelands, considering them to be an integral part of Islam. Thus they presented Islam to their children and their non-Muslim neighbours mainly as a system of legal duties and prohibitions. Worse, by reducing everything to the categories of *halāl* and *harām*, these Muslims reversed the order of priorities of their own religion.

The author hopes to bring about a change in this situation by pointing out that Islam can protect the second and third generation immigrants if it is lived affirmatively and proactively, with a broad, universal vision of the world and humanity. In other words, Muslims in Europe must rediscover that their ritual duties are acts of worship, to be filled with spirituality, and that their tradition is a methodology for coping with the problems of their times.

As a modern (but not modernist) Muslim, Ramadan places himself squarely between assimilationism and rejectionism with his belief that the methodology of Islamic jurisprudence is as useful and valid today as ever. If the Muslims were to keep in mind that the traditional Islamic sciences are “useful means rather than everlasting solutions”, and do not confuse any given moment of their history with the essence of their religion, they can regain the dynamism that characterised their ancient scholars in order to formulate answers to questions which their ancestors had never been asked (pp. 41–43).
If this happens, Ramadan expects, European Muslims to remain faithful to the revealed Message while successfully addressing changes in their political, social, and technological environment (p. 10).

*   *   *

In order to prepare that ground, the author gives an extensive overview of the beginning of Islam and its early history up to 950 ce, discussing the evolution of the Islamic sciences (Tafsir, Hadith, 'Ilm al-'Aq'idah and Kalâm, 'Ilm al-Akhlaq, Uṣūl al-Fiqh, and Tassawwuf, also called by him 'Ilm al-Haqqah). That Islam, originally faith, spirituality and law, had widely been reduced to legal prescriptions, far away from Islam's original simplicity, disturbs Ramadan to such an extent that he leans a bit too much towards mysticism. It is one thing not to exclude Sufism from Islam and not to see it to be of non-Islamic provenance, and quite another to call it “a science which lies at the heart of Islam” (p. 53).

Ramadan prepares the ground further by explaining in detail what is immutable in the Islamic tradition and what is not. Here again his view is balanced. He ridicules the people who feel that the more they refuse change, freedom and progress the more Islamic they would be, claiming that a fatwa was not more Islamic simply because it was more rigid (p. 71). At the same time, he rules out any wild-cat “ijtihad” used by people who are submissive to the Occident, as ijtihad to which recourse was made almost in respect of everything (p. 56). The key to the author’s approach is the distinction between Shari‘ah which is based on clear-cut texts and categorical rulings of the Qurän and the Sunnah, and Fiqh which consists of man-made legal deductions (ijtihad) from the Shari‘ah by resorting to qiyas, ijma and maslahah.

In a very good chapter on maslahah and ijtihad, both of which are much abused to justify almost anything, Ramadan makes clear that any interpretative effort divorced from the Qurän and the Sunnah (and their maqasid) will lead to a purely rationalistic jurisprudence which no longer deserves the appellation ‘Islamic’. After all, what the Shari‘ah aims at are humanity’s masā’il (pp. 76 ff.) The author especially warns against violations of the basic principle that everything not expressly forbidden is allowed (p. 64). He rejects the notion of taqlid as fundamentally un-Islamic: No ‘ālim had any authority to rule out future ijtihād or the overruling of an existing ijma”. On the contrary, for every new generation ijtihād was a fard kifaya (p. 93). Otherwise modern Muslims could not possibly face the challenges of their era (p. 88).

Contemporary Muslims should select from the Islamic legal tradition what remains valid, should proceed to new rulings concerning the new issues, and have recourse to “collective ijtihād”, i.e. a team-work between fuqahā’, medical doctors, financial experts and natural scientists (pp. 96 f.). These efforts, so the author says, will shape a “European-Islamic identity” (p. 101) which, I take it, is something entirely different from Bassam Tibi’s secularist call for a “Euro-Islam”, which in fact means, much Europe and a little Islam.

In all this Ramadan follows Muhammad ‘Abduh and Shaykh Yūsuf al-Qarādiwī, President of the “European Council for Islamic Rulings and Research” founded in 1997 in London. The author, however, fails to give credit to the pioneering contributions to the same subject by Muhammad Asad, Fazlur Rahman, Fathi ‘Uthmān, and Tāhā Jābir al-‘Alwānī, to name only a few.
With that theoretical background, in Part II Ramadan is ready to tackle the “sensitive questions of belonging, identity, and citizenship” or, to put it in more simple words, such questions as “Where are we”? (Chapter I) and “Who are we”? (Chapter II). The author proceeds from the undisputed observation that the Islamic presence in Europe is perceived as a problem because the Muslims are seen to have a problem with progress, democracy, and modernity, in particular as far as women are concerned. Indeed, until recently the European Muslims felt that they faced the alternatives of either disappearing from sight or spending their days explaining what Islam is not (concerning jihād, hudūd, hijāb, and despotism). In this process, many forgot that Islam also has something to offer to the West. If less Islam means less problems, then of course Muslims without Islam would be the solution! (p. 113).

However, Ramadan reads the future more optimistically because, during the last 15 years, a positive change is visible everywhere among the European Muslim communities: The second and third generation Muslim youths in reaffirming their identity have self-confidently rediscovered their religion, and that in a form purified from the “accidents of its traditional reading”. Their Islam is a new actualization based on immediate contact with the Qur’ān and the Sunnah (p. 114). They can indeed make an invaluable contribution to Islam in general provided they are not oppressed by unfavourable circumstances to develop a feeling of inferiority because of their inability, in very many cases, to speak Arabic like their fathers and grandfather did (p. 116).

In the chapters on “Where are we”? and “Who are we”? Ramadan exclusively focuses on the situation of the 12–15% Muslims in the Western part of the Old Continent; Islam in America is not his subject. The 80% of Muslim migrants do not practice their religion regularly even though 40% attend Friday prayers and 70% observe Ramaḍān (p. 121).

Given that the great majority of Muslims in Europe who live in an atmosphere of security and peace, the author launches into an interesting study of what, dār al-harb (or dār al-kufr) and dār al-Islām mean today. The author is decidedly of the opinion that these terms, neither derived from the Qur’ān nor the Sunnah, are incongruent with today’s geopolitical realities and have outlived the usefulness they once had in a simple, bi-polar world of the medieval times (pp. 123–131 and pp. 141–145).

More narrowly, he points out that the criteria for this binary division had been based either on (i) whether the population in their majority is Muslim, or (ii) whether the governmental system is Islamic, or (iii) whether the Muslims live in peace and safety.

These criteria are clearly unsatisfactory because they allow calling certain countries dār al-Islām even though their governments are un-Islamic, dictatorial, corrupt, unjust and repressive (p. 127). At the same time, given the peace and security that the Muslims enjoy, it would be possible according to these criteria to call Europe dār al-Islām. ‘Imām Shafi‘i, with his dār al-‘ābd, does not provide an escape either, even if one re-defines al-‘ābd as a treaty obligation between this State and the individuals, because Shafi‘i’s
category presupposes the knowledge of where to find dār al-Islām and dār-al harb (p. 128). Thus he sends us back to square one.

In the end, Ramadan opts in regard to the West for new concept of either dār al-ann (domain of security) or, even better, dār al-da‘wah (domain of da‘wah), or dār al-shahādah (domain of testimony) because in the new global village, the Western Muslims find themselves exactly in the Prophet’s situation in pre-Hijrah Makkah. Thus, Ramadan concludes that the Muslims are not only allowed to live in the West but must fulfil a great responsibility there: to give witness, in word and deed, before all mankind (2: 143), and that in a world which has become binary in a new sense. Now, the world is devided between Centre (the Occident) and Periphery (including the Muslim world). In such a situation, it is only Muslims in the West who can act upon the centre (pp. 148 f.).

This analysis is sound in as much as it is based on the observation that the Muslims in the West

* can freely profess their faith and give testimony of it;
* can practice the pillars of Islam and much of the Sharī‘ah;
* are recognized and protected; and
* can freely form associations and take part in the social, political, and economic affairs of the society (p. 131).

This does not preclude problems with hijāb, ādbān, school education, halāl meat, interest (ribā), marriage and inheritance, and Islamic burials. Nor can one overlook the problems of living an Islamic life in modern society which is saturated with irreligious values. Yet these problems are mostly caused not by governments nor by laws, but by Western civilization and age-old prejudices (138). It is therefore important that Western Muslims are learning how to seek legal redress.

*   *   *

With that, in his most important chapter, the author asks the key question: “Who are we [Muslims in Europe]”? Is there a European Muslim identity, and if so, is it of a religious or cultural nature? Can a Muslim be a genuine European citizen at all? Ramadan has no doubt that European Muslims have an identity based on their strong feeling of community, a feeling of belonging to the ummah which, in turn, is nourished by the prayer (with the neighbours), zakāh (for Muslims in their nation), Ramadān and Hajj (linking Muslims world-wide). Yet the author hastens to clarify that the Umma is no tribal or blood relationship in the sense of “my country: right or wrong”. For him, “justice has priority over emotion” and, as in the case of the family (see Qur‘ān 31: 15), solidarity with foreign Muslims ends where they commit large scale evil. This is an important point since the European Muslims frequently feel to be like hostages who are held responsible for whatever happens in the Muslim world (p. 159).

In this context, Ramadan reminds his fellow Muslims that at least by applying for a visa they have entered into a treaty relationship with their host country which requires them to be faithful to its constitutional and legal framework, unless they are constrained to act against their conscience in important matters. Examples for that would be a war conducted by the host country against Muslims. This would call for “conscientious objection” (p. 176). But the sale of alcohol or the taking of interest are not valid
grounds for disobedience because Muslims in the West are neither obliged to drink nor to accept interest.

In fact, a Muslim is bound by the sharī'ah to act as a trustworthy citizen. It is, nevertheless, pointless to ask whether someone is first a French Muslim or a Muslim Frenchman because religion and nationality are non-competing categories of different levels of existence (pp. 162 ff.).

Nevertheless, some European Muslims still debate whether it is permissible for them to remain in the Occident. These are reminded by the author that Muhammad (peace be on him) in pre-Hijrah Makkah was once in the same situation. So were the Muslims in exile in Ethiopia and Muṣ'ab ibn ʿUmayr when he was sent as a preacher to the heathen and Jewish Yathrib. In accordance with traditional Fiqh, Ramadan urges the Muslims to remain in Europe provided they did not come with evil intentions or for purely selfish purposes, and are useful for Islam.

European Muslims frequently tend to believe that they are confronted by the alternative either to assimilate or to isolate themselves sub-culturally. Both reactions to a foreign culture are natural for people who do not realize that they have something to offer (p. 178). The first reaction is to be ruled out because secularism is a screen behind which atheism operates and which produces “Muslims without Islam” (p. 183, 186). On the other hand, rejection of local culture — “living in Europe out of Europe” — is no solution either. What Indo-Pakistanis in England try to preserve is frequently not Islam but the Asian way of being a Muslim. European converts who rigidly follow the salaf of the earliest times do no better (p. 187).

But there is not only this alternative of extremes but also a middle way: to proceed selectively and develop a European Islam in the sense in which an African or Indonesian Islam exists.

*   *   *

This is easier said than done because the secular culture is all-pervasive and Muslims cannot but make certain compromises, justifiable on the grounds of darūrah in areas of secondary importance like Islamic burial, slaughter, and inheritance (p. 177). The battle in Europe is indeed more cultural than religious and will only be won if Islamic education morally equips the Muslim children to a point where they can selectively pick and choose, particularly in the field of entertainment; because it would not work to switch TV off altogether.

Examples in point are music and pictures. Ramadan takes Ibn Hazm's al-Ra'y approach by interpreting labw al-hadīth (31: 6; 28: 55) as idle talk and not as music. According to the author, as shown by Yusuf Islam's album: “I have no cannons that roar” (1997), all depends on the type and use of music.

Similarly, given that Allah loves beauty, the author sees only statues to be forbidden since these statues, as idols, could lend themselves to worship. (Well, what about the portraits of Stalin, Tito, Mustafa Kemal and others on stamps?) To him, photographs lie entirely outside the domain of prohibited things.

As to their non-Muslims neighbours who tend to see Islam not as a faith and way of life but as a problem per se, Ramadan sees quite a job since practicing Muslims are automatically classified by them as extremists and fanatics and suspected to be wolves in sheepskins (pp. 216 ff.). There is no use complaining: in order to make coexistence
possible for instance “Muslims must themselves undertake a number of reforms” in Europe (p. 219). They should, for instance:

* accept religious pluralism and build a culture of dialogue (without being naive, of course);
* work for financial and political independence from foreign sponsors;
* practice *shūrā* among themselves and organize at regional level;
* accept local citizenship and share in the concerns of the civil society;
* resist the temptation to engage in black-and-white thinking and be tolerant vis-à-vis pluralism within the *Ummah*;
* redevelop spirituality;
* focus on relevant education of the 2nd and 3rd generation; and
* fight unemployment to forestal delinquency and xenophobia.

This is an ambitious but a very practical agenda.

* * *

In Annex I Ramadan provides us with an overview of current pluralism within the *Ummah*. While there is only one Islam — and not “Islams” as Orientalists would want us to believe — there are different views as to the status of Islamic texts, the ways of their interpretation, the extent to which they should be interpreted literally, and the role of reason in understanding them. Taking these criteria into account the author distinguishes between:

* Scholastic Traditionalism (*Deobandis*, Baraylis, *Talibán*, *Tablīgī Jamā‘at*, Nurevilklar, i.e. *Abī al-Sunnaḥ* of old);
* Salafi Traditionalism (*Wahhabism*, the *Abī ‘l-hadīth* of old);
* Political and literalist Salafiyyah, *Hisb al-Tahrīr* and others who have grown under the shadow of repression, pushed into exclusive political commitment for an “Islamic State”. They form about 0.5% of the Muslims in the West.
* Liberal (rationalist) Reformation of the non-practicing cultural Muslims who favour total assimilation regardless of the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah*, which is perhaps the attitude represented by Muhammad Arkoun and Bassam Tibi.
* Sufism.

In my opinion, this Annex, like Annex II on Immigration, Integration and Cooperation Policies, should have been integrated into the main body of the book.

* * *

As Professor Nielsen, who has praised the work in his foreword, recognizes that Ramadan has provided European Muslims with the first major attempt, both theoretical
and practical, to engage in a systematic *tajdīd* and *islāh* within the parameters of mainstream Islam.

Having said this, it needs to be pointed out that the book is certainly useful for *convinced* European and American Muslims. However, as far as *wavering* young Muslims and non-Muslim Europeans and Americans are concerned, the book’s usefulness is rather limited for the following reasons: In dealing with *tawḥīd* and the Qur’ān, Ramadan does not take into consideration the agnostic climate of contemporary Europe. Its extreme anti-metaphysical stance, epistemological critique, and dismissal of the so-called “proofs of God” preclude an approach, like the author’s, which takes the existence of God and the revelatory nature of the Qur’ān as given. Rather, he should have shown how to make the existence of God and Revelation *plausible* in terms of overwhelming *probability*.

A few other, minor suggestions may be permitted:

(i) That the ’Abbasid Caliphs made a great show of respect for Islamic law and its scholars’ (p. 34) seems to be an overstatement in view of the inquisition (*miḥnah*), i.e. the persecution of scholars like Ibn Ḥanbal who refused to accept the Mu’tazīlī doctrine. (On p. 54, n. 66, the author seems to admit that much).

(ii) Ramadan makes the sweeping statement that the Islamic world was “in stagnation and decline” from 1258–1870 CE. This bleak view is no more held even by the Orientalists. In fact, the author himself continues the work begun not only by Ibn Taymiyyah (whom he acknowledges), but also by Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī, Shāh Wāfi Allāh and Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.

(iii) References to *ahādīth* in *Hadīth* collections should mention their specific locations rather than simply mention the work in which they occur.

(iv) At several places the author tends to express doubts about the reliability of certain *ahādīth* and talks about some of them being fabricated (p. 33) and to insinuates a degree of dissatisfaction with the means of authentification employed by the scholars of *Hadīth* (pp. 83, 95). While these remarks might at times be justified, it would be preferable to deal with the issue in a manner likely to chase Goldziher’s and Schacht’s ghosts away.

(v) On p. 37, 9th line from the bottom, the word “esoteric” should be read as “exoteric”, and Jilānī’s death date needs to be corrected.

Murad Wilfried Hofmann


In the eleven chapters of this book one of the most influential and powerful Muslim intellectual politicians, now the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, outlines his