

# European Islam and Tariq Ramadan

Ramadan's major contribution to the debate on Islam in Europe is perhaps his re-conceptualization of the traditional *fiqh* categories related to space (from *dar al-islam* and *dar al-harb* to *dar al-shahada*). While Ramadan has no formal linkages to the class of ulama, his contribution to the debate is testimony to the worldwide emergence of a Muslim intellectual elite, with a secular background (in his case, a doctorate in philosophy), entering the restricted world of religious representation and interpretation.

For many years now, Ramadan has been touring Europe persuading Muslims, and in particular the youth, that they do not have to feel any guilt or reservation about living in the non-Muslim West. He argues that the Muslim communities in Europe should not wait for an Arab scholar to come and solve their problems, but should start actively participating in their new societies in order to find answers to their predicament; Muslims, as upholders of a universal religion, are not in need of a justification for living as minorities, "spreading out on the earth," and "enjoining the good."

Many contemporary Islamic scholars would undoubtedly agree with Ramadan that the dichotomy between *dar al-islam* and *dar al-harb* has become obsolete in our globalized world. This consensual assertion, however, often hides the differences that still underlie, in the minds of the ulama, Islamic thought and practice in the Muslim world, on one hand, and in the "diaspora," on the other.

For Ramadan, on the contrary, a European Islamic identity is not—or, should not be—a minimalist one. Exceptions based on rules of necessity (which, thus, do not question the norm) are no longer deemed suitable. Rather, Muslims in Europe (and now, in America too) must provide answers to the dilemmas they are facing, drawing mainly on the Islamic principle which states, "all that is not strictly forbidden is allowed," allowing them to incorporate whatever good they encounter.

This and other juristic principles governing the presence of Muslims in the West were first enunciated in his book, *To Be a European Muslim*, published in 1999. More recently, in his *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (2003), Ramadan has attempted to provide concrete applications for these principles.

In his lecture Ramadan adamantly stressed the importance of binding one's loyalty to Islamic faith to one's loyalty to the nation-state, whose secular values allow Muslims to live their religion peacefully. Referring to the contemporary reflection on issues of *fiqh al-aqalliyat* (Islamic law for Muslim minorities), which takes a similar stance on loyalty, Ramadan criticised what he perceived as the negative consequences of the minority syndrome, which encourages "ghettoization," preferring to emphasize the key concept of *citizenship* instead.

Arguably, at the grassroots level, this is already happening: "Western Muslims"—and this is a central theme of Ramadan's work—are shap-

**In the context of the exhibition *Urban Islam in Amsterdam* (see p. 44), the Royal Tropical Institute and the ISIM co-organised a series of lectures and debates. The theme of the meeting held on 27 April 2004 was "From Cyber Imam to European Islam: Youth and Islam in Europe." In his introduction to the event, Alexandre Caeiro (ISIM) focussed on how the Internet is giving rise to new types of socialization among Muslims in Europe, including original matrimonial strategies and enhanced modes of political mobilization. The main speaker for the evening was Tariq Ramadan who delivered a lively lecture on the role of Western Muslims and the future of Islam to a mixed audience of Muslim youth and non-Muslims.**



Tariq Ramadan at the European Social Forum, 2003

ing a new and civic form of Islamic religiosity in tune with their time and place. They are sowing, and perhaps already harvesting, the seeds for a "silent revolution," inexorably taking place outside the media limelight. In Ramadan's view, Western Muslims are thus starting to re-read the Islamic texts in the light of their cultural base and social context, attempting to reconcile between their Islamic values and those of the democratic forms of participation, and prevalent human rights discourses.

This, as Ramadan knows only too well, is only one part of the multifaceted dynamics of Islam in the West: along with progressive interpretations and positive engagement co-exist fundamentalist movements and strong inward tendencies, each claiming to speak for the true Islam. As a committed Muslim intellectual he is faced with a difficult choice: either to argue that only the ulama may interpret the religious texts, and thus exclude other voices (including, perhaps, his own) from the debate on the meaning of Islam; or to call for the democratization of religious interpretation, despite the very real fears that this may also lead to extremism.

Specifically questioned by the audience in relation to the above, Ramadan was rather prudent in his articulation of what constitutes Islamic authority in

the West: Muslims must start training their own future scholars, specialised in both Islamic sciences and knowledge of the local contexts and histories; but until then it is up to the ulama, including those living in the "East," to draw the contours of the Western Islam for which he has been advocating.

At the confluence of disciplines, Tariq Ramadan was perhaps not interested in (sociologically) dwelling on the impact of national dynamics on Muslims in the various European countries, nor did he elaborate on the links between Europe and America. More importantly, given his (implicit) theory that Muslims in the West *represent* the future of Islam, he did not address the specificities of "Western Muslims" regarding Muslims in the "East." A frequent visitor to Muslim majority countries, both in the centre and in the periphery, Ramadan is aware that the new perceptions emerging among Muslims in the Western world are not without precedents in the Muslim heartlands. As the life-stories of Alioune (Dakar), Farina (Panamaribo), Ferhat (Istanbul) and Hanane (Marrakech) from the *Urban Islam* exhibition (see p. 44) suggest, the Muslim world as well, is undergoing profound structural changes, forcing each individual believer to take position amid conflicting interpretations and engage in the hermeneutics of sorting out the cultural from the religious.

Alexandre Caeiro is a Ph.D. fellow at the ISIM.  
E-mail: caeiroa@yahoo.com

ALEXANDRE CAEIRO