

Ramadan's Radical Reform

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To cite this article: Tom Wilson (2017) Ramadan's Radical Reform, Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, 28:1, 33-46, DOI: [10.1080/09596410.2017.1282696](https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2017.1282696)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2017.1282696>



Published online: 07 Feb 2017.



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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Tariq Ramadan's reform agenda is relatively modest in scope and has not had the wide-ranging impact the more liberal intelligentsia may have wished for. The article is written from the perspective of a convinced and practising Christian. I am not seeking to prove myself right and Ramadan, or anyone else, wrong, but to evaluate Ramadan's reform process. The article is divided into four main sections. The first outlines Ramadan's argument that Muslims must move beyond slavish imitation towards a carefully thought out, contextually appropriate expression of Islam in the modern context. The second critiques Ramadan's arguments for a realistic pluralism and his suggestion that Muslims regard wherever they live as *dār al-shahāda*. The third outlines two areas where Ramadan directly challenges the majority opinion within Islam, asking whether these challenges are appropriate and effective. These areas are his call for a moratorium on the Islamic penal code and his desire for greater female involvement with mosques. The fourth section briefly examines Ramadan's critics before reinforcing the conclusion that Ramadan's reform, while radical in the sense of returning to Islam's roots, does not seek to bring about the changes that some might expect it to do.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 March 2015

Accepted 21 December 2016

KEYWORDS

Tariq Ramadan; reform;
pluralism; Islam

Beyond imitation

In his discussion of possible Muslim attitudes to British society, Tariq Ramadan (1999, 1) initially suggests two contrasting reactions. The first is assimilation, which would result in a loss of Muslim identity, a move Ramadan does not accept. As such it is not relevant to this article, and so will not be treated further here (although see Modood [2011] on issues raised by the drive to assimilation). The second is a binary view of the world that Ramadan (1999, 1) describes as a protective strategy whereby individuals and groups 'determine their identity in contrast with what it is not', and are very concerned with what is *ḥalāl* and what is *ḥarām*. Ramadan is critical of this view, regarding it as overly literalist, and arguing that Muslims should follow the principles enshrined in the Qur'an and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet) rather than engage in a woodenly literalist imitation of the letter of those prescriptions. Discussing the example of how the Prophet dressed, Ramadan (2009, 20) proposes that in order to imitate the Prophet one should not literally dress as he did but rather dress in a modest fashion appropriate to one's present context. In

Ramadan's view, to be Muslim does not mean one must literally imitate seventh-century Arabian Muslim practices and customs, but rather elucidate the underlying principles and adhere to them in a contextually appropriate fashion.

Ramadan himself rejects both assimilation and literalist stances, preferring what he describes as a 'reformist' path, which he encapsulates in his description of the place where Muslims find themselves as *dār al-shahāda* (the place of witness). According to Ramadan (1999, 123–150; 2004, 62–101), Muslims should be actively engaged with their surrounding society, in a visible but non-confrontational manner, living out their testimony as Muslims.

The example of food will illustrate his thinking. Ramadan (2004, 123; 2009, 236–252) argues that a focus on the method of slaughter is overly simplistic. He suggests that the only concern of many Muslims is to eat the 'correct' food, and weightier issues are given little or no consideration, reducing the choice to eat *ḥalāl* food to a simple boundary marker. He argues forcefully that debates over ritual slaughter have become more concerned with technical minutiae and have lost sight of the actual purpose of the injunctions, which is to ensure animals are cared for, raised and slaughtered in as decent a manner as possible. He suggests that to be concerned about technicalities of how an animal is killed while showing no concern for animal welfare, factory farming or overconsumption is 'illogical, astounding, and simply deranged' (Ramadan 2009, 237). In his discussion, Ramadan is concerned both about the mistreatment of animals and also about the waste that the food and farming industries generate, arguing that:

Ritual slaughter is a simple, day-to-day example, which perfectly reveals the contradictions within contemporary spiritual teachings. It emblemizes the whole problem: obsession with form regardless of substance, confusing means and ends, adoption of reform that is not suitable for transformation, and overdetermining norms while neglecting meanings: it is the heart of all contradictions. (238)

He goes on to argue that an organically reared, free range hen slaughtered without any ritual practices, but over whom the formula '*Bismi-Llāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*' is pronounced before consumption may actually be more *ḥalāl* than a factory farmed chicken, slaughtered in an approved abattoir, where the formula may simply be played on a recording, or even said endlessly by employees as they kill chickens by the hundred (249). Thus, for Ramadan, choices about food are far from simple, and potentially expose deeper spiritual challenges.

He raises similar concerns about all forms of consumption. He laments the fact that little consideration is given to the 'squandering of natural resources, to the exploitation of men, women, and children, to the outrageous treatment of animals' (247). When the only motives are profit and a veneer of Islamic respectability, Ramadan does not consider the goods and services produced to be genuinely *ḥalāl*. His criticism is strong, as he complains that:

Fast food is profitable, therefore Islamic, *halal* fast-food restaurants are put into operation, from McDonald's to other famous brands. Coke dominates the soft drink market, so a line of products labeled as 'Cola' emerges (Mecca Cola, Zem Zem Cola, Medina Cola) to recall the 'taste' of the parent company's product while they are alleged to resist the actions of the foreign company or constitute an alternative! (249)

Although the examples may at first glance seem relatively trivial, for Ramadan the underlying problems they identify are quite serious. The logic of such products indicates, he suggests, a veneer of ‘Islamity’ covering objectives that have little serious ethical concern, including indifference to the ‘collateral damage produced by such economic processes’. In the same way as some Muslims are satisfied that meat is *ḥalāl* if the animal has been slaughtered according to strict principles, regardless of how it was treated during its life, so equally little thought is given to how workers are treated in producing the ‘*ḥalāl*’ goods they consume. Ramadan’s clearest example is Fulla, a hijab-clad doll, ‘an Islamized duplicate of the Barbie doll complete with a line of accessories that, like it, is made in China’ (250). His point is not that Fulla is not an Islamic product, but that it is a symptom of the subversion and conquest of Islam by the capitalist system. This is not to say he is against children playing, or having dolls, but that he regards Fulla more as a cynical exploitation of a marketing opportunity than as an expression of an authentic Islamic faith.

Ramadan regards faith as an important personal choice, not as a by-product of birth or ethnicity. Therefore, when he discusses headscarves, to give a different example, he argues that choices made in relation to clothing should be outward manifestations of an inner and personal piety. He is critical of parents who force their daughters to wear headscarves without instilling in those same children the deep personal piety that such a choice ought, in Ramadan’s view, to reflect. He also argues that the choice to wear a headscarf is one that a Muslim might arrive at gradually, based on the fact that the injunction to cover oneself was given after 15 years, rather than in the first days of the revelation to the Prophet (Ramadan 2001, 53–54, 251–257). He moreover suggests that Muslim women in the West may wear headscarves as an indication of their faith, but they may also dress according to Western fashion trends (Ramadan 2004, 142), and the decision to wear a headscarf should be in no way coerced (Ramadan 2009, 219).

As the above examples have all suggested, Ramadan’s primary concern is for individuals (and communities) to take their faith seriously. It is not enough to slavishly imitate others; intelligent personal choices must be made.

A realistic pluralism and *dār al-shahāda*

Ramadan’s understanding of Islam is one of faithfulness rather than literalist imitation. Using the analogy of translation, I suggest he is against a word-for-word approach, and in favour of a more dynamic stance on translating faith into everyday life. He suggests that human beings, through their own reason and critical engagement with the sources of Islamic teaching (namely the Qur’an and Sunna), can put forward original proposals for how to live as authentic Muslims who are also in tune with their own context. Muslims must work hard at this process. He argues they should avoid a defensive approach, steering clear of ‘an integration that depends on a collection of legal opinions aimed at protection’, and instead endeavour to follow a route that allows Muslims to establish themselves freely and confidently and that opens the way for them to make a contribution to wider society (Ramadan 2004, 62).

This dynamic approach is evident in his expectations regarding societal interaction. The traditional Muslim approach to relations between and within societies has been to

divide the world into two opposing spheres: *dār al-islām* and *dār al-ḥarb*, normally translated as the ‘house of Islam’ and the ‘house of war’. Ramadan (63) suggests that these concepts are not found in the Qur’an or in the Sunna, but that they were developed by the ‘*ulamā*’, scholars who specialized in Islamic sciences, in response to the geo-political realities of the expanding Islamic empire. Ramadan’s point is that these ideas, whilst ancient, are not integral to Islam, although an endnote qualifies his argument, stating the concept of *dār al-ḥarb* is found three times, in two Hadiths of questionable authenticity. This minor reference aside, it appears clear that the idea of *dār al-islām* and *dār al-ḥarb* is venerable but not essential to Islam. But what exactly do the terms mean?

Ramadan (63–66) discusses the criteria necessary to establish a place as *dār al-islām*, suggesting four criteria are relevant for recognizing somewhere to be within the ‘house of Islam’: the population in the country; ownership of the land; the nature of the government; and the laws applied. He notes further that Islamic legal opinion varies as to exactly what is classed as *dār al-islām*, but quotes suggestions including defining it as ‘the property of Muslims where the Islamic legal system is applied (even if non-Muslims are in power)’ and an understanding that it can include any state where ‘practicing Muslims are in a position of safety’. There are also differences within Islamic thought regarding recognizing a country as *dār al-ḥarb*, but there is consensus that where the legal system and government are non-Islamic, that is *dār al-ḥarb*. This means that the population may be majority Muslim, but the country may not be *dār al-islām*. Finally, he notes that, although the country may be classified as belonging to the ‘house of war’, that does not necessarily mean an actual conflict is taking place.

The classification of a country as being within either *dār al-islām* or *dār al-ḥarb* is therefore not as straightforward as it might first be imagined. These definitional criteria mean that, if conditions of safety and security are applied as the primary criteria, then many Western countries are more likely to be classified as *dār al-islām* than many ‘Muslim’ countries where there may not be the same freedom of religion. For Ramadan (66), this exposes a fundamental weakness in the classificatory system, which is predicated on an entirely different world order.

In response to these difficulties, some scholars propose the existence of a third area, of *dār al-‘ahd*, the ‘abode of treaty’. It assumes that there are countries that, although they are not Muslim, have signed a treaty of peace and collaboration with one or more Muslim nations. The existence of organizations such as the United Nations or the Organization of African Unity supports the case for recognizing the place of *dār al-‘ahd*. Ramadan (67) has difficulties with this concept, arguing that the idea of *dār al-‘ahd* is founded on the existence of *dār al-islām* and *dār al-ḥarb*, for the ‘treaty’ only exists to prevent war. He also points out that the same term is used both of treaties between countries and of relations between Muslims and a state, which means the term becomes confused in its precise definition. Third, and most problematic, the idea of a treaty between a Muslim and a non-Muslim state implies that the Muslim is not in his own country. This will in fact perpetuate, rather than solve the problem. A Muslim born in the UK to parents also born in the UK is thus denied his British citizenship, and so the attempt to solve the problem in fact exacerbates it. This leads Ramadan to the conclusion that none of these classifications work, and so he suggests we need a new name for a new world order. He argues that ‘we are living in an age of diversity, blending, and extremely deep

complexity that cannot be understood or evaluated through a binary prism, which is as much simplistic as reductionist' (68).

Many scholars would agree with this point. Thus, for example, Sen (2006) critiques the simplistic understanding of the world by which people are defined merely by one distinguishing feature, such as religion. We all have complex identities, influenced by multiple factors, of which religion may be one, but ethnicity, geographical location, social class, educational achievement, aspirations, sexual orientation and employment status are but several more in the melting pot of personal and group identity. A binary prism is a distorted lens through which to view the world. A much more sophisticated approach is required. Ramadan (2010a, 37) himself quotes another example from Sen that illustrates the complexity of identity. Suppose you are a poet and a vegetarian. If you are a dinner guest, then you do not insist on your identity as a poet, and likewise when you attend a poetry circle, you do not introduce yourself as a vegetarian. Your context and situation determine which aspect of your identity you emphasize: requesting a vegetarian meal does not make one more (or less) of a poet; it simply indicates a preference regarding food.

Ramadan (2004, 69) argues that the teachings of Islam are universal, and the previous classificatory systems are all human constructs that were useful for their own time, but which are no longer relevant. So he suggests Muslims must go back to the Qur'an and Sunna, to the records of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and see if a new understanding can be developed. In developing a contextually relevant understanding of the world, he proposes that the two questions that must be asked are 'we who are' and 'what our religion expects of us as Muslims'.

In developing his understanding of how to respond, Ramadan (70–71) suggests that any society that guarantees freedom of conscience and worship to Muslims, and that protects their physical integrity and their freedom to act in accordance with their convictions, is not in fact a hostile society. He argues that this is true of Europe, where five fundamental rights are guaranteed that allow Muslims to feel at home in their countries of residence: namely 'the right to practice Islam, the right to knowledge, the right to establish organizations, the right to autonomous representation, and the right to appeal to law'. Speaking in constitutional and legal terms, European society is not anti-Islamic. Of course, that is not to say it is necessarily easy to be a Muslim in the West. First, there is the issue of how to maintain spirituality in a society that is secularized and industrialized, and which excludes religion from the public sphere. Second, there is the problem of the public perception and portrayal of Islam as a result of national and international news. Muslims face suspicion and harassment in the West, and these difficulties should not be minimized. The twin challenges of being religious in a secular society and being Muslim in a society that is uneasy with Muslims must not be underestimated.

In Ramadan's (72) view, there have, broadly speaking, been three responses from the *'ulamā'* to the challenge of living in Western European society. First, there is the view that the old concepts of *dār al-islām* and *dār al-ḥarb* are still valid, even if not every relevant condition has been met. Second, there are those who turn to the concept of *dār al-ahd* (abode of treaty) or *dār al-amn* (abode of safety). Third, there are those who develop the idea of *dār al-da'wā*, 'the abode of invitation to God'. Ramadan supports this third idea, but is unconvinced by the name. He suggests Muslims have a duty both to live out their faith and also to engage with the society that is around them, arguing that:

wherever a Muslim who declares, 'I bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger' lives in security and can fulfill his fundamental religious obligations, he is at home, for the Prophet taught us that the world is a mosque. (72–73)

This leads Ramadan to conclude that Muslims living in the West, both as individuals and as communities gathered together from a diverse range of countries, are not only free to live, but also bear the weight of responsibility to give testimony to their society, based on their faith, as to how to live as a human being created by Allah. Ramadan suggests the notion of *shahāda*, testimony, for two reasons: first, one is required to pronounce the *shahāda* before two witnesses in order to become a Muslim, and second because of the qur'anic injunction to bear witness to the faith before humanity (Q 2.143).

Having settled on his preferred term, *dār al-shahāda*, Ramadan (2004, 74–75) then develops six points that support this understanding. First, 'In pronouncing the *shahada*, Muslims testify to their faith and state a clear foundation for their identity' (74). It is a summary of a world-view, belief system and intention of how to live. Second, it is not just the first of the five pillars of Islam; it is the foundation, the rock, on which the other four pillars stand. Third, this means Muslims should be able to respect and comply with the commandments and regulations of their religion, and the observance of what is legitimate and illegitimate in their faith. Fourth,

To pronounce the *shahada* is to act before God in respect of His creation, for *al-iman* (faith) is in fact a pledge (*amana*). The *shahada* is, in effect, a promise to act in certain way, and to be a person whose word can be trusted and adhered to. (74)

Fifth, Muslims bear witness to the meaning of the *shahāda* to their fellow human beings; they should present Islam, the teachings of their faith, as witnesses (*shuhadā'*), which would include the idea of *da'wā*. Sixth, this witness is not simply verbal but includes action. 'To bear the *shahada* means to be engaged in society in every area where a need makes itself felt: unemployment, marginalization, delinquency, and so on' (74–75)

This, then, is why Ramadan is so in favour of the concept: it clearly establishes both Muslim identity and Muslim social responsibility in relation to wider society. On a technical note, he suggests that *dār* should not be translated in the limited sense of 'a house' or 'a dwelling', but rather in the more geographically broad sense of 'space', with a sense both of an environment and also of being open to the wider world. A house is, by definition, discrete, closed and limited, and what is needed is something much more open and free. Muslims should thus regard the area in which they live as a 'space of testimony', or as I have termed it 'a place of witness', which necessarily means they will be both distinctively Muslim and also actively engaged with the society in which they live. Finally, it is important to note that Ramadan understands Westernization and globalization more in terms of centre and periphery than in the sense of two opposing houses, and hence Muslims are called to be witnesses to Islam in both the centre and periphery of the world.

Ramadan's conclusion to his discussion sets out his vision clearly:

For Muslims at the heart of the West, there can be no question of falling back into the old binary vision and looking for enemies; it is rather a matter of finding committed partners like themselves who will make a selection from what Western culture produces in order to promote its positive contributions and resist its destructive by-products at both the human and the ecological level. More generally, it is also a matter of working for the promotion of a true religious and cultural pluralism on an international scale. Many European

and American intellectuals are fighting to ensure that the right of civilizations and cultures to exist is in fact respected. Before God, and with all men, in the West Muslims must be with them, *witnesses* engaged in this resistance, for justice, for all human beings, of whatever race, origin, or religion. (76).

Ramadan's fundamental call, therefore, is for Muslims to be witnesses in the society in which they find themselves. He describes Europe as 'an area of responsibility' (77) for Muslims and concludes that Muslims can no longer hide away or concentrate on protecting themselves or isolating themselves from the world. Instead they must give of themselves to better the societies of which they are part, both as individuals and as a collective group.

In his account of the life of the Prophet, Ramadan (2007, 59–62) sets out a clear example of the practice of living in *dār al-shahāda*, namely the first *hijra* (journey) from Mecca. In the first years of Islam, while Muhammad and his followers were still resident in Mecca, they experienced a significant degree of persecution from the Quraysh leaders in Mecca, who disliked Muhammad's message of allegiance to one God, as it challenged their belief in many gods, and the status of Mecca as a place people came to in order to worship these gods and receive their blessing. Muhammad himself was protected by his uncle, Abū Ṭālib, but many of his followers did not enjoy this luxury. Muhammad therefore suggested that they leave Mecca, and travel to Abyssinia, to seek the protection of the Negus, the Christian king of Abyssinia, who had a reputation for respectful and fair treatment of his people.

Ramadan reports that around one hundred people left Mecca in 615 CE, five years after Muhammad's first revelation, and travelled to Abyssinia. The Quraysh leaders learnt of this emigration, and were troubled by it. The establishment of a second Muslim community would be a great threat, especially if they were able to establish an alliance with as significant a ruler as the Negus. They therefore sent a delegation of two emissaries, 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ and 'Abdullāh ibn Rabīʿa, to persuade the Negus to send the Muslims back to Mecca. Initially, they hoped he might do so without even hearing their case, but this was not to be.

The Negus summoned both parties. The Muslims chose Jaʿfar ibn Abū Ṭālib as their spokesperson. He explained to the Negus the basic teachings of Islam, and their experience of persecution in Mecca. He emphasized the Islamic belief in one God, rejection of idols, and the injunction to respect kinship ties, speak truthfully and oppose injustice. Jaʿfar added that it was because of this teaching that the Muslims were experiencing persecution, and so they had sought protection in Abyssinia. Jaʿfar also recited a portion of *Sūrat Maryam*, the chapter of the Qur'an that teaches about the birth of Jesus.

Ramadan offers the following translation of the relevant portion:

Relate in the Book [the story of] Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East. She placed a screen [to screen herself] from them: then when We sent to her our angel, and he appeared to her as a man in all respects. She said: 'I seek refuge from you in the shelter of the Most Gracious, if you fear Him.' He said: 'I am only a messenger from your Lord [to announce] to you the gift of a pure son.' She said, 'How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and that I am not unchaste?' He said: 'So [it will be]; your Lord says: "That is easy for Me and [We wish] to appoint him as a sign to men and a mercy from Us": it is a matter decreed.' (60–61)

The Negus favourably received this reference to Jesus' virgin birth and he was inclined to grant the Muslims' request for asylum. However 'Amr and 'Abdullāh were not finished yet. They spoke with the Negus privately, suggesting that Muslim beliefs about Jesus were not as similar to Christian ones as the Negus had first thought. The Negus, desiring clarification, summoned Ja'far and his delegation a second time, demanding further information about what Muhammad taught about Jesus. This placed the Muslims in a difficult situation. Should they fudge the issue, to ensure security, or speak clearly, and risk expulsion and a return to Mecca, which would almost certainly lead to death for at least some of them?

Ja'far resolved to be truthful. The Negus asked him what Muslims believed about Jesus, son of Mary. He responded: 'We say what our Prophet has taught us: he is God's servant, His messenger, His Spirit, His Word that he breathed into Mary, the Holy Virgin' (61). Although there was no reference to Jesus as Son of God, there was enough to satisfy the Negus, who reportedly took a stick and exclaimed, 'Jesus, son of Mary, does not exceed what you have said by the length of this stick.' This conflation of theological positions surprised the Negus' religious advisors, but their concerns were ignored, the Muslims were granted asylum, and the Qurayshi delegation were sent back to Mecca. Ja'far and his community were able to remain in Abyssinia for as long as they chose; they were welcomed and protected, despite the differences between their beliefs and Christian ones.

If this episode is thought of as a clear example of living in *dār al-shahāda*, then what exactly does it teach? It could be held up as a model of how different religious groups can co-exist peacefully. However the story does not end there. Ramadan concludes the story by noting that the Negus converted to Islam and 'remained in continuous contact with the Prophet Muhammad. He represented the latter at a wedding ceremony, and the Prophet performed the prayer for the absent dead (*salat al-ghaib*) when he learned of the Negus' death' (62). The Negus therefore did not remain a Christian, but once he encountered Islam, he became a Muslim, and so the story is not of two faiths co-existing peacefully, but of an encounter between two faiths leading to conversion from one faith to another.

In the light of the Negus' conversion to Islam, it is therefore difficult to argue that the first *hijra* from Mecca to Abyssinia is simply an example of peaceful co-existence in a multi-faith context. Rather, it is a further example of the rapid growth of Islam in the first decades of its existence. The historical reality cannot be denied, but neither can it be held up as an example of different faiths co-existing peacefully and respectfully together. If living in *dār al-shahāda* includes the expectation that all those who encounter Islamic witness will convert to Islam, then it is not a suitable mode of existence for a pluralistic context. Ramadan does not make an explicit statement about this either in his account of the Negus or in his discussion of *dār al-shahāda*, but it is an important point of clarification. Does *dār al-shahāda* presume eventual conversion to Islam?

In his discussion as to whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God, the Protestant theologian Miroslav Volf (2011, 219–238) argues that it is possible to be simultaneously religiously exclusivist and politically pluralist. There are, of course, many examples of societies that have been both religiously and politically exclusivist. Volf (225) suggests that the sixteenth-century Christian principle *Cuius regio, eius religio* (the religion of the ruler is the religion of the people) is one example, and that the

Muslim idea of *dhimmī*, whereby a non-Muslim subject in a Muslim state enjoys protection but not equal rights, is another. The example of the conversion of the Negus could arguably also be an example of both religious and political exclusivism. But this does not mean that religious exclusivism necessarily leads to political exclusivism.

Volf suggests two basic conditions that are necessary for political pluralism: that the state is impartial in its treatment of all religions and that each religion is allowed to bring its own understanding of the good life into the public arena. He further proposes that Muslim and Christian monotheisms share two common assumptions that promote political pluralism. These are, first, a belief in the ethical dimension of religious faith and, second, a belief that monotheism decoupled religion from the state and from ethnic belonging. Regarding the first point, justice, law and freedom are all essential components of Abrahamic monotheism, and love of neighbour is enshrined in their teaching to the extent that love of others is a manifestation of love of God. Regarding the second point, salvation is not the same as membership of a particular state or ethnic group. Granted, both Christians and Muslims consider themselves to be a universal group, but this is one that transcends all other ties. These two points lead Volf (2011, 230) to suggest:

Since religion is not identical with the state, and since doing justice and loving all neighbors is a religious duty, we must affirm (1) the appropriateness of there being more than one religion in a given state as well as (2) the right of each religious group to pursue its own religious vision of the good life.

Ultimately, a religious exclusivist can also be politically pluralist because of a belief that God relates to all people on equal terms, that love of neighbour necessarily demands freedom of religion and a refusal to coerce in matters of faith. Does Ramadan's vision of *dār al-shahāda* embrace this understanding? A recent publication suggests it probably does.

In 2010, Ramadan published *The Quest for Meaning: Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism*. It is remarkably different from most of his previously published works. Most of his writings have tended to focus primarily on Islam, in particular on how Muslims can live an authentic life of faith in the twenty-first-century West. These books suggest that Ramadan is religiously exclusivist, understanding Islam to be *the* true path. But *The Quest for Meaning* has a remarkably different tone. It does not promise certainty, or clear answers in the quest (2010b, xii), but it is a search for commonality and the universal. This does not mean religious pluralism, because for Ramadan the aim is not integration leading to the elimination of difference, but the elucidation of 'spaces of intersection where we can meet on equal terms' (Ramadan 2010b, 24).

The quest for spaces of intersection requires knowledge of the other. Ramadan is clear that isolation is not an option, arguing that we cannot simply remain theoretically opposed to Islamophobia whilst not knowing any Muslims personally. Rather, we must 'free ourselves from the ghetto of our noble, secure mind in order to enter the world of raw, tenacious and sometimes mad and dangerous emotions' (41). Encounter with those who are very different from myself does, of course, ultimately also become an encounter with myself. It is only as I engage with differences that I come to realize what I myself am like.

The expectations of *The Quest for Meaning* are those of a religious exclusivist who is also politically pluralist. In a similar vein, Jonathan Chaplin (2011) argues for a Christian retrieval of multiculturalism, suggesting that it is quite possible to hold an exclusivist

understanding of salvation whilst also wanting to support engagement with a diverse range of people. In an earlier report, Chaplin (2009, 21) refers to Rowan Williams' distinction between 'programmatically' and 'procedurally' secularism:

The former intentionally imposes a secularist faith on the public realm and works to privatise religious faith as much as possible, while the latter seeks to allow all faith perspectives equal access to the public realm but claims to confer no political privilege on any.

Although the terminology differs, and there are perhaps some technical differences between them, 'realistic pluralism' and 'procedural secularism' share the common cause of recognizing difference and simultaneously affirming a desire to work closely together. Ramadan (2001, 186) expresses similar sentiments elsewhere, arguing that a committed Christian or Jew cannot be expected to compromise all they believe in order to work together with a Muslim. Provided that there is freedom of religious belief, and individuals are able to enter and leave a religion as they personally see fit, then Ramadan's vision of *dār al-shahāda* is arguably appropriate for life in twenty-first-century Britain. But if there is an expectation of conversion, or of Islamic primacy, then this is no longer the case.

Challenging the status quo

The third main section of this article outlines two areas where Ramadan challenges the established beliefs and practice of the majority of Muslims, noting that in both cases he has had very limited success in bringing about reform. The areas are his call for a moratorium on certain aspects of the Islamic penal code and his desire to see greater female involvement in mosques.

The Islamic penal code (ḥudūd) and the moratorium

In March 2005, Tariq Ramadan launched a call for a moratorium on certain aspects of the Islamic penal code (*ḥudūd*), namely the death penalty, corporal punishment and stoning, in the Muslim world (Ramadan 2005). This call was not that warmly received by many Muslims, and he recalls how much of the response to him did not engage with the substance of his argument, but criticized him either for suggesting a moratorium at all or for not going far enough (that is, for not calling for an outright ban) (Ramadan 2009, 274–276).

The essence of Ramadan's argument in his call for a moratorium is that Islam is a message of equality and justice. His concern is that, although the majority of religious teachers may claim that the restrictions around when the stipulations of *ḥudūd* could actually be carried out mean it would almost never be applicable in real life, the reality is that many women and men are beaten, stoned and executed in the name of *ḥudūd*. That is to say, his concern is that misapplication of the Islamic penal code is being used to subvert the fundamental tenets of Islam concerning the dignity of people, and their right to equality and justice. He does not call for an outright ban, because he believes to do so would be to set himself up as having greater authority than the Qur'an, and he does not wish to do that. He recognizes the presence of texts within the Qur'an that do support the *ḥudūd*, and does not seek to abrogate or deny them. Rather, his concern is that, until the proper conditions under which those texts apply can be clearly established by the majority of scholars, it is preferable to have a moratorium on the use of the punishments than to allow injustice to

be perpetuated. The moratorium calls for work to be done, not for an unthinking change. The issues must be debated and evaluated, not left untouched.

Ramadan was hurt by some of the responses he received. He defends himself, arguing that he has not abandoned Islam, but has remained true to the methodology of decision making, asking what the texts say, in what conditions their stipulations can be applied and under what social context. What was possibly especially hurtful was the experience of scholars who supported his views in private, but then would not do so in public. His attempt at reform within Islam on the particularly difficult and fraught topic of capital punishment appears to have stumbled and stalled. The challenge is in essence that Ramadan does not wish to abrogate the qur'anic texts that establish *hudūd*, but neither does he want them to be put into practice. He is caught on the horns of this dilemma and does not seem to have found a way to extricate himself. He continues to argue that implementing Sharia law 'does not mean enforcing prohibitions and imposing a strict, timeless penal code', but rather that it should be seen as 'a call for social justice, for respect for the rights of children, women and men to education, housing and employment, as well as personal fulfilment and wellbeing' (Ramadan 2012, 126). There is no place, in Ramadan's view, for implementing the *hudūd*, but at the same time, there is no reason to revoke the Sharia either.

The mosque

Ramadan suggests that the role and function of mosques within society is a specific concrete area where the role and status of women can be discussed in some detail. He recognizes mosques as religious spaces 'expressing a certain idea of authority, the substance of a discourse, and the distribution of roles' (Ramadan 2009, 221). This is not new within Islam, but the choices made about welcoming women (or otherwise) are reflective of wider social attitudes and their position within the social structure.

In Ramadan's view, what is of particular significance in the example of the mosque is the fact that women were welcome to and active within the Prophet's mosque in Medina, but this is rarely replicated in Islam today. Instead, mosques have become 'essentially men's places', a reality which Ramadan argues 'does not correspond to the higher objectives of Islam's message' (222). He recognizes that there are Hadiths that express the idea that it is preferable for women to pray at home, but regards the counter-argument of the Prophet's own practice and the core tenets of Islam's teaching as indicating that mosques should be open to women. He argues that, in the mosque in Medina, men would line up at the front and women behind them in order to preserve modesty, but they were in the same space, and all were able to express their views.

Ramadan recognizes that the realities of modern life and cultural expectations may mean that it is impossible to go back to a single common space, but this does not mean that men and women could not have equal access to facilities of the same standard. What is especially challenging is that during festivities (notably the month-long Ramadan fast), women's facilities are taken over by men, and the women are expected to pray at home. The problem is not just limited to provision of space to pray: mosque councils are invariably exclusively male domains. Until this changes, Ramadan argues, there will be no real reform of how mosques are run. This is not just for reasons of equality, but also in order to promote the spiritual wellbeing of the whole community. He suggests

that women, more than men, ‘encourage spiritual, meaning-oriented teaching, rather than formalistic approaches confined to rites, obligations, and prohibitions’ (223). Only when women are in governance roles within mosques will this benefit be felt throughout Muslim communities, which in particular need to continue to engage with younger Muslims to ensure they remain committed to the faith.

Ramadan himself may not be able to demonstrate much success in this area, but while my own experience confirms the reality he outlines, there are signs of change. I concur that invariably mosques are almost exclusively male domains. Of the five places that I am aware of where Muslims gather to pray in a city where I used to live, three are established mosques that make no provision for women, one is a newly established Sufi mosque, which has plans to build a separate women’s facility, and one is a prayer room above an Islamic bookshop, where equal provision is made for men and women (one room is available for each gender), and when they hire a local Muslim community centre’s facilities for Eid prayers, half of the space is available for each gender. This bookshop is the most recently established of the five, reflecting perhaps that more modern Muslim organizations are more concerned to make provision for women. There are therefore some small signs of changes in this area, although it is difficult to argue that the changes are adequate for the expectations of Muslims born and raised in the UK or that Ramadan is pivotal in bringing about these changes.

How radical is Ramadan’s reform?

Ramadan’s work has been subject to relatively little scholarly research. Indeed, I have only found two volumes that engage specifically with his work. In a book first published in French in 2004, Caroline Fourest, an investigative journalist, seeks to expose Ramadan as closely following the agenda of his grandfather, Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906–1949), the Islamist who oversaw the birth of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Fourest 2008). Fourest argues that Ramadan is al-Bannā’s heir, that he is not especially well qualified for the role he has on the global stage and that his agenda is of a creeping Islamization, under cover of a thin veneer of scholarly respectability.

Al-Bannā’s beliefs and politics are not the concern of this article, and there are both similarities and differences between Tariq Ramadan and his grandfather. (On al-Bannā’s life, see Commins [2005]; Ehrenfeld [2011]; Soage [2009]; Whine [2001].) Fourest is correct in her suggestion that his grandson has emulated al-Bannā’s view that Islam impacts every aspect of life, but it is questionable whether Ramadan’s agenda is as sinister and duplicitous as she suggests. She is certainly right that he is an apologist for al-Bannā. Ramadan (2012, 76) portrays his grandfather very positively, arguing that he established the Muslim Brotherhood with very specific objectives: ‘a return to Islam, programmes of mass education, social and economic reform, implementing Islamic legislation and, in the long run, setting up an “Islamic state”’. He argues that al-Bannā set up the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization that opposed violence and sought to work entirely within the law. He acknowledges that the Muslim Brotherhood was engaged in an anti-colonial struggle against British rule in Egypt, but states it remained non-violent until the early 1960s (76–77).

Ramadan argues that the violence associated with the Muslim Brotherhood came later, when different, more revolutionary, leaders were in charge of the organization. He defends

his grandfather's reputation, wishing to portray him as an authentic Muslim who did not engage in violence for the sake of violence, who respected the rule of law and who aimed to bring about reform through calling people back to the roots of Islam. This is also Ramadan's vision, and there is perhaps an element of his projecting his own ideals onto his grandfather's actions and speeches. Ramadan is not a political activist in the sense that his grandfather was; he has not founded a political or revolutionary movement; he speaks more as a lone figure than as the representative of any organization. He has socialist economic views and preaches ideals more than outlining pragmatic realities for reform. He advocates serious adherence to Islam and as the discussion of *dār al-shahāda* above showed, and is arguably ambiguous as to the place of Islam in a pluralist society. But he does not promote violence or hatred of the West, and Fourest's condemnation is overly harsh.

Gregory Baum's sympathetic portrait of Ramadan argues that his call for a moratorium on the death penalty for adultery (as opposed to a call for an outright ban) came because of his desire to work within the Muslim community. To publically oppose clear qur'anic teaching would, Baum (2009, 101–104) suggests, alienate Ramadan from the very people he is attempting to reach. Thus, Tariq Ramadan attempts to be authentically Muslim whilst also engaging positively with Western society (Laurence 2007), a difficult balance to strike, and one that perhaps leads to misunderstanding.

It may be that his critics misunderstand Ramadan, or it may be that they demand more from him than he is prepared to give. Certainly the negative reaction to his call for a moratorium over *ḥudūd* could be explained in both ways. Critics may well have recognized the limited nature of Ramadan's call, and want him to be bolder, calling for an outright ban, but this may be because they do not understand that to do so would alienate Ramadan still further from the more conservative Muslim groups with whom he wishes to engage.

Ramadan's most recent book (2012) addresses the so-called Arab Spring. It is a continuation of his call for reform within Islam, concentrating this time on Muslim majority countries, in contrast to his more normal target of Muslims in the West. He argues that these countries must take responsibilities for their own futures, stating, for example, that they must give 'serious and sustained consideration to the relationship of Islam to authority in its many forms' (89). The call for reform echoes that of his previous works. Education must be the foundation stone in the establishment of a just and fair society where all can prosper (126). He continues to portray himself as a true Muslim, demanding that all those who claim to follow his faith re-examine their own presuppositions and actions in the light of the Qur'an and Sunna.

Ramadan argues in favour of *radical* reform. This should be understood in relation to the Latin root *radix* (root). That is to say, he advocates a return to the fundamental principles of Islam, not the liberalization that some think he favours. Ramadan is neither a religious pluralist nor a liberal (although *The Quest for Meaning* [2010b] does have elements of bafflingly obtuse post-modern prose that could be read as both religiously pluralist and liberal). He wants Muslims to take their faith seriously, but not seek to literally reproduce the conditions of seventh-century Arabia in twenty-first-century Britain. To this end, his call for reform is a call to return to first principles. He argues that Western Muslims should 'act as a bridge between the aspirations of young people in Arab society and the positive experience of young American and European citizens' (Ramadan 2012, 157) and that this will be a vital part of building a more peaceful, more just world. Ramadan's reform, if

implemented, will not radically liberalize contemporary British Islam. Rather, it will give British Muslims renewed confidence and a greater certainty of their faith. It might also make it easier for Muslims to engage intelligently with the wider society in which they live.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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