

Brother Tariq: The Doublespeak of Tariq Ramadan

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Many readers of *Democratiya* will also be readers of Harry's Place, a blog that promotes leftwing critiques of Islamism. This June, its writer David Toube wrote about the launch of a Government funded organisation called Campus Salam: 'designed to help to deradicalise Muslim students at University by providing them with a safe space to talk about Islam, free from the clutches of the evil jihadists.' A non-Muslim friend sent him an enthusiastic email about the project.

Toube's concern was that the venture would be used as a base for the Muslim Brotherhood, a far-right theocratic organisation that stands for the word of God over the rule of law, for the oppression of women, for the murder of apostates, and (as Hamas) for terrorist attacks against civilians.

Don't worry, my friend said. We will be looking for genuine moderate voices in the Muslim community to help us out. Indeed, my friend said, he'd been talking to a very intelligent and moderate Muslim leader who was advising them how to defeat radicalisation. Perhaps I'd heard of him? His name was Tariq Ramadan. [1]

Who?

Tariq Ramadan is considered *the* Islamic thinker of our time. Recently named the eighth top public intellectual by *Prospect* magazine, he has also been profiled by the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*, in which he was praised by Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash respectively. He is a visiting research fellow of St Anthony's College at Oxford University, has lectured on Islam to the Metropolitan Police, was a member of a European Commission advisory panel on dialogue between people and cultures, and sat on the UK government's working group, 'Preventing Extremism Together' – set up by Tony Blair in the aftermath of the London bombs. A gifted orator, his written output is no less formidable: around fifteen books plus articles and prefaces, and over a hundred audio cassette

tapes, recorded from his constant speaking engagements in Europe, America and Africa.

Why is Ramadan in demand?

Terry Pratchett's fantasy novel *Small Gods* – possibly the best fictional portrait of religion – introduces us to a fearsome villain: Deacon Vorbis, head of the dreaded Quisition. 'A murderer, and a creator of murderers,' Vorbis is also the embodiment of fundamentalism – he has 'a mind like a steel ball ... nothing gets in, nothing gets out.' [2]

A non-porous steel ball is a poetic illustration of the fanatical mind. Yet reading Tariq Ramadan, the impression is rather of a thick mist. His thinking seems not narrow but wide open. As his exasperated debating partners have found, trying to get a clear answer out of him is like trying to nail fog to a wall.

Watching him on You Tube, he is warm, pleasant, and empathetic. In debate, he tends to appeal to the middle ground, often framing the argument in such a way as to make his position appear the sensible compromise. 'I'm good for the middle,' he once quipped. (p. 225) His speech, Caroline Fourest says, is 'so ambiguous that one can make anything one wants of it.' (p. 197) It's perhaps this ambiguity that is the key to his popularity with so many disparate groups, from government ministers to academics to Islamic conservatives to anti-globalism leftists. His lectures to these groups differ in content, however: journalist Aziz Mouride was 'astonished to hear him say things in Morocco that he would never dare say in Switzerland or in France.' (p. 221) Ramadan is 'a champion at this game, even modulating his tone of voice to fit the public he is addressing.' (p. 264)

People in the West have been shockingly ignorant of Islam and Middle Eastern thought. In his foreword to this English translation of the French feminist Caroline Fourest's 2004 book on Ramadan, Labour MP Denis MacShane explained the situation: 'For most of the twentieth century, the different currents of religious politics in the Muslim world were little known beyond a narrow circle of specialists in Europe's universities and research institutes.' (p. 7)

No one knew much about Islam, and no one was interested in Islam – until the moment in the twenty-first century when it was suddenly, vitally important to understand the religion and the cultures surrounding it. Western policy makers

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needed to get up to speed. They needed to know everything relevant about a rich and diverse faith stretching back to the seventh century: and they needed it simplified, on PowerPoint fact sheets, in bullet points. And they also needed a way to integrate troubling aspects of this faith with the modern world.

Tariq Ramadan was the man. A good-looking, intelligent, courteous Swiss Muslim who played as well with disaffected Arab immigrants as he did with Western intellectuals. True, Ramadan was the grandson of Hassan al-Banna, founder of the totalitarian Muslim Brotherhood movement. But Ramadan didn't talk as if he wanted to see bombs go off on public transport.

A debate with Ayaan Hirsi Ali gives a fair representation of his stated positions. 'I am a European Muslim and there is no contradiction... Yes we have multiple identities. Don't tell me that I am only a Muslim. And this is what we are spreading around in the Muslim communities. And I hope that you have as many identities as me.' On the vexed issue of Muslim integration: 'I am sorry to hear people saying that they will never integrate. I'm sorry, it's done... You have to look at your own society in a different way. The religious integration, it's done, millions of Muslim citizens are already citizens.' He talks of 'rereading' and 'contextualising' the Koran. 'You do not have to essentialise,' he says. 'There are certain things that are immutable – the way we pray, the way we fast, but the great majority of the verses are to be contextualised.' And he says that there is 'no faithfulness without evolution.' [3]

An academic, with the credibility of the Arab street, who could also speak the language of the focus group. What better man could there be to promote community cohesion? In Paul Berman's summary:

Ramadan, the worthy interlocutor, stands for more than himself, which is why engaging him might be useful – in order to discover the human and philosophical principles that Western and Muslim hearts and minds might share in common, and to bridge the divisions, and at last to achieve, between the West and Islam, a cultural peace: the goals that every reasonable person yearns to see achieved. [4]

Islam and Modernity: Where does Tariq Ramadan stand?

Let's start with the question of ambiguity. It is a great attribute to be able to see both sides of an argument. But an open mind is not enough – what is also required,

especially in politics, is a sense of judgement. Sometimes neutrality is inhumane.

Berman quotes an exchange between Ramadan and Nicolas Sarkozy on the French debating show 'One Hundred Minutes to Convince.' The talk got around to the practice of stoning women who commit adultery. What did Ramadan think of that? 'Ramadan, in Buruma's account, 'replied that he favoured a moratorium' on such practices but refused to condemn the law outright.'":

Sarkozy: Just one point. I understand you, but Muslims are human beings who live in 2003 in France, since we are speaking about the French community, and you have just said something particularly incredible, which is that the stoning of women, yes, the stoning is a bit shocking, but we should simply declare a moratorium, and then we are going to think about it in order to decide if it is good.... But that's monstrous – to stone a woman because she is an adulterer! It's necessary to condemn it!

Ramadan: Mr. Sarkozy, listen well to what I am saying. What I say, my own position, is that the law is not applicable – that's clear. But today, I speak to Muslims around the world and I take part, even in the United States, in the Muslim world.... You should have a pedagogical posture that makes people discuss things. You can decide all by yourself to be a progressive in the communities. That's too easy. Today my position is, that is to say, 'We should stop.'

Sarkozy: Mr. Ramadan, if it is regressive not to want to stone women, I avow that I am a regressive. [5]

This was astonishing, and not just because such a celebrated academic managed to make Nicolas Sarkozy look like a liberal thinker. Ramadan could be said to speak to and for millions of Muslims across the world. He claimed to be an Islamic reformist. Here was an opportunity to state, clearly, unequivocally and to an audience of six million, that the stoning of adulterers was wrong. That Islam didn't need violence against women. Future historians could have pointed to Ramadan's condemnation as the trigger for an Islamic reformation. It was his chance. And he blew it.

Yet the missed opportunity didn't damage his reputation. The writer Oliver Roy defended Ramadan's stance. Berman summed up the mood: 'Better the seventh century than Nicolas Sarkozy.' [6]

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Demokratiya readers will understand Ramadan's appeal to large sections of the left, for the left's dominant narrative is anti-imperialism. Bush and Blair were attempting to create a new American empire by invading sovereign countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq: Iran is next in the crosshairs. This was a continuation of the project of nineteenth-century Europeans determined to civilise the African savages with bayonet and grapeshot. Leftists were disgusted by politicians' talk of spreading democracy and freeing people from oppression. Many felt that governments had debased the language of the Enlightenment by using it to justify wars in which thousands of civilians were killed. As Fourest notes, 'This opinion may be shared by all those who are fed up seeing the American government drape itself in the cloak of humanitarianism every time it seeks to defend its financial and oil interests, particularly in Iraq.' (p. 240) Or, as Ramadan himself put it: 'Human rights are the pretext for economic policies that cannot be presented as such.' (p. 240)

However, this outrage over the hijacking of human rights discourse shaded into a general contempt for the concept of human rights in and of itself. Instead the priority was to defend Islamic cultures from the new imperial hegemony. Liberal thinkers who had once been fiery atheists now saw religion, particularly Islam, as both a bulwark against US imperialism and a viable alternative to the decadent consumer culture of the West. The comment pages of Britain's leading progressive newspaper teemed with advocacies by and for religious fundamentalists, including a column calling for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate. [7]

Ramadan is adept at post-colonial discourse. 'The model of secularism that has made European societies what they are and that they have even forced on their colonies... well, as for us,' he tells Muslims, 'we must select in that model what will allow us to remain faithful to our founding principles.' (p. 213) Globalisation, he says, is another name for Westernisation. (p. 235) Residue of Victorian imperialism lies everywhere: 'If I [the coloniser] depart from you, but leave in your keeping the rules and regulations of everyday life, I am still in your house.' (p. 236) Hollywood is not an entertainment industry but 'an industry that conveys an ideology.' (p. 237) At times, his rhetoric becomes conspiratorial: 'We also know that the architect of [the Iraq war] in the heart of the Bush administration is Paul Wolfowitz, a notorious Zionist, who has never concealed that the fall of Saddam Hussein would guarantee a better security for Israel with its economic advantages assured.' [8]

The important thing was to defend the culture under attack, and the first battle was not long in coming. A 2004 law banned the wearing of veils, headscarves and other

ostentatious religious symbols at school. As Fourest points out, the veil has dubious Koranic authority: scriptures instruct women to ‘draw their veils over their bosoms’ (p. 164) – and that’s it. *Brother Tariq* discusses the case of a seventeen-year-old who was expelled from a lycée because she would not remove her headscarf. The pupil was asked by a reporter ‘on what verses of the Koran she based her decision.’ [p. 169] She tried to find justification in the scripture and could not.

Yet Tariq Ramadan claims that the *hijab* is supported ‘by all schools of thought in Islam, Sunni or Shia’ [9] and that ‘According to scholars... it’s an obligation in Islam.’ (p. 167) The French Marxist Yves Coleman comments: ‘Ramadan always uses the word “contextualisation” but when it amounts to such a basic sign of woman’s oppression as the hijab he forgets the holy “context” and approves the most reactionary Muslim philosophers and “scientists” – on this matter, as on many others.’ [10]

As Fourest explains, many of the younger generation are much more conservative than their *soixant-huitard* parents and rebel against them by embracing reaction and conformity. Still, if a girl wants to wear a hijab to school – with or without Koranic authority – why stop her? Ramadan’s support for girls defying the 2004 legislation can be interpreted in this libertarian way. ‘It’s also necessary to call on the law and on our rights,’ (p. 169) he says.

But as Berman points out, the question was also whether Muslim women and girls had the right not to wear the headscarf. Many were pressured into the dress by misogynistic elders and the wider Muslim community. They were also pressured into refusing participation in gym class on grounds of modesty; and, more seriously, into questioning curricular coverage. Fourest talks of the ‘increasing difficulties’ teachers were having ‘when it came to studying the Holocaust or evolution.’ (p. 212)

The headscarf ban was intended to create a space of freedom: where people could be themselves and think for themselves without the influence of ideology and tradition. Conversely, says Berman, the *hijab* itself was ‘a mechanism of Islamist enforcement... precisely the item of clothing that guaranteed that any Muslim girl or woman who dared to venture into the wrong doorway or to take her place in the wrong classroom was going to be instantly visible to everyone who might disapprove.’ [11]

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Double-speak

Fourest and others have been listening not just to what Tariq Ramadan says to liberal Westerners, but what he says to religious conservatives.

According to Ramadan, the reason women should be veiled is that ‘men are the weakest of the two [genders] and because the way men look at women is much more fragile than the reverse. This veil is a protection for the weakest of the two.’ In other words: women must be covered up to protect men from their own carnal appetites. Ramadan also counsels for ‘modesty’ in general: ‘If you try to attract men’s look by your forms, your perfume, your appearance or your gestures... you are not taking a spiritual path.’ A Muslim woman ‘can’t marry a man from another religion.’ And nor can she divorce: ‘not an innocent act,’ [12] apparently.

What of the position of women in general? Ramadan does not want a ‘prohibition’ on women working – as long as, of course, they respect ‘the rules of modesty.’ [13] But let’s not go mad here: ‘We are not going to go to the lengths you sometimes see in Western society...We’re not going to be so stupid as to say: prove you’re liberated, be a truck driver, drive a truck...’ (pp. 177-78) Here Fourest notes Ramadan’s use of the anti-feminist ‘butch dyke’ stereotype beloved of Western reactionaries. Okay then – if Western liberation is too extreme, what kind of society represents the feminist model for Muslim women? It happens to be... Iran. This fundamentalist state is ‘the most advanced as concerns the promotion of women,’ Ramadan explains. (p. 179)

Another vexing issue is gay rights. For once Ramadan speaks plainly: ‘[H]omosexuality is not something that Islam permits.’ (p. 186) Also: ‘The public legalisation of homosexuality, which is what is demanded in Europe, is inconceivable in Islam’ (p. 187) although Ramadan, generously, is prepared to ‘guid[e] them towards a more righteous way.’ (p. 187)

Yet it is sexuality *in general* that infuriates and obsesses Ramadan, as it infuriates and obsesses all religious fundamentalists. To reduce temptation he argues for separation of the sexes, and even considers it immoral for an unmarried woman and an unmarried man to be alone in the same room. Naturally, abortion should be dependent on the approval of Muslim male authorities: ‘the approach has to be made on an individual basis’ (good luck with that.) Contraception is a no-no except for coitus interruptus: a ‘natural contraception... practised by the Prophet.’ [14]

He advises men to 'keep your eyes glued to the pavement,' for fear of inadvertently looking at posters of naked women. Warning against 'lustful looks,' (p. 192) he led an angry campaign against mixed swimming pools: 'You can't go there because you will be looking at things you shouldn't be seeing!' (p. 193) Clubbing is out of bounds: 'The lights go dim, there's more racket and you lose your head.' (p. 204) All religions are cults of purity, and their attitude towards sex represses the sexual instinct while perversely magnifying the significance of the act itself. And like all fundamentalists, Ramadan is against not just desire but pleasure.

From his early days campaigning against the staging of a Voltaire play, Ramadan has subscribed to what Fourest calls 'the communitarian concept of culture.' (p. 202) Fourest should be credited for coining this term, for it is the underlying concept behind the recent cases of religious censorship or attempted censorship from the protests against the film of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* to the threats made against the Bangladeshi author Talisma Nasreen.

This is not about political correctness, or even, fundamentally, religion; it's summed up by Ramadan's words on literature: 'One has to choose, or select; and the community must take part in the process.' (p. 202) As Fourest asserts: 'If selection is not an individual matter, but a collective obligation, then that means the community must organise the censorship of books, music and films deemed to be in conflict with Islamic morality' (p. 202) – which Ramadan advocates: 'The intent and content of artistic expression... must stay in tune with Islamic ethics.' [15]

We're back to Vorbis's steel ball. In truth, Ramadan is a preacher, masquerading as a scholar. Under the cover of the language of inclusivity and integration, there are the same fixations. A fear of women. A morbid obsession with what lovers do behind closed doors. A paranoid conspiracism regarding external forces. And most of all, the desire to impose an impossible past upon the rest of us.

Ramadan's wish for Islamic education in schools, his approval of the fundamentalist regimes of Iran and Sudan, his apologia for Hamas and the jihadis in Iraq, his constant speaking and travelling; all, Fourest argues, add up to one goal: 'advance of the *dawa* – Islamisation as the Muslim Brotherhood conceives it.' (p. 264) He is so good a strategic thinker that he even gives new definitions to inoffensive-sounding words. *Rationality* for Ramadan is 'an intellectual process leading to the rediscovery of faith,' *secularism* 'is a context in which freedom of religious faith is

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guaranteed,' (p. 263) rather than a separation between church and state; and *reform* is reform towards fundamentalism.

He sees secular laws as 'remnants of the colonial epoch.' (p. 236) To read Ramadan, and many on the anti-imperialist left, you would think that the nineteenth-century European imperialists were akin to an army of Richard Dawkins fans, burning down mosques and forcing confused natives to read *Candide* and Thomas Paine. In fact, as Fourest explains: 'During the colonial period, the occupying nations rarely modified the habits of the occupied countries. They maintained most traditional provisions in the name of that cultural differentiation so dear to Ramadan.' (p. 236)

Ramadan praises the neoconservative Samuel Huntington: 'He [Huntington] has understood that Islam will be a bastion of resistance against Western hegemony.' (pp. 228-9) Ramadan's worldview is a Manichean parallel to *The Clash of Civilisations*. Resistance will come from 'the phenomenon of transnationality, the transnational reference to Islam. In all countries, the United States as well, the Islamic fervour within Muslim communities in phenomenal.' (p. 245) Ramadan's role as he sees it is to co-ordinate this fervour.

In Fourest's words, the 'colonisation' that Ramadan speaks of will last 'as long as all the Muslim constitutions have not been purged of secularism, rationalism and any reference to the Declaration of the Rights of Man – in favour of what, if not the sharia?' (p. 237) Again note the doubling of definitions. Tariq Ramadan's 'anti-imperialism' is a call for the strong to enslave the weak.

Why is this man regarded any more favourably than Pat Robertson or Stephen Green's Christian Voice? There are many intellectuals from the Islamic tradition who are genuinely interested in reform – Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, Shirin Ebadi, Wafa Sultan, Ed Husain. Many speak out against fundamentalism at great personal risk: as Paul Berman says, 'Salman Rushdie has metastasized into an entire social class.' [16] Why ignore serious thinkers in favour of a Ramadan?

The answer surely lies in our conception of *authenticity*. Just as some Western politicians suspect the white working class to be irredeemably backward and racist, many liberal intellectuals truly believe that Tariq Ramadan speaks for the 'Arab street' and that this 'street' shares his narrow mind and reactionary opinions. Ayaan Hirsi Ali was a refugee from fundamentalist Somalia but she, like all Muslim liberals, is screwed because she lost her authenticity the moment she abandoned

her fundamentalism. Ian Buruma, attacking Hirsi Ali, claimed that the writer ‘says that Islam is backward and perverse. As a result, she has had more success with secular non-Muslims than with the kind of people who shop in Brick Lane.’ [17] Paul Berman wonders: ‘Is this true? I wonder if bookish young Muslim women in the immigrant zones of Europe aren’t sneaking a few glances at Hirsi Ali’s writings and making brave resolutions for themselves.’ [18]

So what are we left with? The racism of low expectations; the tendency to think of people in terms of monolithic blocs, defined entirely by race or religion, instead of individuals with a diverse range of competing identities; the anaemic machismo of street politics and prejudice; the creepy servility to unashamed power; and the vicarious thrill of being able to ‘contextualise’ fanaticism and misogyny. Fourest has done a great service in her eloquent expose of Tariq Ramadan. But the danger is not that his supporters aren’t aware of the preacher’s dark side. It’s that they know and do not care.

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Notes

- [1] David T 2008.
[2] Pratchett 1992.