

Extrait du Tariq Ramadan

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**A confident, modern Islam
must challenge the victim
mentality of western Muslims
and a crisis of authority across
the faith says Tariq Ramadan.
But can you be a gay Muslim?**



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- English - Discussion -

Tariq Ramadan

Question : Why do you think that after more than 40 years of significant Muslim immigration to Europe, no Islamic reform movement has emerged here?

Answer : Well, there is nothing very visible yet. In a way that is not surprising, these things take time. But I believe a silent revolution is taking place-things are evolving very fast. Muslims are now talking about national citizenship in a more confident way. Women are much more involved in the process. There are pockets of resistance to change, especially among the elder generation, but this is not the only reality: there are new leaders, new understandings, new trends.

Q : You often say in your lectures that liberal democracies like Britain are more Islamic than many undemocratic Islamic countries. What do you mean by that-that concepts like the rule of law and equal citizenship and democracy are strongly endorsed by Islam?

A : Protection of religion, life, intellect, family, goods and dignity is much more a reality in the west than under the Arab Islamic countries. Nothing is ideal, but we have to acknowledge these facts.

Q : You always stress to Muslim audiences the importance of feeling at home here. But there are many organisations, including the Muslim Council of Britain, that benefit from stressing a distinctive Islamic identity and pursue goals such as state funding for Muslim schools that can contribute to ghettoisation. Is that wrong?

A : I would prefer social mixing and mutual contribution. I'm not against Islamic schools in principle, and I have seen some good ones here in Britain. I am also aware that even in the mainstream system you often get a lot of plain old segregation, with 80 to 95 per cent of pupils coming from one group, and this we have to fight against too. Muslims should, of course, have the same right to faith schools as Christians and Jews. But there is a danger that self-segregation could be the result. So, it's legally right, but Muslims should not necessarily take up the right.

Q : What about the role of the Muslim councils that now exist all over Europe? Do they reinforce a sense of separateness? Should Muslim citizens take their political and social problems to councillors and MPs, rather than the local representative of the MCB?

A : There is a contradiction here. European governments want to see the emergence of leaders who can speak in the name of Muslims. In France, they have even set up Muslim bodies. But at the same time, they do not want to encourage too much identity politics.

Q: So you hope that in the future there will be less of a role for Europe's Muslim councils?

A : Yes, it should just be a religious role. The state should deal with citizens.

Q : In terms of representation you are calling for a recognition of the separation of religion and politics-something which most Muslims, perhaps even in Europe, see as fused together.

A : I'm just saying that we must follow the rules in the countries in which we live. We should not confuse everything and Islamise social problems. Social problems are social problems and we have to deal with them as citizens claiming our rights, not as Muslims defending their religion. It is true that there are some special problems that Muslims face, certain kinds of discrimination or prejudice based on faith, that we call Islamophobia. But most problems that Muslims face are faced by other citizens too.

Q : There is no agreed definition of Islamophobia. What does this word mean to you?

A : At first I was cautious about using it. But we have to distinguish between two things. To criticise the religion and Muslims is not Islamophobia; a critical attitude towards religion must be accepted. But to criticise someone or discriminate against them only because they are Muslim-this is what we can call Islamophobia, this is a kind of racism.

Q : You may accept the idea of criticism of religions but many devout Muslims will not (the film The Da Vinci Code has even been banned in many Muslim countries). Your distinction between legitimate criticism of a religion and condemnation of discrimination might put you in a minority among Muslims.

A : I don't know if I am in a minority or a majority. But I think you are right that there is a great deal of confusion and some very emotional reactions in these difficult times. We need some intellectual critical distance.

Q : How much of a problem is Islamophobia in Britain? Is there much evidence for it? Clearly after events like 7/7 there will be some backlash, but Britain has been reasonably calm.

A : I agree it's not too bad, especially compared to some other European countries. The BNP has been doing well and they are overtly anti-Muslim, but mainstream politics is relatively immune. I think that British Muslims have a sense that they are quite privileged compared to Muslims in Europe.

Q : It is often said that Muslims are more troubled about living in western societies than other religious minorities-Hindus, Sikhs and so on. People say that there is something in the history of Islam as a great world civilisation, and a proselytising religion, that makes it harder for Muslims to adapt, or perhaps gives them greater expectations about the degree of adaptation of the host society. Is that true?

A : I think it's a fact. Things are harder for Muslims in secular societies. The whole intellectual and religious apparatus of Islam perceived itself as not of the west, and tended to see the west as a monolithic entity. Also, the experience of colonisation is something we cannot forget. In north Africa, India and Pakistan, it runs deep. Then on the western side there is the feeling that Muslims are especially difficult to integrate because of the indivisibility of religion and politics; that Islam is monolithic. We have to try to deconstruct these perceptions on both sides, perceptions that can be self-segregating. It's not easy.

Q : The French banned headscarves in schools. But they also banned crucifixes. The ban is on overt religious symbols of all kinds. Surely Muslims should respect France's tradition of laicite, according to which all religious beliefs should be put aside in public places. Do you have any sympathy with that sort of strong French left-wing secular tradition?

A : In theory you are right. But the practice of laicite dates back to a law of 1905. If a law already exists, why a new law in 2004? This is because crucifixes were accepted under the old law. The new law was passed because of France's Muslim presence. The reality is that France's secular tradition is being adapted to target a specific group. French society is going through something of an identity crisis. I have told all French girls that, if they have to make a choice between going to school and wearing the headscarf, they must choose school. Just go. This is the law. But at the same time, being a democrat means that you continue to discuss the merits of the law and call for change.

Q : Would you say that what is happening in France with the headscarf ban is Islamophobia?

A : No, I would say it is a kind of discrimination.

Q : Strictly speaking, Islamophobia means fear of Islam, but in common parlance it is taken to mean animus against Muslims, which is slightly different. Many leading British Muslims do believe that we live in an Islamophobic world. You would disagree?

A : It is dangerous to nurture this feeling. Very dangerous. It is nurturing a victim-mentality, the idea that everyone is against us.

Q : You say that any woman ought to be able to wear a headscarf if she wants to. Would you also agree that a country such as Iran ought to allow any woman not to wear a headscarf?

A : To force a woman to wear a headscarf is against Islamic principles and human rights. That's it.

Q : A key theme in your writings and talks is that the practice of Islam must become less literalist. So, for example, whereas the majority of Muslims are taught that every word in the Koran has to be obeyed, you argue differently. You say that the Koran should be read in its historical context.

A : What I say is firmly rooted in the Islamic tradition. Islam is constructed on a number of principles that cannot change. They are: belief in God, in the Prophet, the books of revelation, and so on. These are immutable. Then there is the practice of Islam: praying, fasting, and so on. Here also there is agreement, among both Shia and Sunni traditions. But there is a third level that deals with Islamic ethics. In this field there are immutable principles and there are implementations that have to take history and societies into account. The answers here come from intellectual creativity, from *ijtihad*. And this idea is also firmly rooted in the Islamic tradition. But we do need a shift in the sources of authority. People who have power to make Islamic rulings are what I would call "ulama [scholars] of the text." What we now need is more of what I would call "ulama of the context." These are people who are aware of modern knowledge and who can help the scholars of the text to be more creative in their answers. This requires is an

acknowledgement that there is a role for modern knowledge in Islamic law and jurisprudence, but that this need not betray the ethic of Islamic teachings.

Q : Can you give an example of such an ethic-an example of something that is subject to changing interpretations?

A : The need for such a new applied ethic is quite clear when we deal with medical sciences: Muslim scholars must work together with medical doctors when they tackle the issues of cloning or euthanasia. It must be exactly the same when we deal with economics or any human sciences.

Q : Are you saying that it is possible to treat the Koran as being something which was actually written by a particular person, at a particular time, in a particular historical context, and that you need to understand that context to understand the Koran's place in the modern world? Or are you saying that the book is the uncreated word of God?

A : For me, the Koran is the very word of God. It is a revelation and this belief is a fundamental pillar of Islam (arkân al-imân). It was revealed over 23 years, but often as a kind of answer to a specific situation. Whether it is created or uncreated had in fact nothing to do with the question of how to read the Koran. It is the very word of God, revealed in a specific period of time: the great majority of the scholars agree that there are immutable principles and teachings and other lessons that we have to contextualise. Even the eternal teachings require human intellect to be rightly enforced in a new environment.

Q : How would you say the Koran should be read? For many Muslims, for example, the verses that call on the wives of the Prophet to cover up are seen as a commandment for Muslim women to wear the headscarf. But would it also be possible to read these verses as general guidance to dress modestly; or to respect women and not see them in a sexualised way?

A : There are two things here. First, all Islamic schools interpret these verses as being an Islamic prescription for women to cover their hair. But at the same time, what we are seeing in most Islamic-majority countries is that this interpretation is contributing to the seclusion and segregation of women. So, the headscarf is an Islamic prescription and I agree that modesty needs to be protected. That's fine. But some scholars of Islam go on to conclude that women do not have the right to work. For me this is wrong and is against women's rights. And we can actually go back to the scriptural sources in order to promote the struggle for women's rights. We have two main problems at the present time. The literalist reading, which is: there is no history, there is no contextualisation. The other is when we read the Koran through our own cultures. This is also a problem.

Q : Parts of the Koran are clear about accepting other people of the book, the Jews and Christians. But other parts are pretty intolerant of anybody who is, say a polytheist, and by implication anybody who is an atheist. You have said that the acceptance of Jews and Christians should now be extended to others too.

A : In the Koran we have very strong verses against polytheists and, in some situations against Jews or Christians. But, again, we have to put things into context. We have to ask: why was it so in this particular situation? Was it because the Prophet was resisting oppression? Remember that the Prophet himself had connections with polytheists all his life. When he had to flee Mecca for Medina, he was guided by a polytheist. The emissary of peace he sent from Medina back to Mecca was a polytheist. His close uncle, [Abu Talib who had raised him as a child] chose not to become a Muslim, but the Prophet never said: "I'm going to kill you because you are a polytheist." So here we have freedom of speech and freedom of conscience for a close member of his family who decided that he did not want to become a Muslim.

Q : What about apostasy? What happens if you are born and educated a Muslim but then say: I have now decided that Islam is not for me. Would you accept that someone born into a Muslim family has a right to say that they no longer believe, and that families and communities must respect that?

A : I have been criticised about this in many countries. My view is the same as that of Sufyan Al-Thawri, an 8th-century scholar of Islam, who argued that the Koran does not prescribe death for someone because he or she is changing religion. Neither did the Prophet himself ever perform such an act. Many around the Prophet changed religions. But he never did anything against them. There was an early Muslim, Ubaydallah ibn Jahsh, who went with the first emigrants from Mecca to Abyssinia. He converted to Christianity and stayed, but remained close to Muslims. He divorced his wife, but he was not killed.

It is different for someone who becomes a Muslim during a war with the purpose of betraying Muslims. They are committing treason. This is why the context is so important because the Prophet never killed anyone because he changed religion. From the very beginning, Muslim scholars understood this. Islam does not prevent someone from changing religion because you feel that this is not right for you, or if you are not happy. There are two records of the Prophet saying that someone changing religion should be killed. But both sources are weak. The most explicit one-"He who changes his religion, kill him"-was not accepted as being authentic by Imam Muslim, [one of the top six biographers of the life of the Prophet].

Q : But what you say is not accepted in many predominantly Muslim countries.

A : No, you are right, it's not the majority position. It has not been the majority position for centuries. But now in our situation we have scholars and people more and more speaking about that. I wrote 15 years ago saying: this is not the only position we have in Islam.

Q : Following on from that, who is to decide which Koranic verse should be accepted in its literal sense, and which verse should be read in historical context? Can ordinary Muslims decide? Should it be religious scholars? How are the "scholars of the context" to be chosen, from where do they derive legitimacy?

A : There is a problem today. In the Sunni tradition we have a crisis of authority. The Muslim scholars are no longer considered as an asset. And you cannot have people just organising themselves, as it will lead to chaos. There is a crisis of authority. We do have some authority figures. But are we happy with them? I don't think so. Do we need a platform of scholars, at least at the national level? We need scholars at different levels. In Britain, we need people who know the country, come from the country, are raised in the country, who know the fabric and the culture, the language and the whole collective psychology. We need people who come from diverse readings of the Koran. We need a platform which will give direction, and this is missing today. This is for national issues and we may think of another platform for international issues.

Q : Who will construct such a platform? Where and how will it derive legitimacy among Muslims, especially since history tells us that, after Islam's earliest years, a theological consensus uniting the different strands of Islam was impossible in practice?

A : Some attempts have already been made with continental bodies (Fiqh Council in the US, the European Council for Fatwa and Research in Europe, and the International Council of Muslim Scholars). These are first steps, but I think that Muslim scholars and leaders in every single European country must take the lead and create pluralistic platforms beyond their respective and closed schools of laws and thought. We need time but I cannot expect the Muslims to remain blind in front of such imperative challenges... for the time being, Muslims are too passive and continue to blame "the others" for their own mismanagement.

My own position on many things may well be a minority position among Islamic scholars. But I can tell you that on the great majority of the issues, my position is mainstream among the new generations of Muslims in the west. On being European, on being a citizen, on being part of society, and on dealing with discrimination, this is all mainstream. Go and speak with the new generations. Their questions are being answered in a new way.

Q : Presumably you would like it to be the mainstream in Egypt, in Saudi Arabia, in Pakistan as well.

A : I think that this will happen. But it will be a long process. In Islamic-majority countries, religion is instrumentalised by both sides: the government and the opposition. There is no freedom, no democracy.

Q : But realistically, how far can you go in a non-literalist interpretation of the Koran? Let's take the issue of whether someone can be both gay and Muslim. In Christianity you'll get a variety of answers. Broadly speaking, in Catholicism homosexuality is a sin. But like all other sins in Catholicism, a little bit of penance can get you out of it before judgement day. In some versions of evangelical Protestantism, homosexuality is a complete sin because evangelicals tend to be literalists. But in the Church of England there are a large number of openly gay Anglican clergy. The argument being that the Old Testament has to be contextualised. Is it possible to have a similar reading of the Koran? Or is it that homosexuality is simply wrong. Could you imagine there ever being a homosexual imam in the same way that the Anglican church in the US has just consecrated a homosexual bishop? Would that be possible?

A : It could happen if such an imam did not declare that he was homosexual. You cannot expect to see homosexuality being promoted within the Islamic tradition. Homosexuality is not perceived by Islam as the divine project for men and women. It is regarded as bad and wrong. Now, the way we have to deal with a homosexual is to say: "I don't agree with what you are doing, but I respect who you are. You can be a Muslim. You are a Muslim. Being a Muslim is between you and God." I am not going to promote homosexuality but I will respect the person, even if I don't agree with what they are doing.

Q : Can you be a Muslim and not pray ?

A : The moment you declare the shahada-"I believe there is no god but God and Muhammad is His Messenger"-that makes you a Muslim. Whether or not you pray is your responsibility, but if you believe in God you are a Muslim. This was the logic employed in a debate on this topic that took place in the 9th century between the founders of two of Islam's major schools of thought, Ash Shafi'i and his student Ahmad Ibn Hanbal. Ash Shafi'i asked Ibn Hanbal whether someone who doesn't pray is outside Islam because this was what Ibn Hanbal was preaching. Ash Shafi'i replied that once you proclaim the shahada you are a Muslim. No one has the right to put you outside the realm of Islam.

Q : Can an Islamic state define who is Muslim or who is not? Or is it a matter of individual conscience?

A : There are norms, of course, but it is a question of individual conscience.

Q : But in Muslim majority countries, it is the state that often defines who is or isn't a Muslim.

A : The problem is not that states want to define who is a Muslim. What they want today is to be seen to be protecting the rules of Islam even though everything around is hypocritical. Hypocrisy is the heart of the matter. As long as you say that you are Muslim, this should be respected.

Q : A striking feature in the long history of Islam is that in its first four or five centuries it was ahead of western Christendom in scientific and philosophical endeavour and in economic development. And then from about the 12th, 13th centuries, long before colonialism, things changed. King Abdullah of Jordan said recently that this is because ijihad, making decisions based on rational thinking, was disallowed, which led to today's dominant, literalist form of Koranic interpretation. Is this right?

A : Yes. Historically it is. If we study the history of Islamic civilisation, around the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, something happened. Muslims and Muslim scholars perceived that they were at risk from being dominated by the west. Before, they were dominant and creative. Now, they try to protect themselves from being dominated by the other.

The first thing that you protect when being under threat of domination is morality, ethics, laws and rules. And this is what happened. So Muslims were less creative, much less confident and more defensive. This is what we have had for centuries now. I have never said that ijihad was closed, because I think it never happened like that.

Q : What you are saying is that at no time did a national or juridical authority say: from this day forth, there will be no more rational inquiry in Islam?

A : Yes. By and large, this is the picture. I always tell western Muslims that they should be confident. This is the only way. I tell them that you cannot become creative if lacking in self-confidence. This is important. This is why I always say we have to be cautious about projecting a victim mentality, which is what I see from some of the fatwas of an organisation of imams and scholars called the European Council for Fatwas and Research. They are about fear. They say: you need to protect yourself, be careful, we are being attacked from everywhere, so it's all about being defensive.

Q : Defensiveness and a lack of creativity is understandable among marginalised communities from the developing world, for example. But among British-born Muslims. Among professionals? Academics?

A : You have to understand that even for people in their late thirties, early forties, there is a fear that we are working under an oppressive state with an oppressive foreign policy. There is the view that the principal function for a Muslim academic or a Muslim in this society should be to just rail against this and to deconstruct it endlessly. I think there are three reasons for this. The first is because of the experience of growing up in Muslim homes. You are told by the first generation of migrants that there is "you" and there is the "west," which is the "other," and that the two cannot be the same. The second has to do with international policies: Iraq, Palestine, and so on. The third reason is the socioeconomic reality that the great majority of Muslims living in this country are not in the mainstream.

Q : But what about those who are in the elite? What about those who have been to public schools, to top universities?

A : Regardless of this, there is a reality; there is a perception among students that in this society, we are not liked; and that there is pressure against Islam. The whole discourse on Islam is not positive in Europe today. Educated people feel this too. This is why it is really important to have an Islamic discourse rooted in the tradition, which says: be confident in your identity, your multiple identities, your responsibilities to society. It is good to show concerns towards Palestine but what about here? The real political involvement of Muslims, not just as a minority, will be a long process but it is already becoming a reality.

Q : The British establishment seems to have fallen in love with you. But in France they think you are quite extreme. One criticism is that you engage in what is called "double discourse." That is, you talk about how Islam should change when you address non-Muslim audiences, but you are more conservative and gradualist when appealing to Muslim audiences. Is this true?

A : For years I have heard people saying: "Be careful with Tariq Ramadan because he has one message in French; and a different one for when he speaks Arabic in the suburbs." Go and try to speak Arabic in the suburbs of France and you won't have an audience because they don't know Arabic.

My problem in France is not one of double-talk, but one of double-hearing. When I talk with non-Muslims, I use different levels of language, different words, references, and so on. When I speak to Muslims, however, my references are mainly coming from within the Islamic tradition.

But if you are telling me the content is different, I would say that is not true. If this was the case, I ought to have few problems with Muslims, or with Muslim countries. But I am not allowed to enter countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Q : Why can't you go to Tunisia, Egypt or Saudi Arabia?

A : Why? Because they know exactly what I am saying. I criticise the fact that they are dictatorships and that the Saudi government is betraying Islamic teachings. When I called for a moratorium on Islamic punishments (death penalty, corporal punishment and stoning) I said it on French television when 6m people were watching, as well as in Islamic majority countries.

Q : Why do you want this moratorium? Why not simply say that stoning to death is just plain wrong?

A : I have said that I am against the implementation of stoning, death penalties and corporal punishments. In Islamic-majority countries, this is a minority position. What we cannot deny is that these punishments are in the texts. What I am saying to Muslim scholars is that today's conditions are different, so in this context you cannot implement these punishments. So we have to stop. This is the moratorium. Let Muslim scholars come together and we'll have three main questions that need clear answers: what is in the texts, what conditions should apply to these punishments and what about the context in which these would be implemented.

Q : How flexible can broader aspects of Shari'a be? Should women, for example, be able to inherit the same as men?

A : The Koranic texts are quite clear as to inheritance and once again it is related to a global understanding of family and the respective roles of women and men. To implement these rules literally today without taking into account social realities is plain injustice. Some mothers find themselves alone with five or six kids to look after, the husbands have left, and nobody is helping them get the inheritance they should be entitled to. We need a holistic approach and the state must think of financial support and compensation for the women. Without such procedures it means that we are betraying the teachings of Islam through a literalist implementation. It is plain injustice and has nothing to do with the objectives of the Shari'a I have mentioned.

Q : You are popular among younger Muslims in Europe. But what sort of reception awaits you when you speak in Muslim-majority countries?

A : It is very good, positive and open in north Africa, Turkey and Asia and many Arab countries.

Q : Is that because you are addressing what is essentially a hand-picked audience? Or is it because people can

come off the street and listen to you?

A : It is both. It is clear to me that people, from students to scholars, are closely following what is happening with regards to Muslims in the west. The Arabic translations of my books, such as *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, have been read by many people in Islamic-majority countries. They know about my work: I am criticised but this is good as well.

Q : Since your arrival in Britain you have become very engaged with the government, which relies on you for advice on Islamic affairs. You were asked to join a task force set up in the aftermath of the 7th July bombings. You are also part of a government-approved "roadshow" of scholars being sent to speak to audiences of young people. Don't you think that by being so closely allied to the government, your reform project might be in danger of being seen as an extension of British foreign policy?

A : I believe that I am involved in something which is important: a task force to act against terrorism is important. I will sit with everyone, any government, even the American government, to talk and discuss, but there are conditions. I must be free to speak my mind, and this is what I am doing everywhere. I said from the very beginning that the British have great responsibilities as to the domestic situation of Muslims, when dealing with violence and exclusion. I strongly criticised the new British security policies. I continue to say that the Iraq war was a mistake, or that the British army shouldn't have been involved, or that it was wrong for Tony Blair to deny any link between Iraq and the 7th July bombings. But let me tell you something: if we constantly worry about misperceptions within the Muslim communities, we will never do anything. When my US visa was revoked, I became a hero to some Muslims, and then, when I called for a moratorium, I was criticised and accused of working for the US administration. Muslims are too emotional, unfortunately. I don't work for the British or any other government. I am open to any kind of dialogue as long as the rules are clear: free to speak out, free to criticise, free to resist and free to support when it is right. Muslims should stop thinking that to talk is to compromise, but the black and white approach is often the reality of Muslims today.

Q : As an adviser to the British government, what will you suggest if asked for your views on the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir? The government is still deciding whether to ban this group. Should it go ahead?

A : Let us be clear. I am not an adviser to the British government. As to Hizb ut-Tahrir, I disagree with them but I think that as long as they are not speaking illegally, they must be free to speak and the society and Muslims should be free to respond. Hizb ut-Tahrir is not calling Muslims to kill or to act illegally, so it must be heard and challenged. To ban is the wrong way.

Q : How confident are you about the future for Muslims in the long term, say, the next three decades? Not just in western Europe, but in Pakistan, in Iran and in Saudi Arabia? What sort of Islamic society do you think we will see? A more open one; or one that is more closed to outside influences?

A : I don't know about 30 years, but I am quite optimistic about the long run, about one or two generations from now. I believe that the change taking place at the periphery of the Islamic world, in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the west, is going to make an impact elsewhere. The European and American experiences are also going to have tremendous impact on Islamic majority countries in the near future. What is happening is not on the margins of Muslim communities in the west. It is much more mainstream.

Source : [Prospect Magazine](#)