

Review Essay

## The Prophet of Moderation

Tariq Ramadan's Quest to Reclaim Islam

Jonathan Laurence

*In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons From the Life of Muhammad.* BY TARIQ RAMADAN. Oxford University Press, 2007, 242 pp. \$23.00.

Most Westerners have a pretty clear idea of what comes to the mind of a Danish cartoonist when he imagines the Prophet Muhammad. They also have a good idea of what comes to the mind of a cave-dwelling Taliban fighter or an al Qaeda operative. Tariq Ramadan, however, is mortified by the caricatures that have shaped public perceptions of the man to whom Allah revealed the Koran in 610. Accordingly, the prolific Swiss-born theologian, who has become both a media star and a lightning rod for controversy, has made it his mission to change the way both Muslims and non-Muslims view Islam.

*In the Footsteps of the Prophet* is Ramadan's loving portrait of Muhammad, but it is also a biography written with the instincts of a savvy publicist. Beneath the book's somewhat dull exterior—essentially a highlight reel of the Prophet's sayings and doings over 23 years of revelation—lies a pointed agenda: to reappropriate and redefine Islam's message and messenger for Muslim minorities and the Western societies in which they live. Muhammad could have hoped for no more sympathetic an advocate than Ramadan to counter all the bad press.

Ramadan aims to weaken the distinction between the Muslim world (*dar al-Islam*) and everywhere else—"the lands of war" (*dar al-harb*). That is, he wants Muslims in the West to see themselves not as an aggrieved minority in hostile territory but

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[128]

### *The Prophet of Moderation*

as equal members of Western society, with full rights and full responsibilities. To understand the role Ramadan hopes to play, it helps to read *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* on three levels. First, it is a thoughtful retort to the humanist newspaper editors—and those "ex-Muslims" whom Timothy Garton Ash has called "fundamentalists of the enlightenment"—who malign Islam through unfair caricature. Second, it is a theological housecleaning aimed at literalists from Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab (founder of the Saudi-based Wahhabi movement) to Ayman al-Zawahiri (al Qaeda's chief theologian). And finally, it is a cautious demonstration to Muslims and non-Muslims alike that Islam is open to interpretation and can be tailored to specific circumstances.

Although he was brought up in Geneva in the 1970s, Ramadan has a notable Muslim lineage: his maternal grandfather was Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and his father was Said Ramadan, a founder of the Muslim World League. As an interpreter of the Islamic tradition who works across boundaries as well as within them, Ramadan has made himself indispensable both to religious reform in Islam and to the political integration of Muslims in the West. He has met with British Prime Minister Tony Blair and European Union Commission President Romano Prodi and has academic appointments at both Oxford University and Erasmus University Rotterdam. At the same time, however, his antiestablishment *modus operandi* has led nervous officials—in Cairo and Riyadh as well as in Washington (and, temporarily, Paris)—to banish him from their territories. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security recently denied Ramadan's two-year-old visa

application, which would have allowed him to take up an academic position at the University of Notre Dame, on the grounds that he had contributed some \$900 to a Palestinian charity later linked to Hamas. (At the time of the donation, the charity was not on Washington's list of terrorist organizations.)

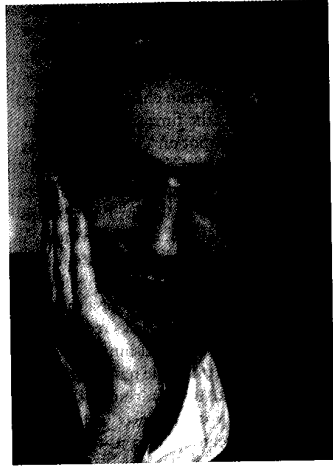
The book's dust jacket calls Ramadan a "Muslim Martin Luther." But perhaps Moses Mendelssohn, the eighteenth-century German Jewish "enlightenment" philosopher who is considered the founder of Reform Judaism, makes for a more apt comparison. Ramadan seeks reform, not reformation: he urges Muslims in the West to leave the ghetto while retaining their religious identity. Like Mendelssohn did, Ramadan promotes an insider's message of emancipation to followers of what he believes is a revealed religion. Also like Mendelssohn, Ramadan is a product of European society. He hopes his voice—mellifluous in French, English, and Arabic—can reassure minority and majority societies alike that full faith is compatible with full social and political participation.

#### DO AS I DO

One of the main challenges for Islamic scholars in the West is to establish a legitimate *fiqh* (jurisprudence) for Muslim minorities without diluting Islamic faith to the point where it is unrecognizable or, worse, un-Islamic. Muslims in Europe or the United States who look for religious guidance in their daily lives have few local options. Little is available for those who are uninterested in either the semi-official religious leadership imported from "homeland" governments or the politicized Islamist movements that have sprung up

FOREIGN AFFAIRS · May/June 2007

[129]



CORBIS

*Moderate Muslim or apologist for terrorism?  
Tariq Ramadan, December 8, 2005*

in opposition to those establishments. There is a British-based fatwa council of sheiks tied directly to the Muslim Brotherhood (the European Council for Fatwa and Research, or *ecfr*), and "Internet imams" based in Turkey, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf dispense instruction through e-mail and message boards. Fatwas from such sources can have the practical effect of enhancing everyday integration—by allowing Muslims, for example, to take out mortgages on first home purchases (against a prohibition on interest-bearing loans) or to pray at unofficial times. But these are mere dispensations from otherwise unchanged and universal rules. Their narrow validity does not supplement or replace Islamic jurisprudence in the Mus-

lim world. In the words of one Saudi sheik who sits on the *ecfr*, they are "legal decisions which remain unknown and inapplicable in the Arab world but which are nonetheless adapted to the Western world."

This leaves scholars focused on developing a "minority *fiqh*" open to attack from purists. A recent letter from the Islamist party Hizb ut-Tahrir to the *ecfr*'s founder, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, proclaimed, "The concept called European *fiqh* is a twentieth-century innovation as in Islam there is *fiqh*, period. ... As Muslims living in different parts of the world, we are all subject to the same sources of sharia, regardless of where we live." Most of the "minority *fiqh*" scholars, moreover, are unfamiliar with the everyday realities of the younger generations they are targeting, as few were born and raised as children of immigrants in Europe.

Ramadan is well placed to embark on a much more ambitious agenda: to bring Islam itself into line with Western mores. He does not simply make the case that Muslims in the West need new practices adapted to their new realities. He also calls for "intellectual creativity" today by showing that it was de rigueur at the time of Islam's founding. Once he anchors creativity—a concept distinct from "innovation," which is taboo—within Muslim tradition, he can lay claim to the tradition of Islamic interpretation. He cites a litany of examples in which early Muslims on the Arabian Peninsula (the revered ancestors, *sufuf*) found literal observance impossible—and how they made do by resorting to interpretation. "The fundamentals of Islam's creed (*al-ʿaqidah*) and ritual practice (*al-ibadat*)," Ramadan writes, "were not subject to

### *The Prophet of Moderation*

change, nor were the essential principles of ethics, but the implementation of those ethical principles and the response to new situations about which scriptural sources had remained vague or silent required answers adapted to particular circumstances." Put simply, God's word is absolute, but it cannot always be followed to the letter.

Ramadan suggests that Muslims follow the precedent of the Prophet and his companions even when that precedent contradicts the revealed text of the Koran. He seeks the suspension of certain rules for all Muslims, rejecting the notion of a two-tiered system in Islamic jurisprudence. He wants thereby to preserve Islam's universality while allowing for the specificities of time and place.

The best-known demonstration of this approach came in a televised debate in 2003 between Ramadan and then French Interior Minister and current presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy. (To make a comparison that would surely annoy both of them, Sarkozy may in fact be Ramadan's closest contemporary counterpart: like Ramadan with Islam, Sarkozy wants to overhaul a collective belief system, Gaullism, for his own time, making a "tranquil rupture" with familiar authority figures and ideologies.) In front of six million viewers, Ramadan refused to call for a ban on the stoning of adulterers, arguing instead for a "moratorium." This apparently semantic distinction reveals Ramadan's reformist logic: it is a way to stop capital punishment immediately while engaging its proponents on their terms. Ramadan concedes that stoning may be supported in part of the Muslim world and by the instructions of law books. But such punishment, he argues, should

be suspended while a debate is held over the conditions of its actual application.

For some critics, this kind of reasoning is unacceptably ambiguous: Ramadan will not categorically denounce stoning! But by calling for a moratorium, Ramadan avoids the Islamic equivalent of excommunication. As a result, his books are far more likely to influence the thinking of observant Muslims than are the proliferating "ex-Muslim testimonials" available in Western bookstores. As Ramadan told a British journalist, "The question is whether you want to please the audience or change the mentality." In that regard, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* has nothing in common with either the outsiders' calls for reform (for example, by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji) or the insiders' laments for a return to earlier golden eras of Islamic thought (by Mohammed Arkoun and Abdelwahab Meddeb). Ramadan seeks the legitimacy of internal critique in the relatively controlled context of theological debate, allowing him to go head-to-head with groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir.

#### **THE REAL MUHAMMAD**

Ramadan's Prophet Muhammad is a humble and compassionate figure, a sponge for learning. He is thoroughly devoted to God, but no fanatic: "Woe to those who exaggerate," Muhammad tells his followers at one point. "Moderation, moderation!" He is a discreet preacher who knows that honey is more effective than vinegar. He wins his followers' hearts with his flexibility: there are no forced conversions, and Muslims may even leave the faith if they find they do not like it. He welcomes the incorporation of local cultural practices, even singing at a wedding (which sharia

Jonathan Laurence

does not permit), as an "enrichment." At another point, he gives a free meal to someone who has broken the rules of the Ramadan fast—and he does it with a smile.

Although current affairs go unmentioned in the book, one can sense Ramadan's deep embarrassment at the claims of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Osama bin Laden to be emulating the Prophet. Ramadan wants to steal Muhammad back. He uses the Prophet's example to take aim at regimes in the Muslim world that do not allow the practice of other religions or the full participation of women in society.

Ramadan's Muhammad is a model of equanimity, guaranteeing "trust and respect of principles" and inviting his fellow Muslims "to go beyond tolerance to learn, listen, and recognize others' dignity." Even when "relations deteriorated" with the Jews, Ramadan reminds his readers, "the Quran states that any hatred that may incidentally arise from a war cannot obviate the principles to which believers must remain faithful." And in Ramadan's telling, Muhammad's first wife, Khadijah—the first convert to Islam and a female presence who could almost always be found alongside her husband—makes a striking case against gender segregation. Muhammad would repeatedly insist before accepting a dinner invitation, "What about her?"

Those predisposed to read between the lines of the book will find some fodder to use against Ramadan, although not much. (One French reviewer objected to Ramadan's use of the term "Muslim advance" to describe Islam's takeover of the Arabian Peninsula, instead of "conquest," allegedly an effort to downplay violence.) For the most part, Ramadan focuses on reclaiming words that have fallen into misuse in the popular lexicon—words

such as "Salafism," which has become code for "potential terrorism" among security officials. Ramadan attempts to restore such terms to their original meaning by explaining the circumscribed contexts in which they were originally invoked. Martyrs are those who refuse to renounce their faith under pressure; jihad is the spiritual and intellectual use of the Koran to defend oneself; *taqiyya* is the use of dissimulation to end torture or save one's own life. As the journalist Ian Buruma concluded in a recent profile of Ramadan, his message seems to represent "the alternative to violence."

It was, of course, Ramadan's activities other than writing books on theology that brought him to the attention of Western intelligence officials. Yet despite his goal to reform both religion and politics, Ramadan does not ostensibly seek to subvert the line between the two. As a religious leader who encourages Europe's Muslim youth to find religion, he advances the message of monotheism and warns against the light morals and consumerist idolatry of contemporary societies. Ramadan does not agree with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, his fellow citizen of Geneva, who argued that religious faith endangers political loyalty. Instead, he is in line with John Locke in his belief that deep religious conviction is indeed compatible with—and perhaps even necessary to—the contract of national citizenship.

In his public talks, Ramadan argues against the "Islamization" of social problems and for a Jacobin-style civic awakening, an *engagement citoyen*: "We have to deal with them as citizens, not as Muslims." The youth in the *banlieues* should "channel [their] revolt into voting, not into car burning."

But beyond this irreproachable rhetoric of civic mobilization, Ramadan's political message is as discomfiting as his tone is reassuring. It is not that there is a "double discourse," a common accusation made against Islamists. It is that his single discourse is a slippery one. (As Ramadan puts it, the different receptions that Muslims and non-Muslims reserve for him is "not a problem of double-talk, but one of double-hearing.") He publicly rejects violence and urges change through the democratic process, but even as he denounces terrorism he reiterates its basic logic. His condemnation of intentional attacks on civilians is tempered by an innocuous-seeming suggestion: that they will cease when European, U.S., and Israeli foreign policies bend to terrorists' underlying demands. He draws a connection between what he considers to be the errant ways of Western foreign policy and the terrorist acts it supposedly engenders. Could enthusiastic young crowds drawn to Ramadan's charismatic public lectures understand this as the tacit approbation of these acts? By "explaining" the attacks, he declines to denounce them as incomprehensible; he keeps the door open to future justifications of violence against civilians on religious and political grounds.

In short, Ramadan departs from the categorically nonviolent company of pacifist leaders and strays into a gray area bordering on apologia. Consider these statements on European policies toward the Middle East: "The pogroms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the Jewish genocide ... [are] the primary source of the current Middle East's conflicts involving territorial issues. ... This historical burden should not silence and shackle the EU forever"; "The silence

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Jonathan Laurence

about Lebanon's misery, just like the silence about the misery of the Palestinians, is a deceptive silence. It is the kind of silence that eventually breeds violence, violence that can again spill out onto the streets of the European cities." Or this one on the London train bombings: "You cannot accept that people disagree and then they kill, you must condemn this. But in the discussion afterwards, you cannot say there is no connection. On ethical grounds, it's wrong. On political grounds, there is a connection."

Ramadan's acknowledgment of the Holocaust, recognition of Israel, and general condemnation of violence are progressive views in contemporary intra-Muslim debates. But the listener comes away unsure whether Ramadan thinks terrorism in Europe and the Middle East is justifiable or unjustifiable. There is a disconnect between his descriptive explanations and his prescriptive condemnations. Social scientists engage in the former as a matter of course, but the result sounds different when Ramadan joins his analysis with his roles as a preacher and a political activist. His reluctance to appear too "liberal" allows him to remain a realistic alternative to the purists, but here it leads him into a rhetorical morass. His theological critique is sharp, but on political questions he will not give a straight answer.

**ISLAMITÉ, FRANCITÉ, FRATERNITÉ**

*In the Footsteps of the Prophet* differs from other biographies of Muhammad that were also written with Western audiences in mind. It is neither proselytizing (like that by Yusuf Islam, formerly Cat Stevens) nor scholarly (like those by Karen Armstrong and Maxime Rodinson). Like most

of Ramadan's works, it was written for a mixed audience and has a take-home message for everyone. Ramadan reminds non-Muslims that the West has an intellectual debt to Islam beyond its having kept some Greek classics in circulation during Europe's Dark Ages. He reminds Muslims, in turn, that Islam is "not a closed value system" that must exclude Western principles but is based on an adherence to "principles that transcend closed allegiances." He calls on Muslims to "demonstrate ... that they share the core values upon which Europe and the West are founded." Ramadan hopes this recognition of mutual influence will lead to peaceful coexistence or even some sort of republican synthesis, such as that first proposed by the French scholar Jacques Berque: France should assume its *islamité*, and French Muslims should assume their *francité*.

Ramadan has become fond of saying that "Europe's identity crisis is revealed by the Muslims." Maybe so, but Islam's identity crisis has also been revealed by Europe. Ramadan incarnates a common heritage of Islam and the West while exposing some fundamental differences that provoke wariness between those acting in the name of Islam and those acting in the name of the West. He is one of the few European Muslim leaders with enough legitimacy to move both "sides" toward a frank exchange on conflicting elements of this identity. Regardless of how one judges Ramadan himself, Muslims and the West will have a hard time reaching a lasting accommodation without more thinkers like him. ☪