

AN INTERVIEW WITH TARIQ RAMADAN

Tariq Ramadan, currently a Senior Research Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford, is a prominent scholar and public intellectual whom *Time* magazine has called 'the leading Islamic thinker among Europe's second- and third- generation Muslim immigrants.' In December 2007, he spoke with *STAIR* editor Naysan Rafati about religion, conflict, and dialogue.

STAIR: Why is religion the focal point of so many conflicts in the world? Is this trend likely to increase or decrease over time?

Tariq Ramadan (TR): I don't think that we can just say it is coming from religion. I think that there are two different dimensions. The first dimension is that in this global world, with new geostrategic realities in the Middle East, in these regions or areas you always had conflicts that were connected with religion, but we can't reduce it to only a religious dimension. The Iraq War did not have a religious dimension at first, even though it has become a religious internal conflict between Sunni and Shi'a, so I think that we have to be very cautious not to religionize every single conflict.

The second dimension is that in our world today, there is something that is a kind of revival of the religious reference. Within our society, people are losing the old milestones and references, and they are coming back to religion. Even in our European societies, Western societies, the most important group coming back to religion is not the poorest in our societies—it is the students. So there is a revival of religious awareness, which sometimes in certain situations could be connected to conflict. But once again, we have to deconstruct this perception that everything is religious or everything is cultural.

We are much more religious in the public sphere today, in the public debate everywhere. George Bush is referring to religion, speaking about inspiration, revelation, and dreams, as is Tony Blair. On the other side, you have people claiming that they are resisting Western domination in the name of their religion. So once again, there are different layers, different levels, but not all the same reality.

Q: *You've spoken about the need to anchor religious principles in cultural reality—this idea of a European Islam as distinct from an Asian Islam or an African Islam. Yet culture itself is not static, particularly in a period of globalization. How do these dynamics impact the processes of interpretation?*

TR: What I am saying is that there is no religion without culture, and there is no culture without religion. But, it would be wrong to try to reduce religion to culture or to try to make everything that is cultural, religious. So, there are two mistakes here that we have to avoid making. The first is to try to have something which is a pure religion without cultural dress or something that is a neutral culture without religious reference. This is not happening everywhere, but we cannot say that these are the same. Why? Because there are some religious principles and we have to extract from them the way people are reading the scriptural sources within their culture, and there are things that are transcultural so they will be the same everywhere. The creed, what in Arabic we call the *'aqida*, is beyond the cultural expression, because in the legal methodology, you can do but what is written. Wherever you are, you do what is written. So, you pray as the Prophet was praying, etc. There is something which is key here, a set of principles and practices that are not moving and will be the same wherever you live. So as a European Muslim, I will be practicing exactly the same as someone else—it's Islam.

Now, the cultural dress will be specific, because the principle of a universal religion is not uniformity, it's inclusiveness as to the cultural diversity. For me, the only way that we can understand a universal dimension in our religion is to be able to deal with the diversity of the cultures and not to be uniform. That is why I say 'no' to the Salafis who are trying to say that the only true—literally *salafi*—Islamic culture is the Arab culture, and the response to the uniformity of global culture or the perceived dominant culture, the Western culture, is a uniform Arab Islamic, or Islamic Arab culture. The answer to global uniformity is universal diversity.

Q: *On this idea of transculturalism and universal values—do you agree with people who argue for the universality of human rights?*

TR: I think that there are universal rights and values and principles. But, I don't buy this idea that we have to sit down and say, 'We have universal values, what are your values?' and try to find a common agreement. I

think it is deeper than that. I think that there are universal values, but we need to come to them with more humility, respect, and consistency. We should accept that what we have in our universe of reference could take a different form in another universe of reference. We have shared universal values, but the roots, the paths, the ways are different. I'm not undermining the principle of universal values, but I am calling for humility and respect—respect to the people who are coming from another root and who are coming to the same shared values, universal values. So when it comes, for example, to human rights, I have no problem with, say, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but I may come to these texts from another root than the West.

There's also a certain mindset, which is what Ghandi was referring to when he got the first draft of the human rights declaration and said, 'My mother told me and taught me that with every single right you have a duty.' This is something which is really important to the mindset of another civilization, culture, religion. Yes, there are rights, but there are responsibilities, and we want to stress another dimension. So, you can come to the same universal values but within a framework which is quite different, saying, 'What about our responsibilities?' We are coming to our responsibilities in the West because of the ecological catastrophe; if we continue like this we understand that we are destroying the world. This is what the French philosopher Michel Serres was saying about the natural contracts, that there is a third part now in the relationship between human beings. For me, the point here is that I accept this as a principle, I accept this as the starting point of our discussion among civilizations, cultures, and societies, but I really think that we have to accept the fact that people are coming to this from different roots and from different universes of reference. They can meet somewhere on an equal footing, building something that has to do with the human rights declaration or the charters or the principle of dignity, for example.

Q: How do you define the separation of church and state? Is this possible? Is it desirable?

TR: I think that before asking this question that way, let us be clear on what we are saying. You may find Muslims who will avoid your question by saying, 'What are you talking about? In Islam there is no church, so how do you want to separate church and state when there is no church because there is no hierarchy of priests or church?' I think

that the very important point for me is that that we have to distinguish between two universes here. There is something that has to do with the *umma*, imposed from on high, and there is something that has to do with negotiation, which is discussed in a bottom-up process. One has to do with faith and the other with rationality.

So when we are talking about this, we are in fact talking about something that is quite clear. It's a question of authority first, and power, and there is something from on high which comes from a revelation of my faith and which I accept. So this is the universal—what we call religion and what is understood in Christianity as the church on high, hierarchy, etc.—something which is imposed from on high and not negotiated. On the other hand, when we speak about the state, we speak about the space for negotiation between the people, the democratic process. For me, these two dimensions are not desirable. There is no way but to go toward this, and by saying this, I'm not speaking against the Islamic tradition. I think that from the very beginning, it was quite clear that we have two different fields: one where you do what is written in the texts and you obey, if you are a believer, everything which has to do with your faith and your practice, and another field where everything is disputable, open to discussion, and we have to try to find our way. Here we face what is called in Arabic the *mu'amalat*, the social affairs.

So the core for me is not to come with a concept which is perceived by the Muslims as coming from colonization, the colonization period, coming from the West, which is the concept of secularism. Secularism has a positive connotation in the West and a very negative connotation in the Islamic countries. The point is not to waste time with concepts. It is to discuss what we mean by these concepts—what do we want? Do we want the birth of a civil society, democratization, and the involvement of people? This is what I want, and I would say this is not at odds with the very original, old Islamic legal tradition. For me, this is not only good, it's imperative. This distinction is imperative.

Having said this, and this is the last part of my answer, I think it's also important to ask ourselves what the relationship is when we decide we are living in a society where the state and the church are completely separated and distinguished. How do we respect something that has to do with ethics in the world where religion is not present? Ethics not only derive from religions, but also come from rational morality, for example. A secular space, a space with no religion at all, which is the way we want people to negotiate under the name of rules and the rule

of law, should not be disconnected from an ethical input. What does it mean in the end? Political involvement without ethics, economy without ethics—these are important points. We should be able to open a space for negotiation not only on performance and progress but also on ethics, negotiated ethics and applied ethics. That is still missing today. So this is why from a Muslim background I would say yes, there is a distinction. I want to see and to try to find a way to make a distinction between faith and rationality, private sphere and public sphere, but I want in the public sphere something that has to do with ethics. I need to distinguish without divorcing the two spheres, and this is the challenge for the future. Even the Western countries have exactly the same challenge; it's not an Islamic concern, it's really deep in our world today, how to reconcile our political involvement, our economic involvement, anything which has to do with our behavior, with a kind of ethical awareness.

Q: On economic issues, for example, how do you approach the capitalist order, the international monetary system, by bringing in an ethical component to conduct?

TR: I'm quite critical toward the dominant economic system. But, I don't think that what we have now coming from the Islamic majority countries is right, or even from people living in the West saying, 'We have an Islamic economy.' I don't think there is an Islamic economy, but there is an Islamic *ethics* in economics. There is a Christian ethics in economics. We are dealing with a dominant system with interests, with speculation, so we have to weigh this and say, 'Ok, this is the market,' and accept it. I'm not going to accept this because it's killing one hundred thousand people per day, this order. We need to try to find a way to get more ethics into economics. So when you have transnational corporations that are coming and are trying to integrate ethics into their business dealings, that's fine. It's the beginning. Yet we need more than that. We need to have it at the local level as well as at the global level.

But I really think that we cannot continue to be blind by saying, 'Oh, we are dealing with democracy in the political arena' while that arena is driven by forces that have nothing to do with the democratic process. It's not democratic, but it's very powerful when you have the weapons industry, when you have people that have nothing to do with our democratic processes but can decide for us. You can have millions in the street in London saying 'no' to a war, but there are pressures coming

from elsewhere that are more powerful than millions of people, and such actors have millions of pounds.

This is the reality of it. Once again, I think what is really important here is not to come up with an Islamic alternative, because we don't. But we have principles, very strong principles, and you have to work with them and use some references to rationally try implementing them with something that has to do with applied ethics.

Q: How important is education in promoting integration and knowledge of 'the other', in terms of state policies, for example?

TR: Once again it's imperative. You cannot go forward without education. The people are speaking about tolerance, but I think it's not enough. I met people who are just tolerating me, but in fact, they ignore me. It's indifference—they don't care. This is not the way forward. In our society if you tolerate me in times of peace, I may become your enemy in times of crisis, because you don't know me. This is why I don't label this state of affairs as peaceful coexistence. I don't want this. I want a positive, proactive coexistence, meaning that first, you reach out from your intellectual ghetto, you try to understand others and understand where they come from. You are building something which is a relationship based on knowledge and then respect. Respect for me is tolerance plus knowledge. It's something that is an added value here, the added value of knowledge with respect, because you can't have respect for someone if you ignore him. This mutual knowledge is essential; it is the future of the pluralistic society.

Some people are saying multiculturalism has failed, what we need now is interculturalism. I think that at the beginning what we meant by multiculturalism was interculturalism. It means, in fact, social policies, it means educational policies—how do you integrate this inclusive dimension of the other in the building of the common sense of belonging in our society? This is why I am saying that we need to teach a common history of memories. A common history of memories, accepting for example, that in Britain we don't only have one memory, we have memories. You have memories from Pakistan, from Turkey, now from Poland, and these memories should be integrated into our common history because this is the way you build a sense of belonging out of knowledge.

Q: Is the notion of an inter-faith dialogue practically viable? What are its opportunities and limits? What are its benefits to religious communities?

TR: I've always thought, and I still think, that this is something which is unavoidable. We need to have this kind of inter-faith dialogue. But as I've previously written, there are conditions, and there are also things that we have to avoid. I have been involved in inter-faith dialogue for the past twenty years, and it's as if I was a member of a club with people meeting in every single capital around the world, knowing each other and some of them are not even connected or are not still connected to their communities. They come and they don't need inter-faith dialogue because they know the other, they know the same people, so it's useless.

So there are conditions. The condition is not to create something which is a new circle of specialists in inter-faith dialogue, knowing each other and building something which is very utopian—that's going nowhere. First, and this is really important, is to have people involved in inter-faith dialogue who themselves are involved within their respective communities. Translation of what is happening in the common space is something which is important when you come back to your respective space.

Second is to be able in this space of inter-faith dialogue to build trust and to ask all the questions we want to ask. Because to avoid the questions, to avoid the sensitive issues is not going to work. It's far from reality where people are dealing with sensitive issues every day.

The third one, which is also important, is not to try to read the texts of the other on behalf of the other. Yes, you can read the texts and ask them for their interpretation but you cannot take the texts and just create or build your own interpretations. I think that this is very dangerous, and we had some Muslims doing this. My stand for example on Ahmad Deedat in South Africa and others taking the Bible and saying, 'Look, this is what is in your book and it's ridiculous.' You can't do that. Likewise, we cannot do this with the Qur'an, which is a very difficult book to read. So I think that there are conditions for this: connections with the communities, being able to ask the tough questions out of trust, and not to read the text on behalf of the other.

The last thing that is important is self-criticism. Yes, Islam is great, but not all Muslims are great. So this capacity to come back to your own universe of reference and say, 'Ok, this is what I believe in and some of the Muslims are betraying this.' We are talking about terrorism and

there is quite a consensus among the Muslim scholars that this should be condemned, but it's not only this. It's more specific. When it comes, for example, to racism, Islam is against racism but many Muslims are racist. Even in our communities in the West, you see Pakistani people who don't speak to Turkish people, they don't speak to Arabs. That's the reality. And this is not acceptable. So there is discrimination and women's rights and all these things are really important and you have to be quite critical here. But a constructive dialogue has to be self-critical, asking the questions and coming to a very high standard of dialogue and debate and then translating these to our communities. If we're not doing that, what is the point?

Q: But what is the central motivation behind an inter-faith dialogue? Is it to promote understanding and tolerance, or is it more a feeling of putting together a common religious platform to contrast with secular society?

TR: I think that the intentions are not always the same for people. Some clearly want something that has to do with a new religious alliance against the secular society. This is not my point, but I saw a book by a Christian professor, and he said we are together in the house and around us are secular forces, and we have to resist together. He was speaking about a sort of religious alliance. This is not what I am doing. You can come together to share something which is an ethical awareness. This is why, for example, I have been advocating for the last ten years that we need to have the secular, even the atheist, in our society. They are representing somebody. It's an inter-faith dialogue, it's where values are produced. But values are also produced with people who are atheistic, who are agnostic, and they are living with us. So if we are serious about sharing views on the religious and the philosophical ground, it can not only be with Jews, Christians, and Muslims. I think that's wrong. We need to open up all this to be able to make it clear that this is not the new religious alliance; rather, it's where we are nurturing and producing something that has to do with values and ethics. This is the way I see it. I can't say that all the people involved in inter-faith dialogue understand it that way because for them it's sometimes a new alliance.

The second thing, and it could also be referring to other intentions and understandings, is to nurture something that has to do with mutual knowledge. I have been at the grassroots level with so many Christian priests, and they speak about poverty and love. By knowing them they

pushed me to know myself better. For example, the centrality of the notion of love in Islam was not something which was quite clear for me after all the literature that I got when I was young, because it's not a central concept. We have it, but we don't put a stress on it and the Christians, much more than us, are connected to this. Muslims are coming, speaking about rules, about justice, but today not enough about love. So inter-faith dialogue is also this—the other could be a mirror through which you come back to yourself, and this is something which is important, this mutual knowledge.

Many times the perception I have about people being so resistant, so reluctant to enter with the Muslims is very often that they are scared. Why? Because their perception is, 'These guys know who they are and we don't.' An Italian journalist said to a friend of mine, 'You know the problem with Tariq Ramadan? You know why we have all these problems with him? Because he knows everything about us while we know nothing about him.' Ignorance natures fears, and fears nature ghettos, and ghettos are the starting points of fractures within our societies. ■