

Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation. By Tariq Ramadan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. ix + 372 pp. \$29.95 cloth

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Radical Reform discusses Muslims' problems by calling for a self-critical reflection. Tariq Ramadan discredits the idea that debating a reform is "not a priority yet." For him, to reform Muslim thought and practice is the priority, without which problems are simply reproduced. The first and second parts of the book provide a theological, conceptual, and historical framework, which stresses that the interpretation of Islamic law has always been something diverse, changing, and open to disagreements. The third part elaborates Ramadan's principles of reform, and the last part examines them through some cases.

Overall, the book has four main arguments. First, Ramadan challenges the authority of the ulema (scholars of Islamic sciences) arguing that they are not well equipped to respond contemporary challenges Muslims face. Therefore, the process of producing Islamic theory and praxis should include experts of several fields, "even non-Muslim experts." Ramadan simply calls the ulema "text specialists," who have no superiority over experts of other fields. The role of the ulema in producing Islamic knowledge should be limited: "We can no longer leave it to scholarly circles and text specialists to determine norms (about scientific, social, economic, or cultural issues) while they only have relative or superficial, second-hand knowledge of complex, profound, and often interconnected issues" (p. 124).

Ramadan refuses the categorization of fields of sciences as "Islamic" or not, as a misleading way of giving sacred position to the former: "extracting rules for interpretation and understanding from a 'body of texts' is no more 'Islamic' or 'sacred' than identifying a principle in the functioning of the human body" (p. 110). He thus rejects the projects of "Islamization of science" to produce "Islamic" medicine or economics. "What is 'Islamic'" for him "are the ethics, the norms, and the goals" (p. 128).

Second, Ramadan criticizes the literalist and formalistic understanding of Islam. He promotes a holistic and dynamic perspective that emphasizes substance, meaning, and higher objectives. The higher goals include "promoting and protecting Dignity (of humankind, living species, and Nature), Welfare, Knowledge, Creativity, Autonomy, Development, Equality, Freedom, Justice, Fraternity, Love, Solidarity, and Diversity" (p. 139). For him, *shari'ah* referring to divine origin is mainly about these higher revealed principles, instead of legal details. Legal opinions are to be determined by *fiqh*, "which is associated with the open and relative activity of human intelligence" in order to understand and implement revealed principles "at a given moment in human history" (pp. 122-3).

Third, for Ramadan, the existing literature on Islamic legal opinions should be re-examined regarding contemporary conditions because old opinions were issued for old conditions. He puts, “no scholar has ever approached the texts without being, in one way or another, influenced by the culture in which she or he lived” (p. 191). A major example of the contextualization of Islamic perspectives is women issues. Text scholars’ perceptions of women were mainly affected by status of women in their “traditional and patriarchal societies,” so “Islamic legal thinking about women is certainly the field that has suffered most from...literalist *reduction* and cultural *projection*” (pp. 212-3). “A literalist, strictly legal reading produced by men cannot” provide new perspectives to women issues. Today mosques “are essentially men’s places.” To solve this problem, “[w]omen must be integrated into mosque management committees in the same way as their presence is necessary in reflection and *fatawa* (legal rulings) councils” (pp. 22, 223). Another major issue is criminal law in Muslim-majority countries. Ramadan repeats his 2005 call for a moratorium on the death penalty, corporal punishment, and stoning, in which he argues that these practices have created multiple problems, including unfair punishment of the poor and women.

Finally, Ramadan argues that the attempts for Islamic authenticity have failed to provide a sufficient critique of globalizing capitalism because they have been obsessed with formal technicalities while ignoring higher goals. Therefore, now “a double effort is needed: on the one hand, resisting the exclusive, uniform appropriation of the texts’ initial meaning by the original Eastern culture, and, on the other, resisting the homogenization imposed by Western culture” (p. 193). In other words, “Muslims today are lost between trends of thought that forbid everything (and that make life arid and/or intolerable) and the realities of a carnival of life that alienates them (which they claim to reject but which they end up becoming involved with or simply imitating)” (p. 198). Ramadan elaborates this point with the example of *halal* meat: “a formalist, technical approach empties the spiritual message of all its substance” because it is obsessed by *halal* techniques and says nothing “about the issue of outrageous treatment of animals in our societies marked by overconsumption and excessive productivity (in some factory-breeding farms, in slaughterhouses).” Similarly, he points out: “Communities, firms, or economic functionaries should” pursue higher goals of ethics “rather than simply being content with making techniques...*halal* while aspiring to the same profit levels and soulless consumerism” (p. 243).

Radical Reform frankly and boldly emphasizes points many urban Muslims have experienced and practically embraced, whereas very few of them have dared to express in a theoretically consistent way. It is a must reading for those who are interested in Islam and Muslims in the 21st century.