

The Islamic Optimist

By [Malise Ruthven](#)

In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad

by Tariq Ramadan

Oxford University Press, 242 pp., \$23.00

To Be a European Muslim

by Tariq Ramadan

Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 273 pp., £9.95 (paper)

Western Muslims and the Future of Islam

by Tariq Ramadan

Oxford University Press, 272 pp., \$16.95 (paper)

Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity

by Tariq Ramadan, translated by Said Amghar

Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 352 pp., £9.95 (paper)

The Heirs of the Prophet Muhammad and the Roots of the Sunni-Shia Schism

by Barnaby Rogerson

Little, Brown, 432 pp., \$37.95

1.

No one would deny that the Prophet Muhammad is one of the most influential men in human history. Of all the founders of world religions, he is also the most controversial. Unlike the Buddha and Christ, he not only founded a new religion but created a theocratic state, with all that entails for the idea of a divinely constituted moral order.

The story of Muhammad's life has a long but problem-filled history. The first of many Muslim accounts was written by one Ibn Ishaq who died in 767 CE, 135 years after Muhammad's death. By then the Muslim armies had long defeated the Persian Empire, wrested control of Palestine, Syria, and Egypt from the heirs of Constantine and Justinian, and established a fragile imperium that stretched from Iberia to the Indus Valley. The Arabian prophet whose exemplary life and

preaching inspired this astonishing series of conquests was already famous, and his biography came supplied with many of the supernatural details that adorn the lives of other holy persons.

The text of the Koran, the "discourse" or "recitation" that is said to contain the exact words dictated by God to Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel, is supposed to have been fixed by Uthman (r. 644–656), the third caliph, or successor to Muhammad's worldly power. It may provide some clues to Muhammad's biography—but they are only clues. The text is not arranged chronologically, and tends to be highly allusive and elliptical. There are few extended narratives comparable to those in the Bible: Muhammad's auditors were evidently familiar with the materials in his discourses, which include stories and themes from the Hebrew Bible and the Midrash (biblical commentaries), stories about Jesus similar to those that are found in some Gnostic sources, and stories about Arabian prophets and sages who do not appear in the Judeo-Christian literature. The Muslim exegetes—many of whom were Persian converts to Islam and far removed culturally from Muhammad's Bedouin milieu—were inspired to reconstruct the Prophet's biography in order to understand the holy text, in particular the allusions to events in the Prophet's life or "occasions of revelation." There is a sense in which the Koran's textual history conforms to Muslim piety: far from Muhammad being its "author" the Koran is, in a literary-historical sense, the "author" of Muhammad.

To their credit the earliest scholars of this new religion (a rejuvenated version of Hebrew monotheism, with Midrashic, Christian, Gnostic, and Arabian colorings) were meticulous in recording and documenting variant versions of the oral histories they researched in order to reconstruct the Prophet's life. The process of canonization was remarkably transparent given the circumstances. The scholars were working under social, political, and cultural conditions that differed radically from those that prevailed during the Prophet's lifetime. Each tradition, or *hadith*, was traced to its source in the Prophet or one of his companions through a chain of oral transmitters that were rated according to their reliability and ethical standing.

While some modern scholars have adapted methodologies from biblical studies to pick holes in the received Islamic tradition, the central bastions of the faith have so far remained largely intact. Revisionist theories that question the received account (using archaeological data or its absence, form criticism, paleographic data, linguistic analysis, and other tools of the scholar's trade) have yet to shake the foundations of Islam in the way that "higher criticism" challenged Christian certainties in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Recent biographies of the Prophet, of which there are many, have tended to confirm the general outlines of the received tradition while placing emphasis on different aspects of the narrative. Muhammad began preaching around 610 in his native Mecca, the site of an ancient pagan shrine to which Arabs made regular pilgrimages. His attacks on the local gods brought him into conflict with the city's rulers and in 622 he and his band of followers migrated to the neighboring settlement of Yathrib—later known as Medina, the Prophet's "city"—where he formed an

alliance with local tribes, three of which were Jewish. After a series of raids and battles (to which there are allusions in the Koran, but no descriptions), he overcame the Meccan polytheists and restored the shrine at Mecca to the true worship of the God of Abraham. The recalcitrant Jews who refused to accept his message were expelled from Medina—and in one instance massacred for allegedly treacherous dealings with Muhammad's Meccan enemies.

In producing a new biography aimed at Western readers, Tariq Ramadan enters a field already crowded with excellent books. The best is still *Mohammed* (1961; English translation 1971) by the French Marxist scholar Maxime Rodinson. He presents a convincing portrait of the religious revolutionary who transformed world history, using the cultural materials available to him. Karen Armstrong's *Muhammad: A Western Attempt to Understand Islam* (1991) sketches a sympathetic portrait of an inspired visionary whose religious experience she finds to be authentic, while taking full account of a historical setting that made it necessary for him to assume political power, with all its controversial consequences. Barnaby Rogerson in *The Prophet Muhammad: A Biography* (2003) captures the epic quality of the era in an elegant, fast-paced narrative.

Of the popular and accessible books on Muhammad only Michael Cook's short but pithy biography in the Oxford Past Master series (1983) seriously questions the validity of the traditional source materials. There are, however, other scholarly texts in English that expose the fragile historical ground on which the edifice of the Prophet's biography rests. Of these the most valuable is *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (1994) by F.E. Peters. Aware of the deep sensitivities surrounding his subject, Peters constructs his biography using the traditional source materials, which he quotes at considerable length, condensing his doubts into an appendix entitled "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad." Unlike several more radical scholars who suggest that the Koran might have been "cobbled together" out of materials that might predate or postdate the Prophet's lifetime, Peters is persuaded that the Koran "has a very strong claim to being authentic"—which is to say that it contains the words and notions that issued from Muhammad, and that when he alluded to the biblical and other stories, his Arab audience knew what he was talking about "better in many cases than we ourselves do." However, the Koran, he insists, "is of no use whatsoever as an *independent* source for reconstructing the life of Muhammad":

It is a text without context. For Muhammad, unlike Jesus, there is no Josephus to provide a contemporary political context,...no Qumran Scrolls to illuminate a Palestinian 'sectarian milieu.'... [It] therefore stands isolated like an immense composite rock jutting forth from a desolate sea, a stony eminence with few marks upon it to suggest how or why it appeared in this watery desert.

2.

Tariq Ramadan is a Swiss-born academic and a prolific writer on Islam who has achieved fame—and notoriety—on both sides of the Atlantic for his engagement with the issues that concern the millions of Muslims now living in Western countries. In France, especially, he has been depicted as an Islamist wolf in sheep's clothing. Strip off the wool, say his critics, and you will find a hard-line fundamentalist hostile to the values of freedom and democracy he claims to

espouse. Two causes célèbres have been, first, the fierce polemics arising from Ramadan's claim that leading French intellectuals including Bernard-Henri Levy, Daniel Gluckstein, and Bernard Kouchner put their commitments to Israel before their humanitarian concern for Palestinians; and, second, the famous encounter with Nicolas Sarkozy in 2003, before six million French television viewers, when Ramadan at first refused to condemn outright the penalty of stoning for adulterers, but called for a "moratorium" while the Muslim world engaged in "debating" this issue along with other harsh punishments. He went on to say that "we should stop" the practice. But this has not satisfied his critics.

Part of the animus against him derives from his family history: he is the grandson of Hasan al-Banna (1906– 1949), founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Middle East Sunni movement that originally advocated the establishment of an Islamic state. After the suppression of the Brotherhood in Egypt, his father, Said Ramadan, settled in Geneva and established an influential center of Islamist ideology with financial support from Saudi Arabia.

As is now well known, Ramadan has been prevented by the US government from taking up a tenured professorship at the University of Notre Dame. The reasons are obscure. While Ramadan has numerous intellectual critics in France as well as in the United States,^[*] it seems unlikely that any official can seriously believe that such a well-known figure could himself pose a security risk to the United States. The only official mark against him appears to be a donation of eight hundred euros made some ten years ago to a Palestinian charity that was subsequently put on a watch list.

Notre Dame's loss has been Oxford's—and Europe's—gain. Ramadan's current position as research fellow at St. Antony's College has enabled him to carry on his work as a teacher and spokesman for European Muslims while keeping in touch with his Continental following. In Britain he has been an adviser to the government—though in view of the unpopularity of the Iraq adventure among British Muslims, he has avoided close relations with officials. He declined an invitation by the outgoing Prime Minister Tony Blair to attend a highly publicized conference of "moderate" Muslim leaders in June. Politically street-smart, he fears he might lose credibility among his younger followers if it were thought that the British government was "using" him.

Fluent in French, English, and Arabic, with degrees in Western philosophy—his Ph.D. was on Nietzsche—and a year spent at al-Azhar University in Cairo, the oldest and most prestigious academy in the world of Sunni Islam, Ramadan is admirably qualified to interpret Islam and its founder to uninformed, skeptical, or just curious Western readers. But for a nonbeliever *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* is disappointing. One would have expected him—at the very least—to have alluded to the vigorous scholarly debate surrounding the origins of Islam, if only to dismiss it—as several orthodox Muslim scholars have done—as a conspiracy to undermine Islam at its source. Instead he has produced a faith-promoting narrative, pleasant enough, but bland and colorless, that avoids any serious attempt to engage with the traditional sources critically (as Cook and Peters do) or to fully explain the setting of the Prophet's actions (or alleged actions, allowing for the skepticism that some scholars still feel about the sources) in the harsh and cruel

environment of the stateless society where the Prophet is recorded as spending his life (as Rodinson and Armstrong have done in their different ways).

Extraordinary events, where supernatural actors have walk-on parts, are recounted in the flat terminology of a police report:

The Angel Gabriel appeared to him several times. The Prophet was later to report that the angel sometimes appeared to him in his angelic persona and sometimes as a human being.... While he was walking in the surroundings of Mecca, the Prophet received a message from the Angel Gabriel, who taught him how to perform ablutions and practice ritual prayer.... The Prophet followed the Angel Gabriel's instructions one by one, then went home and taught his wife, Khadija, how to pray.

This may read convincingly to someone brought up in the Muslim tradition who accepts without question the dogma that the Prophet was illiterate, a tabula rasa who received the entire corpus of his teaching directly from God; but it does not fit any of the categories—whether anthropological or theological—through which scholars familiar with the literature of religious experience seek to understand encounters with the numinous.

It may be that Ramadan, the careful professor, simply lacks the literary ability to convey to the infidel reader the sheer weirdness, and strange beauty, of the fragmentary prophetic narratives that the early Muslim scholars assembled into the Life of Muhammad. One suspects that, as with many other religious conformists, his faith in the received tradition has been acquired or maintained at the cost of imagination and genuine curiosity. The visions of heaven and hell that feature so terrifyingly in the Koran's early *suras*, or chapters, are virtually left aside. He ignores altogether the episode of the Satanic Verses where the devil interpolated passages in the Holy Book to make the new religion more acceptable to the Meccan pagans. While it is true that this doesn't feature in major collections of traditions or in the narrative of Ibn Ishaq on which his account largely depends, it appears in Tabari's famous early-tenth-century chronicle, a source that Ramadan uses to describe the Prophet's humane teachings on war.

More troubling for the non-Muslim reader is the quiet way Ramadan slides over the most controversial and notorious episodes in Muhammad's war against the Meccans, when the Prophet authorized the massacre in 627 of men of the Banu Qurayzah, the Jewish tribe he accused of breaking their pact with him and of treating with the enemy. Despite pleas for mercy from their former Arab confederates, some six hundred to nine hundred men of the Qurayza and one woman were beheaded in the marketplace. Their bodies were thrown into large open trenches, their women and children taken into slavery, their property distributed among the Muslims. The sentence was pronounced not by Muhammad but by the chief of the Arab tribe who had formerly been their protectors.

The chief, who had been fatally wounded in battle, rejected pleas from his fellow tribesmen to show the Jews mercy. After the sentence had been pronounced Muhammad is said to have exclaimed: "You have given the judgement of Allah above the seven heavens!" While Armstrong goes out of her way to portray the atrocity in the context of the cruel customs of the times, Ramadan strips this highly disturbing episode of all its gruesome and tragic profanity:

Muhammad accepted the sentence, which was carried out during the following days.... The fate meted out to the Banu Qurayzah men delivered a powerful message to all the neighboring tribes that betrayals and aggressions would henceforth be severely punished.

Any religious believer who writes about Muhammad faces the difficulty of reconciling the contrasting figures of prophet and statesman, the perfect moral exemplar and the master of realpolitik who united the Arabian tribes under the banner of God. In Islamic tradition he emerged as a powerful religious archetype, the Perfect Man predestined at the Creation, whose spirit pervades the entire universe. In recovering the historical figure it becomes necessary to find a plausible human actor inside the penumbra of charismatic veneration. Sharpening the human focus, however, can only threaten the image of perfection, especially in a tradition that has barely begun to subject itself to what F.E. Peters calls "the abrasive burr of the so-called 'higher criticism.'"

Ramadan acknowledges that his aim is not to replicate the classical sources but to focus on "situations, attitudes, or words that could reveal Muhammad's personality and what it can teach and convey to us today." By pointing to examples of the Prophet's kindness, compassion, love of animals, and so forth he hopes to make

the Messenger's life a mirror through which readers facing the challenges of our time can explore their hearts and minds and achieve an understanding of questions of being and meaning as well as broader ethical and social concerns.

He thinks his portrait displays a man who was above all lovable because he transcended his own ego and his love of God made him "free from human dependence."

The Prophet, he concludes, carried a universal message in both the experience of love throughout his life and his reminders to people of the need to adhere to a universal ethic above and beyond "divisions, affiliations and rigid identities." While recognizing that this set of beliefs makes for a useful corrective to the negative pictures of Muhammad that pervaded Christian and some secular writings in the past, I do not find this portrait convincing. By any reckoning Muhammad was one of the most extraordinary figures to have made his appearance on this planet. In this pious homage Ramadan is only able to convey the palest shadow of his presence.

3.

Ramadan's difficulty in conveying a strong and convincing image of his hero is not surprising. As an academic his special strength has been in the exposition of texts, and it is here that his contribution has been most valuable. Two of his earlier books, *To Be a European Muslim* and *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, may be significant in helping to integrate some fifteen million Muslims into European societies. The first, published by the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, a Muslim think-tank with close links to the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliate in Pakistan, the Jamaati-Islami, is primarily addressed to his fellow Muslims. It uses the classical forms of argument deployed by traditionally trained scholars to put the case for integration. The arrival of Muslim migrants into Western Europe during the 1960s as a result of decolonization

(from North Africa to France, and later to Spain; from South Asia to Britain; from East Asia to Holland) and guest worker programs (from Turkey to Germany) was an unregulated process for which there were few precedents in the classical reporting of Islamic law.

Traditional jurisprudence (known as *fiqh*) decreed that where possible, Muslims should live within the fold or abode of Islam (*dar al-islam*) where the Sharia—the divine law derived from the Koran and the Sunna, the Prophet's exemplary custom—would be upheld by the state. Muslims who found themselves living outside *dar al-islam* were urged to leave the realm of war—*dar al-harb*—and return to the fold. Where this became impractical for the obvious reason that Muslim societies (both in their homelands and in the Western diaspora) were benefiting economically, there was a tendency (abetted by local authorities in countries such as Britain) for informal ghettos to form themselves around local mosques and community centers. Imams (prayer leaders) imported from Indo-Pakistan, North Africa, or Turkey knew little of local conditions, and in many cases did not even speak the languages of their European congregations.

In his two books on the "West," Ramadan engages in a comprehensive reappraisal of the sources of Islam with the explicit aim of helping Muslims to integrate themselves in European societies. His approach is systematic and uncompromising. Adopting the classical methodology created by the religious scholars during the formative era of Islam, he makes a fundamental distinction between the religious duties of Muslims and their social and political obligations. While the former (including prayers, fasting during Ramadan, payment of charity, and the once-in-a-lifetime performance of pilgrimage) are nonnegotiable, all other duties derived from the Koran and the corpus of Islamic law are contingent on the wider sociopolitical environment. Ramadan is critical of imams and community activists who encourage their followers to preserve a ghetto mentality, for example by adopting dress codes that set them apart from the mainstream. Young Muslims, especially, should be confident enough in their own culture to join the society around them and work for the common good.

This is an important message for Muslims of the second or third generations who have felt marginalized, have suffered from racial and ethnic discrimination, and have become increasingly subject to religious hostility—"Islamophobia"—since the Islamist attacks on America in September 2001 and London in July 2005. An important distinction between these two atrocities is that the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon with the loss of nearly three thousand lives were planned and executed by hostile foreigners (most of them Saudi citizens) who had infiltrated the United States. The attacks on the London transport system, which killed fifty-six people, including the four bombers, were carried out by native-born Britons belonging to the second generation of Muslims raised and educated in that country. Ramadan does not address domestic terrorism in either of these books, which were published before the London attacks, but his diagnosis and proposed remedies have an important bearing on the issue.

The difficulties facing Muslims living in the West, with its permissive consumerist culture, have provoked a reactive response in neighborhoods and cities where the rules of behavior derived from the Koran and the Sunna are seen as immutable, provoking an inward-looking, ghetto-style mentality and detracting from the wider ethical issues of the Prophet's teachings. This reaction is

mirrored in the wider society which responds by insisting that Muslims living in the West do indeed have problems with progress, democracy, and modernity. The resulting impasse falls particularly hard on the young, who often have a strong desire to assert their Muslim identities without having the knowledge or confidence to formulate "Islamic answers" to questions arising from living in Europe. As a result, says Ramadan,

we are witnessing...the unhealthy development of a complex whereby they discredit themselves and think that the right responses should come from abroad, from the great '*ulama*' [legal scholars] residing in Islamic countries.

In many cases scholars living in conservative Muslim areas have not the faintest idea about social conditions in the West or the legal cultures of the Occident. European Muslims must develop their own solutions to the problems facing them; the sources of Islam, Ramadan writes, are abundant:

There is no longer a place of origin from which Muslims are "exiled" or "distanced." "Western Muslims" are at home, and should not only say so but feel so.

Instead of turning their backs on European culture, they should try to understand its complexities:

We are still very far from having attained this stage and very little has been achieved in a well-thought-out and selective approach to literary and artistic production in the West.

In addressing this question, he confronts the prejudices of parents who prevent their children from taking courses in art or music. After a lengthy discussion of Muslim sourcebooks, when he encounters numerous *hadiths* condemning art or music, he concludes with one that presumably trumps all the rest: "God is beautiful and He loves beauty."

The non-Muslim reader may ask why it should be necessary for Ramadan to engage in lengthy discussions with long-departed *ulama*; but that, essentially, is his approach. Unlike some more farsighted Islamic theologians, such as Mohammed Arkoun, he has an impressive following of mainly young Muslim fans whom he wants to lead to the light. His credibility with his constituency depends on his command of the sources that they themselves deploy to rationalize their estrangement. In Britain, for example, separatist groups like the Hizb ul-Tahrir (HuT), which is active on many campuses, use these same sources to argue the case for separation from mainstream society. To put it rather more crudely, he is trying to sell his integrationist and reformist agenda using traditionalist legal wrappings.

It is, of course, this pragmatism, which sometimes comes across as slippery casuistry, that so annoys his critics. His insistence on a "moratorium" on medieval punishments such as stoning, rather than the outright abolition he says is his personal preference, is integral to this method: with no "church" or overarching institution to enforce new rulings in the mainstream Sunni tradition, fresh interpretations of prophetic edicts, he argues, can only take root where there is a governing consensus (with consensus being one of the "roots" of Islamic legal governance).

Before there can be consensus on an issue that would challenge the text of the Koran and a well-attested *hadith* legitimizing stoning for adultery, in Ramadan's reasoning, there has to be debate.

Ramadan expands on his ideas in *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, a book in which he attempts to address the wider question of whether Muslims at large—and not just in Europe—"can accede to modernity without denying some of the fundamentals of the Islamic religion." In contrast to his essays urging Muslims living in the West to integrate with their secular host societies, he argues for a revitalized Islamic society in Muslim majority countries along the lines proposed by his grandfather and other "Salafist" reformers in the Muslim Brotherhood tradition.

The book begins with an extended bout of self-reflection in which he acknowledges that the critiques leveled by Westerners, and some Muslim intellectuals, against Muslim societies are often justified. He deplors the privileges of kings and presidents, the expediency of justice, the illiteracy of women along with a variety of discriminations, each more painful than the other, as well as "the narrow traditionalism of some '*ulama*' who decide and resolve questions away from any human reality."

He also mounts a sustained and impressive attack on what he sees as the shallow thinking and empty formalism of those who think that all the Muslim world's problems will be solved by imposing *zakat*—obligatory charity—on society, forbidding the charging of interest on loans in accordance with Islamic law, "as if 'reliance on God'" must entail "a lack of intelligence or competence in action." By seeking to "plaster a *façade of Islam*" over the problems of contemporary society, Muslims, he charges, prevent themselves from finding workable solutions. Good intentions are thus "rendered into a daily nightmare," especially when making a society more Islamic means instituting further prohibitions and permanent censorship, "reprimanding, imprisoning and punishing without respite."

Repression, he insists, was not the "Way of the Prophet"; it is the spirit of Sharia, rather than its letter, that should govern the reconstruction of Islamic societies. He urges a return to the "greater jihad"—the spiritual struggle against one's ego, as distinct from the "lesser jihad" of war against Islam's external enemies:

Jihad is to man's humanity what instinct is to an animal's behaviour.... The real meaning of Islamic spirituality lies in reforming the space of one's interiority.... It is loving in transparency and living in the light.

Terrorism is wholly incompatible with this gentle spiritual outlook:

One must denounce political violence which finds its expression in the assassination of tourists, priests, women, children and in blind bombings and bloody slaughters. Such actions are indefensible, nor do they respect, in the least, the Qur'aⁿic message.

Ramadan has reinforced this message in recent comments on BBC radio, following the failed suicide bomb attacks in London and Glasgow. Responding to a request by Sir Alan West, Gordon Brown's new security chief, that people should "snitch" or inform on neighbors suspected of terrorist activities, Ramadan said that all citizens must "come together and fight" terrorism. It was, he said, important to distinguish between a "tiny minority" and the wider Muslim community who condemned extremism. "Anyone who knows something should call the police," he said. But he also added: "We must be very cautious not to nurture this sense of suspicion toward Muslims." People should reach out to their neighbors. "We need to get to know each other and build spaces for trust."

His comments were in line with statements by the Muslim Council of Britain, an umbrella body with links to the Islamist movement, which recently shifted its position from guarded suspicion of the police to outright public endorsement, stating that it was an "Islamic duty" for Muslims to support them in preventing terrorism. For its part the new Brown government has reduced the rhetorical temperature by dropping phrases such as "Islamic terrorism" and the "war on terror" from its vocabulary.

While endorsing democracy and citizenship for Muslims living in the West, Ramadan turns his sights on the negative impact that Western institutions and culture are having on lands with Muslim majorities. Western-style secularism has failed to take root in Islamic lands because the links there between religious, political, and cultural experience are different. The Western-style constitutions that were imposed on Muslim lands by the colonial powers have resulted in authoritarian systems of government where "dictatorship and cronyism" cause havoc. Western powers talk of the need for democracy, but in cynically protecting their interests, they support dictatorial regimes: "Democracy, here, supports dictatorial terror there." The impact of his reasoning is not less trenchant for being broad and unspecific, and there is much in his analysis with which most students of Middle Eastern politics would find themselves in agreement.

Occasionally, however, a sentence or two leaps from the page that will cause alarm: Minority rights? Who needs them?

On the purely juridical level, Muslim thinkers have never formulated the question of coexistence in terms of the binary "majority-minority." This is undoubtedly because they have straightway understood, with the example of Medina, that there existed two distinct belongings.

The first is that of the state which makes of each person a full-bodied citizen whereby there is no majority other than that resulting from the vote. The second is that of the religious community for which there exists an autonomy of worship, language and legislation (for personal affairs).... We can afford not to imitate the Western model of nation-state and still have the possibility of establishing other things.

When reading those sentences it is impossible not to recall the fate of the Banu Qurayzah.

What is proposed here, one suspects, though this is not spelled out, is a "re-Ottomanization" of the Muslim world in which religious communities would once more enjoy a semi-autonomous

existence such as they had under the sultan-caliph. The Caliphate was abolished by the Turkish National Assembly in 1924, after the collapse of the Ottoman system during World War I. A hankering for a restored caliphate is common to many of the more radical Islamist groups such as HuT. A corollary of this nostalgic idea is that Islam is somehow impervious to the processes of secularization and loss of religious identity and feeling that has prevailed in most (though not all) parts of the Western world in the course of modernization and industrialization.

"The history of Islamic civilization," Ramadan writes,

confirms that there exists a primal difference between the elements which have given meaning to its internal dynamic and that which, in the West, has produced the phenomenon of secularization, at least since the Renaissance.

In analyzing Western secularization he places the emphasis on classical, Renaissance, and Enlightenment themes that freed the Western spirit from the institutional control of the Church. In Western history, he writes "the sphere of the religious was...founded on authority and dogma." The Church not only had spiritual authority but property and temporal power which it used to oppose science, rationality, and freedom of thought. Secularization was therefore the process by which the people claimed their rights to intellectual freedom after centuries of suppression by the Church.

Islam, he insists, will not be subject to this process of secularization because it was never institutionalized in the form of a church. God is present in Muslim consciousness "by means of a Book and a human example...and not by means of an institution or an incarnation." Under a revitalized Islamic polity—based on the constitutional principles of Medina—Muslims can modernize their societies without succumbing to the dehumanizing forces of secularism.

This is a widely held belief among the Islamists or "Salafist reformers" whom Ramadan is proud to support. There is, however, a profound flaw in his analysis which pervades all of his books under review. It is dangerously utopian and optimistic. In several unguarded passages he gives himself away: unlike Western Christianity the shared faith of Islam—"the brotherhood of Faith—is opposed to any idea of tragic consciousness." This is an astounding statement because it excludes, consciously or otherwise, the whole of the Shia minority tradition, which is suffused with a tragic sense of loss and betrayal.

4.

In his book on the heirs of Muhammad, Barnaby Rogerson explores the origins of the Shia–Sunni schism that afflicted Islam almost from the time of its origin. A natural storyteller, he achieves his purpose not by viewing the first great schism of Islam from the outside, as academic treatises do, in order to highlight the theological and institutional issues, but by immersing his readers in the master narrative of events as these came to be viewed, with the bitterness and benefits of hindsight, by subsequent generations. The historical facts are themselves contested, but Rogerson is generally scrupulous in his treatment of the sources, giving equal weight to both sides of the story.

Muhammad died in 632 in his early sixties without unambiguously naming a successor. His closest kinsman, Ali, his first cousin and husband of his daughter Fatima, who the Shia minority believe had been designated to succeed him, was passed over three times before becoming caliph in 656, by which time the leadership of the Arab empire (vastly expanded by the conquests of Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and Persia) was already in danger of fragmenting. The first three caliphs, acknowledged by the Sunnis but rejected (and sometimes ritually cursed) by the Shia, reunited the tribes and drove forward the Arab conquests in a series of stunning military victories over better-equipped and better-organized Byzantine and Persian armies.

The flaw in the triumphant progress of the true Abrahamic faith emerged during the reign of the third caliph, Uthman, a pious believer and early convert to Islam, but also a member by birth of the old Meccan aristocracy who had fought against Muhammad and his message. Despite being personally virtuous, Uthman was unable to resist the demands of his newly converted clansmen, to whom he gave preferential treatment in the spoils of battle and privileges of government—exacerbating the hostility of those faithful to Ali.

Some of the stresses that gave rise to the first great schism in Islam can also be traced to tensions within Muhammad's extended household—between Ali and Muhammad's young wife Aisha, daughter of Abu Bakr, the first caliph (a contemporary of Muhammad and the only "rightly-guided caliph" to have died a natural death). By the time Ali succeeded Uthman (after the latter's assassination by mutinous troops) as the fourth and last of the "rightly-guided" caliphs, the stage had been set for the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus under Uthman's kinsman, the brilliant and wily Muawiya. Ali's rule was never uncontested: his principled disdain for the dirty business of politics alienated some of his own supporters (who would leave his camp to form the separate sect of Kharijites). After four conflict-ridden years as caliph he died a violent and brutal death, as did his son Husayn, who perished in a heroic but doomed attempt to wrest the caliphate from Muawiya's son Yazid in 680.

Thereafter the spiritual and secular streams of Islam would divide and merge in complex and sometimes lethal patterns that continue to this day. While Rogerson's book does not address the ramifications of the subsequent Sunni–Shia divide, he sets the scene in an absorbing narrative that captures the epic quality of an era to which Muslims of different persuasions look back for inspiration.

The absence of virtually any reference in Ramadan's work to the Sunni–Shia divide is highly significant and has a direct bearing on his flawed analysis of secularization. The process of secularization in Western Europe was a complex phenomenon, and included important strands of the anticlerical tendencies to which he alludes. But he overlooks the most critical ingredient in the mixture of intellectual and historical forces that engendered the Enlightenment: the privatization of religion in the West and its progressive and necessary removal from the political realm. He ignores both the Reformation and the wars of religion that devastated Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is a strange omission for a Swiss student of Nietzsche educated in the city of Rousseau and Voltaire.

The anticlerical and sometimes antireligious feeling of the Enlightenment was born in humanitarian revulsion at the horrors of sectarian slaughter. For Pierre Bayle, writing in the

1690s, God was "too benevolent a being to be author of anything so pernicious as the revealed religions which carry in themselves the inexterminable seeds of war, slaughter, and injustice." By failing to address the cleavage that reaches back to its point of origin—in the first civil wars of Islam and in the Prophet Muhammad's household—Ramadan avoids putting forward "Islamic answers" to explain the fates of thousands of victims of sectarian killings of Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

The Sunni–Shia division is a raw, untreated wound in the body of Islam. Though Muslim leaders routinely denounce sectarian strife as contrary to the Prophet's teachings, the cleavages in Muslim societies—buttressed by endogamous marriages and separate places of worship—still tend to fall along sectarian lines, as we see daily, whether in Baghdad or Beirut. Unless this fundamental division is addressed, with religious differences recognized and institutionalized along the lines that prevailed in Europe after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, Ramadan's argument that Islam can avoid the destiny of Christianity falls flat on its face.

—July 12, 2007

Notes

^[*] See for example, Paul Berman's lengthy article "Who's Afraid of Tariq Ramadan?," *The New Republic*, June 4, 2007.