

Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation

Tariq Ramadan

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Tariq Ramadan's latest book, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*, consists of sixteen chapters divided into four major sections: "On Reform," "Classical Approaches of the Fundamentals of Law and Jurisprudence," "For a New Geography of the Sources of Law and Jurisprudence," and "Case Studies."

The author commences by criticizing the process of *ijtihad* as it currently exists. Although it made things progress for centuries, he finds that *ijtihad* is highly inadequate, has not resolved the crises faced by Muslims, and has not produced the expected renewal. As far as *taqlid* is concerned, Ramadan argues that imitating past scholars makes Muslims believe that they can avoid today's challenges by taking refuge in the past. *Ijtihad*, he believes, has always been behind the times, simply seeking to interpret Islamic law in light of new changes and developments in society. He is critical of literalist, traditionalist, conservative, and culturally based interpretations of Islam. Arab culture, he points out, is not Islam's sole culture. Thus if Islam is truly a universal religion, it must provide its followers with the means to approach cultural diversity.

The author provides an intelligent criticism of Salafism, which confuses eternal principals with historical models and thereby reduces Islam's universality to the dream of an impossible return to the past and an irresponsible "nostalgia of origins." As he points out, many Salafi reductionists cannot distinguish between religion and culture and therefore view diversity and socio-cultural evolution as religious innovations. Not only is he critical of most traditional approaches to *ijtihad*, he is critical of virtually every Islamic movement when it comes to their methods of implementing Islamic law.

Having dismissed the existing approaches to *ijtihad*, Ramadan proposes moving from "adaptation reform," which requires religious, philosophical, and legal thought to adapt to evolutions in society, to "transformational reform," which requires a mastery of all fields of knowledge in order to anticipate the complexity of social, political, philosophical, and ethical challenges. Adaptational *fiqh* simply responds to change, while transformational *fiqh* questions, criticizes, and challenges, seeking to change the order of things on the basis of Islamic ethics.

To achieve “transformational reform,” Ramadan believes that text scholars (traditional religious scholars) and context scholars (scholars in every other field) must work together on an equal footing to set off this radical reform. Although he insists that the Qur’an and the Sunnah should be the primary sources of law, he believes that they must be supplemented by other sciences, since there are two revelations, namely, the Qur’an and the universe, that need to be read and understood in parallel.

Although he agrees that jurists must maintain authority over the fundamentals of faith and worship, since they are exclusively determined by the text, he believes that other specialists should be equally involved in interpreting social, economic, and scientific issues. It is also imperative, he argues, to distinguish between immutable and mutable principles. Considering the complexity of problems currently facing Muslims, it is impossible for a text specialist to assimilate the whole range of those sciences – not even a council of religious scholars would suffice, since those fields of knowledge are largely outside of their own area of expertise.

Ramadan describes the religious scholars’ attitude to his theory as defensive, one of reactionary resistance and protection, the natural response of their inability to master the sciences concerned with humanity, societies, and the universe. As he points out, religious scholars live in autarchy; well removed from research in the exact, experimental, and social sciences; and reliant upon scanty information to issue legal rulings about realities and contexts that are inevitably beyond their understanding.

In order to Islamize modernity, as opposed to modernize Islam, Ramadan believes that it is urgent to organize equal representation, egalitarian, and specialized research and fatwa committees. Not only should Muslim jurists work with Muslim specialists in other fields, but non-Muslim context scholars should also sit on such committees. In his estimation, all Muslim intellectuals, thinkers, and specialists should be considered as *ulama*. Although he believes that all Muslims scholars and scientists should contribute to transformational *fiqh*, he strongly opposes the exercise of free *ijtihād* proposed by “progressive” circles who seek to “reform” Islam.

Although he blames Muslim jurists for maintaining a backward approach to jurisprudence, he also blames Muslims in general for failing to demand more of their scholars. According to him, many Muslims seem content with adaptive tactics that comfort them rather than act as agents of transformation in a world that constantly challenges the global ethics of Islam. In this regard, the section on “Case Studies,” which addresses some of the ethical issues facing Muslims in the West, is particularly relevant.

While Ramadan's theory may seem novel to some Muslims, he has merely borrowed it from Christian Liberation Theology. In fact, he seems to have drawn the idea from Roger Garaudy, the Christian-communist turned Islamist who believes that revolutionary writings and scientific studies represent an extension of revelation. Although it is true that the creation is also a revelation, Ramadan is wrong to believe that Islamic jurisprudence can be transformed simply by ordinary jurists and scientists.

Ramadan also confuses jurisprudence and ethics, which are two separate fields. The first one establishes the limits of what is permissible and forbidden, while the second one addresses what is morally ideal. The author also confuses *shari`ah* and *fiqh*, arguing that *shari`ah* is of divine origin while *fiqh* is the product of human intellectual effort. *Shari`ah* is Islamic law, and Islamic law is regulated by *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). Although some elements in the *shari`ah* are immutable, many of its laws are the results of *ijtihad*. As such, there is not a single *shari`ah* or system of law in Islam; rather, there are Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi`i, Hanbali, and Ja`fari legal systems, among other interpretations of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Although the Sunni *shari`ah* stagnated for centuries due to closing the door of independent interpretation, the Shi`ite *shari`ah* has continued to evolve over time.

Considering the ummah's condition, his claim that there is no Islamic alternative to the dominant neoliberal model is disheartening. His image of al-Andalus as a place of cultural diversity and religious tolerance is as idealistic as it is erroneous. While there were periods of tolerance toward Jews and Christians, there were also periods of persecution. Considering that the Umayyads, Almoravids, Almohads, and Nasrids imposed Maliki Sunnism as the only legal school of law in al-Andalus, life was perilous for the non-Maliki Sunnis, Sufis, Kharijites, and Shi`ites.

Whether one agrees with all of his arguments or not, *Radical Reform* is sure to stimulate discussions and debate in many intellectual circles.

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