

Reading Tariq Ramadan: Political Liberalism, Islam, and “Overlapping Consensus”

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The interest of Western intellectuals in Islamic political and ethical traditions (predominantly its traditions of warfare, but also of governance, social order, and gender relations) is now almost matched by our fascination with “Islam in the West.” This interest quite naturally manifests itself in a focus on certain key public figures in European Islam, the single most prominent of which by far is Tariq Ramadan.

The fascination with Ramadan is understandable. He is, on the one hand, a scion of political Islam—the grandson of Hasan al-Banna, the Egyptian founder of the Muslim Brotherhood (the wellspring of many of Islamism’s twentieth-century tendencies); and the son of Sa‘id Ramadan, one of the most prominent mid-century figures in the “Islamist International,” comprised of exiles from Muslim countries, local grassroots movements (from the Brotherhood to more radical “Salafi” groups), and the conservative oil monarchies. On the other hand, he is an outspoken advocate of the notion that European Muslims can be both European and Muslim in equal measure. He calls on Muslims to be active and engaged citizens of European countries, faithful to their constitutional systems, yet insists that this can be done without adopting a diluted, “liberal Islam” in matters of social and personal morality. On top of this, Ramadan is telegenic, articulate, multilingual, and charismatic. For a Western audience he is a unique Muslim media figure: neither a radical bogeyman à la bin Laden or Khomeini (or one of their myriad imitators, such as Sheikh Abu Hamza al-Masri or even, significantly, Ramadan’s own brother, Hani), nor an outright secular liberal (ex-)Muslim à la Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, or Salman Rushdie.

Given the current historical and political moment, Ramadan is an exciting and controversial figure; and it was perhaps inevitable that there should emerge a small journalistic and political industry dedicated to speculation on his ultimate views or intentions.¹ Underlying the scrutiny of Ramadan’s career and

views is not just a concern with whether this particular public intellectual is trustworthy, but a larger concern with whether and how Islam might be rendered “compatible” in the long-term with European conceptions of liberalism, modernity, and social order.

Ramadan is indeed an appropriate object of scrutiny for those interested in the place of Islam in the West. He has written about the possibility of an Islamic affirmation of membership in European societies in perhaps the most self-conscious manner of any European Muslim thinker. While situating himself as much as possible in a conservative Islamic legal and theological tradition (his book *To Be a European Muslim* is tellingly subtitled “A Study of Islamic Sources in the European Context”), his treatment of the core matters of forging political community in the conditions of religious and moral diversity reveals a familiarity with the language and long-term concerns of political liberalism. It is less clear, however, of what precise interest Ramadan’s writings ought to be and what should be expected from them. An early journalistic cliché pegged Ramadan as the “Muslim Martin Luther.” This awkward attempt to express a desire for an Islamic theology that would allow Muslims to endorse certain aspects of Western-style modernity nonetheless got it exactly wrong. Indeed, the last thing Western liberals ought to wish for is more “Muslim Martin Luthers” on top of the countless self-appointed, iconoclastic, back-to-the-text, literal-minded zealots who have appeared in the footsteps of Ramadan’s own grandfather. What was meant, of course, was that Ramadan might be a potential “Muslim John Locke”—that is, a thinker who would use religious and scriptural arguments to formulate a doctrine of religious tolerance and secular government.

If this is why political liberals ought to be interested in reading Tariq Ramadan, does he fit the bill? What exactly is the place of (possibly illiberal) religion in a liberal society, what constitutes a loyal affirmation of citizenship, and what positions cross the boundaries of reasonableness? Further, given that we prefer a single secular public language for deliberation, why should we concern ourselves at all with Islamic theological or juridical polemics?

POLITICAL LIBERALISM AND RELIGION

Much of the disagreement and controversy over Ramadan’s significance arguably stems not from a disagreement over what he is on record as having asserted or done but from unexamined or unarticulated assumptions about liberal principles and what they demand of Muslims.

Political philosophers often speak of two forms of liberalism: comprehensive liberalism versus political liberalism. Comprehensive liberalism is a way of life, a theory of value, and an epistemology. Comprehensive liberals value rational autonomy, critical scrutiny of tradition, skepticism, and experimentation. They make truth claims for these values and do not seek to disguise their incompatibility with ways of life based on heteronomous deference to established authority. Comprehensive liberalism is often associated with the worldviews of Voltaire, Kant, J. S. Mill, and (more recently) Joseph Raz.

Political liberalism, by contrast, is purely a doctrine of social and political cooperation. It seeks to elaborate the most reasonable public conception of justice and citizenship for free and equal persons, given the existence of disagreement on the ultimate meaning of life and the epistemological foundation for discovering it. Political liberals value the right to individual freedom from being coerced to live a certain way based on a certain conception of the good, as well as social solidarity based on mutual recognition and a fair distribution of resources. They also insist on the education of citizens so that they are aware of their freedoms and rights and of the need to recognize the equal rights of other citizens to these freedoms, but they do not presume to educate citizens into a single worldview or epistemology. Political liberalism defends these terms of citizenship not as “true” but as the most reasonable given the fact of moral pluralism and—importantly—insists that these terms need not contradict the aims of most ways of life, particularly religious ones. This doctrine of social cooperation is most explicitly associated with the work of John Rawls (and many other contemporary liberal philosophers), but a tradition of similar thought might also be plausibly traced from John Locke to the decisions of the Warren Court.

Many citizens of Western democracies are both comprehensive and political liberals. They value autonomy and critical thinking in their own lives and raise their children in this way, but do not assume that religious fellow citizens need to be taught the truth of these values in schools and other public institutions. Many citizens are comprehensive authoritarians but political liberals. They believe in the truth of a revealed morality and raise their children to obey it, but do not seek to commandeer the state or other coercive authority to impose it on others (or even their own children). Of course, many citizens are not political liberals at all but (to continue to follow the philosophical jargon) “political perfectionists”: they think they *know* that their metaphysical (religious or secular) beliefs are true and that this alone justifies using public authority to transform society and the consciousness of its members.

Which doctrine best characterizes contemporary European and North American societies? Broadly speaking, a form of political liberalism holds sway, although not usually by that name. Rather, we speak of societies that accommodate diversity, religious freedom, pluralism, multiculturalism, fairness, and tolerance. But the broad agreement with political liberalism is unmistakable: the state does not come down on one side or the other of metaphysical questions (Is there a God? Which revelation best conveys His instructions? What is the best way to live?); religious communities are tolerated so long as they respect human and civil rights and are left alone to perform their own exegesis and theology; the state is only permitted to interfere in the lives of individuals and minority communities insofar as this is necessary to defend the rights of vulnerable individuals or to protect legitimate public interests (such as security, public health, and so forth); and we expect that certain religious ways of life that do not affirm the primacy of individual freedom, scientific rationality, and absolute gender equality will survive.²

Political liberals are thus faced with the task of identifying what exactly the minimum demands of “integration” are with special reference to Islamic doctrine and the possible points of principled conflict. Integration into a liberal democratic society involves, I would like to submit, demands of *justice* and demands of *citizenship*.³ Demands of justice relate to the broad range of liberal rights and freedoms that all citizens enjoy on an equal basis. There is no doubt that a committed Muslim can find within Islamic legal doctrine plenty of grounds for rejecting liberal conceptions of justice. Muslims are enjoined to “command the right and forbid the wrong”; and a long tradition of juridical, political, and theological thought encourages Muslim communities to enforce Islamic morality in ways that manifestly violate modern liberal civil and human rights.⁴

Demands of citizenship, on the other hand, relate to the idea of membership, belonging, and loyalty to a *particular* political community. Membership in a Western society is problematic from an Islamic perspective to the extent that many jurists and theologians have argued on the basis of revelation that Muslims form a political community themselves and are not permitted to form deep bonds of solidarity with non-Muslims. Non-Muslim political communities are often presumed to be directly antagonistic to the Islamic community and enjoy rights to immunity only if so contracted with a legitimate Imam. Islamic jurists often assert that Muslims ought not to strengthen their non-Muslim host

societies, ought not to integrate into them, and owe those societies no loyalty—political or military.

There is no doubt that a liberal society has the right to expect its citizens to endorse its most fundamental principles of justice and citizenship. Given the capacity for Islam to deny these principles, I would suggest that the most important and elemental principles that liberals ought to insist on include:

- that Islamic conceptions of morality can only be cultivated and encouraged within Muslim families and communities through noncoercive means;
- that the public sphere in non-Muslim liberal democracies cannot be expected to accommodate all Islamic religious sensibilities by limiting freedom of expression;
- that grievances with public authorities be redressed politically and with a long-term commitment to democratic political institutions;
- that non-Muslim fellow citizens are recognized as eligible for bonds of political and social solidarity and that relations with them are regarded as relationships of justice (rather than contingent accommodation);
- that Muslims can recognize the diversity and ethical pluralism of liberal societies as a permanent feature and not something to be ultimately overcome by a future Muslim majority;
- that, whatever legitimate solidarity Muslims feel for the global community of Muslims, non-Muslim states of citizenship enjoy immunity from violence.

I would like to argue further, however, that the above principles are *all* political liberals are justified in demanding. Political liberalism allows for a wide range of disagreement on moral matters and does not insist on Muslim assimilation into all aspects of liberal culture. If it is true that the liberalism of most modern European and North American societies is more “Rawlsian” (pluralistic and neutral between conceptions of the good) than “Voltairean” (committed to a robust and true conception of autonomy and scientific rationality to which the religious must conform), then we have an obligation to evaluate the political thought of someone like Ramadan from this perspective: Is he endorsing the liberal terms of social cooperation on principled grounds or not? Is Ramadan calling on Muslims to endorse European citizenship or is he peddling an esoteric doctrine of subversion from within liberal societies, which a close reading of his utterances will reveal?

If citizens comply with just laws and act in a way that allows a well-ordered democratic society to enjoy stability, what justification might political theorists in politically liberal societies have for inquiring into those citizens' religious beliefs?

An important feature of political liberalism's self-restraint is that public institutions do not give a philosophical or religious account of how liberal tolerance and neutrality fit into a grand theory of truth, the good, or the meaning of life. The claims of political liberalism are meant to be “free-standing”—that is, not derived from any single doctrine or religion, which might alienate those who do not endorse it. This strategy is, of course, designed to increase social unity: religious and cultural conflicts can be avoided or mitigated by limiting governmental power to what can be justified to all reasonable citizens. However, precisely because political liberalism is a thin public philosophy and does not help citizens to order their own souls so that their private purposes and public institutions are aligned, social unity might be fragile: Because some citizens might have no deep, compelling reasons to regard thin, free-standing political principles as outweighing the political principles derived from their deep and purposeful religious and philosophical beliefs, there might exist what we could call a “justificatory gap.” Such citizens will thus only be contingently committed to liberal institutions as long as their relative social and demographic power requires tactical moderation and self-restraint. This is precisely the claim of Paul Berman and others regarding Brotherhood-inspired Muslim organizations in Europe today—namely, that they (unlike more radical groups) call for a tactical integration into European societies today but with the express ambition to Islamize them in one form or another in the future. The retort that such a strategy is law-abiding or nonviolent in no way dispels the concern that it is in many areas hostile to existing liberal institutions and principles.⁵

Political liberalism gives the following answer to this central problem: Because liberal principles are free-standing rather than derived from a controversial doctrine of truth or the good, they are eligible for endorsement by a variety of such controversial doctrines. Thus, the conjecture goes, individual citizens will have their own deep and compelling philosophical and religious reasons for endorsing liberal principles. To take a classic example: Perhaps a Christian (following John Locke) believes that only sincere and uncoerced belief can help a believer achieve salvation. She reasons from this that state power used to punish citizens for

thought or behavior incompatible with salvation is futile and, hence, religiously unsanctioned. She therefore endorses liberal political institutions, while at the same time affirming the truth of Christianity. When she relates liberal institutions to her deepest commitments and beliefs in this way, she has what Rawls has referred to as a “full justification” for those institutions, which the institutions themselves studiously avoid providing. When there exist many doctrines in a society (for example, various religions and secular philosophies) that all happen to provide their own unique full justifications for endorsing, on principled grounds, liberal terms of social cooperation, such a society enjoys what is known as an “overlapping consensus.” The entire project of political liberalism rests on the belief that it can solve the problem of social unity by identifying those moral principles that suffice for regulating just social cooperation and which, at the same time, can and will be affirmed by a variety of comprehensive religious and secular doctrines.

Political liberals are thus deeply interested in whether the existing doctrines flourishing in a liberal society are part of an overlapping consensus. Citizens whose deepest beliefs do not provide them with a full justification for liberal institutions might not regard them as legitimate, might be alienated from them, and might even be motivated to undermine them. And, of course, it is always possible that the precise terms of liberal social cooperation could be altered within the boundaries of justice to accommodate otherwise reasonable citizens. Herein lies the longer-term interest in the writings of someone like Tariq Ramadan. Is he articulating an Islamic doctrine that would be part of an overlapping consensus of support for liberal institutions? If so, is he doing so in a way that reveals authentic and convincing Islamic reasons for such support? Do his writings perhaps increase the future likelihood that even conservative, textually minded Muslims might come to regard liberal institutions as not incompatible with an Islamically well-lived life?

RAMADAN’S EUROPEAN ISLAM

It is not my intention to provide a conclusive reading of Ramadan’s works, still less to assess his own personal political career. Rather, it is to argue that the most plausible reading of Ramadan’s main book on the problem of Islam and Europe, *To Be a European Muslim*, is that it gives evidence for the possibility of an overlapping consensus between the core elements of political liberalism and a form of

Islam that might be appealing even to conservative, traditionally minded Muslims. Examining Ramadan's views on a few core questions, particularly in contrast with more radical Islamist views, is instructive.

Islamic Law and Reform

A key question for European Muslims is how to relate their situation to Islamic sources, and how to use those sources to provide binding guidance. Among some conservative Muslims, life in the West is a challenging and historically unique political situation but one that does not give rise to serious doubts about the applicability of traditional understandings of Islamic social codes to modern Muslims. Some Salafi groups (such as Hizb ut-Tahir) are open and vociferous in their active rejection of inclusion into European life, whereas more mainstream trends influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood (such as Britain's Islamic Foundation, the Union of Islamic Organizations of France, and the myriad Islamic Centers around the continent) advocate a more patient and flexible attitude toward asserting *shari'a*-based demands. However, even moderate Brotherhood-style talk about a "new *ijtihad*" (independent scriptural interpretation) or the pragmatic balancing of various Islamic goals (for example, Yusuf al-Qaradawi's "*fiqh al-muwazanat*") does not call into question the basic rectitude of traditional Islamic legal rulings in such areas as criminal, family, and public law.

Ramadan's approach to these traditions, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, is obviously complex. However, his views on Islamic law and legal reform are intriguing (if not necessarily intellectually powerful) and go beyond what a Brotherhood ideologue seeking to avoid trouble would say. In opposition to the tendencies of Salafi and other revivalists, Ramadan rejects presenting Islam as a "whole series of rules, interdictions or prohibitions, rulings which explain Islam within the framework of a specific relation of protection from an environment which is perceived as too permissive and even hostile."⁶ He regards this narrow, rule-based approach to Islamic morality as "acting—or rather *reacting*—out of fear of Western permissive culture rather than in light of a deep comprehension of Islamic science." More important, he insists that the general assumption that Muslims even know what the Islamic social code involves for all times and places is mistaken. The attitude that

the Islamic juridical frame [is] *entirely immutable*, fixed once and for all, because it is from God or because our previous '*ulama*' have already formulated all that has to be known and followed . . . reveals a profound lack of knowledge and, above all, tends to

define what Islam is not in light of its own principles, but in contrast with what it is not, namely Western civilisation. If the latter accepts change, evolution, freedom and progress then, *logically, reasonably* and *as opposed to it*, Islam does not. Moreover, in their minds, the more one—whether an individual, group or society—refuses change, freedom and progress, the more he or they are genuinely Islamic. . . . this kind of reflection, even if understandable in a time of social and political weakness, crisis and acute pressure, has no justification within the fundamental Islamic frame of reference. (pp. 55–56)

By contrast, Ramadan insists that only the laws of worship (the so-called *‘ibadat*) are permanent and that the laws of the Islamic social code (the *mu‘amalat*, which include all matters of interpersonal relations, including the infamous *hudud*) “need constant reflection and adaptation in order to permit their faithful enforcement in light of the global principles of *Shari‘a*” (p. 43). Rather than define Islam primarily as a set of traditional rules, he prefers to identify core principles and values, which are themselves used to create instructions appropriate for new settings. The global teachings of Islam must be

apprehended in light of every specific era and environment. Armed with the general rulings, tied to them, the silence of the sources on very precise questions obliges the *‘ulama’* to ponder on the revealed matter, to think about their era and to formulate adequate rulings for their contemporaries. The silence is, in fact, the specific part given to human analytic reason to stipulate inevitably diverse *Islamic rules*, through space and time, but ones which are still *Islamic*. (p. 75)

Ramadan’s understanding of how Islamic teachings are to be redefined in European conditions is also significant. He invokes both the concept of “public interest” (*maslaha*, which is a characteristic feature of late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Islamic Modernist thought) and the theory of the “purposes of the *shari‘a*” (*maqasid al-shari‘a*, a controversial discourse within premodern Islamic jurisprudence, which argues that Islamic law can be derived not only from textual interpretation but also from conjecture about which basic aims and interests God intends to protect through law) to argue that Muslims are able to “define an orientation which will enable us, *while remaining within the limits of the constitution of one country or another*, to come as close as possible to respecting Islamic prescriptions” (p. 101).

These statements do not, of course, amount to a comprehensive, Lockean Islamic affirmation of liberal freedoms, but they are suggestive. They represent, for one, a certain distancing from the more conservative emphasis on how to preserve and implement Islamic morality (rather than creatively debate it) in Western

conditions. However, there is also an explicit openness on Ramadan's part to the virtue of *choosing* to follow God's wishes in the conditions of freedom, which is an obvious condition of long-term integration into a liberal political community:

The human being is free and has the choice: he should know that what is forbidden by God is bad for him since it is a prescription bestowed from his Lord who knows better. The path of Islam is both easy and demanding. The responsibility of the true Believer is to follow it by making the appropriate choices to prevent himself from becoming a wrongdoer or allowing doubts to creep in. (p. 70)

At the very least it is obvious that Ramadan regards the compatibility or incompatibility of European liberalism and Islamic morality as an *open question* and one that new generations of Muslims have the right to attempt to answer for themselves. This alone is a significant departure from the explicit or implicit message of more conservative Brotherhood thinkers.

Islamic Political Geography

Defining the space in which Muslims live as minorities is one of the first and most basic questions addressed in the Muslim legal tradition. The classical juridical binary was that of the "Abode of Islam" (*dar al-Islam*) versus the "Abode of War" (*dar al-harb*) or the "Abode of Unbelief" (*dar al-kufr*). Many premodern jurists permitted residence in non-Muslim lands, but with some distaste. Some contemporary Salafi groups preserve this basic terminology, implying that non-Muslim political authority is always illegitimate and that all forms of integration, including political participation, are strictly prohibited because of what they would imply by way of legitimizing infidel institutions. By contrast, Brotherhood scholars (such as al-Qaradawi and Faysal Mawlawi) have softened the Islamic stance on non-Muslim lands, referring to them often as the "Abode of Proselytizing" (*dar al-da'wa*). This latter term serves to legitimize life in the West, and some integration into it, but caution here also applies. The language of *da'wa* runs the risk of calling only for the conversion of non-Muslims and the ultimate Islamization of the West, not for a permanent recognition of pluralism; it also may be a way of refuting Salafi charges of Brotherhood loss of nerve, as if to say: "We can refrain from calling for *jihad* or seclusion because we have an active, forward Islamic agenda based around missionary activities."

Ramadan often cites the *da'wa* arguments favorably. Here, the common conception that he is basically of the Brotherhood persuasion has some force. However, Ramadan has articulated both the "ideological geography" of the West and

the duty of *da'wa* in an original fashion and one that is starkly more pro-integration than the more conservative “loyal resident alienage” articulated by such jurists as al-Qaradawi. For Ramadan, the West is neither the Abode of War nor the Abode of *da'wa* but “*dar al-shahada*,” the “Abode of Testimony [to the Islamic Message].” Importantly, for him the “Islamic message” to which Muslims are expected to bear witness is not primarily the particularist, socially conservative code of traditionalist jurists, but a commitment to universalism and the welfare of non-Muslims; it is also an injunction not merely to make demands on un-Islamic societies but to express solidarity with them:

...the European environment is a *space of responsibility* for Muslims. This is exactly the meaning of the notion of “*space of testimony*” [*dar al-shahada*] that we propose here, a notion that totally reverses perspectives: whereas Muslims have, for years, been wondering *whether and how they would be accepted*, the in-depth study and evaluation of the Western environment entrusts them, in light of their Islamic frame of reference, with a most important mission. Muslims now attain, in the *space of testimony*, the meaning of an essential duty and of an exacting responsibility: to contribute, wherever they are, to promoting good and equity within and through *human brotherhood*. Muslims’ outlook must now change from the reality of “protection” alone to that of an authentic “contribution.” (p. 150)

Furthermore, while most conservative thinkers emphasize *da'wa* as a project of enlarging the ranks of Islam in Europe, for Ramadan, *da'wa* is the duty to “present Islam, explain the content of this Faith and the Islamic teaching as a whole” (p. 147) and “must not be confused with either proselytism or efforts to convert: the duty of the Muslim is to spread the Message and to make it known, no more no less. Whether someone accepts Islam or not is not the Muslim’s concern, for the inclination of every individual heart depends on God’s Will. The notion of *da'wa* is based on one principle, which is the right of every human being to make *a choice based on knowledge*, and this is why Muslims are asked to spread the knowledge of Islam among Muslims as well as non-Muslims” (p. 134).

This articulation is clearly grounded in the public values of political liberalism: mutual recognition, restraint, and individual freedom. Finally, when he expounds on the content of the Islamic duty to “enjoin justice” or “promote good and equity,” this takes on a particularly political (in the Rawlsian sense) cast: He understands the Muslim’s duty to bear witness to Islamic values as a duty to be involved in society in the areas of “unemployment, marginalisation, delinquency, reform of legal, economic, social and political systems” (p. 147), and so on—that

is, precisely the sort of civic goals appropriate in a politically liberal regime. By contrast, for a genuinely strict Salafi scholar, “enjoining justice” would point toward the direct confrontation of sin or scandalous behavior, such as in the infamous Danish cartoon incident.

Loyalty to a Social Contract

On the question of loyalty to non-Muslim states of citizenship, Ramadan finds valuable resources within the Islamic legal tradition. He argues that “millions of Muslims have tacitly or explicitly recognised the binding character of the constitution or the laws of the country they enter into and then live in. By signing a work contract or asking for a visa, they acknowledge the validity and authority of the constitution, the laws and the state all at once” (p. 164). This argument, shared by the Brotherhood and even many Salafi groups, is very powerful and is regarded as particularly strong from a religious perspective: “Contracts determine our status, fix our duties and rights and direct the nature and scope of our actions. Once agreed, the terms of a covenant should be respected, and if there is a point which seems to work against Muslim rights—or even their conscience as Believers—this has to be discussed and negotiated since Muslims are, unilaterally, not allowed to breach a treaty” (p. 172). In fact, for Ramadan, obeying the European social contract becomes precisely what it means for Muslims to “implement *shari‘a* in Europe”:

One can then see that it is clearly in the name of faithfulness to the Islamic teachings of *Shari‘a* and *fiqh* that Muslims can live in the West, and that it is their duty to respect the law of the country. In other words, Islamic law and jurisprudence *order* a Muslim individual to submit to the framework of positive law in force in his country of residence in the name of the tacit moral covenant which already underlies his very presence. To put it differently again, *implementing the Shari‘a*, for a Muslim citizen or resident in Europe, is explicitly to respect the constitutional and legal framework of the country in which he is a citizen. Whereas one might have feared a *conflict of loyalties*, one cannot but note that it is in fact the reverse, since faithfulness to Islamic teachings results in an even more exacting legal *implementation* in the new environment. *Loyalty to one’s faith and conscience requires firm and honest loyalty to one’s country*: the *Shari‘a* requires honest citizenship within the frame of reference constituted by the positive law of the European country concerned. (p. 172)

Importantly, Ramadan rejects a number of frequent Islamic qualifications on this idea of contract—namely, that un-Islamic European practices negate Islamic obligations or that the general loyalty to the Islamic *umma* trumps civic loyalty in

all cases. As to the first: “The overall ruling here is that Muslims are bound by the terms of their contract except for the specific case in which they would be *constrained* to act against their conscience. This precision, regarding the terms used, is necessary, for some radical Islamic groups claim that a Muslim cannot be bound by a constitution which allows interest (*riba*), alcohol (*khamr*) and other behaviour which contradicts Islamic teachings. European constitutions do not *oblige* Muslims to resort to [such transactions] or to act in such a way” (p. 171). As to the second:

To be a Muslim, anywhere in the world, means to experience and develop this feeling of belonging to the *umma* as if it were an organ of a great body. Does this mean that this belonging, based on Faith, affection and brotherhood, has no restrictions and that it is the only parameter of judgment allowing us, for instance, to say: “All that is done in the name of and for the *umma* is good and what is not is to be rejected”? This statement, sometimes uttered by Muslims, by no means conveys Islamic teaching, for just as there are limits in one’s obedience to parents, so are there principles by which a Muslim bases his belonging and then his supporting. The feeling of belonging [to the *umma*] does not signify that a Muslim is allowed to accept or support an injustice just because its author is his brother in Faith. (pp. 158–59)

Justice, Solidarity, and the Recognition of Non-Muslims

A final area of overlapping consensus relates to the quality of relationships with non-Muslims. Many Islamists endorse the contractarian position above but insist that relationships with non-Muslims should be limited and that political participation can only be permitted to advance Muslim communal interests. Ramadan clearly dissents from this more mainstream Brotherhood-inspired position. For one, he asserts a conception of justice that does not distinguish between the interests of Muslims and non-Muslims: “To defend justice cannot be to defend Muslims only: the best witness of the excellence (*ihsan*) of the Islamic way of life lies in respecting the ideal of justice over and above the failings of Muslim believers” (p. 22). While a Brotherhood thinker might not reject outright such a position, Ramadan is pointing to the imperative for Muslims to concern themselves on a principled basis with the interests and rights of non-Muslims.

The question of political participation is more revealing, however, of Ramadan’s uniqueness in the European Islamic context. Many Islamic scholars reject participation in European political systems either on the grounds that it is sinful to collude in un-Islamic legislative and political power, or that it is preferable not to add to the strength of non-Muslim societies. Furthermore, many Islamic

scholars or public intellectuals justify such participation only on the condition that it contributes to improving the welfare of Muslim communities in particular or that such participation could contribute to reforming European policies in an illiberal direction (such as when some British Muslims called for the British blasphemy law to be extended to cover all religions). Here, the liberal objects that, while no laws are being violated, the arguments for political participation reveal an underlying antipathy toward democratic government and a distaste for excessive solidarity with non-Muslims.

Consider, by contrast, Ramadan's views on political participation:

Muslims should be allowed to commit themselves within society and to act in favour of human solidarity. This also means that Muslims can be engaged in social as well as political and economic activities. This is why, both at local and national levels, their commitment as Muslims and citizens is imperative for it is the sole way of completing and perfecting their Faith and the essential Message of their Religion. The social space, with its laws and customs, should permit them to attain this. (p. 134)

THE BURDEN OF PROOF

This brief review of Ramadan is not meant to resolve the question of whether his vision of Islam in Europe, taken in its entirety, gives enduring principled Islamic support for a liberal political order—that is, is part of an “overlapping consensus” on the reasonableness of political liberalism. Nor have I even addressed the question of his personal sincerity, his ultimate motivations, or whether certain past incidents or personal associations render him untrustworthy as a political figure in Europe. There is no doubt that many Muslim Brotherhood–inspired Islamic figures in Europe harbor illiberal political aspirations, and Ramadan's origins in that milieu need to be borne in mind.

However, Ramadan has attempted to develop a fairly elaborate conception of how Muslims should balance their Islamic and their European commitments, and that is where we should give the preponderance of our consideration in evaluating whether his views are compatible with the most reasonable demands of political liberalism. What I have attempted to demonstrate is that there is very strong reason to regard his main political views as fully supportive of a liberal political order. The burden of proof seems to be on those who are skeptical of this to demonstrate, on the basis of a close reading of Ramadan's political writings, what precisely they regard as beyond the limits of reasonable disagreement in a diverse society.

NOTES

- ¹ This literature is, of course, older and richer in France, where Ramadan is a household name and full-fledged public figure, but now includes periodic coverage in the British press, a prominent profile by Ian Buruma in the *New York Times Magazine* (February 4, 2007), essays by Timothy Garton Ash and Malise Ruthven in the *New York Review of Books* (October 5, 2006, and August 16, 2007, respectively), and, most recently and notably, Paul Berman's 29,000-word polemic in the *New Republic* (June 4, 2007).
- ² Of course, France is notably an exception to the Anglo-American preference for political liberalism. There the desire to create certain kinds of subjects or human selves out of citizens is publicly proclaimed, as is the antipathy to any form of religious or communal self-identification in the public sphere. This goes a long way toward explaining why Ramadan remains much more acceptable in Britain than in France. See, for example, Pascal Bruckner's defense of Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the need for an "enlightened European Islam" as opposed to political liberalism's interest in a "reasonable Islam": www.signandsight.com/features/1146.html.
- ³ See Andrew F. March, "Liberal Citizenship and the Search for Overlapping Consensus: The Case of Muslim Minorities," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2006), pp. 373–421, for an elaboration of the arguments in these paragraphs.
- ⁴ See Andrew F. March, "Islamic Foundations for a Social Contract in Non-Muslim Liberal Democracies," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (May 2007), pp. 235–52, for references to all Islamic views referred to in the present article.
- ⁵ On this theme, see Lorenzo Vidino, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Conquest of Europe," *Middle East Quarterly* (Winter 2005); and "Aims and Methods of Europe's Muslim Brotherhood," in Hillel Fradkin, Husain Haqqani, and Eric Brown, eds., *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology Vol. 4* (Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute, 2006).
- ⁶ Tariq Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim* (Leicester, UK: Islamic Foundation, 1999), p. 3. All page references are to this text and all italics are in the original.