

# Living as Muslims in the 21st Century

**Professor Tariq Ramadan**

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[Introduction by Abdul-Rehman]

Professor Tariq Ramadan really requires no introduction, he holds an MA in Philosophy and French Literature, a PhD in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Geneva, and in Cairo, Egypt, and he received one to one training in Classical Islamic Scholarship at Al-Azhar University. He's a Professor of Islamic Studies, a noted speaker, intellectual Scholar; currently the senior research fellow at St. Anthony's College in Oxford, has an affiliation with Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan and the Lokahi Foundation. He has also been a visiting Professor in charge of identity and citizenship at Erasmus University in Holland. His writing and lectures have contributed substantially to the debate on the issue of Islam and Muslims in the West and the Muslim revival and Islamic revival in the world. His most recent book is in the footsteps of the Prophet. Tariq Ramadan is one of those remarkable individuals who have really shaped the discourse on Islam and Muslims, not just here i



n the UK but truly around the world. So without any further ado, I would like to invite and welcome, Professor Tariq Ramadan.

[Professor Tariq Ramadan takes to the floor]

*BismiLlahir Rahmanir Raheem. Wal-Salatu wal-Salamu 'ala ashrafil mursaleen Sayyidina Muhammad wa 'ala alihi wa Sahbihi ajma'een. Al-Salamu 'alaykum wa rahmatuLlahi wa barakatuh.*

Dear Sisters and Brothers, I am happy to be here this evening and especially after the fact that the three first presentations dealing with the local dimension of the Muslim presence like what you are trying to do here with the Muslim

forum because it's part of what I also want to share with you tonight. And the old global picture about dealing with our society in Britain, and also of course about all the creative dimensions that you are promoting through your work, Brother Peter Sanders. And I think that this is also the way we have to deal with being a Muslim in the twenty-first century. So as I think it's important to have time for questions and answers, I will try to keep it as short as possible and to just highlight some of the points that I wanted to make this evening.

You know, I have been thinking about these issues; of being a Muslim in the twenty-first century, facing contemporary challenges not only here in the West, but also in the Islamic majority countries. And for years, when I was in Egypt sitting with scholars for hours, and hours and hours going through all the Islamic sciences, from the *'Uloom al-Quran*, *'uloom al-hadeeth* and *Fiqh*, which I started to be specialized in. *Usool al Fiqh* and *Fiqh* from the mantles of law and jurisprudence and applied jurisprudence in our lives. The point was always – okay, we have this very great, important and deep legacy but we also have to deal with current challenges and try to find our way. We rely on the past, we rely on great scholars, but we also have new challenges and this is up to us to try to found the way towards faithfulness. And the first thing which has been clear for me, you know spending hours with the scholars, and dealing with the Muslim communities, but also dealing with the surrounding society, is that we have a great problem of knowledge and also terminology. It's the way we translate the Arabic references, the Islamic references. Translation is not only translation of words, it's translation of multi-dimensional reality when it comes to the religious references, the spiritual dimension and also the way we are dealing with the surrounding society. And I think that from the starting point reading all what we had, even in Arabic (because translation is not only from one language to another, it's within the language the way we understand, for example, the concept of Islam) for an Arabic audience, or even for an English audience, a French audience, a European audience, very often the way we translate is conveying the way we understand. And it's clear that under the pressure, because we don't always know how to deal with the current challenges, we can keep something which is a very reductive way to translate our words, our terminology, in a defensive way.

I think the starting point (and I don't have time because it's not really the topic) is the way we translate the concept of Islam is wrong, the notion of Islam is wrong and all the terminology and also the way we are understanding the interconnections and the priorities. And I really think that if there is a challenge for us in the twenty-first century here and everywhere is to be able (and it's not something that only has to come from scholars, it has to come from every single Muslim man and woman. It's something which is really essential in our religion, that our religion is not a religion of elites. It's the religion of every single mind, every single heart) to come back to the understanding of our terminology, the priorities and higher objectives of our religion: why are we here, what is the answer of our religion as to the great questions.

The first question is, 'why are we here?'. What do we want to achieve? What do we want to achieve in this world, what do we want to achieve in Britain? Infact, it's to be able to come to the roots. Not only to tell the people what Islam is not, but what Islam is all about; the multiple dimension.

The great problem of the Muslims today, all this business about radicalisation, integration... The problem is a psychological crisis based on the lack of knowledge and lack of deep understanding of the spiritual dimension of our religion. Because the whole process of this religion is all about liberation, liberation of all kinds of alienation. And the first enemy is your own ego. The second is the perception that you look at the world through your own personal viewpoint, which is a lack of humility. The first sin in Islam is not a mistake, it's a state of mind, a state of heart. It's arrogance. And here we have to come to this because we need to come to the spiritual dimension to be able in our societies to contribute and to spread around what the Prophet 'alayhis Salatu wal-Salam, Peace be upon him, was saying. "*Ifshus Salam baynakum*": spread peace among yourselves, between yourselves, with the people everywhere. Cause at the end of the day the highest objective of Islam is peace because in Islam there is *salam wa istislam*. And *salam* is really important because it's the highest level of what we want, but there are conditions to get that inner peace, social peace, collective peace, starting with the peace with Him, with The One. To be at peace with Him, to be able to be at peace with our own selves, and then to be at peace with the people around us.

If I was to say something about the first challenges, this is really this introspection that we need today. To come with deep faith, but a very critical understanding, profound understanding of our religion, the concepts we are using, the objectives that we are trying to achieve, and what we have to contribute in our societies.

Having said that, I think that as usual we're always speaking about the social dimensions and what we have to promote. And we all know that the first and the priority is the spiritual dimension. And... I was born in Europe. I went back to my country of origin, to Egypt, just to be far from the world, close to knowledge. This is what I needed, I needed this. And I know how many young Muslims they need exactly the same, sometimes they feel lost in this universe. Materialistic dimension, consumerism, loss, crisis of identity; I went through all these. But not being representative of all that is going on at the grassroots level. Why? Because I was coming from a family where knowledge was everywhere. I was born in a family where there was no walls, everything was books. Books everywhere. And still, books were nothing. Nothing, if you don't have this psychological strength coming from spiritual peace. This is the way I understood it and this is why I went back. I went back to get the knowledge and to get this special understanding.

Now, when I'm living in Europe, I'm dealing with the communities, travelling around everywhere, the same spiritual crisis, psychological disturbances and questions, the same. For the younger generations, asking us 'how do we deal with this?'. Then we have to face the reality, the first main crisis, the first main 'how to be a Muslim in the twenty-first century' is to look at this as it is. That what we need is really to think about how do we transmit the spiritual message of our religion? How in our societies we spread this peace and confidence and trust. Because as the starting point of everything is confidence. And confidence is what? Confidence is not only not to be scared by the people. First, of course, for a spiritual mind, for a spiritual message, confidence is to trust Him; *al-tawakkul 'alaLlah*. To know that if you can do it, He can do it. And at the end of the day you have to do whatever you can. What you can't, He can. It's this confidence, it's the tawakkul. It's something which is... I can do it and I... but more than that, it's for the Muslims living in Britain, it's for the Muslim communities living in our country not to wait for someone coming with the answers to our questions. It's to be able, with confidence, to say 'we may have new questions but we have the skills, the knowledge and the people who are able to respond to our questions'. If we do what he have to do, face up to the challenges of our time. It needs something which is really important, not only to look at the past. What you said for example about the Muslim contribution to Europe is essential. But there is two ways to deal with the past. To rely on the past, to tell ourselves how great we were. Or to look at our past to say 'this greatness of the past is something we can reconcile ourselves with today'. So we should be confident that for our time we are able to come with the answers needed today as they were doing it in the past. The past is not an excuse for our failures in our current time. It should be something which is inspiring what we have to do, and this is confidence. This is today something which is really a challenge, everywhere. Not only in the European or the Western societies but everywhere. So we have to ask ourselves, how do we do that? How can we do that? It's not only through... you know, national discourses. These kind of lectures are really important but at the end of the day it's a daily process at the local level. To deal with the communities, to deal with the people, to listen to their questions.

You mentioned in your... the series of the photographs, that you were showing, and that they are representing what is happening in our society in Britain. And I think that there are very numerous people working at the grassroots level, very very anonymous, they are not here to speak. The people who speak sometimes speak too much and do not enough. But the reality of it, you know, you mention Sharifa is here and she was working for years with the Muslim Youth Helpline. And I went there, I went to the office. I listened to people say the problems are deep. The problems are deep, it's not only 'come with a fatwa, this is halal, lawful/unlawful and that's it.' It's not like this, the people are just asking. They don't want to feel guilty after asking questions, they want to be heard. And the problem is that we are building a community on the defensive, obsessed with norms, forgetting meanings. We have to reconcile ourselves with meanings and through the meanings we can understand the meaning of norms. It's not norms without meanings, it's meanings just to understand the norms. To understand why we don't do this and why we do this. This is something which is the first challenge. The first challenge for the Muslims in the twenty-first century is this.

And then we have a vicious circle here because of the pressure that we have about 'oh radicalisation, terrorist'. We are so under pressure sometimes that we are on the defensive. The Islamic discourse is a discourse responding to questions who are already judgemental. We have to... this is the liberation which is needed now. Which is to say okay, we are going to answer the legitimate questions the people have around us. Because they are legitimate questions, of course they are. When the people are looking at the Muslim communities and they are dealing with what is going on in the living room everyday, of course they have questions about violence, about women discriminations. Yes, we have to understand that they are legitimate questions. But we also have to liberate ourselves from this pressure, to come with a very strong spiritual and psychological message where we are able to say what we stand for and what we want. And to be able to deal with this transmission of the values that are promoted by our religion.

We don't speak enough about love, we don't speak enough about learning to love. Because at the end, if you come to the Islamic message you need to get to reach peace. But to get peace is to learn to love. It's not enough to love your father, your mother, the way you love them. You have to learn to love them more. You follow in the footsteps of the Prophet and you say every time you hear about him '*sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*'. But the words are not enough, you have to come back to your heart and ask yourself, is he dear to my heart? Am I missing him? Am I following him? Because in the Quran the connection between love of him and even God is referred to in the way you can love your fathers and your mothers, your relatives, because this is something which is quite natural. But from natural it has to become spiritual. And the difference between a natural love and the spiritual love is the spiritual love is a constant exercise, deeper and deeper and deeper. And this is something which is really, really important.

You know when someone had problem with his father, and the Prophet '*alayhis salatu was salam*' answered and said "*anta wa maaluka li abeek*". You and all your money, you belong to your father. At the first he was coming with 'I love him', but at the end the answer is 'you and everything which is yours is to him'. So you go to have further than that. It's a spiritual journey to love your father and your mother, it's not easy. So it's as difficult as to come close to the spiritual meaning of it. This is why we have to promote all this. This is something which is essential in our religion.



So when we speak about spirituality in our daily life, when we speak about love, when we speak about brotherhood. The Muslims when you come to the community they are always speaking about brotherhood. One thing is to speak about brotherhood, one thing is to experience brotherhood. You know, when you have the Prophet '*alayhis Salatu was salam*' telling the people that... This is something which is really important because the way we deal with it within our community is the way we are

going to spread it around for the people because there is something which is essential in Islam, it's not new. Some of the people when they listen to me speaking they say it's a modern way to speak about ---. Al-Nawawi speaking about one hadeeth of the Prophet *'alayhis salatu was salam* when he said that "You are not going to complete your faith as you don't love for your brother what you love for yourself". *La yu-minu ahadukum hatta yuhibba li akheehi ma yuhibbuhu li nafsih*. When you don't love for your brother what you love for yourself, you are not completing your faith. Your faith is not completed. And he was mentioning it means your brother in humanity, al-ukhuww al-insaniyya. It means not only your brothers and sisters in Islam, it means means your brothers in humanity. You have to spread this beyond the community, it's a universal message of love. It's not a community message of 'we love each other' inside and not outside. Even if you see someone who is your brother in humanity, you may dislike what he or she is doing but you have to love who he is and who she is. Because beyond everything he or she is doing, he and she are signs of God in front of you. You may dislike what Einstein was saying out of his mind, what he was denying God. But you can see in his mind signs of the powerful message of God in his mind. Because he was so bright and so contributing to our humanity.

These are things that we have to come back within our community and these are challenges today. And it's not far from our daily life, it's the way to be a British Muslim. It's the way to be a British Muslim; the way we deal with spirituality, the way we deal with love, the way we deal with brotherhood, human brotherhood in our society. And to be able to liberate ourselves from the defensive attitude to come to a more peaceful, open attitude out of our message of Islam.

And last point, it's about also... Last point of this positive message, when it comes to Islam is to contribute. I am no longer- I am sorry, I am no longer speaking about integration. I speak about integration to deny integration because integration is a success when we stop talking about it. You stop talking about integration, it means that we are beyond something. So I understand the point, because the creativity of all what we are doing is saying, 'it's done, look at this. What are you saying?'. And it's not assimilation. But at the end what is the most important thing from all the pictures we show is that every single man and woman is giving something to his or her community. And it's contribution the central concept. The central word is contribution, what do you give to people? And this is *'li takoonu shuhada 'alal-nas'*, in order for you to bear witness to your message before people, this is what you have to do. A witness gives something; it could be a question, it could be a gift. He or she gives something to the society. And this is what *al-amr bil ma'roof*, to promote what is good and to resist what is bad is exactly this, this is what we have to do, this is what we stand for.

At the end of the day the future of Britain, the future of our Western societies winning it or not, we are on the same side. We are in the same society. We have the same hopes; what we want is peace, what we want is justice, what we want is human dignity. We want to be treated with dignity, this is what we all want. And the point is

to ask ourselves what we are doing to contribute to the future of our society. So I should not accept someone pushing me to be a potential suspect every time, no. It's to be free, it's to be a citizen, it's to struggle for our rights and to be able to say 'what we want is to be treated with respect and we are treating with respect'. Because this is all about the Islamic message.

So let me... with this, this is the starting point of a mindset infact. What I'm trying to say here is that this is building a mindset, this is building an attitude; confidence, spirituality, giving to people. 'I may disagree with what you are doing, I will respect who you are. And I will give to this society.' The starting point of the challenge is a state of mind and a process of liberation.

And then with this, also to be able to read our tradition. And to add to this tradition things that were not possible to be thought in the previous time because the people were not dealing with the same challenges. But this is our contribution not only to our society, but to all the Islamic tradition. We have to come with new ideas, we have to be creative. We have to come with new understandings when it comes to new challenges. We cannot sit here and say... we are not imitators, but at the end of the day we imitate. And we don't come with something which is the new dimension, which is... we need this because the central... Let me give you an example. The last few months I've been working on Islamic ethics and just before this I wrote a book on the Prophet's life, 'alayhis Salatu was salam, and I changed my mind for years about saying the main concept, the main objective of Islam is justice today. I understand that justice is just a condition of peace. The highest level is this inner peace that we are all struggling to get and to reach. And then, starting and working on Islamic ethics, you come to what the scholars were doing for years and trying to say, 'okay, if you look at the world today, don't we have to reassess the whole apparatus of the Islamic ethics when it comes to the challenges of today?'. Why is it so important? Because scholars of the 12th century- and you mention Abu Hamid AlGhazali,- was one of the greatest scholars that we had. Before him, his teacher was Al-Juwaini and after him came Al-Shatibi. Al-Shatibi was a European scholar. And they were trying to deal with the principles of Islam. And the way they tried to extract the principles of Islam was through only the texts, and to understand the texts and to extract these from the text. What they did, they said 'if you look at the punishments in the Quran and in the *Sunnah*, you have very strong punishments in some different areas. And by induction they tried to extract the highest objective of Islam by reading where the Islamic punishments were. For example, they came with 'if you have to deal with someone who is leaving his or her religion (at that time this was the majority understanding. It's not the only one today as to changing religion)... And they were saying, the first principle to be protected is *al-Deen*, your religion.' Then, you cannot drink alcohol and you're going to be punished if you do something which is against your personal integrity. So the second principle is personal integrity. Infact, the principles they set were by opposition to the punishments we have when we betray them or when we transgress them. Okay, this was done in the twelfth century, before the twelfth century 'til the fourteenth century. We today are repeating this and it's clear that the principles are still the same.

But look at our reality today and look at all the discussion about global warming. Look at the nature, our nature, the creation, asking the human beings for more respect! And knowing, ourselves, that the Quran and even the Prophet *alayhis Salatu was salam* was so, so... you know, he was so strong on this; respecting the cats, you have here. Respecting the dogs, respecting the fruit trees, respecting nature. This was respecting water, asking someone making ablution to respect the water, not to waste water. This was the main principle of Islam.

And then we are living in a time where the creation, nature around us, is asking us 'how are you treating me?'. And this is the book of God, this is the revelation. The world, the universe is a book. It's infact the first revelation. We are even wrong in the way we translate '*ayah*' in Arabic. We are today saying in English, 'this is a verse'. Verse is coming from versification, it's coming from the bible translation. It's not coming from Arabic. Arabic means 'signs'. And 'signs' is exactly the word we are using for the world. There are signs in the world and there are signs in the books and there are two books and two revelations. If we understand the holistic message of Islam. Today we are dealing with this, and the world is talking to us. And the scientific experts are telling us 'we need something which is an applied ethics here'. Where are the Muslims? Where are the Western Muslims at the centre of these questions today? They have to come with something. It's not going to come from Africa, it's not going to come from Saudi Arabia, it's not going to come from poor countries, it's going to come from people living in the more industrialised societies.

We are lacking confidence, so we don't have the answers to these questions. And we expect someone to come and to give us this. So, lack of confidence, lack of knowledge, and not dealing with the current, deep questions that are universal questions. So we have to reconcile ourselves with all these dimensions as Muslims. As I said, the spiritual realm, everything which has to do with contribution, and the highest principles of Islam.

So my conclusion here will be that in Britain, with all what I have been saying, which is once again the global message, it has to do with our daily life. It's really... you know now it's over, all this discussion 'are you law-abiding?' 'yes'. 'Are you accepting the British culture?' 'yes'. 'Are you selective with the British culture?' 'Yes, as every single British citizen. What is good for me, I will take it. What I don't like, I am not going to take it. Every single British is doing that.' So are you law-abiding? Yes. Integrated? Yes. All this is over. Now what we have to do is go a step further with a very dynamic, offensive infact, message (offensive in the positive, constructive way) is that what we want, exactly what we stand for. And having said that, and this is also... and one, also one other thing, which I keep on repeating to every single European citizen but I was saying this in the States a few years ago. Our loyalty towards our countries should not be disputed or suspected, we are loyal to our countries because we are loyal to our

principles. But we know something which is everywhere, within the Islamic community as well as outside the community. The only true loyalty is a critical loyalty. It's not 'my community, right or wrong' or 'my country, right or wrong'. This is the beginning of nationalism and fascism. It's 'yes, I am with my community when my community is right. I will be against people from my community if they are wrong. I am for my society, with my country, if my country is doing right. But I will stand up in the name of my principles if my country is doing things that are wrong.' And the dignity of the society of people being able to say 'no' when things are done in my name which are wrong. This is critical loyalty, this is the true meaning of being an active, dynamic citizen. I belong to my principles, and I am with my country, and I will be with Britain every single time where every single situation where we're promoting justice. But I have to stand up for the sake of my country to say 'this is wrong, what you are doing is wrong.' It's not that I am against my country, I want the best for my country. I want the best for my community.

And a Muslim should stand up against some Muslims when some of these Muslims are saying things in the name of Islam which is completely wrong. To kill an innocent people, no. To say to people when you don't agree with them, 'you are outside the realm of Islam', no. to show disrespect and to show people that there is only one way to be a good human being, it's to be like me... it's not my message, it's not our message. So we have to stand up when we have to say something.

A critical mind, a critical loyalty is something which is part of the true integration, post-integration discourse which is contributing to the better of our society. It's based on confidence, and this is something that we have to promote. It's based on consistency. Consistency is really the basis of what I call critical loyalty. Consistency means that we have principles and what we are trying to do is just to be consistent, to apply these principles from ourselves and with the other people. And this is something which is very much missing. The problem some Muslims may have in British society and other European societies have nothing to do with laws and legislations, but very often with a lack of consistency. We have very nice values but we are not implementing these values at the local level and at the social level. What we have to promote is consistency. Justice means justice for all, equality means equality for all, and we have to work for that. But it also means to be consistent in our discourse towards what is happening in the Islamic-majority countries, and I said, the contribution. Where could we do this...

And this is the final word, is what you started by saying at the beginning of this evening. Local dimension, working at the local level, the grassroots, being involved with the people, building spaces of trust, what I call 'the new we'. The new we is here, look at this room. The room is people coming from different cultural backgrounds, religious backgrounds, living in the same area, but we all need to know each other to build the future together. So it doesn't mean to forget who you are, to be able to be with who you are not. It's 'be who you are in order to build trust with the people you are not' in order to get this new we and this confidence and this better knowledge, a

mutual knowledge and trust. So the local level is essential based on confidence as I said and knowledge, because we need that.

And the point which I was happy to have tonight, which is also really important, is creativity, which is a central word. Creativity is a way to give. But not only intellectually speaking, not only religiously speaking. Religion is not only about faith and prayers. It's about culture, poetry and creativity, in all these dimensions. And here what we need is British Muslims being able to write poetry in English, part of the British literature today and for tomorrow, to have all these kinds of photographs, all these kind of... I know that some Muslims disagree with this. The only thing I'm asking these Muslims to say that there are many views in Islam. And that I'm not less a Muslim than them. It's a question of respecting each other. You may think that photographs and movies and music, all this is haram. That's fine, I respect you, you respect me. You are not more Muslim, I'm not less Muslim. These our views and respect.

But on the field, when we have accepted that there is something which has to do with cultures and creativity and arts, let us come together and promote something which is a new sense of belonging through a very dynamic sense of creativity in our communities. So spirituality, love, brotherhood, confidence, critical loyalty, creativity, and still be able to reach out with people at the local level to create this spaces of trust and a new we for the British citizens for today and for tomorrow. Thank you.

*Transcribed by A.J. - many thanks!*