

ISLAM AND THE WEST: Tariq Ramadan and the Discourse of Religion of Peace for a Global Understanding

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ABSTRACT

*As the world is increasingly globalized, culture and human thought are developing in a different way because it is shaped by culture and climate of the local environment. In the West, in particular, Muslims confront the issues currently generated by the culture and philosophy of Western civilization which is very different in terms of the frame of thought. Therefore, to be adapted to the Western/European environment and so Islam will be able to grow, the modification of the format without changing the original teachings of Islam are highly required. Even this method is very suitable based on dynamic Islam. Tariq Ramadan, indeed, is seen as a prominent Muslim thinker who attempt to explore the historical tradition of Islam, or the Prophet's biography, to be applied to the western/European tradition whose typical civilization might prevent Islam from flourishing if global Islamic values are not applied to the current world. In other words, if the same methods are used as practiced in the Islamic tradition in the East, the possibility is that Islam will not thrive in the West. In his book, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*, he clearly shows how the biography of the Prophet is extracted of the essence of teaching to be used as a catalyst in a new life or to be adjusted to the context of the current globalized world.*

Keywords: Tariq Ramadan, European Muslims, tolerance, Messenger of Allah, Islam

INTRODUCTION

The name Tariq Ramadan is increasingly referred to as one of the leading contemporary intellectuals. He has been nicknamed 'very much a public figure'. His speeches in the humanities and firmness in defending Islam are increasingly making Tariq a magnet of attention. Especially when it appears that he has a family relationship with the Mujahideen leaders of the Muslim

Brotherhood movement, namely the grandson of Hasan al-Banna, thus making a big name and giving widespread attention both in the West and in the Islamic world.

However, the figure of Tariq Ramadan does not depend on his grandfather's fame -Hasan al Banna- alone but also due to his character in the intellectual world that placed his name as a world-class scholar. On the back cover of his book, "What I believe" it is written that "... He is among the leading Islamic thinkers in the West, with a large following around the world." His prominence can be confirmed with a number of achievements, awards and four world-class recognitions, such as 1) -100 Innovators of the 21st Century (2000), 2) -100 Most Influential Intellectuals (2004) by Times magazine, 3) -100 Top Global Thinkers of 2008-2010 and in 2012 by Foreign Policy magazine, and 4) - 8th place among 100 public Intellectuals by Prospect magazine (UK).

His reputation as a scholar is again proven with the emergence of a number his monumental works such as, *To Be A European Muslim*, *The Quest of Meaning*, *Western Muslim and the future of Islam*, *Islam, the West and the Challenge of Modernity*, *What I Believe*, dan *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*. Through a series of works he channels bright and fresh ideas which are then read, discussed, and reviewed by academic audiences. And more importantly is that the works provide his clear vision and thought about Islam.

Another privilege of Tariq Ramadan that should be mentioned here is his unique background. He is of Arab (Egyptian) descent but was raised in European tradition and culture and later became a valid European citizen. As a Muslim in the middle of a foreign culture, Tariq successful survived and put myself with pride without diluting his Muslim identity. In fact, on the contrary, his practical ideas began have gained public attention at present. Among his outstanding idea is the concept of *To Be A European Muslim*.

In accordance with the discussion of this work, the author seeks to discuss one of the works by Tariq Ramadan entitled *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*. However considering the limited space of the concept paper, the author will not cover the entire purpose in this book but will touch on some interesting issues that have relevance and interest to be highlighted in work. Among the reasons why the author chose to critique this book is because it appears that there is a disparity in terms of the life of Prophet Muhammad as compared with other books written by the same source and presenting the same theme. As he expressed in the blurb of the back cover of this book, "The biography of the Prophet has been written by many, and why should it be written by someone else? Tariq Ramadan has a

different goal: he approached the Prophet's life story from today's perspective."

Researchers also believe that Tariq Ramadan would not want to repeat what has been written by many prominent scholars on the life history of Prophet Muhammad, but did not mean to present something new and different from the classic. It was not possible since all refer to the same source but what is different is that in terms of processing and presentation of an interesting and practical story. Among which can be critiqued is writing a book on the history of the Prophet which is intended to reassess it in accordance with the current context. For this Tariq said;

"The present biography does not aim to compete with classical sources (which indeed are its sources material), disclose any new facts, or provide an original or revolutionary reinterpretation of the history of prophethood and its context. The aims of the present study are far more modest, though it does not make them any easier to achieve" (Ramadan, 2007 :ix).

The processing is more globalized. Or in other words, it should be understood by broader audience as a global significance, not only among Muslim readers, but across the broader target, namely the Muslim community outside the Islamic world, for example in the West and or in the region in which Islamic teachings need to be practiced by local community having their own tradition (Djar'ie, S.M. & Zaenuddin Hudi Prasojo. 2015). These Muslims live as a minority surrounded by tradition and foreign cultures vastly different from other Islamic countries. Difference in this context is to be taken into account in the view of Tariq in an effort to provide a more global understanding of harmonious Islam. For this reason, this small study seeks to discuss Tariq's approach in talking about the moral values of Islam, particularly the pearl of wisdom and the example set by the Prophet contained in his book, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TARIQ RAMADAN

Interesting to say about the Tariq's life background is that first because he has two important identities, namely Arab/Muslim and Swiss/European. Although his face is genuine Arab Egyptian, he a Swiss/European citizen. He boasts of Arab descent and at the same time is also proud to be a European citizen. Even based on the principles of humanity in the Western democratic tradition, he does not feel isolated and ashamed of being a minority in European soil. Both

of the identities integrated in him to form a new identity as a Muslim Europe. Tariq Ramadan or Tariq bin Said was born on 26 September 1962 in Geneva, Switzerland. His mother, Wafa al-Banna was the son of prominent clerics and prominent Islamic mujahid Sheikh Hasan al-Banna - founder of the Muslim Brotherhood movement. His father Said Ramadan came from Tanta, Egypt who was the son of Sheikh Hasan al-Banna. During the reign of Gamal Abdel Nasser, he moved to Switzerland because of the punishment of banishment (Nor Faridah Mat Nong, 2015: 25).

He is a theologian and contemporary Islamic scholar. He received his early education in his hometown of Geneva. He was interested in philosophy and literature since childhood. With the trend and interest in the field, Tariq was encouraged to study it earnestly. Tariq completed his postgraduate studies in Philosophy, French Literature and Social Sciences at the University of Geneva with the title of his dissertation *The Notion of Suffering in Nietzsche's Philosophy*. His doctorate diploma is in the field of Islamic Studies and Arabic with a thesis entitled Nietzsche as a Historian of Philosophy in a comparative study (Nor Faridah Mat Nong, 2015: 26).

To complement the scholarship in the field of religion and Arabic language, he studies at the Al-Azhar University. At this University, he trained intensively. According to a note on the cover of the book *The Quest of Meaning* it is stated that "In Cairo he received one-on-one intensive training in classic Islamic scholarship from Al-Azhar scholars at the University." (Ramadan, 2012: i). However, for the basic knowledge in the field of Islamic studies, he actually learned a lot from his family, especially from his father (ibid). In other words, even though he was not admitted to religious schools or madrassa like most other Arab / Muslim teenagers, the environment and the traditions of his family were shaping his personality as a European Muslim who holds fast to the principles of Islam in a situation that is very demanding on European soil armed with a strong spirit of Islamic teachings and coated with Western scientific culture that influences the way Tariq thinks and acts. Tariq himself has admitted "I was always a bit too Western for some Muslims and a bit too Muslim for some Westerners" (Ramadan 2010: 14). According Shaharom TM Sulaiman, Tariq Ramadan tries to offer a way to be a true Muslim and at the same time he is a good and meaningful member of the European community (TM Sulaiman Shaharom, 2013: 125).

TARIQ RAMADAN AND THE CONCEPT OF 'EUROPEAN MUSLIMS'

Before tracing of the Footsteps of the Prophet as written by Tariq Ramadan in his book *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*,

it is a good idea if we learn his Islamic thought beforehand. This is because the background of his life and the intellectual tradition influence the way he thinks and shape the way he acts. For more evident in this case Nor Faridah Mat Nong said that “social impact Ramadan feels as a citizen of European minority in various forms of hardship, opens and develops his thoughts to be critical in raising the issues of Muslim communities in Europe in addition to changing the mindset of Muslims to be much more practical and sure to live life as a European Muslim (Nor Faridah Mat Nong, 2015: 37). Thus, when the work of *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* was written, it is very significant in differences of approach and style, though its processing is based on the same source as that referred to by other Muslim scholars.

This study found that Tariq attempted to offer the life history of the Prophet based on the principles of his life as a citizen of Europe that practices pluralism in an open basis. As Tariq’s own confession reads “*my philosophy is travel, and pluralism is my destination. Humility is my table, respect is my garment, empathy is my food and curiosity is my drink. As for love, it has a thousand names and is by my side at every window* (Tariq Ramadan, 2012: xii). Armed with such case, Tariq has to take the middle path in practicing the teachings of Islam in the heart of the European community. Or to put it more simply, he is trying to interpret Islam to fit the context of the West / Europe. He realizes that it is not possible to use the same method to deliver the message of Islam similar to that practiced by the majority of Muslim scholars, especially those who are the product of a Muslim country, namely living within local tradition decorated by Islamic values, or the majority population is entirely Muslim community.

To avoid a clash of cultures and civilizations, and to avoid being isolated and marginalized, then Tariq leverages existing knowledge and extensive experience trying to establish the Muslim community recently, which not only focusing on traditions that were brought together from their home country but also considering the cultural reality of the West / Europe. Tariq prospect in this regard is quite clear as it appears on his work, *To Be A European Muslim*. This book is a kind of blue-print to all Muslims residing in the West / Europe. He sketches how a Muslim should position him/herself in the middle of a very different society in terms of tradition, culture and religious practices. Through this concept of European Muslim, Tariq seems to try to say that if Muslims did not change and adapt to the new situation in the West / Europe then they would face difficulties in the face of the vagaries of life and challenges in the West / Europe itself. Personally, Tariq’s opinion is that “*When I spoke*

of a Muslim identity that is always open, always inclusive, always on the move.”
(Tariq Ramadan 2010 : 135)

In other words, if Muslims want Islamic identity to be preserved in a European setting, and that Islam flourishes in accordance with the concept of Islam as *rahmatan lil-‘alamin*, mercy to the worlds, the changes and adjustments are needed. In short, the concept of European Muslims introduced by Tariq Ramadan is a form of identity savior. Or a new step in facing the European environment (Nor Faridah Mat Nong, 2015: 98).

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE PROPHET

Tariq deliberately named the title of his book *footsteps of the Prophet* with the intention of inviting readers to search again in the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad’s life in order to find the pearls of knowledge and teaching legacy left by him to serve as a guide in the process of human formation. Thus, in addition to the title *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*, Tariq put another subtitle which reads *Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*. The core of this book, based on Tariq’s perspective, is trying to describe the Prophet’s biography with a new style, and aims to take the Islamic values that the Prophet demonstrated throughout his life. Tariq will be able to present the global features that are present in the stories of the Prophet’s life to be adapted to current time and context. In fact, it transcends the limits of time and age. As Muslims living in a developed continent, it seems a bit odd for the traditionalists. It is a sort of fortress that prevents the intertwined between Islam and modernity. As if there is a possible incompatibility of Islam that cannot meet with the modern western world. Similarly, it is also the case of the notion of the West on Islam.

To bring down that dogmatic fortress, then Tariq invites readers to reassess global features contained in the biography of the Prophet. He invites the audience to examine the implicit meanings embedded in every second of the life of the Prophet. He wants to be a perfect human just as Prophet Muhammad exemplified in all aspects of life, especially the global messages for today’s guide. We are aware that between the Islamic world and the West there is sentiment incompatibility in terms of thought and culture that has occurred over the years until now. Muslims feel that there is prejudice of the West against Islam. This is clear as depicted by Muhammad Asad, who among other things said “*many of its historical experiences are deeply tinged by a strange animosity towards Islam*” (Muhammad Asad, 2005:40).

In line with that, it is not surprising that until now there is a clash between the West and Islam. It is exactly as Allah says, “Never will Jews and Christians

be pleased with you as long as you do not follow them.” In fact, to date this paper was written, the anti-Islamic sentiment in the Western world is still felt, especially now Muslims are scattered into minorities in the West. Muslims often get ridiculed until they are labeled as *the sick man of Europe*. The culture clash is becoming more common and it may not be resolved in a short time. Meanwhile, the Muslim community itself is also undaunted to build fortifications to defend their identity so it is not easily melted and eroded. With simple means, the Muslim community itself is also quite careful to adapt to the new environment because of fears that Islam will disappear. Then two lines are running in parallel without end.

Based on such situation, Tariq tried to express a new approach in the daily life of Muslims in the European continent. This approach does not concern the values of rigid dogmatism, but it reapplies the values of the way of life of the Prophet into the reality of modern times in Europe. This is because Tariq would take into account the current realities and cultural life in the West / Europe. Although this approach seems to be different in a way that is commonly done by other Islamic scholars, but it does not cause the slightest scratch on color purity Prophet’s life story.

Therefore, the book *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* is unique and different in terms of processing. In fact it is clear that it is not stereotyped like most books of history that tends to show episodes just to remind readers that historical moments happen without thinking the meanings to be adapted to the realities of life. Tariq rejected writing history in this way, or in other words, easier. Tariq tried to emulate the examples set by the Prophet and then adapted them to the current context. He stressed that it not the episodes to remember the events only.

Tariq’s preparations of the story and examples of the Prophet in the book *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* show that there are some lessons that need to be emphasized. Among the lessons emphasized in the book *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*, which can be traced, are the attitude of tolerance, pluralism, cultural diversity, the rights of women and children, care for the environment, and compassion. These issues are often raised on the political agenda in Western countries. However, this paper will not cover all the aspects contained in this book, but will pay attention and focus on the issue of tolerance only.

ISLAM IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE WEST/EUROPE

As a minority in Europe/the West, Muslims are often suspected by the local

'natives' as a group threatening the Western civilization. Coupled with the dark history of the past crusaders that always lives in their collective memory, the average views Muslims with suspicion, assuming that Islam is threatening the peace and harmony of Western society. This is illustrated by John L. Esposito who notes that "most Westerners are still vague about the history of Islam and the West, their knowledge and attitude toward Islam and the Muslim world are formed by the image and influence of contemporary limited to terms like Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism" (John L. Esposito, 2008: 105).

The condition became even worse when the Western media also plays its part that conspires to worsen the image of Islam in the face of accusations that Islam is uncivilized so it easily turns into something horrific and violent. Even violent images are highlighted on the front pages of the Western media since the beginning until now. Chandra Muzaffar admitted this circumstance and said "... negative images of Islam are very much more prevalent than any others." (Chandra Muzaffar, 2011: 94). With more simple and clear words, it is very accurate as expressed by Edward W. Said in his book *Covering Islam* who stated that Islam has become the "unpleasant sort" news that in the eyes of the West (*ibid*).

In short, between the West and Islam there are two parallel and separate paths that perhaps cannot reconcile. The West has the philosophy of materialism and secularism, while Islam is based on the traditions of Islamic teachings. Due to the fact that Islam has a different philosophy, the West is willing to label others who differ from it as inferior, frenetic, deviant or irrational (John L. Esposito, 2008: 58). Dr. Saodah Abd. Rahman condemned the attitude of the West, by saying that "Materialistic thoughts based on the logic and interests of desires have encouraged most secular society to underestimate the values and traditions of religious life. He further added that "...secular people are those who are not cared for with a religious spirit (The Star, 6 Feb. 2006).

TOLERANCE, RESPECT, PLURAL SOCIETY AND VIRTUES

In order to survive in the middle of the Western/European society that has such a philosophy of life, tolerance is needed. In addition, it also requires respect for other people who differ in their faith and religious beliefs. In this case, Tariq clearly stressed that the Muslims should have tolerance and respect. In writing about the life history of Prophet Muhammad, he paid attention to the issue of how Prophet Muhammad, whose life was surrounded by plural society, namely the disbelievers and the Jewish community as well as the others, but still he could make them live under one umbrella build an intact civilization.

In such society, it was not easy for a leader to form a united community. Such differences not only were common between Muslims and Jews, but also among fellow Arabs themselves who staunchly held the spirit of asabiyah / patriotism of their own respective tribes. However, since the Prophet showed high tolerance, he finally could unite all walks of society under one umbrella. The Prophet managed to subdue egotism of the Arab nation with tolerance.

Tariq wanted to see humanity learn from the Prophet's gentle and kind attitude to be absorbed into the tradition and the life of the Muslim community. Living in a plural society would require a really high tolerance. Tolerance in whatever situation. Tariq then quoted a piece of Hadith narrated by al-Bayhaqi;

“If you find something you do not like of your brothers' actions, then seek even seventy reasons to justify the acts. If you do not find them, say, may he have a specific reason (why doing so) that I do not know (Ramadan, 2013: 187).

Tariq sees more of the doctrine of implied compared with the trivial episodes in the life history of the Prophet. In other words, Tariq tries to take the essence of the teachings of the Prophet's life story and not a sequence of events that have plots. His description is more anchored to the current context than the text. He looks at the reality of the real Islam to be practiced in daily life. Efficiency in the application that ensures a person will not feel awkward and marginalized from the modern mainstream. On the other hand, if Muslims fail to take heed of the way of life that is appointed by the prophet, then surely he will experience many problems. It may be uncomfortable to adapt to the new environment that is far different from the Islamic tradition. Racism, murder, strife were not found in the life history of Prophet Muhammad. Instead, the events that are less fun or that could lead to racism is not exaggerated. What can be considered is that of Tariq tries to reconcile between people. This may be due to his environment in Europe that claims to practice discipline and tolerance to live together that very much affects his attitudes and thoughts.

Tariq's determination to promote the spirit of tolerance as shown by the Prophet is very significant in this book. While reading it, we will immediately notice the tolerance during the writing of this book. He intentionally shows to the public outside of Europe or the West about how Islam is concerned in terms of tolerance and respect. And Islam itself is not only about civilization, the Islamic values are practical and suitable for all times. Arising from this, then without a doubt Islam is the first priority for humanitarian matter in

accordance with the concept of *rahmatan lil'alam*. In other words, Islam and humanity are inseparable partners. In fact the essence of the teachings of Islam itself is to *endure values for humanity*.

Meanwhile another evidence that suggests that Tariq is likely to promote the spirit of tolerance is the story about life between Muslims and the Christian-Jewish and Arab tribe of Quraysh. For example, first, the story of a meeting with a priest Bahira in Busra where obviously Bahira had a humanist attitude toward Prophet Muhammad. In fact, it was he who suggested that Abu Talib immediately bring the Prophet back to Medina to escape harassment and deceit. Second, when Muslims migrated for the first time into Habsyah and received protection as well as good service from King Negus, the Quraish Arabs' mission to bring back the Muslims failed eventually. And third, when the prophet met Christian young man named Addas in a vineyard in Taif.

Of the three stories, it can be seen how intimate the relationship between Muslims and Christians. Here, it seems that Tariq wanted to state that religious diversity is not the main causes of hostilities. The cause for the outbreak of conflict is due to the attitude of the man himself who is ill-mannered, who tends to be selfish, and often uses emotion to over rational thinking, ignoring the message of religion in its true sense. To live in peace and harmony in a great civilization which is composed of various groups who have the background and understanding of different traditions, it really requires dynamic social mechanism. The most obvious method, according to this book, is tolerance and respect for each other, especially in the context of the West/Europe, it is very important that tolerance should be practiced in an earnest manner. Even it is encouraged not to ignore it at all.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the tolerance in the writing of the biography of the Prophet by Tariq Ramadan through his book is an important emphasis. Typically, when it is written by most Islamic scholars, it could not escape from being linked to episodes of war, or battle scenes that led to the death and the like. Not just a series of major wars involving two major groups, namely the Muslims vs the infidels but also small wars involving ethnic groups and tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. Indeed, if traced through the life of the Prophet, since he was appointed the Messenger of Allah, to the establishment of the Daulah Islamiyah in Medina, wars have become part of a string of events that cannot be separated. A series of wars in the history is still remembered by all Muslims, such as the Battle of Badr, Battle of Hunayn, Battle of Khandak, Battle of Tabuk, etc. In other words, it is not complete when talking about the history of Islam, or rather, in this context, the life history of the Prophet, it does not touch a series of wars at all. This is because it is actually a series of

wars recorded in history.

Almost all Muslim historians recorded honestly about what happened in the past. What happened was written but it is not the case with Tariq. He has a different approach in writing the life story of the Prophet. He tends to avoid detailing the battle scenes. He did not even exaggerate episodes of the war as it was written by many other historians. He only mentioned war as an episode only to complement the Prophet's biography. A series of wars during the Prophet's era is merely a way of maintaining strategic faith and purity of Islam from enemy attacks but Tariq tends to avoid talking about it emotionally. This is because Tariq, as a supporter of the spirit of tolerance, is more likely to see the order of the Prophet's life history from a global perspective that emphasizes the sense of brotherhood and global security. Thus, the study finds that the processing of the Prophet's life story in the book is not filled with a round of 'blood splash'. Instead, it is flavored with elements of tolerance, solidarity, and compassion. As to compare, Hendar Riyadi (2016) also emphasizes the teaching of tolerance and peacefulness practiced by "modern Muslims" in Java. Perhaps Tariq Ramadan tries to awaken all to see the need for building a civilized society. Therefore, he tends to put aside the old story of the vengeful battles but gives his attention to how to live in harmony and peace under global rules. Here it can be concluded that the essence of the book of the Prophet's life by Tariq is to take the example of how the prophet practiced tolerance in dealing with the Arabs of all tribes, and how he respected the Jewish-Christians and Arab tribes that he managed to rule them. Finally, he managed to bring Islam to the entire Arab world and the whole world. This is among the important message delivered by Tariq in this book.

CONCLUSION

It is humble to conclude that Tariq Ramadan intends to ensure that the teachings of Islam, in this context, are tolerance, which is global in nature, and it should be not wasted but can be lived and shared with the entire human race for the sake of unity in the world. This great message, namely tolerance, respect, solidarity can be applied and practiced in public life in the European continent against the backdrop of different traditions in the Islamic world. Tariq Ramadan is decisive in this case. Therefore, the elaboration of the biography of the Prophet which was derived from a broader and comprehensive global awareness is fundamental. It aims to avoid force which can trigger the fire of conflict. He did not write in a copy-and-paste manner, but through the appreciation and awareness of intellectual in order to understand the implicit meaning of the events taking place every second, and then re-interpreted

them to suit the new environment as well as for current consumption in the context of the modern world.

Accordingly, Tariq Ramadan's writing about the life story of the Prophet stresses on harmony, without prejudice and discrimination. This clearly indicates that Tariq Ramadan seeks to redefine the life story of the Prophet with a new approach aimed to provide awareness, education and example to all citizens of the world, especially Muslims, to search for traces of the Prophet with the awareness of high intellectual efforts toward the establishment of a harmonious society in accordance with the nature of Islam as a religion of peace and peaceful religion.

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