

Tariq Ramadan versus Ayaan Hirsi Ali: debating Islam in Europe

Seduction in the realm of ideas

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PRELIMINARY DRAFT

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Abstract: Over the last decade, Europe has been increasingly depicted as a theatre of conflict between a tolerant, individualist secularism and a collective, monolithic religion, Islam. The battles making up for this conflict are fought on a multi-leveled stage. At the most visible and most broadcasted level, ‘evil Islamic fundamentalists’ make life unbearable for many ‘innocent Western people’. Not at all surprisingly, underneath this main stage many other debates can be distinguished: more implicit ones and often purely mental ones. Those battles of ideas decide what will eventually be displayed on the main stage and how spectators will interpret it. Although the currently institutionalized EU Inter-Cultural Dialogue might prove useful, attention should not be diverted from the intra-cultural dialogues. This paper singles out the ideas of two individuals: Tariq Ramadan and Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Both are somewhat controversial intellectuals dedicated to the question of where the current interplay between ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ should lead. They ask similar questions, but come up with opposite answers. The scope of this paper is to deconstruct the messages they send out to Europe, thereby analyzing several extremes of the debate. By understanding disagreements on some apparently basic questions, many insights on the “what to do with Islam in Europe”-debate can be gained. Whether it makes the debate an easier one? Probably not.

In the last decade, Europe has been increasingly depicted as a theatre of conflict between a tolerant, individualist secularism and a collective, monolithic religion, Islam. The battles making up for this conflict are fought on a multi-leveled stage. At the most visible and most broadcasted level, ‘evil Islamic fundamentalists’ have been making life unbearable for many ‘innocent Western people’. Not at all surprisingly, underneath this main stage many other debates can be distinguished: more implicit ones and often purely mental ones. Those battles of ideas decide what will eventually be displayed on the main stage and how spectators will interpret it. And, although the currently institutionalized EU Inter-Cultural Dialogue might prove useful, intra-

cultural dialogues are just as important. In the following pages the focus is on two actors important in the 'Muslims-in-Europe'-debate: Tariq Ramadan¹ and Ayaan Hirsi Ali².

With Ramadan and Hirsi Ali we stumble upon two controversial intellectuals dedicated to the question of where the current interplay between 'Islam' and 'the West' should lead us. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born ex-Muslim and ex-member of the Dutch Parliament, is often perceived as playing her role too bluntly, too black and white, and as being unable to distinguish Islam in general from her own personal, cultural experience (see for example Buruma 2007). Tariq Ramadan, grandson of Hassan al-Banna³, tends to arouse contrary critics: he is accused of having chameleon-like traits, of operating in an indefinable grey area, of manipulating his audiences. His aim would be to advance a conservative society in line with the wishes of the Muslim Brotherhood (see for example Fourest 2004, Landau 2005).

In this paper it is pointed out that Hirsi Ali and Ramadan not only almost constitute an antithesis in style, but in contents as well. They ask similar questions, to come up with opposite answers. What does that tell us? To give an answer, their messages have to be deconstructed. The focus therefore will be successively on what they perceive as the true face of Islam, on how they define the current challenge for Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe and on what they envision by the 'intellectual revolution' in Islam they both preach. Understanding these implicit mental battles will deviate us away from the simple classifications of 'Islam' and 'West', 'secular', 'religious', 'Enlightened' and 'not-having-seen-the-light-yet'. Although convenient, in societal terms, these

¹ Prof. Tariq Ramadan is Professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford), visiting Professor at Erasmus University (The Netherlands) and currently Senior Research Fellow St Antony's College (Oxford), Doshisha University (Kyoto, Japan) and at the Lokahi Foundation (London). He is well-known for his books *To Be a European Muslim* (1999), *Islam, the West, and the Challenge of Modernity* (2001), *Western Muslims and the future of Islam* (2004), *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (2007) and *Radical Reform: Islamic ethics and liberation* (October 2008).

² Ayaan Hirsi Ali is Research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, served as a member of the Dutch parliament from 2003 to 2006. She is well-known for her books *The caged Virgin* (2004) and *Infidel* (2006), and for being the script-writer of the short movie *Submission*, directed by Theo van Gogh in 2004, which resulted in the director's assassination by an Islamic extremist.

³ Founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.

simplifying models are taking us further away from the truth while allowing undesirable political forces to exploit them by presenting them as truths. Some complexity is therefore needed. To start somewhere, we turn to comparing Ramadan's and Hirsi Ali's ideas.

Islam, show us your true face!

Although often depicted in the West as a monolithic religion, Islam has spread throughout the world in many forms, through many interpretations. What Islam essentially stands for depends much on the eye of the beholder and on what that eye focuses on. Tariq Ramadan and Ayaan Hirsi Ali can be considered 'essentialists' as both of them focus on the scriptural sources as the objects from which to extract the true meaning of Islam: unchangeable characteristics from the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* make up for the Muslim world today. The level of essentialism they apply, is nevertheless totally different.

Hirsi Ali – absolute essentialism The nature of Hirsi Ali's view can be said to be absolute. In her eyes, 'Islam is a culture that has been outlived [...] an unchanging, fossilized culture. *Everything* is written down in the *Qur'an*, and that is the end of the discussion' (Hirsi Ali 2006, 80). When scanning the *Qur'an* on verses that could explain the 9/11 terrorist attacks, she states to have discovered the religious core - dubbing it the 'Islamic Trinity': 1) the Muslim's relationship with his God is one of fear, demanding total submission; 2) Islam knows only one moral source: the Prophet Mohammed (and the thousands of *hadiths*); 3) Islam is strongly dominated by a sexual morality derived from tribal Arab values, when women were property of their fathers, brothers and uncles. As a consequence, the former Dutch MP sees Islam as the main explanation for the backwardness of the Muslim world in comparison with the West and Asia, both in technology, finance, health, as well as in culture (Hirsi Ali 2006, 15).

Translated through Hirsi Ali's eyes, *the Qur'an* makes all human beings slaves of Allah and every Muslim has the obligation to spread Islam to unbelievers, first through proselytizing, then through *jihad*, if the unbelievers refuse to convert (Hirsi Ali 2007). Muslim minds have been the

first victims of Mohammed: imprisoned in the fear of hell and as a consequence also in fear of the very natural pursuit of life, liberty and happiness (Hirsi Ali 2006, 176).

Ramadan - essentialism mixed with structuralism Tariq Ramadan combines a basic essentialism with a more structuralist view. In his eyes, some characteristics of Islam are indeed unchangeable, most importantly, the concept of *tawhid* - the oneness of God. But overall, he sees Islam as derived from three sources: the *Qur'an*, the *Sunna*, and the state of the world, meaning contemporary society (Ramadan 2004, 37). The state of the world-source is dependent on socio-economic, cultural and political circumstances, thus forming the structuralist element in his assessment. He leaves a major role to 'individual judgment' (*al-Ijtihad*) so as to reply to new questions raised in the course of history and to new social realities. In his view, people can experiment, can bring about progress and reform as long as 'they avoid what is forbidden' (Ramadan 2004, 22). Quite different from the violence-ridden essence Hirsi Ali finds, Tariq Ramadan judges true Islam as being inherently good, representing universal values and being fundamentally democratic in nature. He underlines that *Shar'ia* is a human construction and that some elements may evolve, just as human thought evolves. In Ramadan's view, Allah does not make mere slaves, but actually invites individuals to a deep study of their own inner lives.

When trying to place their views on Islam in the existing generalizing academic framework, Hirsi Ali could be placed in the neo-orientalism corner (kept company there by authors such as Patricia Crone and Daniel Pipes). In this corner, Islam is portrayed as a family curse that lives on and no efforts can ever bring about a change in the essential anti-state and therefore anti-modern core of Islamic dogma (Sadowski 1993).

Ramadan is slightly harder to 'cage'. He presents himself as a salafi-reformist: as someone who aims at protecting the Muslim identity and religious practice, while recognizing Western constitutional structures. These salafi-reformists want Muslims to become involved as citizens at the social level, living with true loyalty in the country to which they belong (Ramadan 2004). Ramadan also has been attributed several neo-fundamentalist characteristics as he proposes Muslims to leave cultures aside and turn back to the religious core. As Olivier Roy points out, these neo-fundamentalists look at globalization as a good opportunity to rebuild the Muslim

Ummah on a purely religious basis, they dream of a new *tabula rasa*, as culture is either redundant or misleading and has no value in itself (Roy 2004, 258).

The conclusions both our actors draw about 'true Islam' show once again the power of hermeneutics, the supremacy of the text interpreter that links language to logics. Not surprisingly, Hirsi Ali is highly skeptical of those Muslim scholars that preach that Islam means peace, such as 'that famous Muslim theologian of moderation, Tariq Ramadan' (Hirsi Ali 2007). As pointed out above, in her eyes all the evidence mounts to the contrary; a moderate Islam is only wishful thinking. Of course, such different starting points can only lead to different ideas about what dynamics the interaction between Europe and Islam brings about.

When Islam and Europe meet: Who forms a challenge to whom?

In the last decades, immigration has been the driving force behind getting Islam and Europe in touch once again. This time, interaction has not been limited to the southern borders of Europe, but is emerging throughout the entire continent. And, temporary labour immigration turned into permanent stay and family reunion.

The current debate about the consequences of the presence of a high – and growing - number of Muslim citizens in Western-Europe takes place in the context of a globalizing world and, more acute, in the context of a '9/11-paradigm'. Renowned scholar Olivier Roy underlines the importance of globalization and the related process of deterritorialization, a slow development blurring the borders between Islam and the West (Roy 2004). Another famous scholar on Islam and the West, Gilles Kepel, stresses the importance of 9/11 and the subsequent birth of the War on Terror. In his view the world is currently trapped in a vicious dialectic of *jihad* and *fitna*⁴ (Kepel 2004, 292).

No serious scholar or politician would argue that the rapid injection of Islam in the West has not brought about a need for societal adjustments. Initially, different countries took up

⁴ The Qur'anic term is translated by Kepel as near to 'sedition', referring to the fragmented state of the Muslim community as it has lost its sense of reality. Also often translated as 'civil war'.

different approaches to come to terms with their new Muslim inhabitants. Recently, we have witnessed a major backlash against the idea of a multicultural society. This backlash can partly be blamed as the outcome of the Islamization of violence, brought about by the rhetoric and practices of the American neoconservatives in office. As a consequence, homegrown Islamic terrorism, such as shown by the UK bombers and the Dutch *Hofstadgroep*, have become symbols of the ultimate failure of western European immigration and integration policies. Thus, a policy convergence towards a more assimilationist approach seems to be the result of the fictional relations drawn between Islam, immigration and violence, correlations happily exploited by the media and populist politicians. But, as will follow, also – and perhaps mostly - within the western Muslim community itself this increased negative attention has spurted a ‘war of positions’ on what would be the best ways for Muslims to reconcile themselves with a dominant non-Islamic Western society.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Tariq Ramadan agree on that the currently polarizing mentalities are forming a dangerous rift in western societies. Both want to spread a call for wisdom. Not too surprisingly they do have quite different ideas about this rift and the wisdom needed. If we are to believe Ramadan, there seems to be a path towards a peaceful coexistence of Islamic and European values. For Hirsi Ali, however, Islam has to be eliminated by the west in order to maintain a peaceful societal order.

Hirsi Ali - incompatibility - Hirsi Ali has come to the conclusion that we are to experience a deadly struggle between cultures (Hirsi Ali 2008a). Her solution thus lies in defeating Islam, ‘without mercy’. In an interview held last year she stated: “I think that we are at war with Islam. And there is no middle ground in wars...There is infiltration of Islam in the schools and universities in the west... There comes a moment when you crush your enemy. Also military, as if you do not do that then you have to live with the consequence of being crushed.” (Bakel 2007). Hirsi Ali wants Europe to recognize the realities of Islam, which is ‘a religion with violence and oppression at its heart’, bringing about the highest crime rates and dominating the list of terrorists suspects (Hirsi Ali 2006, 11; Hirsi Ali 2008). Those are tough words that seemingly have lost all nuance needed for this debate.

Ramadan – compatibility - Ramadan contests these simplifying and polarizing ideas. He argues that the clash is not between civilizations, nor between the principles of Enlightenment and those of religion, nor between the West and Islam, but between ‘those who, in both universes, are able to assert who they are and what they stand for with measure in the name of a faith and/or a rational reason and those driven by exclusive certainties, blind passions, reductive perceptions of the other, and hasty conclusions’ (Ramadan 2006). According to Ramadan, yes, we are dealing with two distinct universes of reference, but this does not imply that they are exclusive and incompatible.

Lack of knowledge – A lack of knowledge of the other and of the self is seen as one of the main drivers of the current problems. According to Ramadan, Muslims in the west are constantly confronted with an absence of boundaries of morality and a lack of constraint, which drags the consciousness into sleep, into the vicious circle of excess, which may even extend to bestiality (Berman 2007, 47). The minds of Muslims have been colonized through an aggressive cultural invasion, and both the west and Muslims themselves have forgotten about the richness Islam can bring to both worlds. Instead of recognizing this, the west has created a backward and evil caricature out of Islam.

In contrast, in Hirsi Ali’s perceptions, the lack of western knowledge about Islam has led to a Europe that is too tolerant and too respectful towards it! The *jihadi* genie is already out of the bottle and Islam is seeking to destroy the west (Bakel 2007). Western leaders are woefully uninformed and often unwilling to confront the tribal nature of Islam, so she argues. (Hirsi Ali 2008a). A lack of knowledge of Islam makes the west blind for Islam’s inherent evil; it now wrongly sees the Muslim community as victims in need a soft and pitiful treatment in the hope of getting respect back, as Hirsi Ali reasons.

Enlightenment – anchor of the debate - The debate about Europe and Islam has brought to the front ideas about western Enlightenment, once again putting the spotlight on the relationship between two protagonists: Reason and Faith. Both our subjects put the antithetical dualism that in the west opposes faith to reason at the basis of the Islamic challenge in the west. Ramadan thinks of this absence of dualism in Islamic thinking as an asset: never is there a contradiction between the realm of faith and the realm of reason. Thus, human consciousness has to take responsibility for finding balance, establishing harmony, making peace (Ramadan 2004,

14). He even sees the values underpinning Islam in line with the European Enlightenment values, except for that in Islam, doubt can only start after accepting *tawhid*, - the oneness of God.

According to Hirsi Ali the separation of reason from faith, State from Church, has been the most important reason for western progress and emancipation. She fears that current developments are leading Europe away from the path of reason, letting romanticism creep in once again. Not having lived Enlightenment, Hirsi Ali concludes that Muslims are incapable of criticizing themselves. Next to that it has led to insufficient individual freedom, inadequate knowledge, and a lack of women's rights. Mistrust is everywhere, and mendacity rules in the Muslim world. In her view, a Muslim is merely capable of blaming the external: the Devil, the Jews, or colonialism (Hirsi Ali 2006, 17). As a last point regarding Enlightenment, Ramadan - rightly so - points out that the west, in all its Enlightenment rhetoric, seems quite incapable or unwilling to extend the universal values of *égalité* and *fraternité* to its Muslim subjects.

Gender equality – It is also worth saying some words on the topic of gender equality in the debate, which in the end is the main cause Ayaan Hirsi Ali is fighting for. Looking at the way both Ramadan and Hirsi Ali deal with this issue, the differences in 'style' come out quite clearly. Ayaan uses her bluntness, her 'Theo van Gogh'-approach of social shock-therapy. As a consequence of her strategy she concludes that in Islam, the 'essence of a woman is reduced to her hymen' (Hirsi Ali 2006). Modesty is defined by virginity. Women and girls must obey, submit themselves to their male guardians and especially to Allah. Her explicitness is shown by her infamous movie production *Submission* (Van Gogh 2004). On the other hand, Ramadan is often rebuked for his non-confronting response regarding gender equality. As Kepel writes 'even a charismatic preacher as Tariq Ramadan does not preach the equality of men and women because of his electorate' (Kepel 2004, 284). Highly likely, Ramadan's careful accounts are more a matter of style, of his media strategy than a reflection of his personal ideas. If you want to seduce, you cannot alienate your audience.

In sum, both Hirsi Ali and Ramadan share the feeling of standing on a crossroad where it regards the relations between Europe and Islam. Both see it as their task to push current developments in a certain direction. However, opposing definitions of Islam and of the differences between Islam and the west are also passed through on the answers Ramadan and Hirsi Ali give on the question: what then is the way forward for Muslims in the West? Ramadan

seems to be an advocate of a slow and silent revolution, whereas Hirsi Ali sees to subscribe shock-therapy. As will become clear in the next pages, both however see a unique opportunity for Islamic reform in Islam's confrontation with the west, with Europe as the main theatre for an intellectual revolution within Islam.

What is needed? On an intellectual revolution for (a western) Islam

To begin with, both advocate a change in the terms of the debate. For Ramadan it should be avoided that the West continues the current dialogical monologue: European Muslims should enter the debate on an equal footing. He orders Muslims to stop thinking about themselves as a minority constituting the 'Other'. He orders them to stop victimizing themselves and to overcome their double inferiority complex – in relation to the West (and the domination of its rationality and technology) on the one hand and in relation to the Muslim World (that quotes the texts with such ease) on the other hand (Ramadan 2004, 225). A uniting Muslim self-awareness and self-confidence has to be constructed in order to show the West the richness of Islam and its positive contribution to western societies.

Hirsi Ali, by contrast, calls upon the West to have a stronger monological monologue, to stop appeasing, to recognize the malicious extremism manifest and fanaticism inherent in Islam and to stop this self-awareness from spreading, as it will never cede at the point of moderate Islam. According to her, what Islam needs is actually self-criticism, so to make Muslims break free from their superstitions by starting to use reason and common sense. Muslims should face the shortcoming of their faith and discover the meaning and importance of secular morality. They 'need their Voltaire' and need to 'live their Enlightenment'. (Hirsi Ali 2004, 154)

Hirsi Ali sees a role for herself as being one of those Voltaires and wants to stimulate the potential – often dissident – Enlighteners of Islam. In her eyes, a movement that will analyze Islam and amend its dogma's has to come from within – from those that will be regarded as traitors and deserters, fouling their own nests. The European Muslim Enlightenment that will emerge will then have its spillovers to other parts of the world and will eventually lead to a global Enlightenment.

Ramadan has a somewhat clearer view on the means that have to bring about the construction of a self-confident European Muslim community: Muslims have to go back to their sources – the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* - awaken their minds, and take into account the new social, political, and scientific environment in which they live (Ramadan 2004, 38). The process of *al-Ijtihad* is at the center of his envisioned intellectual revolution. It will be a systematic work of identifying the margins available for maneuver between the situations in which Muslims are free to act in accordance with an Islamic conscience and the more rare situations in which Muslims must find possible legal adaptations. With these efforts, the west can be made into a land for Muslims (Ramadan 2004, 54).

Europe as the perfect place - For Ayaan's "Voltaires", Europe is ideal as it can be considered a safe-haven; working on the Enlightenment of Islam would just be impossible in the Arab world itself (Hirsi Ali 2006, 35). As the work she and her fellow-dissidents are doing would be of vital interest of the west itself as well, western intellectuals and authorities should help and support their cause in every possible manner.

For Ramadan, Europe is perfect for different reasons. In his view, the cultural detachment brought about by permanent immigration could be the prerequisite for a true deculturalization of Islam. In Europe, Muslims have no choice but to go back to the principles of Islam. Ramadan states that a silent revolution is already taking place as more and more young people and intellectuals are actively looking for a way to live in harmony with their faith while participating in western societies. He sees the emergence – far from media attention - of a pure European 'Muslim' personality that will soon surprise fellow citizens in the west. His goal is to shape an Islam faithful to its principles, but dressed in European lifestyles. Currently, the west is living a period of transition, making the links between west and east are essential but in the end this will lead to an intellectually, politically and financially independent western Islam, thinking for itself.

Believing Ramadan is believing there is a way in between the selling out of Islam and a total rejection of the 'satanic' west by strengthening the religious core of the Muslim community. He brings on the stage a constructivist idea of building up a grass root European Muslim society. At the other side of the spectrum, Hirsi Ali sees the breaking up of the Muslim community and a

move to individualism as the only possible way forward. In her reading, destructive ideas of Islam are the ones that will bring stability back to western societies.

Conclusion

When deconstructing the messages Tariq Ramadan and Ayaan Hirsi Ali are throwing onto the European stage, it turns out that they can be considered two extremes on a gradual scale of essentialist ideas about Islam. Besides the fact that they find the true meaning of Islam by looking at the texts, they have opposite views on what the challenges facing Europe and Islam consist of and how they should be dealt with.

Ramadan promotes a community based on faith, loyal to the true principles of Islam and adapted to the European environment. In his view, Muslims should find back a self-awareness that would enable them to demand a place in the public and private sphere so as to create a new 'We' based on a common citizenship of a pluralistic society. In the opposite line of thought, Hirsi Ali would like to turn the whole Muslim community into secular-minded individualists adopting western values, first and foremost the ability to self-criticism. She sees Islam as inherently evil, while Ramadan distinguishes an inherent goodness in it. Interesting is that the debate over a European Islam has been taken up in a western framework, in which the Enlightenment tends to pop up as a central theme. For Hirsi Ali (a poorly defined idea of) Enlightenment is key and the solution to many of the challenges. Tariq Ramadan's reformist theology takes a much more nuanced and complex take on it, bringing us most likely nearer to a realistic assessment.

When analyzing the current landscape of Europe-Islam relations, often, dangerous rifts and the need for action are advocated in order to avoid painful tomorrows. Again, the media and politicians that shape the public debate have shown themselves capable of magnifying ideas into terms of an apocalyptic jihadist battle, an inevitable clash between the west and Islam.

Of course, the two opposite views set out in this paper provide of course only a snapshot of the ongoing battle of ideas within the European Muslim Community. Many other ideas thrive and the outcome of this mental battle is still far from decided but seems to gain in intensity. Of the less violent wars of position that are fought among European Muslims themselves, the media tends to pick up those voices that scream loudest, or those personalities that have the best skills to seduce. With this point we finally touch common ground regarding Tariq Ramadan and Ayaan Hirsi Ali. They both succeeded in seducing their audiences: Ramadan starred on Time

Magazine's list of 100 most influential people in 2004. Hirsi Ali made her appearance on it a year later (Time Magazine 2004) (Time Magazine 2005).

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