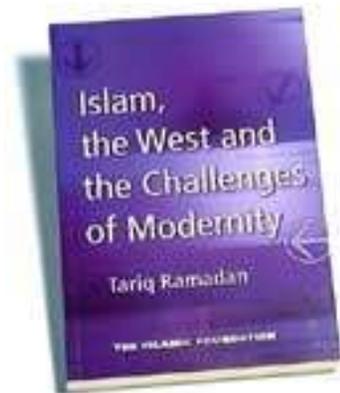


Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity, Dr. Tariq Ramadan.

Reviewer: Br. Mohamed Usman



The book, "Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity" by Tariq Ramadan is a comprehensive, timely and thought-provoking attempt to demonstrate that Muslims are adequately equipped with the means to effectively respond to contemporary challenges without betraying their Islamic identity. The book is divided into three interconnected parts that systematically dissect and analyze the concept of "modernity" in an orderly and well-researched manner. The first part tackles the relationship between God and man from an Islamic perspective. The second part addresses the role of Muslims on the social plane, while the last part examines various cultural issues in both western and Islamic civilizations and the prospects for better understanding through dialogue and a relationship based on sound knowledge and mutual respect.

In the beginning, the author introduces us to the history of modernization in the West and traces its roots to the sixteenth century. He reminds us that modernization in the west was in its origin, a revolution that was the outcome of a long struggle between religion and science. The dominant and oppressive control of the former over the latter with its use of religious institutions to suppress scientific thinking was the source of the conflict in which science later emerged victorious over religion. Thus modernization was seen as liberation from the shackles of oppressive traditions, and institutions. This explains the deep seated hatred and mistrust for religion, divine revelation and its institutions that is noticed in western societies. It is often against this background that western societies perceive Islam as being opposed to modernization because of the absoluteness of divine revelation in Islam. However, Islamic history presents a totally different picture in the nature of this relationship. Islam and science were never in conflict. Scientific facts over the years have confirmed many Qur'anic revelations. Islam's compatibility with science and the advancement of knowledge meant to improve the overall welfare of people is indeed at the core of the teachings of our creed. Islamic history has aptly demonstrated this compatibility of faith and science as seen in the glorious era of Muslim Spain and the city of Baghdad as early as the seventh century. Today western societies are undergoing what the author describes as "a crisis of modernity" because of its unlimited optimism and profound faith in man and its persistent disregard for transcendental truth. Secular modernization in the west has come at a terrible price to family life, social life and above all removes the intangible quality that puts the human into the being, as it is lost to lust and greed. This is why Islamic spirituality strongly opposes such "modernization".

Tariq Ramadan in the second part of the book demonstrates an impressive understanding of the horizons of Islam in his analyses of the role of a Muslim in the Political, economic and social plane. He exposes the dangers in the common assumption among many Islamic activists who believe that by simply establishing an Islamic state, all our problems will be solved. While Muslims are convinced that this is true, he makes us realize that a superficial expression of this fact, tragically underestimates the challenges of applying Islamic principles at various levels to solve contemporary social problems. He expresses the need for Muslim scholars to become proficient in applying classical knowledge that is integrated into specialized knowledge in various branches of pure and social sciences. He argues that without bridging the gap between classical Islamic knowledge with knowledge in various professional fields, it leads to the danger of Muslim scholars passing religious verdicts devoid of empirical and contextual reality. One of the main points he tries to communicate is the need to understand that ijthihad needs to reflect a balance between the absoluteness of the primary sources of Islamic jurisprudence (Qur'an and Sunnah) and the relativity of history. This kind of understanding is necessary in order to save us from imposing a literal, rigid and sometimes inappropriate application of Islamic principles, as opposed to a more dynamic, flexible and effective application of these principles in dealing with the challenges of modern times.

Tariq Ramadan also urges Muslims to actively participate on the social plane and reminds us that this is a duty and a means to truly worship Allah. He caps this by reminding us that "*to be with God is to be with men*". Through service to humanity, one is actually serving God. The need for us to be involved in community activities at the local, regional, national and trans-national levels is a religious obligation. Sadly, this dimension of Islamic horizon has been neglected. Our neglect of our social obligations has been catastrophic for humanity. The author demonstrates an impressive understanding of the magnitude of this neglect with his analysis of the international debt crisis and the role Muslim countries in the Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) played in this crisis. The international debt crisis demonstrates the tragic consequences of our failure to appreciate the wisdom behind certain prohibitions in Islam, in this case *riba* (charging interests on financial transactions). The blatant disregard for Islamic principles by Muslim countries in OPEC is today responsible for the death of hundreds of thousands of people in the southern hemisphere. Our failure to create institutions that are faithful to Islamic principles have unleashed terrible hardship on millions of people in poor countries entangled in the debt trap largely as a result of the petrol dollars Muslim countries invested in western banks. Had we established our own international financial institutions in the seventies during the oil boom, perhaps the debt crisis as we know it today would not exist. Being active on the social plane will make it possible for Islamic activists to address the problems of poverty and illiteracy that are at the front of the challenges confronting most Muslim countries today. By mobilizing our resources we can effectively address many of these challenges that confront our societies on the social, political and economic plane.

In the concluding part of the book the author looks more closely at the conflict between western and Islamic civilizations. He cautions us against seeing the west as a monolithic whole and thus perceiving everything western as anti-Islamic. Unfortunately the relationship between both civilizations for centuries has been characterized by mutual rejectionism. The danger in this for Muslims is the tendency to exert a reactive Islamic identity that often betrays a true Islamic identity. In all fairness, many of the allegations against Muslim societies are not baseless. Problems of human rights violation, government corruption, oppressive regimes and the status of women in many Muslim countries have nurtured and reinforced stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. By addressing these issues through a better understanding and application of Islamic principles these false notions can be corrected and Islam will be better appreciated in western societies. On the part of the west, there is a need to make a clear distinction between modernity and the idea of modernism which tends to impose westernization. Secular modernization based on western history and background is alien to Islam because of its different history, and its clear definition of the relationship between God and man. Modernity amputated from this reality certainly has no place in Islam and will continue to be rejected in Muslim societies.

The book is generally well written and handles the subject of modernity in a meticulous, comprehensive and well-researched manner drawing its body of knowledge from a wide variety of sources, both Islamic and secular materials. This probably explains why some readers will find it challenging to read, because of its depth and intellectual sophistication. The reader might also find it a little difficult to read in the beginning as the book was originally written in French and translated to English. However as one reads further, one gets accustomed to the style of writing and flows into a comfortable rhythm for the rest of the book. In general it is a very good book to read, especially if it is read carefully over a reasonable period of time as it is over 300 pages long.

One of the most striking things about the book is that it contains many interesting teachings from the author's father and grandfather. A prominent example is a comment from Hassan al-Banna that "Dying in the way of God is difficult, but living in the way of God is still more difficult". As Muslims, many of us fail to understand what it means to live in the way of Allah. To live in the way of God requires firm conviction, consistency, dedication, sacrifice, patience and perseverance. It is very difficult indeed but many of us fail to appreciate the gravity of this challenge. Another example is the saying again by al-Banna that urges Muslims to "be like the fruit tree, it is attacked with stones but responds with fruits". This saying captures the magnanimous nature of the ideal Muslim. In reality such level of spiritual depth is hard to achieve, but we must always strive to make reaching such a level our sublime goal. In all, the book, "Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity", makes for very interesting reading. It is a good book to have.

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