JIHAD OF THE YOUTH: 
WHY FIRST GENERATION IMMIGRANT MUSLIM YOUTH ARE DRAWN TO 
THE PHILOSOPHY OF TARIQ RAMADAN

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By

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JIHAD OF THE YOUTH:
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ABSTRACT

Muslim children of immigrants raised in non-Muslim, Western societies face
many issues in practicing their religion. While there are undoubtedly a multitude of
sociological implications of this, this thesis focuses on their being caught in the middle of
two cultures: (i) the culture practiced within their household which is generally a
microcosm of their parents’ homeland; and (ii) that of the society in which they live
(focusing on European nations and the United States). There is no doubt that these
children must attempt to forge an identity that allows them to fully exist in both ‘worlds,’
if you will. However, Muslim youths face a unique problem in that Islam as it is literally
practiced or interpreted by its adherents may not readily allow them to assimilate into
non-Muslim societies.

Tariq Ramadan, an Islamic modernist leader, advocates an Islam that allows for
this assimilation. Muslim youths worldwide, without any formal Islamic education,
generally tend to favor his interpretations of Islam over those of other Islamic modernist
leaders. This thesis postulates that Tariq Ramadan uses *ijtihad*, or the concept of
analyzing sacred Islamic texts in light of present-day circumstances, to allow for and advocate assimilation into the youths’ Western society while being able to practice Islam. In doing so, Ramadan’s interpretation of Islam frees the faith from the cultural and ethnic practices and traditions often presented to youths as ‘Islamic’ or as being justified by Islam. By encouraging youths to read sacred texts and analyze their place in society today, Ramadan empowers youths and propagates individual piety rather than a blind-faith mass following.

This thesis will delineate the unique situation in which first generation Muslim children of immigrants are placed in when attempting to reconcile their faith, as presented to them by their parents, with Western society, and how Tariq Ramadan harmonizes Islam and living in the West for these youths.
DEDICATION

To Haseeb, for loving me and supporting me in ways unimaginable.

For my mother, who loves me unselfishly.

For Soha, the littlest love of my life.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COPYRIGHT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I: MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS: AN OVERVIEW OF THEIR CONUNDRUM</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II: FIRST GENERATION MUSLIM YOUTHS: THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III: TARIQ RAMADAN: AN INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV: TARIQ RAMADAN’S UNIQUE APPEAL</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Successive periods of glory and gloom characterize the patchy history of the Islamic civilization. Although its various facets have been scrutinized endlessly, present day tensions between the Islamic world and its occidental counterparts have resulted in the West’s perception of Islam as the villain on the world stage today. Specifically, since September 11, 2001, the terms ‘Islam’ and ‘terrorism’ have become almost synonymous. Previous tensions between Islamic nations and the West along with increasingly violent present-day terrorist attacks have created a stigma of violence and fear associated with Islam and Muslims. Although the basic tenets of Islam are touted as being nonviolent and peaceful, the sacred passages pale in comparison to the bombings and tragic acts the world sees so often on their television screens. The debate surges on, asking whether Islam is compatible with the “modern” world. Is Islam the problem, or is it the Muslims practicing it? How does one fight or even pacify an enemy who seeks its own death, who believes that only death will result in the ultimate reward of eternal salvation? These, and many other such questions, are on the minds of politicians, intellectuals, and the masses as they all seek peace, safety, and answers to the current political strife attributed to Islam.

Politicians, historians, and the like have postulated both positively and negatively about the future of Islam and its relations with the modernity of the West. Some pundits,
like Francis Fukuyama, have proposed that Islamic nations are merely “local irritants”\footnote{Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” \textit{The National Interest}, no.16 (Summer 1989), http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.html (accessed June 2009).} without the ability to “project themselves globally.”\footnote{Aga Saeed, “The American Muslim Paradox,” in \textit{Muslim Minorities in the West: Visible and Invisible}, eds. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002), 40.} This rare and more neutral view of Islamic nations concludes with the “possibility of long-term global peace.”\footnote{Saeed, “The American Muslim Paradox,” 40.} On the opposing end is Samuel Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations?” which argues that major conflict will ensue between the West and Islamic states.\footnote{Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” \textit{Foreign Affairs}, No. 3 (Summer 1993), http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/48950/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations (accessed June 2009).} Huntington states that such conflicts will arise because Islamic nations cannot compete with the West and will seek to challenge the West, thus the West must contain these volatile nations immediately.\footnote{Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”} It is within this panorama of varying opinions that first generation Muslim youth are raised with in the West. One must take these varying opinions into consideration when analyzing the youth’s perspectives of Islam, Western society, and their choice of Islamic ideologists and leaders.

In an effort to dissect the great debate about Islam and the supposed Islamic values propagating such violence, it is particularly important to understand that Muslims cannot be analyzed as a collective. Instead, they are a mass population composed of numerous subcultures, ethnicities and sects with intricate issues that are not necessarily
representative of the whole. In fact, these smaller cohorts tend to practice Islam very differently from one another and may not even consider one another ‘Muslims’ according to their own interpretation and practice of the faith. Collective stereotyping, thus, leads to inaccurate, sweeping generalizations of Islam and Muslims. Instead, one approach is that these subgroups be analyzed in their respective contexts if one is to understand the intricacies of their issues, and how each subsection is interconnected.

One such subgroup of Muslims is the first generation children of immigrants living in non-Muslim, Western nations. In 1998, nearly seven million immigrant Muslims resided in Western Europe alone. Of these then seven million, nearly half were “born raised, [and] schooled” in Europe and were under the age of twenty. These youths are raised in households that generally maintain the culture and religion of their parents’ homeland while living in a non-Muslim nation. These two unique settings are often at odds with one another, creating tension in terms of which society and culture the youths will ultimately veer towards and choose to internalize as their own identity and practice. The language and religion emphasized in their homes may be radically different from the society in which they live. Many of these conflicts tend to stem from how these Muslims chose to observe their religion in a non-Muslim society that may not accept their more conservative practices.

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7 Vertovec and Rogers, *Muslim European Youth*, 1.
While there are undoubtedly a multitude of sociological implications of this, this thesis will focus on these first generation youths as being caught in the middle of two cultures: (i) the culture of their household as, generally speaking, a microcosm of their parents’ homeland; and (ii) that of the society in which they live, with a focus on European nations and the United States. There is no doubt that these children must attempt to forge an identity that allows them to readily exist in both ‘worlds,’ if you will. However, it seems that Muslim youths face a unique problem in that Islamic tenets as they are literally practiced or interpreted by many may not readily allow their assimilation into non-Muslim societies.

This thesis will propose that Tariq Ramadan, an Islamic modernist leader, advocates an interpretation of Islam that allows for and in fact encourages such assimilation. Ramadan’s Islamic education and background further binds Muslim youths worldwide, the vast majority with little or no formal Islamic education themselves, to respect his opinion and adopt his views as their own. This thesis will attempt to analyze the unique issues faced by these immigrant youths, and how Tariq Ramadan advocates an Islam that resonates with this audience. It will further address why his views are not culturally limited and appeal to the Muslim masses across the board. Finally, it will discuss the importance of such a ‘leader’ in the Islamic community and perhaps how his appeal could be harnessed by nations seeking to demonstrate to Muslims and non-Muslims alike that Islam is harmonious with the ‘West.’
CHAPTER I
MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS: AN OVERVIEW OF THEIR CONUNDRUM

Islam and the clashes between its predominately Christian, Western counterpart are not particularly unique when viewed in light of broader historic patterns through the centuries. An underlying tension and ignorance of the ‘other’ exists to this day within many other religious groups. Combine this with feelings of non-assimilation, a loss of identity, and persecution and we are left with understandable yet complex situations. At present but not unlike in the past, we are faced with conflict that will likely be interpreted by historians as inevitable. Current relations can be contrasted against those of the past: tension, ignorance of faiths, political agendas and so forth abound today just as they did hundreds of years ago. Historical occurrences that are mirrored in many respects today illustrate similar sentiments, indicating that, while the times have changed, this historic pattern has not. It is within this context that Muslim immigrants raising their children in the West must be construed.

‘Islam in the West’ is a topic of much debate and writing. First generation children of immigrants face unique issues battling and attempting to maintain their ethnic and religious identity in non-Muslim nations, if they choose this route. On its face, there appear to be two paths for both these children of immigrants, and the immigrants
themselves: the road of “tradition” and that of “reality.” The general conclusion is that Muslims living in America, for example, are “indeed on a path to Americanization” although the definition of ‘Americanization’ and what it means “remain uncertain.”

Muslims living the West are “far from homogenous in their composition and in their attitudes and practices.” Instead they are comprised of numerous ethnicities, cultures, languages and differing schools of thoughts within Islam. These Muslims must now adjust to their new host country, and find jobs and homes and a new way of life.

Yvonne Y. Haddad notes:

[Earlier immigrants] are influenced by new immigrants who serve to deter assimilation by reminding the earlier immigrants of overseas values and cultural taboos and holding them accountable for maintaining those values and taboos in the new environment…. First-generation Muslim immigrants are often reluctant to leave behind particularizing dress, or language, or religious practices that essential to their own sense of identity. This reluctance sometimes frustrates their children who are in search either of great invisible assimilation or of a more essential Islam, not colored by regional variations or practices.

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

Islam in the Media: How Immigrant Muslims Perceive their Characterizations

a. Standardization of Thought via Media Outlets

Our nation’s current leader, President Barak Hussein Obama, is making public efforts to curb the ‘Islamophobia’ that has become rampant since the tragedies of September 11, 2001. Religious diversity was cited by the President as a strength, rather than a weakness, of the United States. The dynamics of societal diversity have been stunted, to a degree, by the media in its “standardization… of the way humans think.” Both the media and modernity walk hand-in-hand as those societies that are increasingly developed display “many aspects of this inescapable standardization, ranging from the similarities of airports around the world to the increasingly ubiquitous cell phone.” Despite the increasing diversity and complexities of modern societies, there is a ‘standardization’ of thought through the media. The images portrayed by the media are absorbed by the masses who, for the most part, take the broadcast at face value. Acceptance in and belief of the information communicated often creates inaccurate

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stereotypes of major societies, faiths, or ethnicities. Immigrant Muslims, in particular, struggle greatly against these individual personifications of themselves via media outlets.

b. How the Media Affects Muslims in the West

The trials and tribulations of Muslim immigrants are not limited to the decision to assimilate into their host country’s society or not. Immigrants and their children also face the “Muslim paradox,” characterized by “extreme vilification” on one end and by a “considerable degree of acceptance, even popularity, on the other.”

Contradictory images of Muslims praying peacefully in mosques are broadcast alongside antithetical footage of bearded men committing heinous acts. This creates confusion within the Muslim community and the non-Muslim public alike. Even Muslims must be reminded that the enemy is not Islam as a whole but those with an extreme interpretation of the religion. As Sahinaz-Amal Naguib states in her article “…Muslim Communities in Norway:

In the public debate about Muslims, there is a marked tendency to represent Islamic democracy and Muslims as a monolithic, undifferentiated group. By essentializing the religion in this way, the plurality of Islam is disregarded…. No religion, of course, is homogenous, and ignoring its heterogeneity both contributes to its being stereotyped

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and “orientalized” and tends to transmute religion… In the most extreme cases, it appears to give way to fanaticism.\textsuperscript{10}

Muslims must fight against these stereotypes and create a niche for themselves in the West. Although, as Samuel Huntington states in his book, \textit{The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order}, “Muslims agree that basic differences exist between their culture and Western Culture,” but such differences, when portrayed by the media, often further the gap between immigrants and their feeling of being at home in their host country.\textsuperscript{11}

Public perceptions of Islam justifiably arouse fear in the hearts and minds of those who see such images on their televisions. Muslim immigrants often feel that the media seeks to vilify Islam and, as a result, fear persecution and the like resulting from the public’s perceptions of them as a group.\textsuperscript{12} The Western “misunderstanding” of Muslims is neither “unexpected or unreasonable considering the events that have occurred,” but the American Muslims’ “frustration mainly lies with media coverage of these events.”\textsuperscript{13} The perspective of Western Muslims on the portrayal of Islam in the media is twofold: (i) frustration with the fact that the media reports only the most


sensational stories; and (ii) that reporters link criminal acts of terrorism to Islam as a religion.\textsuperscript{14} Muslims feel that the media makes an extra effort to state that the offending person was Muslim or that the act was propagated by Muslims: when “a Muslim does something bad, his religion is always noted by reporters.”\textsuperscript{15}

On the other hand, Muslims in the West feel that when people of other religions commit a crime, their religion is rarely mentioned, even when their faith was a motivating factor for the act.\textsuperscript{16} Media coverage of the recent Virginia Tech shootings, for example, did not highlight the assassin as being Christian. Moreover, the news generally fails to mention that most Muslims condemn the acts and are as horrified by them as would be anyone else. Muslim youths, thus, grow up with a general distrust and distaste for the media due to their portrayal of Islam.

Asma Gull Hasan, a Muslim youth raised in the West, cites noted Palestinian activist and former Columbia University Professor Edward Said, saying that the media “by using academics and so-called experts, media reports give views and readers the idea that they understand Islam.”\textsuperscript{17} Blanket generalizations and stereotypes are used by these

\begin{footnotes}

\textsuperscript{15} Hasan, \textit{American Muslims}, 87.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\end{footnotes}
experts, laying the blame for everything from political to social issues on Islam.\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, stereotyping and negative portrayal of Muslims in the media is far more dangerous than of other groups because Americans and Westerners, in general, are unfamiliar with Islam and its beliefs.\textsuperscript{19} In contrast, when the media pontificates about other groups, people are generally able to distinguish reality from fact due to their knowledge of or personal experience with that cohort.

One of the more commonly discussed issues of Islamic portrayal in the media is what is referred to as the ‘Israeli filter.’ Edward Said, often referred to as Palestine’s political voice in the 1990’s, duly explains:

Political as well as public discourse has so definitively transformed Israel into the victim during the recent clashes, that even though 140 Palestinian lives were lost and close to 5,000 casualties have been reported, it is still something called “Palestinian violence” that has disrupted the smooth and orderly flow of the “peace process.”\textsuperscript{20}

Muslims are well aware of this so-called Israeli filter and feel that even outside the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict they are consistently portrayed by the media as villains regardless of the circumstances. “As a consequence of this pattern of news coverage, the distinction between the oppressor and the oppressed becomes blurred,


victims become vilified, and Muslims in general are represented in exceedingly negative ways.” Thus, there is a “cognitive dissonance between how the media reports about Muslims and how most Americans experience their interaction with Muslims.”

Muslims begin to feel that “Islam is centrally tied to the image of an irrational personal,” creating a distrust amongst Muslims, immigrant or not, first against the Western media and secondly against the West and its way of life as a whole.

Muslims abhor these characterizations, reciting tales of their rich heritage. Undoubtedly, modernization in Islamic countries has been slow. However, despite the largely negative portrayals of Islam, the West and its “institutional observers… are beginning to realize that Muslim Americans are not homogenous ethnically, economically, or ideologically.” As basic as this statement may be, painting a balanced picture of Islam in the media has been rare, but is forthcoming. Muslims, particularly immigrants, are embracing this increasingly accurate depiction of themselves as more than radical terrorists.

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22 Saeed, “The American Muslim Paradox,” 44.

23 Ibid.


25 Saeed, “The American Muslim Paradox,” 44.
Just as Muslims are perceived negatively by society as a whole, they also tend to view politics and news reported by the media as suspect. “Relatively few Muslim Americans believe the U.S.-led war on terror is a sincere effort to reduce terrorism, and many doubt that Arabs were responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Just 40% of Muslim Americans say groups of Arabs carried out those attacks.”

Also, a large majority of Muslims feel that it has become increasingly difficult to practice their faith in the United States, post the tragedies of September 11, 2001, stating that the government singles out Muslims for “increased surveillance and monitoring.” Mosques have become prime surveillance targets and airports ‘randomly screen’ Muslims, making Muslims not only more visible in society but subject to increased scrutiny.

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27 Pew Research Center, “Muslim Americans.”
CHAPTER II
FIRST GENERATION MUSLIM YOUTHS: THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES

It is within this context, the context of the West and their largely inaccurate understanding of Islam, that the first-generation Muslims living in the West must be scrutinized. These youths live in a society where their American or European counterparts know little of Islam beyond what they see on television or in movies. To them, many of whom have been to their country of origin regularly, Islam as practiced in the East comes in various forms. Some may tend to starkly disagree with its portrayal in those regions, others may agree with reluctance, and even others may choose to embrace and defend the decisions of their more radical counterparts even though they themselves may not adhere to the same path.

Just as Muslims cannot be analyzed as a collective, Western Muslim youths are also not a stagnant, cohesive group within themselves. Within this cohort, they each construct their identity under the influence of language, socio-economic status, the Western society in which they live, their parents’ country of origin, varying levels of education and profession, and so forth.¹ This identity, not identical to but not dissimilar from those of youths worldwide, is malleable and is constantly being defined and redefined by life’s experiences.

¹ Yunas Samad, “Imagining a British Muslim Identification,” in Muslim European Youth: Reproducing ethnicity, religion, culture, eds. Steven Vertovec and Alisdair Rogers (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1998), 60.
**Ethnic versus Religious Identity**

Transplantation of the immigrant family into a new country provides for benefits as well as burdens. The family structure, often accustomed to extensive familial integration into extended families and communities is, generally speaking, suddenly isolated from other relatives, seeking solace and identifying only with others in their particular circumstance. While an accurate, recent quantitative analysis of the number of Muslim immigrants in the United States or Europe remains uncertain, a 2007 survey by the Pew Research Center estimated that there were approximately 2.35 million Muslims in the United States. The same survey notes that two-thirds of these 2.35 million Muslims were born abroad, and are thus immigrants to the United States. Muslims also comprise the largest religious minority in Western Europe. As their numbers grow in the West, Muslims become increasingly visible in society.

The contrast between culture and religion is a major stumbling block for these younger generations of Muslims being raised in the West. For many of these children, “a move away from the ethnic identity of their parents is often intentional and

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3 Pew Research Center, “Muslim Americans.”

articulated.”\textsuperscript{5} American Muslims, in general, feel they must attempt to assimilate to a degree and adopt American customs rather than remaining isolated or distinct from society as a whole.\textsuperscript{6} The “individual and communal culture are central to [immigrant parents’] identity formation during acculturation” since they must now face very fundamental issues regarding “who they are and who they will become in their new country.”\textsuperscript{7}

In fact, there is often a distinct difference between their parents’ vision of their homeland and the childrens’: whereas “members of the immigrant generation speak in nostalgic tones about the country they left behind, their children may speak of the ethnic home of their parents with some disappointment, and even resentment.”\textsuperscript{8} The youths are particularly disappointed with the way religion is practiced in their ethnic homeland. They see the West as a place where they can practice their religion without it being mired by culture.\textsuperscript{9}


\textsuperscript{8} Schmidt, “The Complexity of Belonging,” 114.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
In contrast, the Islam of the old country is diluted and misinterpreted in their minds. Attitudes such as this one are not entirely representative, of course, but convey the way a large percentage of Muslim children think. Garbi Schmidt strives to psychoanalyze this subgroup of Muslim youths by concluding that they are not American or European, but they do not feel they are entirely Indian or Arab or Persian either. What they are left with then is religious identity; they are Muslim. The analysis does not end there. Schmidt articulates:

Young Muslims, born and/or raised in America, are exposed, through their upbringing, to two variable sets of normative behavior: that of the culture of North America and that of the culture of their parents. To some groups... the answer may be to stress one of these alternatives at the cost of another. To others, the answer may be a third alternative, that on the ideological and moral level, is seen to encompass and supersede both ethnic preferences, i.e. the Islamic alternative. In Weberian terms it may be described as a movement from gesellshaft (solidarity with a society or a nation) to gemeinshaft (solidarity with a community). Schmidt goes on to state:

Geographical boundaries become of limited importance, and morality becomes the ultimate standard according to which humans are judged, included, or excluded. Exemplifying this change are the young Muslims who argue that their parents’ practice of Islam is culturally and implicitly “wrong” because, in these youngsters’ eyes, it fragments the Muslim community and mixes the absolute message of God with the

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fantasy of human weakness and vice. Some youngsters even state that they feel forced to teach their parents about real Islam.\textsuperscript{12}

The ‘Islam’ of these younger Muslims is not marred by decades and generations of cultural surroundings. Instead, their interpretation of Islam comes from their own understanding of it within their social context of the West. In this way their identity transcends ethnicity.

**The Americanization of Muslim Youths**

Culture and heritage are things that immigrants justly seek to preserve. This is not to say that the immigrants are not grateful for the opportunities presented, but that they maintain a sense of identity and attachment to their nation of origin. Moreover, there is a fear that their children will choose to self-alienate themselves from all things related to their homeland. Immigrants thus have a fear of cultural extinction; that they might lose their sense of self if they ignore cultural practices or traditions.\textsuperscript{13}

The term ‘Americanized,’ meaning the acceptance of what immigrants perceive as “negative traits of American culture,” is used freely.\textsuperscript{14} Immigrants use this term regularly to describe losing their children to American or Western society and its


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
customs although such practices may be taboo in their own society despite religious allowances. Immigrant parents list the following fears and concerns about their children: “loss of children to [Western] culture, loss of parental authority over children, loss of authority to discipline children according to native customs, loss of authority to select children’s mates….”

The primary fear is that “their children will be socialized into Western secular values that will do little to advance their child’s well-being” in terms of their socio-economic status as well as their moral and religious standing. Western values, then, are equated with negativity and loose character.

It is true that Muslim youth have often been found to participate in “Western culture to a greater extent than their parents and [face] the need to accommodate potentially conflicting points of view” between the two cultures. The transplanted parents may find solace in the fact that a 1999 study of Muslim youths in Britain found that those adolescents were “much more likely to retain their own values” than other immigrant faiths, for example Sikh or Hindu. Muslim youths have also been found to

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17 Ibid.

be more “concerned with Islamic values” when compared to their Western counterparts who are “concerned with secular themes such as idolizing and meeting famous people.”

**Dilution of Heritage**

The immigrant experience, when viewed broadly over a period of decades and several generations, reinforces the fears of Muslim parents and the ‘Westernization’ or ‘Americanization’ of their offspring. John O. Voll, in his article entitled “Muslims and Religious Diversity in the United States,” succinctly summarizes:

> The first generation, the people who came, maintain close ties to their homeland and are identified with their land of origin by language and culture. The second generation tends to know about the homeland, but also works to make sure that they do not look or sound “different.” They often try to avoid the accent that identifies the way their parents speak as “foreign.” However, they still maintain some strong sense of ethnic identity, as reflected, for example, in who they marry. By the third generation, in terms of these standard patterns, while the person may maintain some habits of their heritage, they are primarily identified as “American.”

Sociology has shown, then, that over the course of several generations, ethnic identity and traditions eventually fade away into what becomes the universality of...

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Western society. Well aware of this eventuality, immigrants still struggle to maintain their ethnic and religious identity, and to instill these values in their children. While an outsider may view this as futile over the long-term, immigrants as a whole, not just Muslim migrants, seem to either refuse to accept this end or choose to believe it may be prevented through their efforts. In the very least, they absolutely do not want to see their own children becoming ‘Western.’ These parents also tend to look down upon community members and families who are lax about maintaining these norms and traditions in their own homes and passing them along to their children.

**Child-rearing in the West**

Recently arrived, ‘fresher’ immigrants have a strong influence on older immigrants, deterring assimilation by “reminding the earlier immigrants of overseas values and cultural taboos and holding them accountable for maintaining those values and taboos” in this new land.\(^{21}\) Eventually, families and communities decide what aspects of Western life are appropriate to adopt and what types of cultural and religious practices they will maintain. These decisions are not homogenous across the board. Generally, what various ethnicities choose to keep or adopt are similar within their subgroup, but not necessarily comparable to other Muslims.

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Immigrants’ children are the guinea pigs, if you will, for these decisions. Using a study of Turkish youths living in London as a representative finding, the sample group revealed two things: (i) the primary conflict between migrant parents and their children were “rooted in the traditional and cultural values of the parents;” and (ii) that the youths were gradually beginning to distance themselves from specific norms and beliefs embodied by their parents’ ethnic value system by “internalizing social attitudes” of their Western homeland.\textsuperscript{22} This study indicates that the youths have difficulty automatically adjusting to and accepting the dualism of the societies in which they live.

In most Muslim families there is a strong sense of one’s honor and reputation being attached to that of their daughter’s.\textsuperscript{23} The daughters, then, are monitored much more closely and given very limited freedoms, particularly in regard to relationships with boys. In one study, ninety percent of young Muslim females stated that they had frequent disagreements with their parents.\textsuperscript{24} The girls felt their parents were “overprotective” and had “too much control” over them.\textsuperscript{25} This is a considerable difference from the attitude the parents display toward their sons, whose actions are not so easily attributed to damaging the family name. The parental justification here has

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{22} Talip Kucukan, “Continuity and Change: Young Turks in London,” in \textit{Muslim European Youth: Reproducing ethnicity, religion, culture}, eds. Steven Vertovec and Alisdair Rogers (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1998), 111.

\textsuperscript{23} Kuckan, “Continuity and Change,” 111.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
little to do with Islam itself, as Islam requires both males and females to remain chaste and limit intermingling with the opposite sex. Instead, conservative Eastern values come into play, placing relatively reasonable limits on a son’s actions but severely restricting those of their daughters.

Often, in their quest to raise their children with a strong ethnic and religious identity, those youths retaining more of these values are quite visible in the community as being more religious or less Westernized. Across the board, general indicators of the ethnically and religiously faithful include wearing the hijab, observing halal, and speaking the paternal language. Girls who choose to maintain the headscarf are considered pious and assumed to be strict and practicing Muslims. Similarly, those who eat only meat slaughtered according to religious decree are deemed ‘religious’ and their counterparts ‘modern’ or ‘Western.’ The fluency with which a child is able to speak their parents’ language is a gauge not only on degree of Westernism adopted, but a measure of how well their parents raised them. These are general, broad examples of popular points of contention. However, the most trivial of aspects, including whether one’s clothing was appropriate or if one was not praying correctly are also raised, making

26 Hijab: Arabic term for a cover or veil; interchangeable for headscarf.

27 Halal: Arabic term for those things permissible in Islam; referred to in this context in terms of maintaining the Islamic version of kosher also known as zabihah.

the interpretation of what is or is not Islamicly proper “so narrow… that anything can become questionable behavior.”

**Hijab**

The issue of *hijab* is especially interesting. In some Islamic countries, it is required that women don the veil, whereas in others it is not obligatory and the vast majority of women choose not to. Thus, the decision to wear the headscarf in certain cultures is considered necessary and in others is interpreted as one perhaps going a step further in terms of piety. Surprisingly, some girls choose to wear the veil as a means of rebelling against their parents’ Islam.

The veil is always seen as a physical sign of Islam and being conservative, thus to wear it in public in a non-Muslim country is to call attention to oneself rather than assimilate. Hence, choosing to wear the *hijab* in the West is a “gendered badge of religious and political allegiance and a way for Moslem women from various nation-

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states and social and cultural backgrounds to engage modernity in a new manner and within different paradigms.”

*Hijabis,* or those who chose to wear the Islamic veil, are not oppressed. They do not feel that their headscarf is marginalizing them. On the contrary, they feel the veil has liberated them from wandering eyes and impure thoughts. For these women, “wearing the scarf is now no longer an act of defiance against an unwilling government but a gesture of obedience to what is believed to be a divine commandment.” Yvonne Y. Haddad explains:

Women who seek this identity in contemporary Islamist movements resonate with the ideology that insists on veiling as a guarantee of protection for those who fulfill their Islamic obligation to participate in the public sphere. Such visibility enhances the modern Islamic vision of a woman as the maintainer of culture and the repository of Islamic values.

The *hijab* is therefore a physical symbol of Islam adopted by many for cultural reasons and by others for religious reasons. Regardless of the rationale behind its donning, those who see a young woman on the street wearing a hijab will stereotype her. Her ethnic community and her religious community will also pigeon-hole her into a

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34 Haddad and Smith, *Muslim Minorities in the West,* xiv.
personality type. Thus the decision to wear hijab by a first generation Muslim female is an important one, particularly in the West where she is scrutinized both by the West and her own Muslim peers.

**Parenting in the West as Far More Conservative than the East**

The youth face another conundrum: their parents’ general imposition of harsh rules while in the West, but an unusually great degree of leniency when visiting the old country. The children often feel that their cousins and relatives back home are much more free to do as they please, and often far more liberal.\(^{35}\) Thus, they are raised with the mentality that they must be protected from the “potentially harmful influences of [Western] society” while enjoying “liberated conditions” when visiting their parents’ country.\(^ {36}\) An anthropological explanation for this rationalizes that it is only in the West, which is representative of “being torn from the group’s culture, that children are carefully monitored by parents and each other.”\(^ {37}\)

Immigrants’ children are no less clever than Western children in sneaking out and the like. Many do not feel that they are deceiving their parents or are ‘bad Muslims’ but that they are merely finding a middle ground between what they perceive as Western


\(^{36}\) David and Ayouby, “Being Arab and Becoming Americanized”, 138-139.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 139.
liberalism and their parents’ stringency. Some also claim that their parents impose values upon them that are far more conservative than in the old country, and perhaps even values that the parents themselves did not embody until migrating west. In this manner, they seek to live up to their parents’ expectations while trying to express themselves.

From a Western standpoint, these more outgoing youths can by no means be considered ‘bad kids.’ Instead they are caught in a web of trying to express their “cultural variant” by embracing both the Western culture and society in which they live while being good Muslims. Over the years, as a sense of identity begins to solidify, they demonstrate a competence and fluency of these multiple cultures. Behaving as would a metaphorical chameleon, they intuitively blend into their respective cultures and societies by behaving appropriately and switching between practices as necessary.

Muslim youth often find themselves in a “tug-of-war between family traditions and [Western] values, the latter instilled primarily in school.” The values propagated


39 David and Ayoub, “Being Arab and Becoming Americanized,” 140.

40 Ibid., 140.

41 Steven Vertovec and Alisdair Rogers, introduction to Muslim European Youth: Reproducing ethnicity, religion, culture (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1998), 7.

by each tend to be vastly disparate. Muslim parents usually command “complete obedience and devotion to the family and community, while school develops individualism, autonomy, personal initiatives, and a critical sense.”\textsuperscript{43} Eastern parents are, usually, educated by memorization and repetition rather than Western concepts of reflective questioning.\textsuperscript{44} These contradictory learning systems inculcate implicit values in Western raised Muslims, who often begin to question their parents. School thus reinforces the sense of dualism. School being a place where they spend considerable time, they must learn to embrace a dual set of values, often remaining more passive at home and more vocal at school.

The nuclear family is also a fairly unfamiliar concept for many Muslim immigrants when they move West. Usually, in Islamic countries, relatives and extended family members either live together or so close by that children are thought to have multiple sets of ‘parents’ with as much authority over them as their own. As families migrate West, parents must learn to raise their children on their own, without the help of aunts and uncles, the elderly, or even cousins raised with similar values.\textsuperscript{45} This presents a significant problem, as the vast majority of Muslim parents may have never observed true parenting in the nuclear sense, and may feel unprepared to rear their own children.


\textsuperscript{44} Steven Vertovec and Alisdair Rogers, introduction to \textit{Muslim European Youth: Reproducing ethnicity, religion, culture} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1998), 12.

\textsuperscript{45} Diouf, “Invisible Muslims,” 155.
Often, this results in the father figure’s “tendency to rigidify the rules… to assert their power at home.”\textsuperscript{46}

Some Muslim children accept this authoritarianism as the way it is and learn to abide by their family’s rules. Others, particularly boys, tend to drop out of school as soon as they able to find a job and earn enough money to become independent of their parents.\textsuperscript{47} Girls, on the other hand, can generally achieve independence from their families only though marriage. Marriages are typically arranged marriage as is customary of Muslims in the East.\textsuperscript{48} This leads to girls either choosing to agree to marriage at a young age, or staying in school for as long as possible and achieving graduate degrees in an effort to avoid marriage.\textsuperscript{49}

**The Western ‘Culture’ of Youths**

One way to characterize this new mesh of East meets West is as a cultural hybrid, removing the impurities of both sides and embracing the best. In articulating this identity a number of terms have been utilized: crossover, hyphenated, hybridity, multicultural,


\textsuperscript{47} Diouf, “Invisible Muslims,” 155.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 156.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
and diasporic consciousness. The new identity, then, is neither Eastern nor Western and is its own, unique form. For the parents, however, the ideal is that their children will be no less knowledgeable or ethnically inclined than they would be had they been raised in the old country.

Youths tend to absorb and practice more cultural traditions in a desire to embrace what makes them different and retain culture. With religion, the differences tend to be much broader. Westernized immigrant Muslim youth absorb what they feel is pure Islam, detoxifying it of cultural stigmas and variants. They often feel that their parents’ culture-driven version of Islam is not true Islam and attempt to educate them on the true tenets of Islam on a particular topic or point of contention amongst them. Be they have been raised in America, Europe or beyond, they are essentially “straddling two civilizations and trying to maintain a presence in both.”

It is important to note that these are children of immigrant parents who have decided to settle in the West. Their parents have little or no intention of returning to their homeland, for various reasons, including more opportunities in the West or perhaps to escape persecution. Thus, the parents understand that the West is their new home and

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50 Steven Vertovec and Alisdair Rogers, introduction to Muslim European Youth: Reproducing ethnicity, religion, culture (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1998), 5.


hope to enjoy its fruits while safeguarding their children from what they perceive as its harms, for example dating or drinking.\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore, by retaining their language, cuisine, clothing, and religious norms, immigrants incorrectly feel that they are creating an environment that is a “direct representation of the original ancestral culture.”\textsuperscript{54} The youths have learned to transition easily between both of their worlds, and generally have little intent or interest in possibly moving back to their parents’ country of origin or perhaps even to other Muslim nations.

Muslim youth in the West are marshaling their ideals and identities with these multiple backgrounds in mind. Steve Certovec and Alisdair Rogers, in \textit{Muslim European Youth} explain:

[Muslim youth are] increasingly demonstrating that there is no inherent contradiction or cognitive dissonance necessarily associated with... identifying with certain contemporary global orientations within Islam, being for example British and Muslim and Pakistan and perhaps being at the time in accord with and at odds with the values and values of one’s parents.\textsuperscript{55}

The immigrant childrens’ Muslim identity then becomes intricately complex. This identity is one which must be unraveled in an effort to understand how they have come to balance their two cultures; or, if they have not. It seems that first generation


\textsuperscript{54} David and Ayouby, “Being Arab and Becoming Americanized,” 140.

\textsuperscript{55} Steven Vertovec and Alisdair Rogers, introduction to \textit{Muslim European Youth: Reproducing ethnicity, religion, culture} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1998), 1.
children of immigrants find a way to exist in both ‘worlds,’ if you will. They must find a happy medium not only between their Western society and Eastern heritage, but also determine the degree and type of Islam they will practice; their parents’ version or their own.

Some of these children choose generally to adopt their parents’ vision of the world, with little to no changes made to account for their Western society. They do not ‘assimilate’ into their Western society and choose to maintain and limit their relationships to their parents’ friends or relatives. These youths are in the minority, however. First generation Muslim children tend to mature and make conscious decisions on what aspects of Western society to adopt, for example Western clothing, and which aspects of their culture and religion to maintain. Often, there exists conflict between both their parents’ culture and the youths’ vision of what pure, culturally-untainted Islam truly is. Within this mix is their understanding of whether Islam can be practiced in the West or whether the two are not compatible. This creates “hyphenated, multiple, or overlapping identities.”

Muslim children are by far raised with very conservative values. They tend to analyze Islam, looking beyond the here and now of Western culture and their ethnic heritage to decide what is right, not just for them, but morally, socially and most important ‘Islamicly.’ This mode of analysis is critical in the next step:

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understanding why these youth tend to flock toward Tariq Ramadan’s interpretation of Islam and the West.
CHAPTER III

TARIQ RAMADAN: AN INTRODUCTION

There is no dearth of Islamic modernist leaders or ideologists; there are numerous in every sect of Islam and in every nation, both Eastern and Western. There have been multiple approaches to the question of whether Islam can be practiced in the West, seeking, in essence, to reconcile Islam with modernity. Differing methodologies of interpreting Islam have decomposed both Islam, and the classic stumbling blocks Muslims may face while living in Western societies, to reach conclusions that vary anywhere from the two being reconcilable, to the possibility of such a reconciliation being oxymoronic.

The nineteen-hundreds were blessed with the prominence of Islamic intellectuals including Muhammad Abduh and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Later came Maulana Fazlur Rahman and the well-known Allama Muhammad Iqbal. More recently, we are presented with modernist thinkers like Amina Wadud, Hasan Hanafi, Mohsen Kadivar, and Leila Ahmed. Across the board, these intellectuals have been successful with reaching a target audience and discussing specific topics such as women and patriarchal issues in Islam. However, most have been unable to engage a mass following because their discourse has not necessarily resonated with, and allowed them to connect to, Muslims across international and cultural lines. Tariq Ramadan is a modern-day exception.
A “global phenomenon,” Tariq Ramadan is the most quoted and widely-circulated Islamic writer in Europe.\(^1\) Ramadan has seemingly effortlessly penetrated barriers of culture, ethnicity, and even Islamic schools of thought and sect\(^2\) to achieve transcontinental appeal. His ideology, if not his name, spans Muslim minds and households throughout the globe. This is particularly true in Europe and the United States. His curious appeal, however, should not be mistaken as solely Western; Tariq Ramadan is renowned in the Middle East and throughout South Asia. Such great span and diverse audiences are critical to the analysis of how and why he is so popular to our particular target audience of first generation Muslim youth. This target audience, as the reader may recall, is not homogenous but aggressively diverse in their cultural backgrounds, languages spoken, economic status, and so forth. Ramadan’s appeal to the Muslim diaspora not only eclipses these differences, but also unites Muslims based on faith and the essence of Islam.

**Ramadan’s Background**

Just a few years shy of fifty-years-old, Tariq Ramadan’s life reads as would a colorful novel. Ramadan was born in Switzerland as a first generation child of Muslim immigrants due to his family’s was exile from their homeland of Egypt. Ramadan is

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\(^2\) Tariq Ramadan is popular amongst Muslims as a whole, although most of his followers hail from the Sunni, or Sunnat Al Jamaat, school of Islamic thought.
none other than the grandson of Hassan al-Banna, a key name in the history of Islamic terrorism. Al-Banna was known for creating the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 and revered by Islamic extremists, many of whom hail from his school of thought and later go on to join the likes of the infamous Al-Qaeda.

Al-Banna’s influence on Tariq Ramadan’s now famous interpretations and views on Islam cannot be ignored. In fact, al-Banna has been referred to as a “towering figure” in Ramadan’s life.³ Greatly influenced by what he saw in Cairo during his college years in the 1920’s, al-Banna felt that “secular and Western ways had penetrated the very fabric of [Egyptian] society.”⁴ Reading into Islamic reformism, focusing on Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, Ramadan’s grandfather concluded that the “decline of the Islamic civilization relative to the West” could only be reversed by “returning to an unadulterated form of Islam.”⁵ He felt that Islam had become diluted by incorporating secular and Western norms into Islamic society and practice, and “urged the rejection of all Western notions.”⁶

Ramadan’s grandfather went on to create an organization that is now associated with terrorism. However, the Muslim Brotherhood began as an effort to promote a return

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⁵ Denoeux, “Hasan al-Banna.”

⁶ Ibid.
to Islam through reading religious texts and engaging in community service and charity.

Laura Secor, in her article “The Reformer,” explains:

In 1928, during the period of British colonization in Egypt, al-Banna, scandalized by what he saw as the licentiousness of a westernizing Cairo, founded a group called the Society of the Muslim Brothers. The group's doctrine -- fiercely anti-colonial, religiously and morally conservative, and economically redistributionist -- has since inspired a panoply of Islamist movements across the Arab world, with leaders ranging from moderates like Ramadan to the most violent extremists such as Egyptian Islamic Jihad founder Ayman al-Zawahiri.

In their day, the Muslim Brothers accepted the parliamentary democracy Britain had exported to Egypt as fundamentally compatible with Sunni Islam. But they felt it should be revised to enforce Islamic morality and law. Like Ramadan, they believed Islamic teachings should be interpreted in light of contemporary context. But the context of colonized Egypt was morally restrictive and politically anti-Western.7

Ramadan’s nuclear family was not itself removed from the actions of his maternal grandfather. Rather, his father, Saïd Ramadan, was Hasan al-Banna’s disciple, son-in-law, and a lead figure in the Muslim Brotherhood. Exiled from Egypt, Ramadan’s father moved the family to Geneva, where he continued al-Banna’s legacy by opening the Islamic Center of Geneva.8

Born and raised in Europe, Tariq Ramadan is most commonly characterized as an academic due to his numerous posts teaching and lecturing at various campuses throughout Europe. In the Islamic world, Ramadan is considered both a modernist and a reformist with the knowledge and education to intelligibly argue his stance. Numerous


8 Secor, “The Reformer.”
media accounts, however, pose Ramadan’s words as tainted with terrorism and a lineage of violence.

His initial claim to fame was undoubtedly his grandfather. The grandson of such a notorious, yet seminal, Islamic figure, Ramadan sparked the curiosity of the Muslim masses. Even today, he is often criticized for his familial ties to the organization. Frustrated with the accusations and having taken careful measure to avoid association with the Muslim Brotherhood, Ramadan continues to deny that he is connected to or is involved with the organization. Tariq Ramadan has made clear on multiple occasions that he is proud of his family and his heritage, but does not consider his father and grandfather’s actions as being representative of who he is and where he comes from.

The intellectual holds firmly that his lineage is what has inspired him. It is perhaps this personal experience of growing up around people with questionable associations that has molded Tariq Ramadan into a propagator of *ijtihad,* versus the more commonplace *taqlid,* practiced in the majority of Muslim households. His father and grandfather’s notion of returning to the text to purify Islam is carried on by Ramadan. Whereas Ramadan insists that Muslims are fully able to integrate into

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10 *Ijtihad:* An Islamic term within religious law; the process of decision-making through independent consultation of sacred texts such as the Qur’an, Sunnah, and Hadith.

11 *Taqlid:* An Islamic term which means the following of established legal rulings/edicts made by religious scholars.

12 That is, *ijtihad* encourages independent reflection whereas *taqlid* states that one should follow the established rulings of previous scholars.
Western society without compromising their religion, his father and grandfather felt that the two were incompatible, and that Western secular ideas diluted Islam as practiced by the majority of Muslims.

**Ramadan’s Message**

The following seeks to outline several major concepts pertinent to understanding Tariq Ramadan’s unique perspective. A discussion of his views is necessary in order to grasp how and why his message appeals to first generation Muslim youths as a collective, despite vast racial and ethnic variances. Mehran Kamrava synthesizes Ramadan’s purpose and goals:

His primary goal has been to present Muslims with a set of analytical and reasoning tools, which he claims are inherent in their religious values and traditions, in order to deal successfully with the challenges of modernity, whether they find themselves in Muslim-majority societies or Europe. This line of reasoning is informed both implicitly and explicitly by the assumption that there is no inherent clash between the values of Islam and those that underlie Western civilization. The discrepancies and differences that historically have emerged between the two are due to their interpretations rather than their innate dispositions.13

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Tariq Ramadan’s message, be it through his lectures or his writings, thus tends to focus on two major themes: (i) renewing and reforming Islam; and (ii) “the place of Islam as a world religion Western societies.”

a. Islamic Modernism

Western society has posed political, social, and intellectual challenges for Islam with regard to ‘modernity.’ Movements and intellectuals have attempted to reform Islam as a responsive measure by positing varying analyses of its tenets and, perhaps, the purpose of the faith as a whole. These reformers seemed to be of the opinion that, were Islam readily compatible with modern, Western society, its followers would take pride in their religious heritage and their faith would strengthen. This presupposes, of course, that Islam is incompatible with Western society and prescribes a “dilution” of Islam as a roundabout means of increasing piety.

The idea behind this type of reconciliation is that Islamic tenets are such that, when practiced, they often conflict with the norms of Western society. For example, those orthodox Muslim men who choose not to shake hands with women under the conservative belief that “unrelated men and women should avoid touching each other due to the sexual overtones potentially associated with touching.”

In many contexts, particularly professional work environments, refusing to shake another’s hand would be

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considered quite rude. It is, however, a belief that some Muslims hold strongly and is, on its face, incompatible with Western society. Thus, both mainstream and ultra-conservative Muslims, then, turn to Islamic modernists who attempt to bridge this divide such that they may live and practice their faith in the West without the two being at odds with one another.

Attempts at ‘modernizing’ Islam were generally only adopted by the elite who were able to truly understand the intellectuals’ often complex ideologies, but failed to develop a means of sending the message down the socio-economic ladder. The remaining Muslim followers, thus, observed these changes and keenly tagged their compatriots as becoming westernized and losing their faith. They firmly “proclaimed the self-sufficiency of Islam to generate its own, alternative path and responses to the demands of modern life.”

b. Fire and Brimstone

The mosque down the street, across town, and those around the Western world approach the responsibility of properly indoctrinating the younger generation with Islamic principles as a daunting but mandatory task. They consider this a great burden, one which requires that they make every word dramatic and worth remembering. As a consequence, young Muslims find themselves leaving the mosque with fear in their


17 Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis, Religion and Globalization, 193.
hearts and minds; they are going to Hell. As dramatic as it may sound, the majority of Friday prayers begin with a fire and brimstone sermon. While this may work for some members of the audience, many feel alienated and doomed. The mosque’s ‘Islam’ is far too intense for them, and their personal level of faith simply is not up to the challenge. These Muslims often shy away from attending mosque services, criticizing their fellow mosque-goers for their negativity.

Ramadan never seems to preach of death and doom, or tell youths that their ways are wrong. He is instead a guiding light, explaining the ultimate purpose behind a tenet or a means of approaching a particular situation. Even when responding to the press, or angry about a visa denial, no one is ever banished to the depths of hell or cursed for their Westernism or modernism. Ramadan, generally, is the metaphorical grandfather; a kind voice which explains what other leaders cannot, while reminding Muslims to simply be good people.

Da’wa,18 for example, is stressed by Ramadan as something that should be a primary concern for all Muslims.19 The family and extended family must be cared for first with “love, knowledge and good example” and, children especially, should not be left feeling “abandoned and lost.”20 His focus on the family and internal affairs, rather

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18 *Da’wa*: An Arabic term for inviting persons to the Islamic faith through dialogue.


20 Ramadan, “Da’wa.”
than more lofty notions of self-sacrifice for God while one’s family is suffering, reinforces its importance in Islam.

While other Islamic intellectuals tend to speak on levels and with terminology unfamiliar to the masses, Ramadan’s speech is mainstream and colloquial. Explaining every term and notion each step of the way, his words are easily digested even by those unfamiliar with Islamic lexicon. Children growing up in America are initially exposed only to Islam as presented by their family, then their friends and relatives, and then in the mosque. Islam, to them, is very limited in its scope and application in life. Upon growing up and exploring Islam and those unanswered questions of faith, Tariq Ramadan becomes a guidance counselor of sorts, hand holding and helping digest the fundamentals as well as the intricacies as seen by young and old alike. Over time, Ramadan becomes an Islamic role model in addition to a trustworthy Islamic intellectual. Muslims young and old seek his pearls of wisdom not necessarily for answers, but for direction.

c. Ijtihad: A Hadîth as an Example

Ijtihad is an Arabic word for an Islamic term that can be readily defined as making a decision through independent, personal consultation of religious sources, namely the Quran and Sunnah. Tariq Ramadan is a staunch supporter of ijtihad and the concept of one taking the time to read into religious texts and form their own understanding and embodiment of them and their purpose.
In his recent book, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*, Ramadan states:

[T]he awakening of Islamic thought necessarily involves reconciliation with its spiritual dimension on the one hand, and on the other, renewed commitment and rational and critical reading (*ijtihād*) of the scriptural sources in the fields of law and jurisprudence (*fiqh*)… [T]he luminous heart of Islam is indeed spiritual quest and initiation, and its universal dimension necessarily involves a continued process of reading and rereading, of faithful and innovative interpretation, leading to the formulation of adapted legal rulings (*fatāwâ*).\(^{21}\)

Ramadan urges Muslims not to replace *ijtihād* with taqlid, blindly following established legal edicts made by religious scholars. Citing a *hadîth*, a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (saw), which states that every hundred years or so there will be one who renews Islam, Ramadan argues that despite the fact that Muslims firmly believe that Muhammad (saw) was the last messenger, this *hadîth* provides context to that belief. Thus, despite the basic tenet of Islam stating that the Prophet (saw) was the last Messenger of God, others will continue to guide Muslims, renew or regenerate Islam and provide perspective on the faith.\(^{22}\)

Some may argue that this is blasphemous and contrary to a basic Islamic belief. However, Ramadan is not advocating that Muslims change their basic notion of the fact that Muhammad (saw) was the last Prophet. Instead, he clearly states that the “renewal of religion… does not, of course, entail a change in the sources, principles, and


\(^{22}\) Ramadan, *Radical Reform*, 12.
fundamentals of Islam, but only in the way that religion is understood, implemented, and lived in different times or places.”

Tariq Ramadan only asks that his fellow Muslims take the time to look at Islam in the context of all texts and scriptures, rather than focusing on one, to reveal the complete picture. Elaborating, Ramadan states that scriptural sources are primary references, therefore a Muslim’s reading and understanding of these texts “will be “renewed” by the contribution of those scholars and thinkers who will point to new perspectives by reviving timeless faith in our hearts while stimulating our minds so as to enable us to face the challenges of our respective times.”

The above explanation of the hadith is just one example of how Tariq Ramadan takes an issue or topic which seems inherently impossible or contradictory, in the context of Islam as the masses know it, and decomposes it piece by piece into something that Muslims understand. Not only do the masses understand, they agree with him and find the logic so undeniable that they are themselves readily able to pass the information down the line. This is no easy feat, particularly across cultures and sects. Tariq Ramadan makes it possible.

d. Islam in the West: Reform

Tariq Ramadan summarizes the primary problem with Islam in the West by stating: “Muslims today are facing two fundamental problems: the first directly related to

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24 Ramadan, Radical Reform, 12-13.
the founding texts themselves; the second, to differences in interpretation shaped by the
societies in which they live.”\textsuperscript{25} Looking at Islam requires that one analyze the sacred
texts and the respective ways of looking at the Islamic structure of reference as “the
instruments that allow the human intelligence to make the connection between the
absolute and the relative, the essential and the accidental, or, in other words, universal
principles and the contingent realities of human societies.”\textsuperscript{26} Ramadan continually
advocates that one renew and reread in an effort to find their understanding of religion in
light of circumstances and eras, stating:

Faithfulness in time is possible only if human reason, using the
instruments put at its disposal is active and creative in putting forward
original proposals in tune with the time and place. In this sense, new
answers… are \textit{faithful} answers, just as there is no faithfulness without
renewal…. [Muslims must] engage in a deep and constant labor of reform
inspired by the “comprehensive nature of the message of Islam.”… [I]t is
a matter of avoiding an integration that depends on a collection of legal
opinions aimed at protection and instead suggesting a route that will allow
Muslims to establish themselves freely and confidently and that will open
the way for them to make a contribution.\textsuperscript{27}

First generation Muslim youths are often concerned about assimilating into their
Western society, and which elements of the East and the West to adopt or cast off. Here,
Ramadan speaks of integration. He is not referring to avoiding integration with the West,
but avoiding assimilating into the established religious precedents set by other religious

\textsuperscript{25} Tariq Ramadan, “No Faithfulness Without Evolution” (March 18, 2008)

\textsuperscript{26} Tariq Ramadan, \textit{Western Muslims and the Future of Islam} (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2004), 62.

\textsuperscript{27} Ramadan, \textit{Western Muslims}, 62.
scholars. Although there is nothing wrong, per se, with following Islam as practiced by the masses, many Islamic laws or decrees as passed by scholars may be outdated and not “take into account the realities in which people live.”

Thus, following the rulings of the past may create present-day hardships unintended by Islam. This creates the impression that Islam, in that capacity, is incompatible with Western society. However, a basic belief is that “Islam – when well understood and well applied – is valid in every time and place.”

Modern society has changed considerably since the time of the caliphs. Many of the ulama’s then pertinent guidelines and explanations are now outdated. Eastern society tends to grasp these religious solutions and hold firmly, often advancing a return to these ideals. The notion is that any attempt to reevaluate will dilute Islam, modernizing it to fit into society. This concept of ‘modernizing’ Islam is a sensitive one amongst many Muslims. They champion the belief that Islam need not be changed through the coming of ages, and we must maintain Islam as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad (saw). However, Ramadan is not advocating changing Islam to fit one’s society, but is advocating the philosophy behind the literal meaning of the words. There then ensues a battle between the faith and pride that many hold in Islamic orthodoxy and

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29 Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 69.
traditionalism, and, what Ramadan advocates as, Islam as it was meant to be practiced and understood as a religion for eternity, and not just for the Arabia of centuries past.

Following Islamic scholars or religious decrees is futile, according to Ramadan, because “Muslim scholars agree neither on the definitions nor on the interpretation of a number of concepts that are central to Islamic terminology.” This makes their *fatwa* a moot point since a common understanding cannot be conceived.

Reformist trends have become increasingly popular in Muslim societies throughout the globe. This particular point is perhaps what gives Tariq Ramadan his international appeal. He stresses the importance of looking at sacred text in context, as opposed to a literalist interpretation that does not take into consideration the facets of our ever-changing society. Ramadan’s view on the current state of Islamic reform is as follows:

Many reformists… believe that the fields of creed and religious observance are distinct from those of social affairs: in the former the prescriptions of the Qur’an and hadith are immutable; in the latter, they should work in tandem with human rationality…. [T]he results of reform in the past century have been unsatisfactory. By its nature, work that is oriented exclusively toward the texts struggles to keep pace with emerging situations. Our scholars lack the necessary deep understanding of the complex issues of the modern world…. Though they speak about economy, natural and social science, they have in fact little to offer in any of these fields. When they pronounce on current matters their rulings often


31 *Fatwa*: An Arabic term for a religious ruling in Islam, made by an Islamic scholar.
contradict one another, and we are unable to decide which of them is best qualified.\textsuperscript{32}

Ramadan’s bold statements seek not to alienate followers or divide them into sects by degree of religious conviction. Rather, the profound words encourage one to seek knowledge available within their sacred texts.

Tariq Ramadan is frequently criticized for his lack of Islamic scholarship. Ramadan holds no formal degrees or schooling in Islamic theology nor is he a \textit{mufti}, \textit{aalim}, \textit{imam}, or any other type of Islamic religious leader. Ramadan’s is a philosophy of Islam and how Islam ought to be practiced by Muslims. He is not directly discussing Islamic tenants, but the Islam’s purpose in being revealed by God as a religion and as a way of life. There is, thus, no need “for studies and diplomas, for masters and guides.”\textsuperscript{33}

Ramadan is a voice for youths worldwide. He is similar to a guidance counselor who allows his students free reign within wide boundaries. Tariq Ramadan encourages personal dialogue with the sacred texts, but asks that we not disregard historical context and “prophetic tradition.”\textsuperscript{34} This reminder is not meant to burden a Muslim, but to create


\textsuperscript{33} Tariq Ramadan, “Reading the Quran” (January 7, 2008) \url{www.tariqramadan.com/spip.php?article1320} (accessed July 2009).

\textsuperscript{34} Ramadan, “Reading the Quran.”
a holistic picture because, as an example, one cannot learn to pray by reading the Quran.  

Practitioners of any religion may feel overwhelmed by the wealth of religious knowledge a sacred text presents. To analyze it fully would mean to study the history of that time period, understand the vernacular used then, the sociological context, etc. Others may choose to adopt a literal reading of the text. The most common approach is to look at what others have gleaned, using their scholarship and analyses to form one’s own conception of what the faith means and entails. This removes oneself from the religion, minimizing introspection and by no means helping to cultivate one’s belief system.

Ramadan appeals to the immigrant youth, who tend to feel disconnected from the religion as practiced by their parents. They see a disconnect between the Islam they understand through interacting with the text, and the Islam colored by culture and the rulings of scholars. The Quran, Ramadan says, “belongs to everyone, free of distinction and hierarchy.” One need not have a degree from Al-Azhar University, a prestigious Islamic institution, to understand Islam. The relationship one has with God is an intimate, one on one encounter.

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36 Ramadan, “Reading the Quran.”
Ramadan, thus, removes the layers of scholars between oneself and God. Restating the belief that “God responds to whoever comes to his Word,” he once again empowers youths and encourages their personal journey into religion and Islam. By encouraging one to read the text themselves and form their own opinions and beliefs based upon it, Ramadan is publicly preaching what these youths want to hear: that they are capable of forming their own individual belief system and need not be chained to the culturally mired Islam of their parents, their communities, or religious scholars of any sort.

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CHAPTER IV
TARIQ RAMADAN’S UNIQUE APPEAL

What Ramadan is advocating, thus, is not just an independent consultation of sacred texts, but *tajdid*. *Tajdid* is the “renewal of the reading, understanding, and consequently, implementations of texts in light of the various historicocultural contexts” in which a Muslim lives.¹

One of the primary problems regarding the interpretation of Quranic passages and Islamic edicts is that throughout the years *ijtihad* has been slowly replaced by *taqlid*. Muslims feel that by following the rulings already established by earlier Islamic scholars, and most of which have become ‘norms,’ they are correctly practicing their faith. Thus, rather than looking into the sacred texts themselves to come to an understanding of their purpose, Muslims are following the rulings of scholars which may no longer be relevant, or have very likely been misconstrued over the years.

Ramadan seeks and advocates clarity of Islamic edicts and principles through self-study and re-evaluation. *Tajdid* is essential to this as it recaptures the “original essence and “form” of the message, through renewed understanding” since “no

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faithfulness to Islamic principles through the ages can exist without evolution, without reform, without a renewal of intelligence and understanding.\textsuperscript{2}

In fact, reputed pundits of our time attribute the decline of Islamic civilization and the lack of modernization in Islamic nations to the movement away from ijtihad. As Lawrence E. Harrison notes:

The slow pace or progress in the Islamic world in recent countries is an stark contrast with the progressive force that Islam was for several hundred years after it was founded by Muhammad early in the seventh century, and with the dominant power of the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Prominent among those who attribute Islam’s decline to cultural factors is Bernard Lewis, who stresses the consequences for modernization of Islamic orthodoxy since the closing of the Gate of Ijtihad (independent analysis) by Islamic scholars between the ninth and eleventh centuries.\textsuperscript{3}

Harrison goes on to note that even oil-producing Islamic nations like the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait are “affluent” but are “very traditional in many respects.”\textsuperscript{4}

The tradition of practicing Islam in a manner mimicking that of the Prophet (saw) is revered and respected as true Islam by many Muslims. Reinterpreting Islam, then, is thought of as diluting it, or losing the faith the way the Prophet (saw) would have practiced it. The idea that Islam is ‘allowed’ to modify with the times is considered blasphemous. Those believers feel that it is modern society, and not Islam, that is wrong,


\textsuperscript{4} Harrison, “Promoting Progressive Cultural Change,” 301-302.
holding steadfast to the idea that the way things were done in the time of Prophet Muhammad (saw), centuries ago, are still wholly applicable today.

Ramadan’s explanation of ‘Islam in context’ and the notion of one being able to understand and interpret the faith is critical. It frees Muslims both from the interpretations of established edicts and from cultural norms, allowing the believer to practice his or her faith through his or her own interpretation and introspection. This, of course, does not mean that the worshipper should create his own version of Islam, but rather that he or she is free to look at the sacred texts in context and in light of society’s conditions at the time.

A chief reason for Ramadan’s popularity is that he places this power of interpretation in the hands of the masses. Islam, then, is not confined to history and to scholarly edicts. Instead, Islam becomes a personal exchange and identification of the text through one’s eyes. The model of servitude is not that of a submissive believer, but of an interactive worshipper who seeks to practice Islam as he or she believes God fashioned it to be.

**Understanding God’s Purpose**

Religion is a defining influence in Islamic societies. The interplay of culture and religion bring to the forefront divergent issues surrounding the interpretation of sacred texts. Tariq Ramadan’s intrigue amongst Muslim youth is rooted in his propagation of a purer form of Islam, rather than the Islam of one’s parents or culture or that touted by
scholars. Ramadan summarizes the obvious: “Islam is not a culture.”\textsuperscript{5} However, part of Islam’s beauty is its ability to be incorporated into the “existence of different methodologies in worship and social affairs.”\textsuperscript{6} Islam allows for and is open to “cultures, customs, discovers, and creativity of humankind” so long as they do not come into conflict with or violate an Islamic tenant or prohibition that is “specific and recognized as such.”\textsuperscript{7} In this way Islam both unites across cultures, while diversifying and allowing for the inclusion of all backgrounds, and across types of ethnic makeup and contexts.

Ramadan argues that Islam allows anyone to read the texts and reach a conclusion, but one must do so fairly and in light of the circumstances surrounding the scriptures. This, in effect, gives Muslims a feeling of autonomy and control, particularly the youth. Muslim youth are already struggling to maintain two very different cultural identities, often living in the West without personally having traveled to the East. Thus, their Eastern identity is scattered and based only on what their parents have retained and passed on to them.

\textsuperscript{5} Tariq Ramadan, \textit{Western Muslims and Future of Islam} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 214.

\textsuperscript{6} Ramadan, \textit{Western Muslims}, 214.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
Ramadan’s popularity with Muslim immigrant children raised in the West is rooted in his advocation of self-analysis of scripture. Steven Vertovec and Alisdair Rogers agree, stating:

Among many Muslim European youth there has arisen a desire to analyze religious scriptures for themselves. This embodies reclaiming the concept of *ijtihad* (‘interpretation’ or ‘independent judgment’), which in turn involves both a rejection of authority (of their parents and of the *ulema* or body of Islamic scholars) and a revitalization of belief and practice.⁸

Cultural norms are often intertwined with religious threads. Often, their parents use Islam as a justification for their stringency, whereas Islam may not present such restrictions or requirements. Children, when reading about their faith, find themselves presented with a picture that differs from that painted by their parents. In fact, some find cultural practices so vastly different as to be ‘unIslamic’ yet touted as a religious norm.

When parents believe and feel that their children are becoming ‘Americanized’ or ‘Westernized’ and ‘losing their religion,’ they are not always right. On the contrary, as culture generally begins to dilute over the generations, religious identity tends to strengthen and religious knowledge deepens. Tariq Ramadan believes that “many young Muslims, by studying their religion, [claim] total allegiance to Islam while distancing themselves from their cultures of origin.”⁹ These younger Muslims read and reread the sacred texts “with the aim of recovering a forgotten principle or discovering a horizon as

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⁸ Steven Vertovec and Alisdair Rogers, introduction to *Muslim European Youth: Reproducing ethnicity, religion, culture* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1998), 11.

yet unknown” or perhaps lost in their vibrant culture.\textsuperscript{10} Ramadan urges all Muslims to define their “Islamic identity by distinguishing it from the culture in which it is clothed in particular parts of the world.”\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{a. Female Circumcision as an Example of an unIslamic, Cultural Practice}

Female genital circumcision, or mutilation, is one such cultural practice that is quite common in self-declared Islamic nations, particularly those in Africa. Asma Gull Hasan, in \textit{Why I Am a Muslim: An American Odyssey}, explains the intersection of culture and religion:

Wherever Islam is practiced, including in America, the Muslims there have used or added their own culture to is practice. Some of these practices are harmless,… while others can cause non-Muslims to confuse non-Islamic, cultural practices (such as FGM, polygamy, and so on) with Islam. Among the great Islamic empires, very few were able to minimize the effect and influence of local culture. While Islam was the religion, other matters – including culture, law, and politics – were influenced as much or more by non-Islamic culture that had existed before Islam…. Although Muslims all over the world vary widely in interpretation because of this cultural drift, Islam is a richer and deeper religion for it. The cultural variety among Muslims is to the credit of Islam too, showing how easily adaptable the Islamic faith is.\textsuperscript{12}

The well-known Ayaan Hirsi Ali feels Islam is the problem, alleging that the faith condones female genital mutilation. She is an advocate for victims of this brutal practice,


\textsuperscript{11} Ramadan, \textit{Western Muslims}, 216.

while attributing the problem to Islam because the Prophet Muhammad (saw) “did not explicitly prohibit it.”

In doing so, Ali aligns with the proponents’ justification of female circumcision: if the Quran or the Prophet (saw) did not explicitly state that female circumcision was prohibited, the practice was permissible. Through her lens, therefore, this pre-Islamic practice defaults as an Islamic practice. This stance posits Islam as an identity as opposed to a religion. This is exactly the kind of reasoning that Ramadan is against.

Ramadan advocates looking at the Quran, Sunnah, and other sacred texts in light of the current state of affairs of society. More so, religion is not to be confused with cultural practices. Many Muslims, like Ali, may argue that by not banning it, Islam condones such practices.

Axiomatic to other Muslims, a basic Islamic law is that those practices not explicitly prohibited by or in contrast with the Quran or hadith are allowed. As noted by Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, a Sunni Islamic scholar at the Minaret of Freedom Institute, “This makes for a great deal of tolerance in the religious law. As a result of this

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14 A ‘hadith’ is an Arabic term for the oral tradition relaying the actions of the Prophet Muhammad; used in conjunction with the Quran and *sunnah* for jurisprudence; considered sacred text.

tolerance many pre-Islamic practices were not immediately eradicated by Islam.”

Followers of Islam not familiar with the Quran and Islamic views on a woman’s marital rights, or perhaps practicing a version of Islam compatible with their respective cultures, may therefore justify their social practices under basic Islamic tenants while turning a blind eye to contradictory shariah.

Thus, using Ramadan’s simplistic method of looking at the sacred texts, ordinary Muslims, without formal Islamic education, are able to decipher whether a cultural practice such as female circumcision is ‘Islamic.’ Islamic texts including the Quran and hadîth, irrespective of other traditions or social customs, place explicit, heavy emphasis on the rights of women in various social contexts such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, employment, et cetera. With regard to female genital mutilation, Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad paraphrases the relevant Arabic shariah, translating: “Islamic law protects a woman’s right to sexual enjoyment, as demonstrated by the fact that a woman has the [Islamic] right to divorce on the grounds that her husband does not provide sexual satisfaction.”

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16 Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, “Female Genital Mutilation: An Islamic Perspective,” Minaret of Freedom Institute (Beltsville, MD: International Graphics, 2000).

17 Shariah: An Arabic term for a system of Islamic jurisprudence delineating the legal issues surrounding issues including, but not limited to: marriage, divorce, inheritance, and banking.

Under Ramadan’s thought process, therefore, the texts prohibit all ritual acts and old-world cultural practices that prevent a woman’s right to sexual satisfaction. Ali’s statement that “the Prophet Muhammad [saw] did not explicitly prohibit [female circumcision]” is correct. Any Muslim reading the respective passages on women’s rights in the marital bed can easily deduce that female circumcision would not and could not, then, be considered an Islamicly acceptable practice. Thus, there would have been no need to explicitly prohibit a pre-Islamic practice which Islamic edicts contradict and, in doing so, prohibit.

Any potential confusion surrounding the legitimacy of the practice as Islamically permissible could always be directed toward and answered by sacred text, as Ramadan proposes. Proponents of female circumcision choose to continue this pre-Islamic practice by justifying it is ‘Islamic.’ First generation Muslim children, who may be arguing with their parents who agree with the cultural practice, are able to read the scripture and understand that the practice is by no means Islamic. Ramadan’s method empowers Muslims to read and learn, yielding the analysis that it is their culture, not their religion that condones this horrific practice. The widespread nature of female circumcision as an epidemic concentrated in, but not limited to, Africa seems to be based at least in part on misinformation, misinterpretation, and sheer ignorance of the rights of women as established in Islam.

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Tariq Ramadan attempts to cleanse Islam of these impurities by advocating that Muslims read and reread sacred texts. Although Ramadan does not target first generation Muslim youths raised in the West, they are undeniably his largest fan base, as his message resonates with their desire to rationalize and internalize what Islam requires of them and means to them, often fighting against the fog of cultural Islam presented to them by their parents.

b. Forced versus Arranged Marriages

Forced marriages are an example of cultural “practices that are very often presented as Islamic while betraying the very essence of the Islamic message.”20 The general stigma behind the notion of an ‘arranged’ marriage is negative, deemed an oppressive circumstance that Muslim women are forced into. Within Islam, arranged marriages are welcome with the consent of bride and groom. Forced marriages of any kind, however, are considered relevant grounds for divorce and are illegal under Islamic law.

Despite the normalcy of arranged marriages in the Arab culture and in many parts of the Arab world, a study of Arab-Muslims in Detroit, Michigan found that both the immigrant parents and their children had adopted the attitude that marriage was a matter

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of personal choice. That subsection of Western Muslims, however, appears to be unique since an alternate study found that arranged marriages continue to “be the norm among the majority of children of recently arrived immigrants.” No mention was made of these so-called forced marriages, but the study did note that there was much “Americanization” amongst these Arab-Muslims, referring to interfaith marriages, because only seventy-one percent had chosen to marry Muslims. Thus, it appears that while arranged marriages voluntarily remain the norm amongst immigrant Muslims and their families, interfaith marriages are not far behind despite their being “contrary” to certain ethnic customs.

Marriage in Islam is “a civil contract rather than a religious sacrament…[whose] legality depends on the consent of the parties.” Using Ramadan’s method of analysis, we turn to Islamic texts to determine whether forced marriages are, if not allowed, condoned in Islam. Sacred text is summarized as stating, “Since no agreement can be reached between the parties unless they give their consent to it, marriage can be

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23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

contracted only with the free consent of the two parties.”  

This notion of the free will of the parties is of utmost importance. While parents and others are welcome to suggest suitors, if either party refuses or dislikes the other, the matter is closed. Forcing the bride or the groom into a marriage they do not want is prohibited in the sacred text. One hadith states that females are “not to be married until [their] consent is obtained.”  

Furthermore, the Prophet Muhammad (saw) is quoted as saying that “a man gives his daughter in marriage and she dislikes it, the marriage shall be annulled.”  

The numerous references to this issue are noteworthy. In another hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (saw) paraphrases the same statement about a female’s right to agree or disagree to a marriage. Forced marriages were very common in pre-Islamic Arabia and, again, the multiple references indicate the importance of this issue in Islam and the need to prohibit it. Ramadan is quite emphatic on the issue of forced marriages stating, “Forced marriages are not Islamic and must be condemned in the name of Islam!”  

While this may also be his personal opinion, Ramadan explains the problem behind forced marriages as an issue of, once again, interpretation:

The contemporary Muslim conscience is actually facing two major problems: the literalist reading and reductive interpretation of the


27 Doi, “Marriage.”

28 Ibid.

scriptural sources (Qur’an and prophetic traditions –Sunna-) on the one hand and the great confusion between religious principles and cultural practices on the other. Forced marriages are at the crossroad of these two very serious challenges: some ‘ulamâ’, Muslim scholars, are keeping silent or even accepting these practices by relying on some texts read literally without referring to the overall Islamic teachings (and their objectives) or at least contextualizing these very marginal scriptural sources. Muslims are very often confusing cultural practices with religious principles and they think that forced marriages, to which they were used in their culture (the current one or the culture of origin) are in fact Islamic. The literalist and cultural readings of the Qur’an and the Sunna are two dangerous phenomena for they mislead the believers and betray the very essence of Islam….  

Thus, “nothing, in the overall Islamic teachings, can justify forced marriages….“

Forced marriages versus an arranged marriage are two very different institutions, either of which may stem from one’s respective culture. Regardless, a practice prohibited by religion cannot be justified by culture. Moreover, it cannot be circled back and deemed a religious practice. Forced marriages are in no way Islamic nor does Islam condone them. In fact, Tariq Ramadan views marriage against one’s will as an epidemic and a human rights issue. Ramadan actively campaigns against forced marriages and has gone as far as to issue an initiative against the matter, because “too many things are done (or understood as being done) in the name of their religion that indeed are against the very essence of the Islam.”

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31 Ramadan, “No to forced marriages!”

32 Ibid.
Western Education and its Impact on Muslim Youths

In the West, Muslim youths are taught in schools that emphasize questioning and rationalization. They take classes in philosophy and anthropology, learning how the great names of history made their mark. Having spent months and years dissecting various thinking processes, their ideologies no doubt seep into their minds. These youths learn about the complexity of the theodicy issue, illustrating the differing views of those who accept and believe in God, and those who deny His existence. The theodicy problem has four basic statements: God exists, God is omnipotent, God is good and just, and God is omniscient. The problem presents several poignant questions. Why would a good and just God allow innocent people to suffer? Or perhaps God is good and just, but He is not omnipotent and has no control over their suffering?

Courses as innocent as those covering the French Enlightenment or Ancient Philosophy spark discussion and curiosity as students ruminate over Candide, metaphysics, or Immanuel Kant, and, fundamentally, over theism and religion. Muslim youths are then encouraged to question religion and seek answers that will help them become closer to God and find peace, ending up being forced not only to learn how to question faith, but also interact with fellow students holding entirely different views, which they may find upsetting or exciting.

Muslim students schooled in the West are forced to confront issues such as these. Were they educated in the East, however, these thoughts would be shot down and
deemed blasphemous immediately. Discussions of theodicy or philosophy would be unlikely to take place, and if they did, parents would fiercely protest and may even withdraw their children from the offending institution. Muslim parents tend to believe that “the purpose of school is understood to be academic learning.”\textsuperscript{33} The East and Eastern education, thus does not allow the questioning of basic principles of faith. To resolve this conundrum, many Muslim parents choose, instead to enroll their children in ‘Muslim’ schools. These schools, although they have the same curriculum as the areas’ public schools, hold additional Islamic classes imparting upon students how to read the Qur’an, Qur’anic stories, and so forth.

Enrolling a child in an Islamic class, as opposed to an Islamic school, is wonderful for the purpose of deepening their understanding of the faith. Ramadan believes, however, that the purpose of parents and Imams in creating such Islamic schools “has been to protect the children from the bad influence of society, to distance them from a [morally] unhealthy environment, and make them live “amongst Muslims.””\textsuperscript{34} Ramadan is a harsh critic of Islamic schools in the West because they interfere with positive integration into Western society. The Islamic schools, he says, are ““artificially Islamic” closed spaces [that] are created in the West… almost completely cut off from surrounding society…. The [Islamic] school puts forth a way of life, a space,


\textsuperscript{34} Tariq Ramadan, Western Muslims and Future of Islam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 131.
and a parallel reality that has practically no link with the society around it.”

Muslim youths, already facing head-on issues of identity and social acceptance, become reclusive when they leave these schools and go on to experience ‘real life’ in the West. Although they may have been educated in Islamic schools in the West, “apart from their [similar] compulsory disciplines, live in another dimension: while not being completely “here,” neither are they completely from “there,” and one would like the child to know who he is…. Ramadan, then, is arguing for assimilation into one’s Western society through participating in the Western education system. An integral process of living in the West is interacting with Americans or Europeans and the primary means of children to do so is at school.

The theodicy problem and similar such issues, when raised in Western society and educational systems, cause children to positively question their religion, and seek practical answers. However, when children bring these perspectives to their Eastern educated parents, they are often met with a brick wall: such ruminations are the equivalent of blasphemy and, if they are not, they must remain within the confines of school. Ramadan encourages thinking in a fashion similar to those of theologists. “The realm of faith necessarily calls on intellect,” such that faith is not a blind belief but one embodied both emotionally and rationally and which will satisfy both one’s heart and

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36 Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 17.
mind. By casting the net wide and explaining his reasons and their implications, Ramadan advocates the Western education system as a means of deepening a Muslim youth’s convictions in their faith through introspection while simultaneously assimilating into their Western homeland.

**Muslims as Citizens of the West**

**a. The Plight of the Immigrant**

Immigrants face ever-increasing and cumbersome burdens, both of the tangible and intangible variety. A vast majority migrates to the West without a job offer, a home, and sometimes without extended family that could serve as a safety net and spring board. Often migrating with visions of immediate prosperity and safety, immigrants inadvertently find themselves quite alone in a foreign land touted by many in their homeland and throughout the East as a real-world utopia. Upon arrival in the West, immigrants must immediately (and minimally) secure the basic necessities of life to provide for their family. Their concerns about assimilation are very practically limited to those things which will affect their daily lives, or will have an impact on their children. Their ‘world,’ then, is very immediate and the scope of their worries limited.

When immigrants discuss the politics of their adoptive country, they do so passively. Most policies and legalities simply do not affect their daily lives, with their

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interests constrained to their individual economic welfare and socioeconomic conditions. They are concerned only with limited aspects of government: namely, the general state of the economy (‘‘Will I lose my job?’’), whether a law affects them or not (‘‘Does this mean I do not qualify for a work permit?’’ or ‘‘Are my taxes going up?’’), or perhaps why the driving age is so low for teenagers. The politics and policies of both their homeland and their host country may be discussed in depth, and often with much passion, but never enough to seek personal involvement. The thought of becoming actively involved is usually a far stretch of the imagination.

While it is true that the immigrant is still settling into their host country, and making a life for himself, his family, and often extended family, this lack of involvement is by no means limited to the working class. Many could care less about becoming actively involved in their Western society not necessarily due to indifference but because that level of integration requires stability that they may have yet to achieve. Those fortunate enough to migrate with a small fortune, despite being financially stable, must still face numerous hurdles in the West. Often, the first and most important are outward cultural differences and language barriers. Immigrants may find themselves shocked at the way males and females interact in the West. They may be frustrated at being unable to communicate with a cashier and make simple purchases at the local grocer. They must begin to forge a new identity in their host nation. This identity, as mentioned earlier, often attempts to retain much of the old country and its values and traditions.
First generation immigrant children, on the other hand, often seek to involve themselves in the community. These youths are primarily in school or working, and often have the flexibility and desire to contribute to the society at some level. Sometimes, this may be limited to volunteering or voting, or as involved as working on a campaign. Many youths begin their involvement in high school clubs like Amnesty International or the Red Cross Club. Others use involvement as a way to round out admissions applications by volunteering at a soup kitchen and so forth. There are no qualms to their efforts, and youths often find themselves quite dedicated to the cause, once they begin. Regardless of the means, these first generation children of Muslim migrants see the Western nation in which they live as their permanent home and have a desire to get involved.

Immigrant parents often do not champion their children’s pursuits and may even question the purpose of such activities. Immigrants may feel their children are becoming distracted from their education, too involved in Western culture and thus gradually slipping away from their ethnic culture, or becoming too ‘Westernized’ by involving themselves in the community. Immigrant parents do not necessarily prohibit their children’s such activities, but they do not encourage them to actively participate either.

Immigrants, while often quite grateful for their new life in the West, do not tend to feel any duty or obligation to ‘give back.’ This serves as yet another example of how immigrant parents and their first generation children clash. However, this lack of meeting of the minds is not founded in any Islamic restriction. Immigrant parents tend to
want to absorb the benefits of the West without actively contributing to it; whereas their children are inculcated with a Western ideal, most often in school, of giving back to society through civic service.

b. Europe as an Ideal Islamic Milieu

Switzerland being Tariq Ramadan’s homeland, his experiences with the integration of Islam within European society is shaped by his rearing and travels. Growing up in the West as the first generation child of Muslim immigrants, Tariq Ramadan speaks from personal experience and observation when he advocates Europe as an ideal environment for Muslims. Ramadan praises the European milieu for providing Muslims the security of freedom of religion without persecution, amongst other civic ideals. He encourages Muslims to look toward the positives of such a society rather than being overly critical and reclusive. This encouragement is two-fold. It instills within immigrant Muslims, who are by far the vast majority of Muslims within Europe, and within their children a sense of pride for their host country. Furthermore, this optimistic view encourages a gradual movement away from reverence of their country of origin toward a more grateful eye for their host country and the ideals propagated by it.

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40 Ramadan, “Islam in Europe.”

41 Ibid.
Not meant to be a harsh change, Ramadan proposes only that Muslim immigrants and their following generations maintain a realistic outlook on the reasons for the initial migration, and the necessity of a degree of host-nationalism if not outright, feverous pride.\textsuperscript{42}

Tariq Ramadan does something which most other Islamic leaders, modernist or not, tend to avoid: he encourages integration.\textsuperscript{43} Harmonious assimilation is not in direct contrast or contention with the faith since the host state does not persecute or discriminate against it. Islamic leaders, however, tend to interpret integration into a non-Muslim society as a necessary evil. Conflict between the religion of Islam and the milieu of the host society is, in their mind, unavoidable and must be minimized through as little contact as possible. Moreover, negative influences of the host society may increase the possibility that those of weaker faith begin to question the religion or turn away from it altogether. This mentality leads to isolationism, with families forming communities and social circles of those with similar backgrounds and religious beliefs. A ‘comfort zone’ of these forged alliances can cause problems on multiple levels. Two such concerns Ramadan chooses to address include the political ramifications of such isolationist behavior, and the substitution of culture for religion on the balance beam of importance.


\textsuperscript{43} Ramadan, “Islam in Europe.”
Ramadan argues that in order to fully integrate into a society, it is of “absolute necessity” to possess a “deep knowledge of [ones’] environment.” By ‘environment’ Ramadan refers to the political and social intricacies of the state. Civic awareness is essential to being an active player as it forces assimilation and an understanding of the society.

Ramadan urges Muslims to vote, stating that voting “is a positive thing and sign of open and progressive thinking” however “to do it without providing for the concrete prerequisites for civic commitment is dangerous.” This position is somewhat radical. Muslims have recently been very encouraged for vote for specific leaders. Unfortunately, upon voter consultation, one finds that the party platform is generally unfamiliar territory to them. Most of these voters will simply repeat vague statements and broad generalizations of a candidate’s platform. Ramadan staunchly opposes this shallow approach. Instead, he calls for positive integration. Tariq Ramadan articulates:

Sustained by their faith and on the basis of their understanding of the texts, Muslims must develop an understanding of the Western context that will make it possible for them to do what all Muslims have done throughout history: to integrate whatever there is in the culture where they live that does not contradict what they are and what they believe. So, the universal and shared fundamentals of their Islamic identity will put on the trappings of a variety of cultures, which they should not fear or reject as

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45 Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 167.

long as they remain aware of the body of principles to which they must remain faithful. Their identity is determined by completely open, dynamic, interactive, and multiple factors.\textsuperscript{47}

American Muslims agree. Asma Gull Hasan, who grew up in the United States as a child of immigrant Muslim parents, also urges the integration of Muslims into Western society, stating that a Muslim immigrant’s “greatest challenge is overcoming our public image as terrorists, followed closely by the need to unify, despite our different ethnicities, so that we can contribute in a significant and positive way to American society and take our place alongside other groups as a part of American culture.”\textsuperscript{48}

While Hasan, it may be argued, is not representative of all such first generation Muslim immigrant youths, she is yet another voice urging Muslims to break out of their self-contained shells and integrate. Many Muslim youths are already doing so, and are contributing in profound ways within their communities and on national and international levels. Others have chosen to maintain a less involved lifestyle, focusing on other relevant priorities.

Integration need not require that one join the military or spend the summer volunteering for a presidential campaign. Integration can be as simple as accepting Western culture. In 2005, a Danish newspaper published a series of twelve cartoons

\textsuperscript{47} Tariq Ramadan, \textit{Western Muslims and Future of Islam} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 216.

depicting the Prophet Muhammad (saw).\textsuperscript{49} Islamic doctrines undisputedly prohibit characterization of any of the prophets, including Prophet Muhammad (saw). Tariq Ramadan did not advocate, as several Islamic leaders did, that Muslims threaten the Danish newspaper or boycott European, specifically Danish, goods.\textsuperscript{50} Indeed, Ramadan instead addressed the Islamic response to the cartoons in \textit{The Herald Tribune}, explaining as follows:

\begin{quote}
[I]n the Muslim world, we are not used to laughing at religion, our own or anybody else’s. This is far from our understanding. For that reason, these cartoons are seen, by average Muslims and not just radicals, as a transgression against something sacred, a provocation against Islam.

[Muslims must] understand that laughing at religion is a part of the broader culture in which they live in Europe, going back to Voltaire. Cynicism, irony and indeed blasphemy are part of the culture. When you live in such an environment as a Muslim, it is really important to be able to take a critical distance and not react so emotionally. You need to hold to your Islamic principles, but be wise enough not to overreact to provocation.

For Muslim majority countries to react emotionally to these cartoons with boycotts is to nurture the extremists on the other side, making it a test of wills. On one side, the extremists argue: "See, we told you, the West is against Islam." On the other side they say, "See, Muslims can’t be integrated into Europe, and they are destroying our values by not accepting what we stand for."\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}


Civic responsibility requires that Muslims behave appropriately, and address sensitive issues with wisdom.\textsuperscript{52} Freedom of speech is both a right and responsibility which must not be abused and must be utilized within reason. Threats are counterproductive. Ramadan, by no means, condones the cartoons. He states that they are inappropriate but within the free speech category and as such may only be condemned. Cartoons and other such communicative expressions should not, however, become an excuse for or incite Muslims to create fear or apprehension of immediate harmful contact against Europe.

Civic responsibility and integration are critical aspects of living in the West. Tariq Ramadan calls the emergence of first generation immigrant Muslim children raised in the United States, Europe and other Western nations a “silent revolution.”\textsuperscript{53} This new generation is vastly different from their generally simplistic, Eastern parents. The laws and social structure of Western nations allow Muslim youths to practice their faith freely and openly and, Ramadan argues, for this reason must be respected.\textsuperscript{54}

c. Popular Cultural Expressions of Islam

Islam in the media is not an uncommon subject matter, particularly in the news. More and more, Islam is being depicted as a point of contention in mainstream movies.


\textsuperscript{54} Ramadan, “Islam in Europe.”
and texts, most of which seek to discuss the popular aspects of terrorism, Islam’s ‘compatibility’ with the West, and other such controversial issues. Within this mix there are a few expressions of Islam that elicit a very different representation than the images of suicide bombers and *burkas* that the West has, unfortunately, become accustomed to.

A popular Canadian television series entitled “Little Mosque on the Prairie” presents an astonishingly accurate portrayal of Muslims living in the West. The show is based in a small town in Canada, with a handful of Muslim residents. First generation children of Muslim immigrants find themselves relating to the scenarios and the characters on the show. Both sides of the coin are presented true to form. There is the religiously-lax immigrant parent of an exceptionally pious physician-daughter who refuses to get married. The conservative immigrant-imam father of a teenage daughter who is trying to find a balance between East and West as she struggles with typical teenage issues of boys and dating while feeling imprisoned by her father’s cultural and religious rules. The sitcom depicts the fallacy of Westerners viewing all Muslims as terrorists, while Muslims try to shape an identity and comfort zone for themselves in the West.

*Skunk Girl*, by Sheba Karim, and *Dahling, If You Luv Me, Would You Please, Please Smile*, by Rukhsana Khan, are just two examples of several teen fiction books recently written for the bicultural, Muslim audience. Attempts to appeal to Western Muslims indicate that there is both a market for these types of materials and a cohort of individuals who identify with the cultural confusion and hybrid identity illustrated in
these novels. Islam is portrayed as light and humorous, as popular terms and sayings are envisioned through the eyes of Muslim youths.

In *Skunk Girl*, Sheba Karim renders a particularly apt scene. Karim, from the perspective of a teenage child of first generation immigrant Muslims, addresses the Islamic ideals behind male-female interaction likely played out in many a Muslim home throughout the West:

My mother turns around, arms folded. “Nina, remember that you should never be alone with a boy, ever. Because when a boy and girl are alone together, there is always a third person with them. Do you know who that third person is?”

“Shaitaan,” I answer. I have heard this one, like, a zillion times. You would think that the devil has better things to do than hang out with adolescents. I picture a teenage couple at the movies with the devil sitting in between them, trying to eat popcorn with his hooves, his two horns casting a shadow on the movie screen, and start to giggle.

“Why are you laughing?” my mother asks, frowning. She’ll never find any humor in this topic.55

This axiomatic Islamic belief that when single, unrelated males and females are together, Satan is there with them is meant to convey that sexual tension is more likely without a guardian. While Karim pokes fun of the maxim, it is something that many Muslim youths think about and often feel is outdated. Without explaining the religious purpose behind the adage, as is often typical of Western Muslim parents, Nina’s mother expects her daughter to fully embody this belief. Although it may simply be commonsense to older Muslim youths, those without a more knowledgeable foundation

may simply brush off the advice as old fashioned rather than an appropriate and profound proverb, particularly for their cohort.

Muslim youths are diversifying into mainstream outlets to discuss their similar household and societal experiences. Standup comedians Maz Jobrani\textsuperscript{56} and Azhar Usman\textsuperscript{57} poke fun at Islam and its popular cultural expressions to sold-out audiences of young Muslims. Their experiences, then, are not uncommon. Muslim youths experience a sense of solidarity in knowing that their cousins, friends, and Muslims of all ethnicities face similar frustrations practicing Islam in an un-Islamic, Western society alongside parents whose Islam is, largely, cultural.

Tariq Ramadan appeals to these youths in a fashion mimicking that of these comedians and authors. Ramadan’s Islamic foundation is, in a sense, grounded in the very basic belief that the religion should be interpreted by its believer, within certain guidelines. Western Muslims, particularly the first generation children of Muslim immigrants frustrated by their parents’ cultural overlays on Islam, are increasingly accepting Ramadan’s views and embracing them as their own.

Asma Gull Hasan, in her text \textit{Why I am a Muslim: An American Odyssey}, carefully delineates a popular Muslim persona in words and terms the average Muslim

\begin{itemize}
  \item Maz Jobrani is a first generation immigrant Muslim youth. Born in Iran, and raised in American, Jobrani now tours worldwide as a standup comedian in “Axis of Evil.” The comedy routine pokes fun at cultural interpretations of Islam from a Persian perspective.
  \item Azhar Usman is a first generation immigrant Muslim youth. Usman was born in America, and is a first generation immigrant Muslim youth to parents originating from India. Usman is an attorney turned comedian, touring worldwide in the hit comedy show “Allah Made Me Funny.”
\end{itemize}
youth identifies with and understands. Her ideals run parallel to those of Ramadan’s: “The Qur’an is meant to evolve and be re-applied to each person. To judge how another practices Islam is wrong because God is the only judge.”\textsuperscript{58} Hasan, similar to Ramadan, advances \textit{ijtihad} and encourages her readers to form their own opinions from the sacred texts by explaining that the “interpretation and application [of the Quran] to modern times can be current” because the idea is that a “person of enough scholarship and training can read the Qur’an and re-interpret it based on the current situation they are facing.”\textsuperscript{59} However, this is not to be confused with “Islamic universality” or the idea that Islam may be adopted or reinterpreted to fit into any society or time.\textsuperscript{60}

It seems, then, that the characterization of Islam in the media and the West as a whole is becoming more diverse, be it at a slower pace. As Muslims growing up in the West seek to communicate their experiences, others learn that they are not alone in their notions of how their parents have raised them and what it means to be a Muslim in a non-Muslim country. Ramadan completes this circle of integration and acceptance of oneself and one’s faith by saying that this experience is commonplace and that being a practicing Muslim in the West is both possible and respectable.


\textsuperscript{59} Hasan, \textit{Why I Am a Muslim}, 30.

\textsuperscript{60} Tariq Ramadan, \textit{Western Muslims and the Future of Islam} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 32.

80
CONCLUSION

Western Muslim youths, then, must attempt to explore, empower, and liberate themselves. They struggle against the ethnic and social hierarchies that construct their dual lifestyles and seek to define them. The true nature of the youths’ quest and their desire for their interior mindset, which generally seeks rationality and an Islam without cultural adornments, must mesh with their exterior lives in a non-Muslim nation. Their experiences, juxtaposed with the cultural and social norms posited by the West provide a ripe environment for Islamic intellectuals such as Tariq Ramadan to suggest an alternative, organic, thus more authentic, way of practicing Islam in their Western world. Rather than allowing Muslims to submissively melt into the backdrop, Ramadan comprehends the importance of civic duty and of integrating into society. The West, then, is not an oppressive facet against which youths must struggle, but is an opportunistic and fertile ground for Muslims to practice their faith in. While Muslim youths generally seek to embrace an appropriate mix of culture and religion, rather than escaping the clutches of their ethnicity altogether, most find that Tariq Ramadan’s vision of Islam allows them to define their identity and create a voice for themselves. Hence, through Ramadan’s postulations, youths are able to work within the cultural and societal hierarchies, defining their identity and their religious convictions within proper societal jurisdiction.
From time immemorial, societies have suffered from a clash of cultural practices and religious edicts. The clash has almost always ended with the religion morphing into a watered down, more agreeable version of its original self, or the culture seeping into the religion. The latter can sometimes become rampant to the point where even the staunchest of practitioners fail to comprehend where the scope of religious decrees ends and the specter of cultural practices take over. Islam, much like other religions before it, has been overshadowed in many parts of the world by cultural customs that sometimes predate the advent of Islam in that region by Millennia.

Interestingly enough, Islam’s basic teachings are counterintuitive to many cultural practices that are considered ‘Islamic.’ Female genital mutilation and forced marriages are just two examples of cultural practices commonly ‘publicized’ as being ‘Islamic.’ What’s more, the very religious texts that can be used to dispel these abominable cultural practices are used to justify them. Religious texts are deeply contextual in nature and lend themselves to varying interpretations when read out of context or when used as lectern-fodder by self-professed experts. Many contemporary scholars, instead of disseminating fact (the prescribed belief system) from fiction (cultural practices), introduce their own biases to their analyses, leading to conclusions that are altogether misleading and disinformative. The non-malleable nature of Islamic principles makes it harder for latter-day reformers to change it to conform to their vision of a ‘friendly’ religion. If they were to dig through the cultural epidermis, they would realize that Islam
is a reasonably tolerant religion. As the Quran puts it: “La Kum Deen-u-kum, Wal Ya-
deen” or “Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion.”¹


Denoeux, Guilain. “Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949): Founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Banna was one of the century’s most original thinkers.” *Islam Times* (April


---. *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity.* Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2001.


