

# Promoting Critical Islam: Controversy, Civil Society, Revolution

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**Abstract:** Critical Islam is an intellectual orientation that prizes timeliness and broad-mindedness and a political sensibility that tends to honor majority rule, minority rights, and the good of pluralism. This essay considers how an important European Muslim scholar, Tariq Ramadan, promotes critical Islam in his call for a moratorium on stoning, his argument for the reformation of *fatwa* committees, and his analysis of the Arab Awakening. The essay argues that the art of controversy and the building of civil society—more so than political revolution—can cultivate a critical sensibility among Muslim scholars and publics.

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, scholars have coined the term *critical Islam* to describe a hermeneutical and political orientation among contemporary Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Though scholars differ on the details, they converge on a general notion of where critical Islam originated, what it opposes, how it interprets the Qur'an and Sunnah, and what its political assignment is today. Critical Islam has its roots in Muslim philosophers and jurists such as al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and al-Ghazali who believed that knowledge transcends religious, geographic, and political boundaries; was taken up by Muslim modernists such as Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Muhammad Iqbal who argued for a selective appropriation and contestation of European ideas and practices; and has been given new life by scholars and public intellectuals such as Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Khaled

The author thanks Anny Bakalian, Mucahit Bilici, Bret Nelson, the audience at a talk at the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC), and the editors and anonymous reviewers who have commented on this essay.

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Abou El Fadl (Moosa 2003). From its inception, critical Islam challenges, and has been challenged by, those who hold that a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah suffice for political and religious life, including Islamists who want the modern state to enforce divine law (Euben and Zaman 2009, 4). As a general rule, critical Muslim scholars advocate a "hermeneutical historicism" that interprets revelatory texts in light of historical context, whether that is seventh century Arabia or twenty-first century Europe (Fadel 2011, 133). Flowing from this exegetical approach, critical Muslim scholars believe that Muslims have a responsibility to endorse—or, if need be, generate—timely political ideas rather than endorse the model of the first Muslim community at Medina (Moosa 2003, 120). The political assignment today is *multiple critique* (Cooke 2001): negatively, to challenge local despots and foreign imperialists, and positively, to advocate ideas of whatever provenance that best advance Islamic ethics. For Muslims and non-Muslims around the world, critical Islam stimulates and contributes to a dialogue of civilizations.

Partisans of critical Islam, however, are currently embroiled in a war of position with at least two sets of opponents (see Kepel 2004). According to Khaled Abou El Fadl in *The Great Theft*, Wahhabis based in Saudi Arabia oppose the cultivation of a critical ethos. In the eighteenth century, Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab argued and fought for an Islam purified of foreign accretions, including mysticism, the veneration of saints, the use of reason, or Shi'ism. "Pursuant to a doctrine known as *al-wala' wa al-bara'* (literally, the doctrine of loyalty and disassociation), 'Abd al-Wahhab argued that it was imperative for Muslims not to befriend, ally themselves with, or imitate non-Muslims or heretical Muslims" (Abou El Fadl 2005, 49). Wahhabis conflate Bedouin culture with the teachings of Islam, and may have remained a local phenomenon if not for an alliance between the Wahhabis and the Al Saud family. Because of this union, Wahhabis control the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and have the funds to establish schools and institutions around the world. "Every single Islamic group that has achieved a degree of international infamy, such as the Taliban and al-Qaida, has been heavily influenced by Wahhabi thought" (Abou El Fadl 2005, 45). Abou El Fadl deplores this development: "The only way that Muslims can remain true to the moral message of their religion and at the same time discharge their covenant with God is through introspective self-criticism and reform" (Abou El Fadl 2005, 13). Today, however, Wahhabis promote a conception of Islam that does not value *self-criticism*.<sup>2</sup>

One does not have to be a Wahhabi, however, to wonder about the intentions of those who call for critical Islam. The anthropologist Saba Mahmood pursues this idea in her essay, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation.” According to Mahmood, the United States “has embarked upon an ambitious theological campaign aimed at shaping the sensibilities of ordinary Muslims whom the State Department deems to be too dangerously inclined toward fundamentalist interpretations of Islam” (Mahmood 2006, 323). The United States wants to protect its access to oil and prevent a repeat of the events of September 11, 2001. To achieve this end, the United States has instituted a Muslim World Outreach program to disseminate a kinder and gentler conception of Islam. “U.S. strategists have struck a common chord with self-identified secular liberal Muslim reformers who have been trying to refashion Islam along the lines of the Protestant Reformation” (Mahmood 2006, 329). The key maneuver for U.S. strategists and so-called Muslim reformers is to sell a scriptural hermeneutics that historicizes the Qur’an and the lessons of the Prophet Muhammad (Mahmood 2006, 334). Fortunately, this effort has come to little: “as repeated polls conducted in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey suggest, the United States’ popularity has never been at such a low. There is also every indication that Islamist opposition (whether reformist or militant) is thriving all over the Muslim world” (Mahmood 2006, 330). Mahmood’s dismissal of the authenticity of critical Islam has influenced many European and American cultural scholars and social scientists (see Jansen 2011).

This essay considers how Tariq Ramadan—arguably “the most influential Muslim intellectual in Europe” (March 2010b)—promotes the cause of critical Islam. The essay explicates Ramadan’s conception of critical Islam; shows how he employs the art of controversy via his call for a moratorium on stoning; follows his argument for the construction of civil society; and investigates why he expresses only cautious optimism for recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa. I highlight four of Ramadan’s theses: critical Muslim scholars ought to root their arguments primarily (though not exclusively) in Islamic sources; controversy, in the short-term, can promote intra- and interreligious dialogue; civil society, in the long-term, is necessary to sustain a critical ethos; and revolutions do not necessarily change old patterns of thinking. I conclude by arguing that critical Islam has a viable claim to authenticity and, keeping in mind the precedent of how the Islamic legal schools emerged, critical Islam may prevail over literalist ideologies.

## A RADICAL REFORM OF MINDS

In *What I Believe*, Tariq Ramadan states: “All cultures, whether Arab, Asian, or Western, require a critical and self-critical mind” (Ramadan 2010b, 43). All cultures ought to ask themselves whether they are living up to their highest principles and pose the same question to other cultures. More profoundly, all cultures need to reassess their principles, and not just their actions, in light of the distinct conditions of our time. In *Radical Reform*, Ramadan explores the Islamic intellectual tradition—particularly the science of *usul al-fiqh* on the “sources of the law”—in order to articulate a conception of critical Islam. For Ramadan, critical Islam emanates from the deepest springs of Islam: “it is a matter of recapturing the original essence and ‘form’ of the message, through renewed understanding, to remain faithful to it while lucidly facing the evolution of human beings and societies” (Ramadan 2009b, 13). And yet the distinguishing feature of critical Islam is a willingness to participate in give-and-take dialogue with other existential faiths: “determined self-assertion allied to confident opening up to all civilizations and religions” (Ramadan 2009b, 295). Why does Ramadan call for this project today?

The worldwide Muslim community, according to Ramadan, suffers from intellectual malaise. “The innovative, bold, creative spirit of early times [has] given way to timid approaches that only consider reform in terms of adapting to the world and no longer with the will and energy to change it” (Ramadan 2009b, 3). On the terrain of ideas, “it is imperative to struggle against the two phenomena of restrictive imitation (*taqlid*) of past scholars and contemporary literalist reduction (*qira’a harfiyyah*)” (Ramadan 2009b, 293). The problem, from Ramadan’s perspective, is that many contemporary Muslims—by focusing on the revelatory texts to the exclusion of the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities—have overlooked the Qur’anic message to learn about all aspects of the world. In *The Theology of Unity*, Muhammad ‘Abduh argues that the Qur’an enjoins “rational procedure and intellectual enquiry into the manifestations of the universe, and as far as may be, into its particulars, so as to come by certainty in respect of the things to which it guides. It forbids us to be slavishly credulous” (‘Abduh 2004, 39). In his call upon the Muslim community to awaken from its intellectual slumber, Ramadan renews ‘Abduh’s message.<sup>3</sup> But intellectual malaise is not restricted to the academy: it also affects the political and social life of Muslims. “When visiting Muslim-majority societies and communities the world over, one cannot but observe a state of deep, general crisis. Reflection struggles to

renew itself, visions for society are partial and fragmented, and the challenges presented by the West's economic and cultural domination seem insurmountable" (Ramadan 2009b, 260). For Ramadan, as for 'Abduh, critical thinking empowers, rather than weakens, the *umma*, and elevates Muslims on the world stage.

In *Radical Reform*, Ramadan elaborates the ethos, the methodology, and the practices that sustain critical Islam. Before parsing the details, it is worth noting Ramadan's guiding intuition. Ramadan starts with the Book of Revelation, the Qur'an and Sunnah, to determine how Muslims should carry themselves, study the texts and the world, and practice jurisprudence. Then, Ramadan reads the Book of the Universe, "the social and human context (*al-waqi*)," to learn about how other people, Muslims and non-Muslims, do things (Ramadan 2009b, 102). The final step is to achieve some sort of harmony between the two, to achieve an Islamic version of what John Rawls calls reflective equilibrium (Ramadan 2009b, 139; cf. Fadel 2011, 9–10). The goal is not to make Muslims similar to non-Muslims or the reverse; rather, the goal is to have Muslims learn from and contribute to humanity's collective accomplishments. The main difference between Ramadan's efforts and those of other contemporary Muslim reformers may be the range of Ramadan's critical inquiry. A reformer's "interpretive activities will be bounded by certain 'fixed points' of justice and morality that any theory of Islamic commitments must include" (Fadel 2011, 10). Ramadan's conception of critical Islam articulates a notion of *wide* reflective equilibrium that subjects everything, or nearly everything, to the critical gaze.<sup>4</sup>

Ramadan calls the ethos of critical Islam *transformation reform*. Adaptation reform is a stance whereby Muslims recycle a handful of concepts from jurisprudence—such as *maslahah* (public interest), *hajah* (need), or *darurah* (imperative necessity)—to adjust to the modern world (Ramadan 2009b, 31). Transformation reform, in contrast, "equips itself with the spiritual, intellectual, and scientific means to act on the real, to master all fields of knowledge, and to anticipate the complexity of social, political, philosophical, and ethical challenges" (Ramadan 2009b, 3). For Ramadan, critical Islam is not so much a doctrine as an ethos, a way of being in the world that is both curious and creative in the face of new circumstances.

Critical Muslim scholars may follow many paths to renew Islamic commitments in the present historical moment. In *Radical Reform*, Ramadan's methodology is *usul al-fiqh*, a rethinking of the fundamental

principles of Islamic law. *Usul al-fiqh* “expounds principles and methodology by means of which the rules of law and jurisprudence are inferred and extracted from their sources. It involves the study and formulation of rules of interpretation, obligation, prohibition, and global principles” (Ramadan 2009b, 360). Ramadan’s major claim to novelty is that “the Universe, the social and human context, has never been considered as a *self-standing* source of law” (Ramadan 2009b, 82); his reconceptualized account of *usul al-fiqh* does just that. Andrew F. March contends that Islamic jurisprudence serves as a “vanishing mediator” in Ramadan’s work, that Ramadan uses juristic ideas to call for the dissolution of *fiqh* into a more fluid Islamic ethics (March 2011a). That observation should be qualified in at least two ways. Even in earlier work such as *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Ramadan advocated “constant dialectical movement between the essential principles determined by Revelation and actual circumstances” (Ramadan 2004, 37). And the claims of novelty may occlude Ramadan’s connection to traditional juristic methods such as *takhsis al-‘amm*, “specification of the general term” (Fadel 2011). Throughout his work, Ramadan experiments with multiple methodologies to generate ideas and arguments for critical Islam.

One way to incubate critical Islam, according to Ramadan, is to form legal ruling (*fatwa*) committees composed of text scholars (*ulama al-nusus*) and context scholars (*ulama al-waqi*). “It is urgent to devise *equal-representation, egalitarian, and specialized* research and *fatwa* committees that are able to ally three essential requirements: global understanding of the two Books’ higher goals, awareness of the higher objectives and goals in their field of study... and first-hand specialized knowledge in the said subject” (Ramadan 2009b, 132). Ramadan is not asking Islamic scholars (*ulama*) or jurists (*fuqaha*) to become experts in other fields of inquiry; rather, he is saying that critical Islam requires conversations among multiple experts and publics. We will return to the importance of this argument below.

Is critical Islam authentically Islamic? In *Islamic Liberation Theology*, Hamid Dabashi accuses Ramadan of “mental entrapment inside an Orientalist disposition which makes him effectively speak to an imaginary white European interlocutor pointing an accusatory finger at him and his faith, against which he assumes an apologetic and explanatory posture” (Dabashi 2008, 135). Ramadan attempts to refute the charge of Orientalism in *Radical Reform*. Ramadan argues that he continues the tradition of *tajdid*, “a renewal of the reading, understanding, and,

consequently, implementations of texts in light of the various historical-cultural contexts in which Muslim communities or societies exist” (Ramadan 2009b, 13). In this book, as in virtually all of his work, Ramadan points to precedents in the history of Islam. Ramadan, for instance, recounts a *hadith* of the Prophet, who once suggested that the inhabitants of Medina stop grafting their palm trees. Once the date crop decreased, the Prophet explained, “I am but a human being. So, when I tell you to do something that pertains to your religion, accept it; but when I tell you something from my own personal opinion, remember that I am a human being. You are better informed of your worldly affairs.” According to Ramadan, “Many other similar situations have been reported, and they shed light on the Prophet’s particular status: despite being the depository of the divine norm and, as such, the reference in religious affairs, he remained a fallible human being in all other fields” (Ramadan 2009b, 331). For Ramadan, the Islamic tradition remains vibrant on the condition that each generation of Muslims perform *ijtihad*, Islamic critical thinking in new situations.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, according to Ramadan, engaging in a conversation with other Muslims and peoples of other faiths is a sign of health and confidence, not sickness and fear. Muslims who only counsel antagonistic relations with the West prevent the Muslim world from benefiting from constructive dialogue with others. Critical Islam “requires breadth of vision about values and an open prospect as to outcomes, confidence, and a permanent effort to subject ideals to the instrument of the critique of reality. This is the meaning of the Prophet’s appeal: ‘O God, we ask you [to grant us] useful knowledge’” (Ramadan 2009b, 309)! At the same time, critical Islam may also criticize Euro-American political ideals, cultural practices, economic policies, and so forth. Ramadan, for instance, holds that “Islamic teachings are intrinsically opposed to the basic premises and the logic of the neoliberal capitalist system” (Ramadan 2004, 177). Supporters of critical Islam often endorse the main planks of *liberal Islam*, including opposition to theocracy and support for democracy, the rights of women, the rights of non-Muslims, freedom of thought, and the ideal of progress (Kurzman 1998). But critical Islam is a process, not a destination, and it leaves open the possibility that new concepts and principles will better serve Islamic ends.

In short, Ramadan calls for “a radical reform of minds” among Muslim scholars and publics (Ramadan 2009b, 310). But how is this message going to reach a non-Western and non-academic audience?



## THE ART OF CONTROVERSY

In *Islam and Democracy*, Fatima Mernissi explains why *jadal* (“the art of controversy”) is the best *jihad*. The basis of *jadal* is the Qur’anic verse (16:125): “Reason with them [*jadilhum*] in the most courteous manner.” Nearly a thousand years ago, *jadal* inspired scholars such as Al Ghazali, Ibn al-Qasar, and Ibn-al-Sa’ati to compose masterpieces in the genres of *nazar* (contemplation) and *hilafiyat* (dissenting opinions). Recently, the Al-Jazeera television network employs the art of controversy in popular programs such as *Ar-Ra’y al Akhar* (The Other Opinion) and *Al-Itijah al Mu’akiss* (The Opposite Direction).<sup>6</sup> The word *jadal* shares the same root as *majdoul* (a silk braid), and like it proceeds by weaving together arguments so that other people come to share one’s own point of view. “When *jadal* is used, force is unnecessary.” *Jadal* is a technique that Muslim intellectuals and publics may use to oppose extremism and despotism (Mernissi 2002, xvi-xix). I now wish to argue that Ramadan’s most notorious publication—“An International Call for a Moratorium on Corporal Punishment, Stoning and the Death Penalty in the Islamic World,” posted on his website in 2005—is an exercise in *jadal* meant to promote critical Islam beyond the Western academy.

Here is the backstory to the piece. In 2003, Ramadan appeared on the television program “100 Minutes to Convince” with then French minister of the interior, Nicolas Sarkozy. Sarkozy asked Ramadan if he agreed with his brother, Hani, that adulterous women should be stoned: “that’s monstrous—to stone a woman because she is an adulterer! It’s necessary to condemn it!” Ramadan replied, “You should have a pedagogical posture that makes people discuss things. You can decide all by yourself to be a progressive in the communities. That’s too easy. Today my position is, that is to say, ‘We should stop’” (cited in Berman 2010a, 215). For Ramadan’s liberal critics such as Paul Berman, this moment confirmed their worst suspicions: “The seventeenth century had suddenly appeared, poking out from beneath the modern rhetoric of feminism and rights. A moment of barbarism” (Berman 2010a, 215; see also Fourest 2008, 82–86). There are at least two problems with this version of the story, pervasive in journalism about Ramadan. In *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, published two years before the Sarkozy incident, Ramadan condemned the literal application of rules in Muslim-majority societies: “Good intention, whether real or presumed, is thus rendered into a daily nightmare, this especially so when making a society more Islamic means prohibiting further, censoring permanently, reprimanding,



imprisoning and punishing without respite” (Ramadan 2001, 46). Furthermore, readers of the Call ought to ponder Ramadan’s claim that “an endogenous dynamic is imperative” to bring about lasting social and political change (Ramadan 2005). Here is how the Call is designed to generate conversation about hermeneutics and politics among Muslim publics.

Like *Radical Reform*, though in a more accessible form, the Call begins by identifying the repercussions of intellectual malaise in the Muslim world. The “somber reality” is that “women and men are punished, beaten, stoned and executed in the name of *hudud*.”<sup>7</sup> The penalties are “applied almost exclusively to women and the poor”; and “hundreds of prisoners have no access to anything that could even remotely be called defense counsel.” By “resigning ourselves to having a superficial relationship to the scriptural sources, we betray the message of justice of Islam.” Politicians seek to ride the rising tide of Islamic religiosity by enforcing the *hudud* penalties, with the consequence that the “the political system of the Arab world is becoming more and more entrenched, references to Islam frequently instrumentalized, and public opinion is often muzzled or blindly passionate.” Ramadan directs his critical fire primarily at the scholars (*ulama*) who have abdicated their responsibility to teach Muslims to think critically about the message of Islam. “The *ulama*, who should be the guarantors of a deep reading of the texts, the guardians of fidelity to the objectives of justice and equality and of the critical analysis of conditions and social contexts, find themselves having to accept either a formalistic application (an immediate non-contextualized application), or binary reasoning (less West is more Islam).” *Ulama* enflame the violent passions rather than teach Muslims about how best to practice their religion (*din*) in the contemporary world. Ironically, Western Muslims, with a certain distance from the historic homelands of Islam, have the responsibility and the means to remedy this state of affairs: “Muslim women and men who live in spaces of political freedom, who have access to education and knowledge, shoulder...a major responsibility to attempt to reform the situation, open a relevant debate, condemn and put an end to injustice perpetrated in their name” (Ramadan 2005).

The Call attempts to popularize a critique of what Ramadan calls *salafi* literalism (Ramadan 2004, 25–26). Ramadan acknowledges that the Qur’an and the Sunnah contain passages that, on a plain reading, require corporal punishment and the stoning of adulterous men and women. Yet Muslim scholars and jurists from the very beginning of

Islam have exercised judgment about how to interpret and apply such passages. The caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, for instance established a moratorium on theft during a famine when a literal interpretation of divine law would have contravened Islamic ethics. “A literal and non-contextualized application of *hudud*, with no regard for strict and numerous stipulated conditions, and one which would present itself as being faithful to the teachings of Islam, is in fact a betrayal” (Ramadan 2005). In *Radical Reform*, Ramadan puts forward a complex theory of *usul al-fiqh*, a reformed Islamic jurisprudence for the present historical moment. And yet the Call opts to spur thought rather than lay down the law. In the spirit of a Socratic dialogue—or the Prophet’s conversation with the judge Muadh ibn Jabal (Ramadan 2007, 199)—Ramadan asks: “What are the texts (and what is their respective degrees of recognized authenticity), that make reference to corporal punishment?” “Where are the margins of possible interpretations and on which points are there clear divergences (*al ikhtilaf*) in the history of the Islamic law and in the contemporary era?” “What are the conditions (*shurut*) for each of the penalties by the sources themselves, the consensus of the scholars (*al ijma*) or by individual scholars through Islamic law history and jurisprudence (*fiqh*)?” “In which context today is it possible to apply *hudud*? What would be the required conditions in terms of political systems and the application of the general legislation: freedom of expression, equality before the law, public education, eradication of poverty and social exclusion?” And so forth. The Call is for a moratorium on the *hudud* but it is also a call for a debate within the worldwide Muslim community about how to interpret texts.

In fact, the Call makes multiple demands about civil society, the role of *ulama*, institutions, and democracy. Ramadan envisions “the opening of a vast intra-community debate (critical, reasonable and reasoned) between the *ulama*, the intellectuals, the leaders and the general population.” The responsibility of the *ulama* is to promote and elevate the quality of this intra-community debate, not to control or dominate it. Where institutions for debate do not exist—such as independent media or world-class universities—the Muslim community must build them. Furthermore, Muslims must not be satisfied with only debating the *hudud*: they must embrace the role of debating all of the important aspects of their lives. For this reason, “it is urgent to set in motion a democratization movement that moves populations from the obsession of what the law is sanctioning to the claim of what it should protect: their conscience, their integrity, their liberty and their rights” (Ramadan 2005).

The controversy about the *hudud* is the bait to make readers bite the hook of critical Islam.

Did it work? In 2005, IslamOnline.net, a website founded by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, hosted a debate whereby multiple prominent English-speaking Muslim scholars responded to Ramadan's Call.<sup>8</sup> Consider the representative response of Taha Jabir al-Alwani, Chairman of the Fiqh Council of North America and President of the International Institute of Islamic Thought. "Fabricating lies against the Muslim nation is unacceptable, be it done by an individual or a group. Moreover, such a fabricator or allegor against the Muslim nation is deemed wrong, regardless of the validity of his point of view. Dr. Tariq should have referred such an issue to specialized men of religion and institutions, namely the Muslim jurists and scholars and Islamic fiqh academies, instead of changing the issue into a media topic that preoccupies Muslims" (al-Alwani 2005). Al-Alwani's stance is consistent with the argument he makes in his book, *The Ethics of Disagreement in Islam*. Muslim scholars should exercise good manners (*adab*) when disagreeing with each other and not make mountains out of molehills: "If differences of opinion operate in a healthy framework they could enrich the Muslim mind and stimulate intellectual development. They could help to expand perspectives and make us look at problems and issues in their wider and deeper ramifications, and with greater precision and thoroughness" (al-Alwani 2007, 4). And yet the working assumption should be that Muslim scholars strive for consensus: "from early post-Qur'anic history, leading Muslim scholars have warned against disagreement in all its forms and emphasized that it is essential to avoid it. The companion of the Prophet, Ibn Mas'ud—may God be pleased with him—said: 'Discord (*khilaf*) is evil'" (al-Alwani 2007, 17). On multiple occasions since the publication of the Call, Ramadan has expressed frustration that his critics have condemned him for causing *fitna* (religious dissension) rather than weighed his arguments (Ramadan 2009a, 274–77; Ramadan 2009b).

Given that his liberal critics (such as Paul Berman) and his Muslim critics (such as Taha Jabir al-Alwani) both disparage Ramadan's Call, should we judge it a failure? In a review of *Radical Reform*, Andrew F. March notes that Ramadan's ethical vision as a whole is "elusive and risk-averse" and "designed to alienate as few potential constituencies as possible both within the Muslim and non-Muslim populations" (March 2010a, 255). So why does Ramadan spend so much theological and political capital articulating a position on the *hudud* that irritates almost all of his readers? The reason, as Mernissi explained in her account of *jadal*,

may be that entering into a debate teaches one the art of considering and responding to alternate viewpoints. Of course, Ramadan's opponents can polemicize against him, refusing to open their minds to divergent perspectives. Still, the challenge may be not so much to convince one's present opponents as younger generations who are figuring out how to precede in a multicultural, interconnected world: "civilizations are always in motion" (Ramadan 2010a, 187). In sum, *jadal* may be a tool in the reformer's kit, but few would argue that it is sufficient to bring out about lasting change.<sup>9</sup>

## BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY

Just as a plant needs water, sunshine, and soil to flourish, a critical ethos needs institutional support to thrive for a sustained period of time. In *Radical Reform*, we saw above, Ramadan calls for the reformation of *fatwa* councils to combine the wisdom of text scholars and context scholars, jurists and scientists. What will actually transpire on these *fatwa* committees? Paul Berman is cynical: "A reading of *Radical Reform* makes it obvious that Ramadan would staff his committees with the various 'salafi reformists' [e.g. Yusuf al-Qaradawi] whom he praises in the book—the authors of the 'seminal' works of salafi reformist analysis, who would never in a million years come out against stoning" (Berman 2010b). In this section, I contend that Ramadan's call for new *fatwa* councils is a kind of Trojan horse—but one for critical Islam rather than textual literalism.

To appreciate Ramadan's strategy, follow the steps that Ramadan lays out to reform the *fatwa* councils. The first step is to convene a wide range of Muslim scholars responsible for making policy recommendations. These will be "*equal-representation, egalitarian, and specialized* research and *fatwa* committees that are able to ally three essential requirements: global understanding of the two Books' higher goals, awareness of the higher objectives and goals in their field of study (the texts or writings in a particular scientific field), and first-hand specialized knowledge in the said subject (*fuqaha* specializing in texts related to medicine, economics, and other fields—according to the committee in question—being naturally associated with scientists dealing with the same fields)" (Ramadan 2009b 132). Ramadan writes *Radical Reform*, in part, to inspire Muslims to master and contribute to multiple fields of scientific inquiry, just as Muhammad 'Abduh did by calling for a reform of the curriculum of the Azhar in the early twentieth century (see Livingston 1995).

The next step of forming *fatwa* committees is to foment dialogues with non-Muslim scholars. “Although *fuqaha* should by definition be Muslim scholars, nothing opposes recruiting non-Muslim context scholars in those committees, provided their skills are well known and they contribute to enriching the reflection both in the scientific field of question and in the applied ethics that must be produced” (Ramadan 2009b, 132). *Fatwa* committees are committed to broad-minded inquiry involving Muslim and non-Muslim scholars; they are, in other words, seedbeds for critical Islam.

The third step is to disseminate findings and, more importantly, a critical disposition among mass publics. Ramadan enjoins “a general awakening and a critical evaluation of all consciences and all skills, those of ordinary Muslims as well as of intellectuals, scientists, and *ulama*” (Ramadan 2009b, 6).

The preliminary moves will come to naught if newly empowered critical scholars and publics lack institutional homes. It thereby follows that *fatwa* committees are an early manifestation of a movement that will build many such homes. “A vast movement of intellectual, social, and political openness must be initiated, a *democratization* movement in the sense of shared speech, legitimacy, and powers. This opening up can only be meaningful if equipped with some means of respecting the conditions for its success, by opening places for debate, consultation, and critical assessment. Such consistency can only be possible if it promotes an education whose substance, form, and scope answer the ends of openness itself” (Ramadan 2009b, 278). In other words, interdisciplinary, interreligious *fatwa* committees are the prelude to the formation of research institutes and universities in Muslim-majority countries (cf. Meddeb 2013).

But a critical disposition nurtured by *fatwa* committees will flow out of the academy. The final step of the process that Ramadan describes in *Radical Reform* is the widespread cultivation of critical Islam. Scholars can accelerate this process by teaching the masses their history and an openness to new ideas: “This generalized elementary civic education is the *sine qua non* condition for the process of political openness, democratization, and eventually the formation of a civil society that is intellectually well equipped and politically active” (Ramadan 2009b, 281). Muslim political actors, in turn, can aid critical Islam by protecting “critical speech, participating in elections...and establishing areas and meeting places where power can be challenged” (Ramadan 2009b, 281). The skills taught in *fatwa* committees, in sum, will empower Muslims to generate the desire and ability to govern themselves through civil societies and democratic states.<sup>10</sup>

One of the great questions confronting advocates of critical Islam is how to “reconcile the call for participatory democracy with the reconstruction of *shari‘a*” (Salvatore 2007, 140). Given the complexity of the assignment, critical Muslim scholars may pursue multiple ways to interpret the revelatory texts, read the contemporary condition, and recommend ways to cultivate the critical impulses within Islam. In *Radical Reform*, Ramadan performs *tajdid* to argue that Muslim scholars and publics should reform *fatwa* committees in order to nurture a critical disposition among Muslim intellectuals and publics and amplify the demand for civil societies and democracies.

## DO REVOLUTIONS HELP?

In December 2010, a young Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire and a subsequent protest movement toppled the Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. In January 2011, protestors in Egypt succeeded in deposing President Hosni Mubarak. In various ways and with different results throughout the rest of the year, mass movements changed political regimes and the political climate throughout the Middle East and North Africa. During this time, Tariq Ramadan wrote opinion pieces that he synthesized into his book, *Islam and the Arab Awakening*. On its face, the Arab Awakening seemed to confirm Ramadan’s wildest hopes: young people were mobilizing, forming coalitions, taking advantage of social technology, and imposing their will upon history, practicing, in other words, *transformation reform*. “The people of the Middle East have proven that dictators can be overthrown without weapons, by sheer force of numbers, by a nonviolent, positive outlook” (Ramadan 2012, 2–3). And yet a notable feature of Ramadan’s book is its *cautious* optimism, its warning that the revolts could replace regimes with ones that are just as bad if not worse. It is worth following Ramadan’s logic to see why political revolutions do not necessarily change how people think.

There are at least four aspects of the Arab Awakening that concern Ramadan. First, the demands of the protestors were almost exclusively reactive. “The uprisings, and those who propelled them forward, had a clear idea of what they no longer wanted, but they struggled to give expression to their social and political aspirations, beyond the slogans that called for an end to corruption, cronyism, and the establishment of the rule of law and democracy” (Ramadan 2012, 60; see also Joffé 2011, 508).

Second, the United States and European countries—the Global North—may have been satisfied with the political outcomes as long as they had access to oil. “Behind the celebration of the values of freedom, dignity, and the struggle against dictatorship is concealed a battle for economic domination, control of oil production and reserves, and coldly cynical geopolitical calculation” (Ramadan 2012, 28). Though Ramadan unfortunately gestures at conspiracies he cannot prove, his valid point is that Muslim majority-societies do not necessarily strengthen themselves by changing leaders. Political revolts, at best, can be one step in a larger process.

Third, elites in Muslim-majority countries remain trapped in sterile debates between Islamism and secularism. “Muslim countries need to set aside the pointless, counterproductive, and empty quarrel over the conflict between secularization and Islam and/or Islamism”; “Now, in the aftermath of the Arab awakening, the time has come for real debate to begin instead of the empty controversies that pit secularists and Islamists against one another on grounds that are as artificial as they are ideologically and politically motivated” (Ramadan 2012, 81, 84). The problem, once again, is that Muslim elites have not yet enacted the hard work of radical reform necessary to determine how Muslims may best synthesize the objectives of the law (*maqasid al-sharia*) with salutary political concepts that may have originated in other places or traditions. Political revolutions without intellectual ones may just be sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Finally, the Arab Awakening has not yet educated the masses in the art of critical thinking or self-governance. In the immediate aftermath of the revolutions, “The populations concerned had not been taught democratic practices; civil society had not achieved the necessary degree of autonomy, had not acquired the tools to carry out critical and contradictory debate” (Ramadan 2012, 61). Ramadan is not making the Orientalist argument that Muslims cannot exercise intellectual or political autonomy; rather, he speaks as a connected critic who thinks that Muslims can do better on the intellectual and political planes.

Ramadan makes at least two recommendations in *Islam and the Arab Awakening* about how critical Islam, rather than *salafi* literalism, can take root in the Middle East and North Africa. The first is that Muslims need to build a civil society that will encourage people to debate respectfully across difference and generate new ideas to pressing problems. “Getting rid of a dictator is not enough: a broad-based social and political movement must come to the fore. The active participation of the citizens,



of civil society as a whole, of nongovernmental organizations, of intellectuals, and of the media is the precondition for ensuring that the dynamic of democratization preserves its independence” (Ramadan 2012, 115–16). Ramadan only hints at what he thinks an Islamic civil society (*mujtama’ madani*) looks like: it encompasses democratic institutions, better public schools, education for women, free media, and universities. Yet Ramadan’s inability to specify an Islamic civil society may be because no one can foresee the future with much accuracy. Ramadan is not so much providing a blueprint as encouraging fellow Muslims to experiment in building homes for critical Islam.

Lastly, Ramadan reiterates in *Islam and the Arab Awakening*, clearly written for a popular audience, the message that he has honed in his more academic books: Muslims need to think more deeply (into their sources), widely (by considering non- or differently-Muslim arguments), and creatively (by exercising *ijtihad* when the sources are silent). “As Arab societies awaken, as peoples achieve political liberation, to invoke Islam means to liberate minds through the acquisition of knowledge, autonomous rationality, critical thinking, and freedom of thought” (Ramadan 2012, 83). The “Arab awakening must do more than overthrow dictators. It must break the bonds with which decades of abdication have shackled the order of science, knowledge, esthetics, art, and beauty in general” (Ramadan 2012, 130). Ramadan’s more popular work is replete with such exhortations. For Ramadan, Muslim-majority societies should not become complacent and assume that new leaders mean better instantiations of Islam in the contemporary world.

## CONCLUSION

Critical Islam is an intellectual orientation that prizes timeliness and broad-mindedness and a political sensibility that tends to honor majority rule, minority rights, and the good of pluralism. Though scholars debate the origins, planks, and frontiers of critical Islam, there is a sense that critical Islam may provide a response to movements that combine an avowed literal reading of the revelatory texts with the belief that the modern state should enforce correct religious practice—whether that is called *salafi* literalism (Ramadan 2004), puritanism (Abou El Fadl 2005), or Islamism (Euben and Zaman 2009). To be clear: critical Muslim scholars disagree amongst themselves about means and ends, just as Islamists do. Movements are not monolithic, nor do most interesting thinkers fall into

simple camps.<sup>11</sup> Still, there are trends within bodies of thought, and critical Islam represents an orientation that expresses a willingness to engage in an open-ended dialogue with other peoples in a way that literalist ideologies do not. For non-Muslims interested in, say, translating human rights norms into an Islamic universe of reference (e.g. Merry 2006), critical Muslim scholars seem like natural conversation partners. The goal of critical Islam is to actualize Islamic ethics in the contemporary world, not necessarily to make Muslims similar to non-Muslims, but this attitude is compatible with thinking that “the experience of the West can...enlighten and enrich internal debate in Muslim majority countries” (Ramadan 2012, 83). One of the great questions of our time, for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, is whether critical Islam can enter into productive conversations with critical thinkers from multiple existential faiths.

How do critical Muslim scholars respond to the accusation that they serve the ends of U.S. strategists concerned about national security and oil? Ramadan grounds his arguments in the Qur’an, Sunnah, Islamic legal tradition, and other Islamic intellectual sources. Ironically, Mahmood’s argument that Islam does not possess resources for a critical attitude—that it is merely a Protestant imposition—reflects her ignorance of Islamic theology (see March 2011b, 808). For Ramadan, Islamic *tajdid* (renewal) demands that Muslims mine their sources to regain their confidence that Islam can positively shape the contemporary world. In opposition to intellectual and political orientations that confuse ignorance with purity, Ramadan maintains that Muslims can and ought to learn from, and contribute to, other civilizations. Furthermore, Ramadan directs the arrows of critique in multiple directions. Sometimes, as in the Call, Ramadan castigates Muslim-majority societies for simplifying textual and contextual issues about the *hudud* in order to appear more Islamic in the face of Western power. Other times, as in his critique of Western intervention in the Arab Awakening, Ramadan accuses the United States and Europe of failing to honor the ideal of political self-determination. Intellectually and politically, Ramadan marshals arguments to refute his Muslim and liberal opponents who deny the legitimacy of critical Islam.

Can critical Islam win the battle for Muslim minds against scholars who argue for literalist readings of the sources, including Islamists who want the modern state to enforce divine law? In his work, Ramadan indicates how critical Islam can compete with self-fashioned literalists on the terrain of ideas. In the short-term, critical Muslim scholars can employ *jadāl*, the art of controversy, to spur Muslim intellectuals and publics to debate how to interpret the revelatory texts as well as how to practice

Muslim ethics in the contemporary world. Like any art, *jadal* can be well or poorly done: sometimes, provocative acts may inspire belligerence rather than thinking. There is also the fact that in an age in which the news cycle accelerates ever-faster, controversies may quickly be forgotten. That is why, in the long-term, Muslim majority countries need to build an Islamic civil society (*mujtama' madani*) that houses spaces for open-ended discussion. These spaces may resemble European or North American universities, newspapers, or coffee houses, but they may also express different cultural and religious concerns: “It is to be hoped that in the name of the shared values to which people aspire—freedom, justice, equality, autonomy, and pluralism—they will find, within their own references, the modalities that govern the production and application of these values” (Ramadan 2012, 21). For Ramadan, critical Islam is a project and, as such, it is in motion and liable to head in different directions. But critical Muslim scholars need not despair if, at the present moment, literalist ideologies have a numerical and financial advantage. The founders of the Islamic legal schools (*madhahib*) did not anticipate that their texts would become so influential: “Shafi‘i did not know that he was Shafi‘i” (An-Na‘im 2012). Rather than bemoan the present balance of forces, critical Muslim scholars and their allies can promote broad-minded ways of thinking among Muslim intellectuals and publics.

## NOTES

1. For definitions of the term critical Islam, see Mandaville (2004, 2002), Moosa (2003), and Mincheva (2012). On the pros and cons of terms such as liberal Islam, modernist Islam, critical Islam, and progressive Islam, see Safi (2003) and Duderija (2010). I focus on the term *critical Islam* for at least two reasons. First, critique implies a willingness to weigh diverse perspectives and thus does not predetermine what substantive positions a Muslim intellectual will hold on a certain issue. Second, people in many religious and philosophical traditions can and ought to express a critical sensibility; in other words, a dialogue of civilizations will involve critical practitioners of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Spinozism, Marxism, Confucianism, and other existential faiths. As a leading exponent of critical Islam explains, “A diverse and cosmopolitan world, in the best sense of the terms, requires the production of knowledge that will sustain such complexity” (Moosa 2006, 107).

2. Samira Haj (2009, 36–37) argues that ‘Abd al-Wahhab exhibited a critical sensibility when he condemned popular practices, such as the veneration of saints, as well as the doctrine of *taqlid*, blind acceptance of religious authority. The ideal of critique, however, involves taking and not just giving criticism. According to ‘Abd al-Wahhab, Islam was “a self-sufficient and closed system of belief that had no reason to engage or interact with any other, except from a position of dominance” (Abou El Fadl 2005, 50).

3. On how ‘Abduh wrote for Muslim elites who might lead a revived *umma*, see Hourani (1983, 139). This precedent indicates who Ramadan’s primary audience may be in *Radical Reform*.

4. Ramadan consistently states that Muslims do not need to criticize basic facets of Islamic rituals (*ibadat*) or creed (*aqidah*).

5. For an account of how Ramadan interprets the life of the Prophet, the Islamic legal tradition, and the Nahda, see Tampo (2011). On how Ramadan's call for a Copernican revolution in Islamic political thought brings him into contact with the Kantian tradition, see Tampo (2012).

6. On how al-Jazeera has helped generate a Muslim public sphere, see Lynch (2006).

7. *Hudud*—Arabic for “limits”—is the juridical term for punishments detailed in the Qur'an for theft (*sariqa*), unlawful sexual intercourse (*zina*), false accusation of unlawful intercourse (*qadhif*), drinking alcohol (*shurb khamr*), banditry (*qat' al-tariq*), and, according to several schools of law, apostasy (*ridda*). On the textual sources of the *hudud* as well as the history of their interpretation, see Peters (2005, 53–68).

8. On the history of IslamOnline.net, see Graf (2007). The Muslim scholars who criticized Ramadan's Call included Taha Jabir al-Alwani, Wessam Fuaad, Sheikh Muhammad ibn Al-Mukhtar al-Shinqiti, Ahmad Ar-Rawi, Muzammil Siddiqi, and Salah Sultan. Perhaps because of a leadership change at the website, the critiques of Ramadan's Call are no longer posted. The documents are on file with the author.

9. Many of the points about the fleetingness of *jadal* could also be made about admirable cultural exchange programs such as Hands for Peace, a program that brings together Palestinian, Israeli, and American students. Controversies and exchanges are seeds that can wither unless they land in fertile soil: cultures that appreciate critique.

10. Civil society is a space for “public discussions about the exercise of political power which are both critical in intent and institutionally guaranteed” (Habermas 1974, 50). On how spaces such as the Yemeni *qat* chew perform similar functions to the eighteenth-century European bourgeois public sphere, see Wedeen (2008).

11. On the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of Islamist feminism, see Halverson and Way (2011).

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