

**On Tariq Ramadan
Morning Prayers
Appleton Chapel
Harvard University
Thursday, September 28, 2006**

I have a Google Alert on my computer that sends me an email almost daily with news of Tariq Ramadan. It is my way of keeping track of a Muslim theologian and ethicist whose works I much admire. He is Swiss born and teaches at Oxford now, and when he writes a piece responding to the furor over Pope Benedict's remarks or to the Danish Cartoon controversy, I want to read it. Thus, the Google Alert.

I first heard Tariq Ramadan in the summer of 2004 in Barcelona when Dorothy and I attended the Parliament of the World's Religions. He spoke of the importance of restoring a culture of dialogue in the countries of Europe where religious difference has created division and suspicion. Like many Muslims, including Ali Asani who spoke from this lectern earlier this week, he cited the Qur'anic verse, "O people, I have divided you into nations and tribes so that you might know one another."

Ramadan comments, "Knowing the other is a process that is unavoidable if fear of difference is to be overcome and mutual respect is to be attained. So human beings live a test that they can –and must—master by making the effort to know and recognize those who are not of their tribe, their country, their race, or their religion. Dialogue, particularly interreligious dialogue, is indispensable."

I believe this deeply. I read and re-read his book *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, when it came out three years ago. I found in Ramadan and in his writings an ally in the work I consider, in a sense, my own life's work –exploring the theological foundations for a religious view of the other --he a Muslim, I a Christian.

"The issue is to find out how the Islamic universal accepts and respects pluralism and the belief of the Other: it is one thing to relativize what I believe and another to respect fully the convictions of the Other," He turns to his own theological starting point in the Muslim doctrine of *tawhid*, the oneness of God. "It is the principle on which the whole of Islamic teaching rests and it is the axis and point of reference on which Muslims rely in dialogue. The intimate awareness of *tawhid* forms the perception of the believer, who understands that plurality has been chosen by the One, that He is the God of all beings, and that He requires that each be respected. . . It is out of this conviction that Muslims engage in dialogue. . . .¹

Ramadan is not only a theologian, but also a citizen philosopher, encouraging young Muslims not to see themselves as outsiders or victims in western societies,

¹ Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, p. 203.

like France and England, but participants, citizens, at home. This summer he wrote an article called "Manifesto for a New We." It's the kind of language I myself use when I ask students to pay attention to who they mean when they say "we." Ramadan wrote, "Our societies are awaiting the emergence of a new "We". A "We" that would bring together men and women, citizens of all religions –and those without religion—who would undertake together to resolve the contradictions of their society: the right to work, to housing, to respect, against racism and all forms of discrimination, all offenses against human dignity." Such a "We" would henceforth represent this coming together of citizens confident in their values, defenders of pluralism in their common society and respectful of the identities of others."

In August 2004, my Google Alert brought me astonishing news of Ramadan. On the eve of his departure from Europe to America to take up a new professorship of peace studies at Notre Dame, his visa had been revoked by the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security. They said he had "endorsed" or "espoused" terrorism. Those of us who knew his work in the American academic community were astonished. His work and life give no evidence whatsoever of this charge. Quite the opposite. But no evidence was given.

After months of inquiry and patient waiting, after months of stony silence on the part of the U.S. government, Ramadan finally had no alternative but to resign his professorship at Notre Dame. His furniture and household belongings were sent back from South Bend to Geneva. Oxford University offered him a professorship in Islamic studies. Ramadan went on to become an adviser to the British government and an invaluable asset in speaking to the concerns of young and sometimes disaffected Muslims in Britain. In September 2005, he applied yet again for a visa to the U.S., hoping to clear his name of baseless accusations.

By January 2006, he had heard nothing. Three American organizations –the American Association of University Professors, the American Academy of Religion, and the writers' PEN America Center joined an ACLU lawsuit, charging the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security with "ideological exclusion," barring Tariq Ramadan from the U.S. on the grounds of his beliefs and views and depriving our members of the opportunity to engage directly with him. The U.S. District Court in Southern New York supported the suit and ordered the U.S. Government to issue Ramadan a visa or to state reasons for denial within ninety days.

Last week on September 21, 2006, ninety days later, the U.S. Government responded. Once again, a visa was denied, but no evidence was presented for espousing terrorism as previously charged. But in this instance, a new tactic was advanced by the government. What was at issue was not his ideas, but his generosity. Ramadan had contributed some \$700 to a French charity supporting humanitarian aid to Palestinians. This is the reason, they say, he may not enter the United States.

I am a Christian who considers Tariq Ramadan a brother in the work of God in our troubled world. I am an American citizen who believes a new "we" is among

the most important work we all have before us in our complex multireligious societies. And I am a scholar who believes the barring of Tariq Ramadan from our shores is a sign of real danger. It imperils the very spirit of academic inquiry in a free society.

This whole month of Ramadan is a time for reflection, discipline, and fasting among our Muslim sisters and brothers. Last week, Prof. Ramadan wrote this meditation for his community. Let's think about it, perhaps in the context of our daily prayers here in this chapel.

"This month is your blessed guest... and the guests very soon know and feel which place they have in their host's heart. The month of Ramadan is Light, Bounty, Love at your door... and that has no price. Allow your guest to enter in the most precious dwelling of your heart and honour it every day by offering your memory, your generosity, your sisterhood, your brotherhood and your love. It is the best gift you can offer... it is the way for you to invite, beside you, the Absolute One, the Generous, The Most Close. May the One accept your fast, your love, your generosity, with tenderness, and love..."

May those of us who are Christians and of other faiths and none, join in this spirit. Stilling our minds. Deepening our horizons. Encountering our fears. Expanding our circle of the "We." Inviting God, the Generous, the Most Close, to accompany us in our lives. Amen.