

## **Our shared presence and future.**

### **To my Western Muslim brethren and to all my Fellow Citizens**

Prof. Tariq Ramadan, Geneva

**The aftermath of the terrorist attacks has demonstrated once again the degree to which we, Muslims of the west, are isolated in spite of our fifty-year presence. Only a minority of Muslims engage in our discourse of civic responsibility in the United States and in Europe, the majority is socially and culturally marginalized.**

**At the slightest misfortune of events (yesterday it was the Rushdi affair and today it is the terrorist attacks) we see fissures, suspicion and a ghetto mentality emerge quickly.**

### **We must speak out**

Following September 11th, the temptation, to isolate oneself even more, is great; but wisdom invites us to do exactly the opposite. It is today that one has to assert one's presence, to speak up and express oneself, to explain the Islamic faith, its spirituality, its values, and its requirement for justice and peace. More than ever, one should not use the binary logic of "us" and "them"; instead, one must be involved in one's respective society in partnership with those who share a concern for social justice and a respect for the diversity of opinions, be they religious communities, humanists, or otherwise. This commitment to work with our fellow citizens should be accompanied by a clearer message. We cannot, under the pretext of not wanting to hurt "our brothers", continue to engage in unclear and contradictory rhetoric. One has to dare to denounce dictatorial powers as well as reactionary groups (who call themselves Islamic) by ridding ourselves of thoughts and actions which legitimize violence and terror and which disfigure and defame our religion. At the same time, we are in need of a real community dialogue among the Muslims. We are aware of the diversity of our thoughts, but do we realise how little we actually know of our differences and how little we speak to each other? We have lost the sense of critical discourse and the culture of dialogue that so enriched the heart of Islamic Civilisation and within it thrived, and in which we are so poor today. Our struggle for power dishonours our heritage; our divisions among the schools of thought and our disputes are undignified and are examples of a conduct unbecoming. United only where and when we have to react against adversity, we must learn to work together in times of peace.

Living in the West, honour obligates us to never forget the people in the southern regions of the world and the injustices that they suffer; our ethics of citizenship demands that we call to task our governments and remind them to uphold the principles of "liberty and justice for all". We must ask them to terminate relationships with dictators and encourage pluralism and democratic rights in all countries. We, the people of the west who even today engage in

ongoing struggle for justice at home, have a past and present history that invites us to be the voice for the voiceless.

### **Mutual trust and respect is required**

With equal passion and determination, I want to share with my fellow western citizens that we will succeed in giving life to a true pluralistic society only with a continuous and concrete effort. Mutual respect and trust are required, much more than tolerance, to listen to the other and to come to a mutual understanding. To be successful in this endeavour, we must begin by examining basic things; for example, our school programs do not always reflect nor do they inculcate the new paradigm necessary to establish a pluralistic society; furthermore, too many of our fellow citizens are satisfied with superficial explanations and hasty judgements. It will be impossible to live together while simultaneously ignoring each other. Our societies have changed and each one of us should make the effort to get to know one's neighbours better, to transcend the media "after effects" which do not say much about any of us and when they do, they say very little about our convictions and hopes.

### **In times of suspicions...**

It would not be wrong to say that Islam is misunderstood. Muslims should be the first to take the responsibility for this perception, but it is also necessary that all citizens refuse to accept the constant caricatures and simplifications. In the torment of these last weeks, very positive signs have been noted. Intellectuals and many media outlets have, unlike what we had witnessed during the Gulf war, been searching for ways to explain, and to demonstrate the perverted effects of simplistic and hasty conclusions. We have to acknowledge that, internalize it, and continue along this path.

In times of suspicions, one should not mistake who is the enemy. The worst case scenario would be to create a new type of racism or an emotional Islamophobia. Some Muslims have had to face bodily injuries, to endure insults and have been subjected to discriminatory acts because of the fact that they looked "too Arab", because of their clothing or simply because they are Muslim. In our efforts to improve security, there is a tendency to put the most vulnerable under surveillance; we forget those who are engaged in questionable activities and who are often protected by the thickness of their wallets: kings, princes, and businessmen. They represent too great an economic interest for the finger to be pointed directly at them. Unfortunately, it is exactly in this environment that the shadiest of financial transactions take place. The overwhelming majority of Muslims have nothing to do with such shady financial transactions or with violence.

### **Islam and the West**

I would also like to ask my fellow citizens not to become blinded at this time to the point that they no longer see the profound evolution which has been sweeping the Muslim communities in their midst for some years now. The progress has not been a media event, it has been slow, but it is real.

Increasingly the second and third generations Muslims are claiming simultaneously their Muslim convictions and their Western culture. As upheld by the constitutions of their countries, they defend citizenship, call for openly asserting their identity and promote "an American or European Islamic culture". During my last visit to Canada and the United States this summer, like the last few years in Europe, I have witnessed these transformations that are signs of a path to maturity. Will we know how to commit to face the challenge together and to bet on "living together"? In the end, the future of our planet will in a large part be shaped in the heart of our own societies. We have been warned of the doom of "clash of civilisations", but it is up to us to create spaces of common commitments, to refuse to accept an interpretation of the world which is dangerous and manichean. Our best answer to respond to the logic of war or "one against the other", which appears to be a caricatural confrontation between the "West and Islam", is to experience the exchange and the mutual richness of everyday existence in our cities and neighbourhoods.

### **We need each other**

Contrary to first glance appearances, we have in common many universal values. Islam calls upon us, in standing before the Creator, to have respect for one another, to love our neighbours, and to support those in need. Citizens of all persuasions and affiliations, it is time to escape from our intellectual and social ghettos, time to learn to approach one another in each other's complexity, and to respect the differences without compromising the fundamental principles of pluralism, justice and equality. This is the theme of this article : take the necessary risk to promote critical self examination and to have the humility to recognise that one is paralysed and can neither hope nor do anything without "the others".

**Tariq Ramadan**, professor of Philosophy and Islamic studies, University of Fribourg (Switzerland), and College of Geneva

To be a European Muslim, 1999, Islamic Foundation, UK

Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity, 2001, Islamic Foundation, UK