

REVIVING THE NARRATIVE OF MUHAMMAD'S LIFE: TARIQ RAMADAN'S INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES AND ETHICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

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Abstract: This article delves into the intellectual landscape of Tariq Ramadan, focusing on his approach to interpretation and contextualization. The analysis centers on Ramadan's work, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*, which, despite its biographical nature, unveils a profound connection between his thoughts and the art of interpretation and contextualization. The article contends that while Ramadan may not align himself explicitly with the tradition of reinterpretation or contextualization, his practical methodologies reflect interpretive strategies that breathe new life into historical texts, adapting them to contemporary contexts. Moreover, this paper argues that Ramadan's contextual interpretations are deeply rooted in ethics, underpinned by the belief in their universal applicability across diverse conditions. These ethical values, as delineated by Ramadan, serve as a bridge between the past and the present, as they are seamlessly interwoven with educational narratives drawn from the life of Prophet Muhammad. These narratives not only provide a basis for Muslims to rekindle the prophetic ideals in the modern era but also offer a compelling framework for fostering moral and ethical guidance in a rapidly changing world. In this intricate web of interpretation and contextualization, Tariq Ramadan's work emerges as a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse on Islamic thought and its relevance in contemporary society.

Keywords: Tariq Ramadan, reinterpretation, contextualization, ethics.

Abstrak: Artikel ini menggali lanskap intelektual Tariq Ramadan, dengan fokus pada pendekatannya terhadap penafsiran dan kontekstualisasi. Analisis berpusat pada karya Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Pelajaran dari Kehidupan Muhammad*, yang meski bersifat biografis, namun mengungkap hubungan yang mendalam antara pemikirannya dengan seni penafsiran dan kontekstualisasi. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa meskipun Ramadan mungkin tidak secara eksplisit menyelaraskan dirinya dengan tradisi penafsiran dan kontekstualisasi, metodologi praktisnya mencerminkan strategi penafsiran yang baru ke dalam teks-teks historis serta mengadaptasinya ke dalam konteks kontemporer. Selain itu, artikel

ini berargumen bahwa penafsiran kontekstual Ramadan berakar kuat pada etika, yang didukung oleh keyakinan akan penerapannya secara universal dalam berbagai kondisi. Nilai-nilai etika ini, seperti yang digambarkan oleh Ramadan, berfungsi sebagai jembatan antara masa lalu dan masa kini, karena nilai-nilai ini terjalin secara halus dengan narasi-narasi pendidikan yang diambil dari kehidupan Nabi Muhammad. Narasi-narasi ini tidak hanya memberikan dasar bagi umat Islam untuk menghidupkan kembali cita-cita kenabian di era modern, tetapi juga menawarkan kerangka kerja yang menarik untuk menumbuhkan panduan moral dan etika. Dalam jaringan penafsiran dan kontekstualisasi yang rumit ini, karya Tariq Ramadan muncul sebagai kontribusi yang signifikan terhadap wacana yang sedang berlangsung tentang pemikiran Islam dan relevansinya dalam masyarakat kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Tariq Ramadan, reinterpretasi, kontekstualisasi, etika.

Introduction

As a renowned Muslim scholar, Tariq Ramadan has studied Islam from an ethical perspective and relates it to the Islamic context in the West.¹ In addition, Ramadan has written a lot about how to understand Islam in a contemporary context, especially for Muslims living in the West.² This contextualization effort seems to be quite important in the structure of Ramadan's thought, but is still rarely studied by scholars.

Many scholars have examined Ramadan's thought from various perspectives of this 'liaison', especially on the Islamic context in the West and how Ramadan initiated a harmonious relationship between Islam and the West. In the context of this relationship, Bovenkamp even calls Ramadan a charismatic advocate of Islam.³ On the other hand, Ramadan is also often referred to as a scholar-cum-activist, an

¹ Lihat, Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

² Lihat, Tariq Ramadan, *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, Terj. Saïd Amghar (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2001); Tariq Ramadan, *To Be A European Muslim: A Study of Islamic Sources in the European Context* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1999); Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslim and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³ Ellen van de Bovenkamp, "Tariq Ramadan: fashion or fiqh? The powerful charisma of an advocate of Islam in the West," *Culture and Religion*, Vol 16, No. 2 (2015): 215-227.

activist professor who bridges the gap between Islam and the West.⁴ Ourghi also observed Ramadan's position as a bridge by looking at some of his ideas related to the concepts of *dār al-shabādhah* and jihad, which Ramadan initiated and interpreted with Western nuances. According to him, Ramadan's efforts cannot be separated from the context of the existence of Muslims in Europe, which is not yet fully intact. He also saw Ramadan's carefulness in arguing with some modern scholars such as Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, which was considered an effort to eliminate the impression of liberals.⁵ With a historical perspective, Brahimī and Brisson also observed the development of Ramadan's authority in initiating the 'European Islam' project, starting from France, which was initially ostracized, to gaining recognition in the UK.⁶

In this context, there are not enough studies that look at Ramadan in terms of how he interacts with the basic Islamic texts, particularly relating to the interpretation. Ramadan is not known as someone who focuses on reinterpreting the Qur'an or the Sunnah, for example, but in his writings, we are presented with quotations from these basic Islamic texts, both as ethical justification and to provide an initial narrative of how Islam was understood by the Prophet Muhammad and early Muslims.

It is in this context that this article will examine Ramadan's interpretative strategy. The study will focus on how Ramadan revives the narrative of the life history of Muhammad, in some cases also related to the text of the Qur'an, written in his book *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*. It is this narrative of the prophet's life that serves as a reflective starting point to see how Ramadan's interpretative strategy in bringing the narrative of the prophet back to life in the present context. Although he says in one of his statements that the work does not pretend to be an original and revolutionary reinterpretation, the interpretation strategy is evident from the following statement:

⁴ Annemarie van Sandwijk, "The Rise and Fall of Tariq Ramadan in the Netherland: The Interplay of Dutch Politics, Media, and Academia," *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, Vol. 3 (2014): 186, 206.

⁵ Mariella Ourghi, "Tariq Ramadan: From a Mere Co-Existence to an Authentic Contribution of Europe's Muslims," *Journal of Religion in Europe*, Vol. 3 (2010): 285-309.

⁶ Mohamed Amine Brahimī & Thomas Brisson, "Strategies of a Transnational Intellectual: Tariq Ramadan and the Project of a European Islam," *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 68, No. 5 (2020): 1-17.

“Our attentions mainly focused, throughout the narration of the story of his life, on situations, attitudes, or words that could reveal Muhammad’s personality and what it can teach and convey to us today... it seemed essential to observe how the man who best incarnated it in his behavior could “speak” to us, guide, us and educate us nowadays.”⁷

This article, therefore, will argue that although Muslim thinkers are not known to have concentrated on the study of interpretation of Islamic texts, and to have come up with a methodology of interpretation, in practice they have basically applied it in their works. In addition, some of Ramadan’s other works will also be examined to strengthen the argument and to get a fuller picture of his interpretive strategies.

History and Intellectual Career of Tariq Ramadan

Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962) is a scholar who is widely recognized among Muslims. His life history has also been written by many scholars. Many interviews have also been conducted with him, both regarding his life history and his thoughts on Islam. Here, the author will only briefly explain the description of Tariq Ramadan. He is a Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at Oxford University. There, he teaches in two faculties, namely in the Faculty of Oriental Studies and the Faculty of Theology & Religion. He is a Senior Research Fellow and Governing Body Fellow at St. Antony’s College (University of Oxford) and a Senior Research Fellow at Doshisha University (Kyoto, Japan). In addition, much of his intellectual career has been spent in academia, including as a Visiting Professor at the College of Islamic Studies, Hamad Bin Khalifa University (Doha, Qatar); Director of the Center for Research in Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE) (Doha, Qatar), President of the European Muslim Network (EMN) think tank in Brussels and member of the International Union of Muslim Scholars.

In his educational history, he is recorded as having earned an MA in Philosophy and French Literature, as well as a Doctoral degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Geneva, Switzerland. In Cairo, he also received a teaching license in seven disciplines from the Al-Azhar University faculty. Through his writings

⁷ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), X.

and lectures, Tariq Ramadan has also contributed to the debate on Muslim issues in the West and the rise of Islam in the Muslim world.

His research interests include issues of Islamic legislation, politics, ethics, Sufism and the contemporary challenges of Islam in both Muslim-majority countries and the West. He is active both at the academic and grassroots levels, lecturing extensively around the world on theology, ethics, social justice, and interfaith and intercultural dialog.

Tariq Ramadan's name is well known, apart from his revolutionary ideas in developing a moderate and rational Islam.⁸ An equally important reason for his fame is that he is the grandson of Ḥasan al-Bannā, the founder of Ikhwān al-Muslimīn, an Islamic movement that sought to counter Western religious, political, social and cultural domination of Egypt. Tariq Ramadan's mother was Ḥasan al-Bannā's daughter, while his father was Ḥasan al-Bannā's spiritual disciple.⁹ His father met al-Bannā when he was 14 years old. Al-Bannā then educated him until adulthood and then married him to his daughter.

According to Ramadan, his grandfather was an early Sufi. And this is what made his father interested in Ḥasan al-Bannā's teachings. Later, in the course of his life, al-Bannā was known as an activist who mobilized the Islamic masses to fight against Western colonialism. In fact, he is also known as a scholar who presents the concept of jihad and encourages the fighting spirit of jihadism among Egyptian youth to go into the field against colonialism.

In response to this idea, Ramadan said that jihad in that context was nothing but defensive jihad. Tariq revealed that al-Bannā had said that in Egypt at that time they didn't oppress us with weapons, so our resistance was peaceful. According to Ramadan, there is a difference in perception between Egyptian society and Western society when assessing al-Bannā. Ramadan's perception of al-Bannā from the beginning was mostly positive. He revealed that the first time he went

⁸ Untuk beberapa narasi tentang bagaimana resepsi masyarakat terhadap Ramadan bisa baca Bovenkamp, "Tariq Ramadan: fashion or fiqh?," 215-227; Sandwijk, "The Rise and Fall of Tariq Ramadan," 186, 206.

⁹ <https://highprofiles.info/interview/tariq-ramadan/>. Diakses pada 21 September 2021. Terkait dengan deskripsi ayah Ramadan, Said Ramadan, baca Tariq Ramadan, *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, Terj. Saïd Amghar (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2004), vii-xiv.

to Egypt, he met people who knew him. Then he confirmed some things that were very important to the country, including that al-Bannā was against colonialism and that he built 2,000 schools, 1,500 social institutions and more than 80 small businesses to help people do business.¹⁰ This is something that Ramadan says has not reached the ears of Westerners, who only see jihadism in a piecemeal way, which causes the humanitarian spirit behind the actions initiated by al-Bannā to fade away.

In avoiding this bias, Ramadan himself said that he had problems with the Ikhwān al-Muslimīn. Among them is that Ḥasan al-Bannā tried to shape thought through organization and he did it in a very structured way, with slogans. And in this political situation, slogans can mobilize people, but on the other hand they can also be misunderstood and misused. For example, al-Bannā said: ‘The Qur’an is our constitution.’ According to him, if we read al-Bannā’s memoirs, we can understand that his view is that the Qur’an is the main reference, but it still has to have a rational approach to it. and if the slogan stands alone it will be dangerous, because it can be interpreted that in the Qur’an we have all the solutions. Therefore, there is a gap between someone who says this as a way to mobilize people and someone who thinks this is the only understanding of Islam.¹¹ From this, we can see that Ramadan emphasizes the aspect of rationality in understanding the Qur’an.

Unfortunately, Ramadan’s career did not go smoothly, as he was plagued by sexual harassment issues for almost a decade. As a result of these issues, in 2017 he was expelled from Oxford University. He was accused of raping several women, most notably a journalist named Henda Ayari.¹² However, some of his supporters denied the allegations and believed that the case against Tariq Ramadan was a structured attempt to bring down his reputation. In 2018, the rape issue evolved, and Ramadan admitted to having sexual intercourse with the three women who accused him, but on a consensual basis,

¹⁰ <https://highprofiles.info/interview/tariq-ramadan/>. Diakses pada 21 September 2021. Baca juga, Tariq Ramadan, *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, Terj. Saïd Amghar (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2004), viii-ix.

¹¹ <https://highprofiles.info/interview/tariq-ramadan/>. Diakses pada 21 September 2021.

¹² Carlotta Gall, “Tariq Ramadan Is on Leave From Oxford After Rape Allegations,” dalam <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/world/europe/tariq-ramadan-oxford-rape.html>. Di akses pada 21 September 2021.

not by force or rape.¹³ However, the case is still ongoing and no binding judicial ruling has been issued. Finally, on May 24, 2023, an official court decision was issued declaring Tariq Ramadan free of rape charges.¹⁴

Related to Ramadan's thought, some of the criticism directed at him is also directed at his ideas. Paul Berman, Caroline Fourest and Christopher Caldwell, for example, criticize Ramadan for being nothing more than Muslim Brotherhood ideas repackaged for a Western context.¹⁵ Likewise, similar criticism has come from Muslims such as Taha Jaber al-Alwani and Ahmad al-Rawi, who see Ramadan as denying the legitimacy of sharia and attempting to stir up 'unnecessary religious agitation.'¹⁶

Tariq Ramadan is intellectually noted as a prolific scholar. He has written many works published by reputable publishers. Some of the books written by him include *Islam: The Essentials* (Pelican Series, Penguin, 2017); *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East* (Penguin, 2012); *The Quest for Meaning: Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism* (Penguin, 2010); *What I Believe* (OUP, 2009); *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (OUP, 2009); *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (OUP, 2007); and *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (OUP, 2005).¹⁷

The book *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* is the work that will be specifically examined in this article. In relation to the book, Laurence mentions that the context of the discourse of writing this book

¹³ Angelique Chrisafis, "Tariq Ramadan admission sparks fresh row over rape claims," dalam <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/31/tariq-ramadan-admission-sparks-fresh-row-over-claims>. Diakses pada 22 September 2021.

¹⁴ Imogen Foulkes, "Tariq Ramadan: Islam scholar cleared of Swiss rape charges," dalam <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65611696>. Diakses pada 25 Mei 2023.

¹⁵ Paul Berman, *The Flight of the Intellectuals* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2010); Christopher Caldwell, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam, and the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2009); and Caroline Fourest, *Brother Tariq: The Doublespeak of Tariq Ramadan* (New York: Encounter Books, 2008).

¹⁶ Taha Jaber Al-Alwani, "Unacceptable Allegation," IslamOnline.Net, April 19, 2005; Ahmad Ar-Rawi, "An Impotent Call," IslamOnline.Net, April 19, 2005; Nicholas Tampio, "Constructing the Space of Testimony: Tariq Ramadan's Copernican Revolution," *Political Theory*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (2011): 602.

¹⁷ <https://tariqramadan.com/english/biography/>. Diakses pada 20 September 2021.

cannot be separated from three things: namely the context of reply to the slander in the caricature of the Prophet Muhammad made by Timothy Garton Ash, the theological cleansing of the wahabi literalist Islamic group, and the openness of Islam to various interpretations.¹⁸ On the other hand, Ramadan explicitly mentions the depth of meaning in the process of authorship of the book. He mentioned in one of his interviews that the book reflects his spirituality based on the story of the prophet Muhammad. For him, the narratives of the prophet's life need to be re-presented and contextualized so that the Muslim community can pay more attention to the essentials of Islam.

“You know, I’m writing all these books and articles to shape the legal dimension [of Islam], but maybe the spiritual, the mystical dimension of my life is really the most important one. You know, the Sufi will never say he is a Sufi or is following in the footsteps of the Sufis, because this is something that is really personal. You cannot just define it in words, but if I have to say something about it... I am just finishing now a book which is going to be published in February. It’s a life of the Prophet, but really it’s about his spiritual teachings. He is a guide, a model, who helps me to be closer to God. (I never use ‘Allah’ when I speak French or English: for me it is ‘God’ in English, ‘Dieu’ in French and ‘Allah’ in Arabic. It’s the same for the [Coptic Christians]: they use ‘Allah’ in Arabic.) All my personal experience is not only to believe in God but to be close to him, and at the end to love him. I think this is what we are missing today in Islamic discourse. We are so pushed to be on the defensive – Islam is not this, Islam is not that – that we are forgetting the essence of Islam. It is really a love story. Sometimes myself I have to forget everything else and come back to this essential spiritual journey. So, this is what I’m asking him, for myself: it’s just to love him and to try to be loved by him.”¹⁹

The Qur’an as Source of Inspiration

For Ramadan, the Qur’an is a source of inspiration, especially in the ethical aspect. Ramadan emphasizes this in many of his writings. For example, when narrating the life story of the prophet Muhammad, Ramadan quotes many Qur’anic verses, which are then

¹⁸ Jonathan Laurence, “The Prophet of Moderation: Tariq Ramadan’s Quest to Reclaim Islam,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (2007): 128-134.

¹⁹ <https://highprofiles.info/interview/tariq-ramadan/>. Diakses pada 21 September 2021.

appropriated to the prophet's life career. When the prophet was a child, there is a narrative about a man who came to the prophet and then cut open his chest to clean it, and Ramadan reflects on this by quoting sura al-Inshirāh.²⁰ Similarly, when the prophet receives his first revelation, Ramadan quotes sura al-'Alaq 1-5, while narrating the ethical concepts of God, knowledge and humanity.²¹

In Ramadan's view, the inspiration of the Qur'an can be seen from several symbolic words in the Qur'an. For example, the word *Rabb* (Educator) that according to him, the concept of *Rabb* is important in the fragment of the story of the prophet Muhammad. Ramadan considers that the concept of *Rabb* implies a symbolic meaning that is important to underline. The existence of the term *Rabb*, which is mentioned by the Qur'an several times in the early fragments of revelation, implies a strong meaning of God as the Educator of the prophet. In the initial fragment of revelation, the Qur'an describes with the word *Rabb: iqra' bi ism Rabbik al-ladhī khalaq* (read in the name of your Lord who has created). Likewise, surah al-Muzammil, which is included in the category of the early revelation of the Qur'an, also uses the term Educator (*Rabb*) to conceptualize God.

In relation to this textual phenomenon, Ramadan then considers that God is the Great Educator, and He is the one who educated the Prophet Muhammad from the beginning of his life until the prophet received revelation from God. The Prophet's life journey, according to Ramadan, had many exercises as a form of natural education, where God, in all fragments of the Prophet's life, was present as his Educator.

Apart from being an inspiration for ethics, Ramadan also reflects the position of the Qur'an in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In the course of the Prophet's life, not a few that the Qur'an became a medium of resistance to the reproaches of those who did not believe in him. The Prophet often defended and answered challenges from his opponents with Qur'anic texts. For example, when the leader of the Quraysh, 'Utbah b. Rabī'ah came to the prophet by offering wealth and power in order for the prophet to stop preaching his

²⁰ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15.

²¹ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 31.

teachings, the prophet remained unmoved while responding to the offer with the verses of the Qur'an surah Fuṣṣilat: 1-10,²²

“Ha Mim A revelation from the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy; a Scripture whose verses are made distinct as a Quran in Arabic for people who understand, giving good news and warning. Yet most of them turn away and so do not hear. They say, ‘Our hearts are encased against [the faith] you call us to; our ears are heavy; there is a barrier between us and you. So you do whatever you want, and so shall we.’ Say [Prophet], ‘I am only a mortal like you, [but] it has been revealed to me that your God is One. Take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness. Woe to the idolaters, who do not pay the prescribed alms and refuse to believe in the world to come! Those who believe and do good deeds will have a reward that never fails.’ Say, ‘How can you disregard the One who created the earth in two Days? a How can you set up other gods as His equals? He is the Lord of all the worlds!’ 10He placed solid mountains on it, blessed it, measured out its varied provisions for all who seek them—all in four Days.”²³

From the response given by the prophet, ‘Utbah then returned to his clan and became nervous because he heard the verses of the Qur’an recited by the Prophet. ‘Utbah seems to have felt the power of the form and content of the Qur’an that he heard from the Prophet. Even when he returned to his community, he advised him not to attack the prophet and his prophetic mission anymore after feeling the glory he got when he met the Prophet. It is in this context that it can be underlined that the Qur’an inspires Ramadan’s thoughts, especially in relation to ethics.

Tariq Ramadan and the Contextualization of the Qur’an

Attaching Tariq Ramadan to the idea of contextualization is not an easy thing. That is because the idea of contextualization has been attached to several Muslim scholars who are engaged in the study of the Qur’an, such as Fazlur Rahman and Abdullah Saeed. Saeed himself in his book entitled, *Interpreting the Qur’an*, states openly that the interpretation efforts he initiated fall into the contextualist

²² Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 52.

²³ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an: A New Translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 307.

category. This contextualist school at least faces two other interpretation models, namely: textualist and semi-textualist.²⁴

Contextualization, in this case, has become a particular school in the discourse of Qur'anic interpretation. Contextualization generally leads to a double effort in interpretation, namely by involving the text and its historicity with the current context that requires relevance and contextualization efforts. Legal *ijtihad* towards the current context cannot be separated from the texts that lived in the past, but this contextualization effort is not confined by the textuality of the text that represents its time. Therefore, the main emphasis in the contextualist school is to find the main message, which is general and universal, not fixated on particular forms, so that it can be contextualized in all space and time. With this posture of thought, perhaps, the echo of Islam that is *rahmat li al-'ālamīn*, is the fruit of the thinking of contextualist scholars. Or at least, the flexibility of the law that gives leeway to new *ijtihad* is highly accommodated by this contextualist school. So that the jargon of Islam as a religion that brings mercy to all nature, appears to be manifested in steps to conduct *ijtihad*.

In this contextual map of thought, Ramadan was very likely influenced by the spirit of the times in which he lived. Perhaps this is a logical reason to categorize Ramadan into the contextual school. Although Ramadan himself does not mention the model of interpretation he has adapted, this contextual school seems to be quite echoed in his line of thought. In his book *Radical Reform Islamic Ethics and Liberation*, Ramadan prefers to use the term reform (*islāh*) rather than contextualization. This terminology is furthermore an antithesis of the concepts of Islamic jurisprudence that often experience stagnation in the process of *ijtihad*. Therefore it can be said that the concept of Ramadan's reform is based more on the orientation of *uṣūl fiqh* than the framework of Qur'anic interpretation. Although in many cases, Ramadan's reform model appears to be closely related to the tradition of contextual interpretation. For example, he introduced the terms adaptive reform and transformative reform, which in turn are contextual interpretation models.²⁵

²⁴ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards A Contemporary Approach* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-3.

²⁵ Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

In one of his books, he very eloquently explains the flow of this model of thought by writing,

“The initial idea was therefore to plunge into the heart of the Prophet’s life and draw out its timeless spiritual teachings. From his birth to his death, his life is strewn with events, situations, and statements that point to the deepest spiritual edification. Adherence to faith, dialogue with God, observing nature, self-doubt, inner peace, signs and trials, and so on are themes that speak to us and remind us that basically nothing has changed. The Messenger’s biography points to primary and eternal existential questions, and in this sense, his life is an initiation.”²⁶

In the description above, it can be seen that Ramadan’s direction of thought is to conduct historical studies of prophetic stories, which are also closely related to the texts of the Qur’an, to then find spiritual teachings that can be adopted for the current context.

Furthermore, Ramadan also clearly outlines the ways in which he interprets these stories, namely:

“A second type of lesson can nevertheless be drawn from the historical events that filled the Prophet’s life. In the seventh century, at the heart of a specific social, political, and cultural environment, God’s Messenger acted, reacted, and expressed himself about human beings and events in the name of his faith, in the light of his morals. Studying his actions in this particular historical and geographical setting should enable us to throw light on a number of principles about the relation of faith to human beings, brotherhood, love, adversity, community life, justice, laws, and war. We have therefore endeavored to approach Muhammad’s life from the perspective of our own times, considering how it still speaks to us and what its contemporary teachings are.”²⁷

The above quote clearly tells us about Ramadan’s interpretative strategy, which is to look at the historical context of the Prophet Muhammad from a contemporary perspective, while considering how the historical events speak to us, who live today, and being able to adopt relevant teachings to be applied in the current context.

²⁶ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), X.

²⁷ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xi.

In a more specific context, Ramadan's interpretive strategy, in fact, has similarities to what has been initiated by contextualists. In his book *Introduction to Islam*, Ramadan explains in more detail how to understand Islamic texts as follows:²⁸

“Understanding the Qur’anic message demanded a substantial effort on the part of the ‘ulamā’—the scholars, scriptural interpreters (or exegetes), and jurists of the growing Muslim community, for this eternal Text is grounded in a specific history. Its principles, although timeless and universal, can only be grasped by situating them in the historical context in which they were revealed. The task of human intelligence is to grasp the meaning of the Texts in light of their specific context, and from it to derive norms and lay down general directions... That alone was not enough, however. It was equally essential to link the fundamentals and the theoretical framework revealed in Mecca with their real-life application in Medina. The exercise, which proceeded both by deduction, from theory to practice, and by induction, from practice to theory, made it possible not only to formulate practical rules of law and jurisprudence (ahkām), but also to lend them coherence. In the light of this theoretical framework, it was possible to establish a system or, better, a veritable philosophy of law. This philosophy would provide a theoretical structure, establish meaningful connections between rules, and above all, make it possible to identify the objectives—maqāṣid—that constitute the *raison d’être* of the entire message.”

In the practical area, one of the contextualization models carried out by Ramadan is by linking a historical case, or a contemporary case, with a relevant Qur’anic verse. For example, Ramadan said that the Prophet Muhammad was a prophet who was able to carry out a mental revolution.²⁹ Among the forms of the revolution is that the prophet was able to change the map of Arab thought when they recognize something new, including religion, then what comes to mind is about power. Does something new threaten their power, or hinder the pace of their political interests? Power at that time became their train of thought in assessing things. If what is faced is considered to stop the pace of their power, then they will vigorously

²⁸ Tariq Ramadan, *Introduction to Islam*, Terj. Fred A. Reed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 44.

²⁹ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 56.

resist and stop it. Conversely, if it is able to provide political benefits for them, which will also have an impact on the economy, then they will happily accept it.

In this context, Ramadan then introduced that the pattern of social movements carried out by the prophet was not merely to shift power or in order to gain power. However, the social movement carried out by the prophet was to shift the religious traditions or beliefs of the Arab community, which at that time were mostly restrained by idols. The movement was more focused on the theological aspects of Arab society. However, the effects arising from the shift in religious traditions were also closely related to the power that had long been entrenched in Arab society. Finally, the prophet's religious social movement was widely opposed by the Arab community.

The social movement introduced by Prophet Muhammad was more directed towards the concept of one God, *tawḥīd*. It was in this arena of meaning that Ramadan then introduced the verses of the Qur'an, namely sura al-Ikhlāṣ and sura al-Kāfirūn. These two suras are presented by Ramadan to thematically relate the struggle of the prophet Muhammad in introducing and restoring the concept of monotheism, as conveyed by the previous prophets. This concept of thematic relation (*munāsabah ma'nawīyah*) seems to be quite important in the construction of Ramadan's interpretation.

One of the interesting points in Ramadan's elaboration model in linking one historical event with pieces of verses of the Qur'an is linking one verse with another verse that has a similar topic, in this context is sura al-Ikhlāṣ and sura al-Kāfirūn.³⁰ In the context of Ramadan's interpretation, both suras reflect an interpretation of identity. Ramadan writes after sura al-Ikhlāṣ, 'This statement points to the existence of a frontier.' This is in contrast to the narratives of some mufasirs who explain the parallel content between the two suras. Al-Rāzī, for example, recognizes the similarity of the concept of representation between the two that sura al-Ikhlāṣ is commensurate with a third of the Qur'an, while sura al-Kāfirūn is commensurate with a quarter of the Qur'an. In addition, al-Rāzī also added that these two suras have similarities, including in the aspect of liberation, that

³⁰ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 56.

each surah serves to free the heart from something that turns away from Allah. However, sura al-Kāfirūn is more meaningful in 'liberating' oneself from other than Allah and perpetuating oneself to be busy with Allah. While surah al-Ikhlāṣ is more meaningful to occupy oneself with Allah and perpetuate oneself to 'turn away' from other than Allah.³¹

In addition to the model of interpreting thematic relations, Ramadan also seems conscious of using a historical framework in his elaboration. In Qur'anic studies, this is generally referred to *asbāb al-nuzūl* (the causes of the revelation of the Qur'anic verse). Ramadan uses this historical framework to evoke a value from a historical perspective. For example, when Ramadan describes the Prophet teaching his companions about the importance of patience, endurance and perseverance, and not to despair of God's mercy, the Prophet is essentially teaching his companions about the difficult relationship between belief in God and pain. The experience of physical and moral suffering allows one to reach a point of faith where one is able to accept hardship, and can doubt oneself without doubting God.

It is in this context that Ramadan then introduces the story of Ammar who saw his mother, then his father, executed by the disbelieving Quraysh because they refused their invitation to deny the deity of Allah.³² Then Ammar himself was tortured in quite a cruel way. One day when he was being tortured, he could stand it no longer, so he reluctantly uttered a sentence denying Allah and praising the gods of the Quraysh. The torturers then let him go, satisfied that they had achieved what they wanted. In the story, Ammar is still alive, but he is always overwhelmed with an unforgettable sense of guilt. Even he himself believed that his actions could not be redeemed by anything. He then went to the Prophet crying and confessed to him about what had happened. The Prophet himself had basically known beforehand through the news from the Companions. The Prophet then asked Ammar about his deepest belief, and Ammar affirmed that his belief in God had not changed, remained firm and solid. He did not doubt his faith in God. The Prophet then calmed Ammar down and assured him that he had done what he could and there was no

³¹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātib al-Ghayb*, Vol. 32 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1981), 174.

³² Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 47.

need to be angry with himself. It was in this context that God's revelation in surah al-Nahl [16]: 106, which says,

“With the exception of those who are forced to say they do not believe, although their hearts remain firm in faith, those who reject God after believing in Him and open their hearts to disbelief will have the wrath of God upon them and a grievous punishment awaiting them.”³³

The Prophet then advised Ammar that if one day he was subjected to the same torture, then in order to save his life he should say what his tormentors wanted to hear, while maintaining his faith. The Prophet thus accepted both attitudes: that of those who never denied their faith and who died for it, and that of those who, under unbearable torture, escaped death by verbally denying their faith while it remained unshakable in their minds and hearts. This concept came to be known as *taqīyah*, a concept that was later attached to the Shia.

Ethics-based Contextualization

In relation to this concept of ethics, some equate Ramadan with Kant. This is at least evident from some of the narratives written by Ramadan himself in his books. For example, in *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, he writes:³⁴

Our sources help us in this if we can only try hard to reappropriate for ourselves the universality of the message of Islam, along with its vast horizon. This reappropriation should be of a depth that will enable it to produce a true “intellectual revolution” in the sense intended by Kant when he spoke of the “Copernican revolution.”

In this context, Ramadan is not considered similar to Kant in his efforts to secularize Islam, but rather in the aspect of advocating reason and ethics into Islamic theological formulations.³⁵ Some Arabic concepts, such as *ijtihād*, *tajdīd*, and *iṣlāḥ* for example, are associated with Kant's philosophy of autonomy, criticism and universal morality. In fact, in his book *The Quest for Meaning*, Ramadan begins his discussion by citing the three main questions in Kant's

³³ Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 173.

³⁴ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53.

³⁵ Tampio, “Constructing the Space of Testimony,” 603-604.

Critique of Pure Reason: what can I know, what should I do, and what can I expect. Furthermore, he also appeared to develop what he called an 'ethics of liberation' inspired by Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*.³⁶

In the story of Ibrahim and Isma'il, the contextualization of their narratives is emphasized on ethical conceptualization. Ramadan tends to the narrative of Ibrahim's sacrifice. He, Ibrahim, was tested by Allah twice. First, separation and abandonment. This first test occurred when Ibrahim was asked to leave his wife and child in an arid and barren land, where they struggled and even almost died from hunger and thirst because they found no source of water or food. But with total surrender, they were then helped by the sudden appearance of a water source near them.

Against this narrative, Ramadan introduces what he calls 'active acceptance' by personifying Hajar, Ibrahim's wife. This active acceptance is interpreted by Ramadan as Hajar asking questions, then believing and finally accepting what God has decided. It is in this context that Ramadan then emphasizes a model of ethical relations between man and God by writing: "*Abraham develops a relationship with God based on faithfulness, reconciliation, peace, and trust.*"³⁷

In the fragment of the life of the prophet and the revelation of the Qur'an, Ramadan considers that the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an emphasizes several things, namely faith, knowledge and humility. He considers that the first verse revealed to the prophet Muhammad, which talks about the ability to 'read', basically inspires the meaning of knowledge. Although, according to Ramadan, Prophet Muhammad did not have the ability to read texts, Allah still asked him to read in the name of *Rabb* (Educator). This first Qur'anic text, according to Ramadan, directly inferred the close relationship between faith in God and knowledge. This is at least affirmed by the following verse which reads: "*It is He who teaches (man) with a pen, and it is He who teaches man what he does not know.*" It is this knowledge that enables man to know God, and ultimately leads man to faith.

In relation to this first Qur'anic verse, Ramadan employs an intratextual interpretation strategy by relating the text to several other verses. For example, he mentions surah al-Baqarah [2]:31 about the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

creation of Adam by God who was then equipped with the knowledge of 'names' (*al-asmā'*). Then, through this knowledge taught by God, humans are able to become God's 'representatives' (*khāṭib*) on earth, as stated in surah 2:30. Ramadan also relates the first verse to surah al-Qalam [68]. The surah, which begins with this mysterious letter, according to Ramadan, shows certain signs. Not even the scholars or the Prophet have explained the exact meaning of the letter. Therefore, when Allah swears by using the word 'by the pen' and emphasizes the importance of knowledge, at the same time Allah also reveals the limits of human knowledge through a mysterious letter whose meaning is unreachable by the human mind.³⁸ Ramadan is writing,

"The dignity of humankind, conferred by knowledge, cannot be devoid of the humility of reason aware of its own limits and thereby recognizing the necessity of faith. Accepting, and accepting not to understand, the mysterious presence of the letter nun requires faith; understanding and accepting the unmysterious statements of the verses that follow require the use of a reason that is active but necessarily -and indeed naturally- humbled"

Ramadan believes that human dignity, which is based on knowledge, cannot be separated from humility that realizes its own limits and that is why faith is needed. In this context, knowledge always goes hand in hand with the ethics of humility, which at a certain point can lead humans to faith in God. In this context of faith, knowledge must be subject to morality. This ethical concept is what Ramadan calls 'sublime morals'.³⁹

The limitations of reason, perhaps, can be seen in how one can perceive aspects of eschatology. All things about the afterlife or the final day are things that are far from the reach of human sensory knowledge. Heaven and hell are eschatological narratives that are brought to life by every religion as a reminder to humans of the responsibility of their actions. However, no matter what the senses look like, humans will never be able to reach the stage of positivistic knowledge. The eschatological narrative will leave true knowledge only for those who believe and affirm it. Perhaps it is in this context

³⁸ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 31.

³⁹ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 32.

that reason finds a part of its limitation that is not quite able to reach other realms that are beyond its sensory range.

The narrative of the afterlife is basically one of the main topics of the Qur'an in the early era of revelation. According to Ramadan, there are four initial themes mentioned by the Qur'an during the first phase of revelation, namely tawhid, the status of the Qur'an, worship and the afterlife. Regarding the afterlife, as an eschatological matter, human reason is not sufficient to reach knowledge of it. Therefore, the Qur'an makes the narrative of the afterlife as an early enough thing to be known to the people and the community of the Prophet, as a reminder to them that every deed will be accounted for in the hereafter. This concept of the afterlife clearly alludes to the old narratives from the previous books that had reached the Arab community before, both from the Torah and the Gospel.

In Ramadan's view, the message about life in the afterlife was not intended by God to instill the belief that human life has meaning and that it is to God that they will return. The repeated reminders of the Last Day, especially in the early phases of revelation, imply that there will be a judgment on the Last Day, where God will judge every good and evil that each individual is responsible for during his or her life in this world. Thus, the awareness of the Last Day essentially indicates the relationship between faith and morality, and between contemplation and action. Ramadan then cites sura al-Tin [19]: 6, about the integrality between faith and good deeds, *alladhīna āmanū wa 'amilū al-ṣāliḥāt* (those who have faith and do good deeds).⁴⁰

In this ethical context, Ramadan then introduces the concepts of *ma'rūf* (good) and *munkar* (evil) as central concepts in the universality of Islamic ethics. He says "*Being with God, being for God, giving oneself, thus involves 'enjoining what is right' (al-maruf) and 'forbidding what is wrong' (al-munkar); it is opting to meet the ethical demand.*"⁴¹ In Islamic terminology, *al-ma'rūf* means 'what is right' but not in a limited sense. *Al-ma'rūf* is a central concept, it refers to what is universally recognized as good, proper, edifying, and moral as also affirmed by the Qur'an. Qur'anic texts may detail some precepts, but they rely heavily on common and collective sense of 'what is good.' It is this

⁴⁰ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 41.

⁴¹ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 41.

element of ethical universality that allows Ramadan to contextualize the Qur'an to the present era. This is because ethical concepts are not limited to a certain period of time or a certain space, but rather universal ethics that can be applied at any time.

Education and Ethical Values in the Narrative of Muhammad's Life

In narrating the life story of Prophet Muhammad, the most obvious interpretation strategy is to use the Qur'an as a reflective starting point. In relation to the beginning of Muhammad's prophetic story, for example, Ramadan reflects on the story with Sura al-Ḍuḥā [93]: 6-11 and begins with the narrative of trials and tribulations. For him, the Prophet Muhammad underwent his first test by losing his mother and father. He was then taken in by his grandfather and raised by Halimah. He lived in a land that was quite difficult to live in. It is in this context that Ramadan calls this event the first trial.⁴²

Ramadan refers to God as *Rabb* (the Educator). He also explains that the word *Rabb* is often translated as 'God', but the root includes the notion of education or educator, which is directly present in the meaning of the word *tarbiyyah*. The word comes from the same root, which means education, aimed at building a moral personality.

This educational perspective seems to be Ramadan's point of attention in elaborating the early history of the Prophet Muhammad's life. According to Ramadan, the verses in sura 93 carry several important teachings in the conception of education, namely that being an orphan and poor as experienced by the Prophet is basically an initial condition to prepare him as a messenger of God in the future. From this pre-condition, there are at least two important teachings. The first teaching is about the vulnerability and humility that the Prophet naturally felt since childhood. This situation worsened when his mother, Aminah, died, at which time the prophet Muhammad was still young enough, aged six, to face his life. This event, according to Ramadan, actually made the Prophet very dependent on God, as well as close to the lower classes. It was in this context that the Qur'anic verse reminded Prophet Muhammad that he should not forget this event throughout his life, especially during his prophetic mission. The Prophet had experienced the condition of poverty and orphanhood,

⁴² Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.

and this condition was also the background for the Prophet to never leave the poor and those in need.⁴³

As for the second teaching, Ramadan formulated a conception of ethical education derived from the above verses. He emphasizes the importance of past history as a provision for humans to live in the future. Ramadan wrote to never forget the past, be it in the form of trials, environment and origin, because these experiences can be turned into positive teachings for oneself and for others. As in the past of Prophet Muhammad, where Allah reminded him through surah al-Ḍuḥā [93], which was the Prophet's 'school' where he had to gain useful, practical, and concrete knowledge and experiences to benefit others.⁴⁴ In this context, the life difficulties experienced by the prophet become the most fundamental experience to feel the difficulties faced by the community and its people, and then lead them in the right direction.

In the narrative of the Prophet Muhammad's early life, Ramadan highlights how the Prophet's education began. Ramadan argues that the universe was the prophet's school. This universe encompasses all the nature he encountered, from the geographical climate to the structure and culture of society. Ramadan describes how difficult it was to live in the desert with all its obstacles. For him, life in the desert became an important element in shaping man and his view of creation and the elements of the universe. For example, when the Prophet Muhammad was in the desert, he learned from the oral traditions of the Bedouins who were renowned speakers, where this in turn served to develop the prophet's own mastery of spoken language. The power of his diction, his eloquence, and his ability to convey profound and universal teachings were all things that the prophet learned from a young age through the universe that surrounded him.⁴⁵

Ramadan further wrote:

“This relationship with nature was so present in the Prophet's life from his earliest childhood that one can easily come to the conclusion that living close to nature, observing, understanding,

⁴³ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.

⁴⁴ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

⁴⁵ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

and respecting it, is an imperative of deep faith... The first years of Muhammad's life undoubtedly fashioned this outlook, preparing him to understand the signs in the universe. The spiritual teaching that can be drawn from them is essential, both for the Prophet's education and for our own education throughout history: being close to nature, respecting what it is, and observing and meditating on what it shows us, offers us, or takes (back) from us requirements of a faith that, in its quest, attempts to feed, deepen, and renew itself. Nature is the primary guide and the intimate companion of faith. Thus, God decided to expose His Prophet, from his earliest childhood, to the natural lessons of creation, conceived as a school where the mind gradually apprehends signs and meaning.⁴⁶

The quote above illustrates that the prophet's interaction with the universe became the initial foundation of the prophet's education. By understanding, exploring and contemplating the universe, a complete understanding of natural phenomena and the society that surrounds it will be created. Ramadan even emphasizes the close correlation between nature and faith, that deep faith is a belief based on understanding and appreciating the universe, which is a manifestation of His creation. From this it can be understood that the *kawniyyah* verse (the universe) became the initial guidance for the education of the Prophet Muhammad, before the arrival of the *qawliyyah* verse (the Qur'an).

In addition, Ramadan's contextualization strategy can be seen in how he links the prophet's 'school' with the universe in the present context. He considers the importance of human awareness with the universe to be closer, appreciate, and observe and reflect on what nature shows and be able to take lessons from it. Among other things, Ramadan sees a fragment of the Prophet's life as a shepherd as a learning process of solitude, patience, contemplation, and vigilance. These qualities are essentially necessary for all prophets to carry out their mission as messengers of God. And in turn, these abilities that had been honed since childhood enabled Prophet Muhammad to become the most successful in scaling trade as an adult.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

⁴⁷ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Mubammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17.

This kind of education, through its proximity to nature, is considered capable of fostering a relationship with God based on contemplation and depth that will allow humans to understand the deepest meaning of the form and purpose of religious rituals. Ramadan considers that understanding religion through an approach to the universe will be able to provide depth of understanding, both from the intrinsic dimension (religious substance, spirituality) and the extrinsic dimension (rituals). Ramadan even mentions that the act of understanding religion that only sees from the ritual aspect is a religious 'delusion' that can undermine religion itself from the substance of its spirituality.⁴⁸

Conclusion

In line with Tampio's opinion, Ramadan does not add new facts to the biography of the prophet but "to draw lessons from the life of Muhammad for contemporary Muslims". However, from the process of Ramadan's reflection on the history of Muhammad, another perspective that can be obtained from this interaction is Tariq Ramadan's interpretation model of the narrative of Muhammad's prophetic story, which is based on many Qur'anic texts, which is then reflected on as ethical values and to be lived in contemporary times. This model is quite close to the construction of scholars who call them as contextualists. In this framework, we can also state that Tariq Ramadan, although not attached to the tradition of reinterpretation or contextualization, has also carried out interpretation strategies by contextualizing the past texts for the present.

We can also underline that Ramadan's interpretation and contextualization strategy, as seen in his description, especially in his work entitled *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*, is mainly based on ethics. These ethical values, according to him, have a universal dimension that can be applied to various conditions. These ethical values are then combined with educational narratives that are drawn from the history of the life of the Prophet Muhammad which can be the starting point for Muslims in emulating the Prophet in the current era.

⁴⁸ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14.

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