Chapter One
THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE PRESS

Tariq Ramadan is a charismatic and energetic Islamic philosopher in Europe who, during the last fifteen years or so, has become popular and influential among various circles of European Muslims—originally in Geneva, where his father founded the Islamic Center in 1961 and where Ramadan grew up; then in Lyon, the French city closest to Switzerland, where Ramadan attracted a following of young people from North African backgrounds; then among French Muslims beyond Lyon; at the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, in England, where he spent a year on a fellowship; among still more scattered Muslim audiences in Western Europe, who listened to his audio recordings and packed his lecture halls, typically with the men and the women sitting demurely in their separate sections; among Muslims in Francophone regions of Africa—and outward to the wider world.

Ramadan possesses a special genius for shaping cultural questions according to his own lights

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing

and presenting those questions to the general public. He has demonstrated this ability from the start. As early as 1993, at the age of thirty-two, he campaigned in Geneva to cancel an impending production of Voltaire's play *Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet*. The production was canceled, and a star was born—though Ramadan has argued that he had nothing to do with canceling the play, and to affirm otherwise is a "pure lie." Not every battle has gone his way. He taught at the college of Saussure. His colleagues there were disturbed by his arguments in favor of Islamic biology over Darwin. This time, too, Ramadan shaped the debate to his own specification. He insisted that he had never wanted to suppress the existing biology curriculum—merely to complement it with an additional point of view. A helpful creationist proposal. But the Darwinians, unlike the Voltaireans, were in no rush to yield.

That was in 1995, and by then Ramadan had already established himself in Lyon, at the Union of Young Muslims and the Tawhid bookstore and publishing house. These were slightly raffish immigrant endeavors, somewhat outside the old and official mainline Muslim organizations in France. Even so, the mainline organizations welcomed the arrival of a brilliant young philosopher. He built alliances. He attended conferences. His op-eds ran in the newspapers. He engaged in debates. Eventually his face appeared on French television and on the covers of glossy magazines, which introduced him to the general public in France, a huge success. And yet—this is the oddity about Tariq Ramadan—as his triumphs became ever greater and his thinking more widely known, no consensus whatsoever emerged regarding the nature of his philosophy or its meaning for France or Europe or the world.

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing

Some mainstream journalists in France were drawn to him from the start. The Islam-and-secularism correspondent at *Le Monde*, full of admiration, plugged him regularly and sometimes adopted his arguments. At *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Ramadan became a cause, not just a story. The editor lionized him. *Politis* magazine promoted him. On the activist far left, some of the anti-globalist radicals and the die-hard enemies of McDonald's saw in Ramadan, because of his denunciations of American imperialism and Zionism and his plebian agitations, a tribune of progressive Islam, even if his religious severities grated on left-wing sensibilities. The Trotskyists of the Revolutionary Communist League forged something of an alliance with him. A number of Christian activists regarded him with particular fondness: a worthy partner for inter-religious dialogue. A dike against the flood tides of secular materialism. An inspiration for their own revived spirituality. A religiously motivated social conscience similar to their own, laboring on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Ramadan might even have seemed, in some people's eyes, stylishly trendy at one moment or another—a champion of Islam who, because Islam has been so badly demonized, held out a last dim hope for shocking the bourgeoisie. Then again, some of the French experts on Islam likewise found something commendable in him: a thoughtful effort to modernize Islam for a liberal age. The distinguished scholar Olivier Roy, who had no interest in shocking anyone, looked on Ramadan in an admiring light.

Still, in France other people recoiled, and did so without much hesitation, and recoiled at the people who had failed to recoil. The critics insisted that Ramadan's friends and admirers in the press were deluding themselves, and that alliances with

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing

him were bound to backfire, and that, beneath the urbane surface, he represented the worst in Islam, and not the best. Some of the critics were Christian conservatives and political right-wingers and nativists, whose hostility might have been predicted. Then again, the most prominent of Ramadan's left-wing Christian allies turned against him, and did so in a fury, as if betrayed. Some mainline Muslim leaders in France grew reserved. Even the French anti-globalists proved to be of two minds about him. A good many militants of the anti-globalist cause watched with dismay as Ramadan's pious followers filled the seats at anti-globalist meetings, and veiled women thronged the podium. Muslim liberals reviled him. His loudest enemies in France turned out to be left-wing feminists, who took one look and shuddered in alarm. Feminists from Muslim backgrounds denounced him in *Libération*, the left-wing newspaper. The Socialist Party politicians in France, who had every reason to seek out Arab and Muslim voters, showed not the slightest interest in him.

Dark rumors spread. The Spanish police inquired into his Lyon networks. In 1995 the French minister of the interior denied him permission to re-enter France—which sparked a mobilization of petition-signers until the ministry, confessing error, rescinded the order. His detractors in the press—initially at *Lyon Mag*, the city magazine in Lyon—speculated grimly about his personal connections. He responded with a double lawsuit, against *Lyon Mag* and against one of his critics, who was Antoine Sfeir, a Lebanese historian. The verdict ended up split: against the magazine but in favor of Sfeir. The magazine kept on hammering nonetheless. So did Sfeir.

Books about Ramadan tumbled into the bookstores at a remarkable pace. Caroline Fourest's *Frére*

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing

Tariq appeared in France in 2004 (and in English translation, as *Brother Tariq*, in 2008) and has proved to be the most influential: an angry book, alarmed, energetic in tabulating the naïve tropes and clichés of the French press, indignant at the journalists who keep falling for the same old manipulations, indignant at the progressives who view Ramadan as a progressive. But Fourest's book was only the first, followed by at least six more books in France in the last several years—among them Paul Landau's *Le Sabre et le Coran*, or *The Saber and the Koran* (no less hostile and accusatory than Caroline Fourest's); Aziz Zemouri's *Faut-il faire taire Tariq Ramadan?*, or *Should Tariq Ramadan Be Silenced?* (which affords Ramadan a fair-minded chance to have his own say, at length); and Ian Hamel's *La vérité sur Tariq Ramadan*, or *The Truth About Tariq Ramadan* (mildly sympathetic to Ramadan, sometimes skeptical, indignant at the hostility expressed by Caroline Fourest and Paul Landau). And the books, too, having contributed to the controversy, contributed to his popularity.

Ramadan seems to have known instinctively how to respond to accusations and innuendos, and his rejoinders succeeded in turning each new setback into an advance. He suggested a bigotry against Islam on his critics' part, amounting to a kind of racism, which any decent person ought to condemn. He argued that criticisms of him represented a holdover from the colonialist mentality of the past. He was dignified, self-controlled, unflappable; and also a man with a polemical knife. He accused Caroline Fourest of being a militant for Zionism, and a liar. He was angry. Sometimes his anger proved effective in the conscience-stricken atmosphere of modern post-imperial France. Some people, listening to his

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing

responses, grew pensive. His supporters waved their fists. And his critics became still more fretful—not just about Ramadan, but about the people who, in applauding or merely in growing pensive, seemed to have accepted his categories of analysis, as if in a stupor.

His entrance into the Anglophone world began quietly enough. The Islamic Foundation in Leicester, where he studied and wrote in 1996–97, enjoys the distinction of having been the first and most vociferous Muslim institution in Britain to campaign against Salman Rushdie and his novel *The Satanic Verses* back in 1988—before even Ayatollah Khomeini had issued a fatwa authorizing Rushdie's assassination. Ramadan was not vociferous, though. He attracted no attention. In 1999 he published his book *To Be a European Muslim* with the Islamic Foundation. The book enjoyed a modest success. It was regarded as a thoughtful argument for healthy new relations between old-stock non-Muslim Europe and the new-stock immigrant Muslim population. Daniel Pipes in the United States, a sharp critic of Islamist radicalism, was among the expert observers who broke into applause at *To Be a European Muslim*—though, if you visit Pipes's website, you will see that, ever since his initial review, Pipes has been posting additional remorseful observations about how wrong he was, and what could possibly have gotten into him? (You will also see that Ramadan, together with a like-minded journalist or two, has responded by promoting Pipes into the center of an anti-Ramadan conspiracy on behalf of the Jews.)

In 2001 the Islamic Foundation brought out Ramadan's *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*. The new book was a philosophical study,

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing

and it attracted less attention. Even so, controversy went on working its wonders, and in faraway South Bend, Indiana, the University of Notre Dame offered him a professorship, beginning in 2004—partly funded, as it happens, by the Kroc family, which means the McDonald's fortune. Ramadan accepted. He obtained a visa. He arranged for his family to move. But, at the last minute, the Department of Homeland Security balked at the prospect of admitting Tariq Ramadan into the United States. The State Department revoked his visa. The ACLU, PEN American Center, and a couple of academic organizations rallied to his defense, as was their duty, and they kept up their lawsuits for the next several years. The man was barred, though, throughout the rest of the Bush era and through the first year of the Obama administration, too—which generated still more publicity, some of it hostile, of course. Still, the new round of publicity aroused a sympathy, as was only natural: a feeling of outrage on Ramadan's behalf, an exasperation at American provincialism, a fearful recollection of the obtuse McCarthyite xenophobia of yore. A suspicion that here was indeed a bigotry against Islam: an Islamophobia, something shameful. Anyway, America's nay, back in 2004, triggered a British yea. St. Antony's College at Oxford stepped in with its own offer of a fellowship, beginning in 2005. Ramadan accepted.

The London terrorist attack took place in July of that year. Tony Blair was prime minister. His government organized an advisory commission. Ramadan was invited to participate. He accepted. And with one incident piling atop the next—his defeats, his victories—he was lifted, in 2007, to the pinnacle of American journalistic recognition: the sort of full-

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing

length profile and full-page photograph in *The New York Times Magazine* that half the writers of Europe dream of receiving one day, in the hope of achieving the impossible, which is to break into the American bookstores and the American conversation.

No popular magazine in the United States has done more in the last several years to illuminate the intellectual life of the Muslim world than *The New York Times Magazine*—always in a serious manner, with major resources, and at full length. In this instance the *Times Magazine* assigned its profile to the well-known journalist Ian Buruma, and this was an impeccable choice. Buruma is Dutch, though he generally writes in English and lives in the United States. He has reported from many parts of the world. In 2004 he and the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit joined together to write a book called *Occidentalism*, on the historical appeal of European fascist and other anti-liberal doctrines to people in non-Western regions of the world, and this book was a brilliant achievement. It testified to Buruma's expertise on wayward and totalitarian ideologies: a pertinent credential. Some of *Occidentalism*'s most illuminating pages examine the impact of Nazi and fascist ideas on the Islamist political movement in the Arab world—a still more pertinent credential in connection to Tariq Ramadan and his family history.

In 2006 Buruma published a book called *Murder in Amsterdam*, about the assassination of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by an Islamist fanatic. *Murder in Amsterdam* testified to Buruma's familiarity with the Islamist movement not just in the Middle East but also in its newer immigrant home in the run-down neighborhoods of Western Europe—still another pertinent credential. Ian Buruma was, in short, supremely suited to write about Ramadan

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing

for *The New York Times Magazine*. The editors had every reason to commission him. They published his article in the issue of February 4, 2007. The article bore the amusing title, "Tariq Ramadan Has an Identity Issue." You can find it on the *New York Times* website.

The article affected a quizzical tone. Buruma seemed bemused by his difficulties in pinning his subject down—even in scheduling an interview, though he did finally get one. The article rehearsed some of the political accusations that have been leveled at Ramadan in France: dark rumors, feminist shudders, complaints of bigotry, instinctive suspicions. But Buruma explained that, once he had looked into the accusations, they turned out to be groundless, or exaggerated and unjust, or distorted because the context had been omitted. On certain matters of controversy, Buruma expressed no opinion of his own and, out of courtesy, permitted Ramadan to rebut his critics. The rebuttals seemed firm, or at least plausible, even if Buruma now and then raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Buruma marveled over Ramadan's ideological standpoint—his mix of anti-globalist fervor and ultra-conservative cultural views. "In American terms," Buruma remarked, "he is a Noam Chomsky on foreign policy and a Jerry Falwell on social affairs." Even so, Buruma looked on Ramadan rather more warmly than any comparisons to Chomsky and Falwell might suggest. Buruma explained that, in 2006, the French magazine *Le Point* invited him to debate Ramadan and, in the hope of seeing sparks fly, urged him to be aggressive. The debate took place. Ramadan was unflappable. The discussion failed to stumble across any serious differences at all. "We agreed on most issues," Buruma wrote, "and even when we didn't (he was more friendly to the pope than I

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing

was), our 'debate' refused to catch fire"—which suggests a congenial atmosphere that is hard to imagine if Buruma had ever come face-to-face with Chomsky or Falwell at a public debate. "We agreed on most issues"—no, this would have been an unlikely summary of any encounter with the anti-imperialist from MIT or the late tub-thumping evangelist of the Christian right.

Ian Buruma judged that, despite the controversies and accusations, Ramadan the philosopher offers (here I quote the *Times Magazine* profile) "a reasoned but traditionalist approach to Islam," based on "values that are as universal as those of the European Enlightenment." Ramadan's values, although "neither secular, nor always liberal," offer "an alternative to violence, which is, in the end, reason enough to engage with him, critically, but without fear." This was not quite a ringing endorsement. Still, it was an endorsement. It conveyed the unmistakable implication that Tariq Ramadan, the worthy interlocutor, stands for more than himself, which is why engaging him might be useful—in the hope of discovering the human and philosophical principles that Muslim and non-Muslim hearts and minds might share, and of bridging the divisions, and of achieving, at last, a cultural peace between the West and Islam: the goals that every reasonable person yearns to see achieved, even if not everybody would assent too quickly to a vision of the world that consigns the West to one corner and Islam to another.

Such was the evaluation in *The New York Times Magazine*. It was tempered. But it was confident. And here, in a single magazine profile by an admired writer, the entire heap of well-established European journalistic platitudes that Caroline Fourest had catalogued and deplored three years earlier in France glided smoothly into American print, as if landing

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing

at the airport. The European platitudes flourished, too, in their new American home. By the time Buruma's defense of Ramadan had appeared, Timothy Garton Ash had already hinted at the entire line of argument in *The New York Review of Books*. Garton Ash is a rightly admired journalist, famous for having reported accurately and in depth from the Soviet bloc countries during the years of repression. His dispatches from East Germany and other communist countries used to run in those same pages, *The New York Review of Books*. He used to applaud the anti-communist dissidents. In 2006 he applauded Ian Buruma's journalism on Islamist themes. And, in passing, he applauded Tariq Ramadan, too. He applauded Ramadan precisely along Buruma's lines, except without the cautionary remarks.

A third journalist stepped forward. This was Stéphanie Giry, an editor at *Foreign Affairs*. Ramadan published a biography of the Prophet Muhammad. The biography came out in Britain under the title *The Messenger* and, in the United States, under the title *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*. Oxford University Press published the American edition, and *The New York Times Book Review* invited Giry to evaluate the book. Her evaluation was positive. She invoked the profile of Ramadan by Buruma that had just then appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*. She joined her applause to Buruma's. She seconded Buruma's dismissal of Ramadan's critics. She looked on Ramadan's book on the Prophet Muhammad as politically progressive: a book that "can help reconcile Islam with Western liberalism today"—which echoed Buruma's verdict on Ramadan exactly.

It is not obvious to me that Buruma, in preparing his profile for *The New York Times Magazine*, had read very much by Ramadan, nor that Giry, in working up her evaluation for *The New York Times Book*

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing

Review, had read more than a single book, though she had met the man. As for Garton Ash, he intimated in *The New York Review of Books* that he based his estimation of Ramadan on having heard him speak at Oxford, where Garton Ash and Ramadan have been colleagues—which suggests that Garton Ash may have read nothing at all. Even so, a conventional wisdom had plainly convened. The conventional wisdom looked on Tariq Ramadan as a long-awaited Islamic hero—the religious thinker who was going, at last, to adapt Islam to the modern world. This was the reigning opinion in the New York intellectual press, back in 2006 and 2007. In the years since then, a number of subtler and more cautious judgments have made their way into print. Ramadan's critics and skeptics have added their own pointed remarks, here and there. Still, those original American portraits of Ramadan, the ones in the New York magazines in 2006 and 2007, expressed a set of instincts and assumptions, and the instincts and assumptions have turned out to be enduring and influential—instincts and assumptions that are bound to go on shaping the ways that a great many people in the Western countries look on the Islamist movement, and how they look on the Muslim liberals, too, who are the Islamist movement's greatest enemies.

And so, Tariq Ramadan, by acquiring a brilliant fame and refracting its rays in one country after another, has succeeded in brightly illuminating a twin development in the world of modern ideas. He has illuminated a large new trend among select circles of pious Muslims in Europe and in many other places around the world. And he has illuminated an equally remarkable trend among the normally impious journalists of the Western countries. A new twist in the modern history of Islam; and likewise in the history of the Western intellectuals.

(c) 2010 Paul Berman/Melville House Publishing