

Review Essay: Paul Berman's *The Flight of the Intellectuals* and Tariq Ramadan's *What I Believe*

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1. Introduction

Neither of the books under review is a biography, but each devotes its pages to the words and deeds of a single individual. The individual in question happens to be Tariq Ramadan, Professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford University, globe-trotting political activist, media personality, author of several well-received books on Islam in the contemporary world, and human magnet for controversy.

The depictions of Ramadan we encounter in these books are a Rashomon-like study in contrasts. Paul Berman's *The Flight of the Intellectuals* effectively describes Ramadan as a moral and intellectual fraud masquerading as a liberal reformer: a crypto-terrorist, a crypto-misogynist, an excuse-maker for anti-Semitism, and an apologist for the apologists of Hitler's Final Solution.¹ Ramadan's *What I Believe* takes a predictably more benign view of its subject: dismissing the accusations made against him as the defamations of frightened hacks, Ramadan invites us, in a spirit of "open, thorough, and critical debate," to "a book of ideas, an introduction to what I believe, meant for those who really want to understand but who do not always have enough time to read and study all the books."² Needless to say, none of the ideas intended for that audience indicate the slightest sympathy for terrorism, misogyny, anti-Semitism, or genocide.

Both authors might well be wrong about Ramadan, but both cannot possibly be right. That fact gives both books a kind of semi-prurient urgency: What, one wonders, *is* the truth about Tariq Ramadan? The more-than-occasional tedium of the inquiry, however, and its uneasy similarity to gossip-mongering, prompts questions about the point of the inquest: Why all this fuss about the reputation and *bona fides* of an obscure Oxford don? Berman's book does a good job at posing these questions, but an uneven job at answering them. Ramadan's book evades more questions than it either poses or answers.

¹ Paul Berman, *The Flight of the Intellectuals* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2010); hereafter, *Flight*.

² Tariq Ramadan, *What I Believe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 6-7.

2. *Dramatis Personae*

It's probably misleading to describe either Ramadan or Berman as "obscure," since both are about as obscure in some circles as they are famous or notorious in others. In any case, since biographies matter to the controversies discussed in both books, some back-story about both individuals may be in order.

Tariq Ramadan was born in 1962 in Geneva, Switzerland, the son of Said Ramadan and Wafa al-Banna, the latter being the eldest daughter of Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Raised and educated in Switzerland, he (Tariq) earned the equivalent of a Master's degree in philosophy and French literature, and a doctorate in Arabic/Islamic Studies at the University of Geneva. Having earned his dissertation, Ramadan set out for his parents' native Egypt to study Islamic law at al-Azhar University in Cairo. He returned to Europe in the 1990s, where he published several books on the emerging character of "Western" or "European" Islam, achieving some notoriety for his views in Switzerland, France, and parts of the Arab world.

Essentially unknown in American intellectual circles until after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Ramadan rose to prominence in this country during the concerted post-9/11 quest for a "bridge builder between Islam and the West." To that end, he was invited in 2004 by the University of Notre Dame to become the Henry R. Luce Professor of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies there. Having accepted the offer, and having shipped his belongings to South Bend, Indiana, Ramadan's visa was revoked just prior to his entry into the United States, obliging him to resign the Notre Dame position, and to take one at Oxford instead. Following a lawsuit in 2006 by the American and New York Civil Liberties Unions, Ramadan re-applied for a visa to enter the U.S., only to have this visa request denied later that year on grounds of his having provided "material support to a terrorist organization"—namely, two charities designated by the U.S. government as fundraising fronts for the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas.³

³ The relevant legal case is *American Academy vs. Chertoff* (2007), in an opinion written by the Honorable Paul A. Crotty, U.S. District Judge, accessed online at: http://www.aclu.org/images/exclusion/asset_upload_file33_33325.pdf.

A reading of Crotty's opinion suggests that the government's case against Ramadan was probably a greater threat to American national security than Ramadan's presence would have been. In a passage of stunning nonsensicality (one of several throughout the opinion), Crotty writes: "The statute [under review in the case] imposes a heavy burden: it requires Professor Ramadan to prove a negative, and to do so by clear and convincing proof. But this outcome is the direct result of the language Congress used. It is the Court's role to interpret the statute as written by Congress, not to question Congress' wisdom in drawing the line where it did" (p. 30). Since there is no such thing as the "clear and convincing proof" of a negative, the Court's assertion implies that the American judiciary lacks the authority to question a statute that demands outright impossibilities of those within its jurisdiction. For an admirable

The ironic but predictable result of these legal squabbles was to give Ramadan more publicity than he might otherwise have gotten. Established at Oxford, he published several more books on Islam, and then began a career, à la Bono and George Soros, in global political activism. In 2010, the U.S. government reversed its earlier position on his supposed terrorist connections, granting him a visa, and allowing him into the country. He has since gone on two American speaking tours, one in 2010 and one in 2011, addressing rapt and enthusiastic audiences at colleges and universities, as well as at Islamic centers around the country. While the initial enthusiasm for him in the mainstream media has recently begun to die down, the love affair with his theo-political theorizing appears only just to have begun in the academy.

Paul Berman is an American journalist with degrees in American history from Columbia University, and wide reportorial expertise in Europe and Latin America. Currently a Distinguished Writer in Residence at the Arthur L. Carter Institute of Journalism at New York University, he is the author of several books, among them a celebrated series that traces the effects of totalitarian theory and practice on the moral and intellectual life of the left. Accused by many on the left of having betrayed its values—of having become, in one derisive formulation, “the philosopher-king of the liberal hawks”—Berman’s writing is in fact firmly leftist in orientation, structured by the left’s moral and political presuppositions, and soaked in nostalgia for the glory days of the *soixante-huitards*.

To the best of my knowledge, Berman’s first skirmish with Ramadan dates to the two or three skeptical pages he devotes to Ramadan’s thought in his 2003 book *Terror and Liberalism*.⁴ By 2007, however, Berman’s skepticism had evidently turned to outright hostility, provoking what he accurately calls a “long, intricate, and not-always sweet-tempered essay” on Ramadan in *The New Republic*.⁵ The *New Republic* essay forms the core of *Flight*, to which Berman adds “some . . . historical details,” drawn “from the archival discoveries . . . of several talented historians,” as well as ruminations on “a couple of medieval texts, which bear on our own non-medieval difficulties.”⁶ In describing Ramadan as a moral and intellectual fraud,

defense of judicial review in the case, see the American Civil Liberties Union press release, “ACLU Asks Federal Appeals Court to Lift Ban on Renowned Scholar,” January 23, 2008, accessed online at: <http://www.aclu.org/national-security/aclu-asks-federal-appeals-court-lift-ban-renowned-scholar>.

⁴ Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), pp. 24-26.

⁵ Paul Berman, “Who’s Afraid of Tariq Ramadan?” *The New Republic*, June 4, 2007, accessed online at: <http://www.tnr.com/article/who%E2%80%99s-afraid-tariq-ramadan>.

⁶ From the Preface to *Flight* (pages unnumbered).

Berman also manages to accuse liberal intellectuals of complicity⁷ in that fraud (hence the book's title), to praise Ramadan's antagonist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and to criticize the same liberal intellectuals for having attacked Hirsi Ali in the first place. This is not a morally timid book, or one that shrinks from controversy.

Flight has widely been praised as a work of exemplary rigor and courage. It has also been derided, even reviled, as an object of outright contempt. In fact, Berman's book is a very mixed bag which gets about as much right as it gets wrong. What it gets right is very much worth saying. What it gets wrong, it gets badly wrong.

3. What *Flight* Gets Right

As I see it, Berman gets three important things right in *Flight*. He asks the right questions about Ramadan's generally unscrutinized rise to moral and intellectual prominence in the United States. He makes a credible case for Ramadan's complicity in the pro-Nazi past of his (Ramadan's) grandfather, Hasan al-Banna. And he correctly draws attention to Ramadan's equivocal response to a question about stoning as the (supposedly) Islamic punishment for adultery. These are not, to my mind, the most fundamental problems with Ramadan's project or career, but they are real problems, and they fully deserve the attention Berman gives them.

It's difficult to grasp the legitimacy of Berman's first point unless one revisits the smarmy public relations campaign mounted on Ramadan's behalf over the past decade, defined by the slogan that Ramadan was the best candidate for "building a bridge between Islam and the West." Though accepted in some quarters as the cutting edge of intellectual sophistication, this "bridge" metaphor actually makes very little sense. A bridge is a structure built over an obstacle to facilitate passage from one location to the other. We

⁷ "Complicity" is my term, not Berman's. As I'll use it throughout this review, "complicity" denotes any knowing and voluntary association with an immoral agent or institution that provides support for or offers agreement, approval, and endorsement of his or its immorality, whether prospectively, *ex post facto*, or in the present. I myself would endorse the view of complicity (or "sanction," to use her term) taken by Ayn Rand. See Rand's "How Does One Lead a Rational Life in an Irrational Society?" and "The Cult of Moral Grayness," in *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Signet, 1964), pp. 82-86 and 87-92, and her "The Psychology of Psychologizing," in *The Voice of Reason: Essays in Objectivist Thought*, ed. Leonard Peikoff (New York: Meridian, 1989), pp. 23-31. For further elaboration on Rand's view, see Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Meridian, 1991), pp. 276-86; David Kelley, *The Contested Legacy of Ayn Rand: Truth and Toleration in Objectivism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000), pp. 19-60; and Tara Smith, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 159-64. Rand's conception of complicity or sanction is broader than that typically discussed in the mainstream literature, where complicity is understood by analogy with the use of that term in criminal law. See, e.g., John Gardner, "Complicity and Causality," *Criminal Law and Philosophy* 1 (2007), pp. 127-41.

might, then, very charitably understand a “bridge between Islam and the West” as affording a passage to mutual understanding over the obstacle of mutual incomprehension. But the idea of a “passage” presupposes a fixed point of departure and a clear destination. Somewhat absurdly, as conceived by the putative bridge builders themselves, neither “Islam” nor “the West” satisfies this description. Instead, “Islam” denotes a multiplicity of incommensurably different things (“Islam is not a monolith”) and “the West” denotes an equally vague grab-bag of free-floating and feel-good associations. It is unclear how one builds a “bridge” between two sets of civilizational equivocations, and what exactly would be accomplished by trying. It sounds like the proverbial bridge to and from nowhere.

In any case, since Tariq Ramadan was the man for the bridge-building job, and the job itself was a moral imperative, his views were to be admired rather than scrutinized or criticized. Remarkable efforts at special pleading were made on Ramadan’s behalf, lest overly sharp criticism upset the requirements of the Islamo-Western Bridge-Building Enterprise. Much of this consisted of telling readers that Ramadan was not to be subjected to criticisms of the sort reserved, say, for right-wing Christians with similar views. Thus, according to his defenders, one was not to evaluate Ramadan’s historical books by *historical* standards, since what really mattered was his “political philosophy.”⁸ But one was not to evaluate his claims about philosophy by *philosophical* standards, since philosophers were made irrelevant by Ramadan’s “strategic calculation that embracing the political passions of the Muslim mainstream is the only way for his reformist agenda to gain any sort of credibility or traction with the Muslim audiences that really matter.”⁹ Not that one was to evaluate Ramadan’s strategic calculations in a coarsely political fashion, of course: he was an autonomous *intellectual*.¹⁰ But then, one was not to evaluate his intellectual-sounding claims in a coldly intellectual spirit, either, since he was fundamentally a populist *politician*.¹¹ Best not to evaluate Ramadan by any determinate standards at all?

⁸ Stephanie Giry, “The Faces of Tariq Ramadan,” *The New York Times*, April 1, 2007, accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/01/books/review/Giry.t.html>.

⁹ Marc Lynch, “Veiled Truths: The Rise of Political Islam in the West,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2010, accessed online at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66468/marc-lynch/veiled-truths>.

¹⁰ Andrew F. March, “Law as a Vanishing Mediator in the Theological Ethics of Tariq Ramadan,” *European Journal of Political Theory*, accessed online at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1478910.

¹¹ R. Scott Appleby, quoted in Ian Buruma, “Tariq Ramadan Has an Identity Issue,” *The New York Times Magazine*, February 4, 2007, accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/04/magazine/04ramadan.t.html?pagewanted=all>.

It certainly seemed that way. On the one hand, Ramadan was “Europe’s leading Muslim intellectual” about whom it was legitimate to have world-historical expectations on par with Martin Luther, Copernicus, and Kant.¹² On the other hand, one was to ratchet down expectations so as to accommodate Ramadan’s “propensity for intolerance” and for speaking “out of both sides of his mouth”—intolerance and disingenuousness being the price for the best that Europe had to offer.¹³ But maybe intellectual expectations were the wrong ones to have of Europe’s leading Muslim intellectual. After all, even his most ardent defenders had described his work as “intriguing,” but “not necessarily intellectually powerful.”¹⁴ So perhaps we were to “make friends” with Ramadan, not to critique him.¹⁵ Of course, making friends with him meant muting any serious inquiries into his past. So it was enough for some to know that Ramadan was an embattled intellectual “who, in a sure sign of his moderation, has made enemies in both the Western and the Muslim worlds.”¹⁶ But one couldn’t push that principle too hard, since a literal interpretation of it might simultaneously have made “moderates” of Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Qaddafi. (Embarrassingly enough, the author of the latter claim *had* made a moderate of Muammar Qaddafi.¹⁷) But “pushing hard” was not exactly what Ramadan’s defenders

¹² See Alan Wolfe, “Why Americans Should Welcome Tariq Ramadan,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 51, no. 3 (September 10, 2004), p. B20; Nicholas Tampio, “Constructing the Space of Testimony: Tariq Ramadan’s Copernican Revolution,” *Political Theory* 39, no. 5 (October 2011), pp. 600-629; Paul Donnelly, “Tariq Ramadan: The Muslim Martin Luther?” *Salon*, February 15, 2002, accessed online at: http://www.salon.com/2002/02/15/ramadan_2/.

¹³ Wolfe, “Why Americans Should Welcome Tariq Ramadan,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B20.

¹⁴ Andrew F. March, “Reading Tariq Ramadan: Political Liberalism, Islam, and ‘Overlapping Consensus,’” *Ethics and International Affairs* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2007), p. 406.

¹⁵ Wolfe, “Why Americans Should Welcome Tariq Ramadan,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B20.

¹⁶ Benjamin R. Barber, “Letters: ‘Flight of the Intellectuals,’” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2010, accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/books/review/Letters-t-FLIGHTOFTHEI LETTERS.html>.

¹⁷ The *locus classicus* is Benjamin R. Barber, “Gaddafi’s Libya: An Ally for America?” *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2007, accessed online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/08/14/AR2007081401328.html>. For a good discussion, see Jon Wiener, “Professors Paid by Qaddafi: Providing ‘Positive Public Relations,’” *The Nation*, March 5, 2011, accessed online at: <http://www.thenation.com/blog/159046/professors-paid-qaddafi-providing-positive-public-relations>. See also Barber’s response in *The Nation*, March 6, 2011, accessed online at: <http://www.thenation.com/article/159054/benjamin-barber-responds>.

were after. As one of them candidly put it, describing a “debate” he had had with Ramadan: “Perhaps I didn’t push hard enough. We agreed on most issues...”¹⁸ Such airy complacency was the predictable result of a climate of opinion in which the burden of proof was on Ramadan’s critics to make criticisms, not on Ramadan to make his case.

In light of this, Berman’s discussion of Ramadan’s rise to prominence is apt, even understated. Correctly questioning the intellectual credentials of many of Ramadan’s most prominent defenders,¹⁹ Berman writes: “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” (p. 26). That “wisdom” was less focused on the truth of Ramadan’s claims than on bolstering the success of his project, regardless of its cogency or merits: “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” (p. 26). Very well put—and compatible with the observation that none of the *modern* ideas were his.

The issue is not merely that Ramadan’s views went unscrutinized, but that there were elements in them that desperately needed scrutiny. One of them—the one that reflects the most poorly on his defenders—is Ramadan’s adamant refusal to repudiate (or even acknowledge) his grandfather’s pro-Nazi past. This issue, developed over about a hundred pages of *Flight* (pp. 27-126), involves a bit of moral and historical complexity. Ordinarily, it would be illegitimate to hold one person responsible for another person’s views, no matter how closely connected by family ties the two happened to be. Individual responsibility is a basic presupposition of moral judgment, and individual responsibility cannot be passed on by genetic means. But a person can certainly be held responsible for those of his *own* words which make him complicitous in the injustice of another, especially if those words make him complicitous in an injustice like Nazism. And one cannot, in such a case, plead immunity from moral judgment because one’s complicity involves a revered family member, the repudiation of whom would be personally or emotionally costly. It is after all Ramadan himself who insists that moral obligations trump personal or familial ties.²⁰ If family ties can’t put a person on the moral hook, they can’t get him off the hook, either.

¹⁸ Ian Buruma, “Tariq Ramadan Has an Identity Issue,” *The New York Times Magazine*.

¹⁹ I don’t mean formal academic or journalistic credentials, but credentials in the dictionary sense of the word: “that which entitles to credit or confidence.”

²⁰ Cf. Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 86-93.

Berman makes a strong case to the effect that Ramadan is guilty of a morally significant sort of complicity with Arab Nazism. Drawing on the work of historian Jeffrey Herf,²¹ Berman points out that the Palestinian leader Amin al-Husseini not only collaborated with the Nazis prior to and during the Second World War, but was also directly involved in the Final Solution (pp. 71, 91-97). Having spent most of the war in Germany, Husseini escaped to Switzerland after the Nazi defeat, but was extradited to France and arrested there (p. 99). After a concerted Arab attempt to have him released, “the French authorities quietly permitted [Husseini] to slip away” (p. 104). On his return to Egypt in 1946, Husseini was lauded in unqualified terms by Ramadan’s grandfather, Hasan al-Banna: Berman quotes al-Banna’s sickening obeisance for Husseini in enough detail to show us that al-Banna’s admiration for Husseini included admiration for his unreconstructed Nazi past (pp. 105-7). Berman also argues, correctly, that Ramadan is equally admiring of Yusuf Qaradawi, a Muslim cleric whose various ravings Berman quotes in some detail (pp. 77-78, 92, 186-92).

Though Ramadan has explicitly opposed anti-Semitism,²² he has expressed his admiration of al-Banna in ways that evade the issue of al-Banna’s praise for Husseini’s Nazism, and ultimately put him, Ramadan, in the position of excusing it: “I put Hassan al Banna in the context of his period and his society, and I take that context into account in analyzing his objectives and the means he used to achieve them.”²³ But taking his “context into account” is perfectly compatible with condemning his pro-Nazi apologetics,

²¹ See Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). Herf’s claims have been the subject of sharp criticism by the historian Gilbert Achcar, but the issues that divide Herf from Achcar are irrelevant to those discussed in the text. As it happens, Berman’s claims about al-Banna are nicely complemented by Achcar’s work. See Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), chap. 4.

As Malise Ruthven notes (“Righteous and Wrong,” *New York Review of Books*, August 19, 2010, accessed online at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/aug/19/righteous-wrong/?pagination=false>), Berman makes some mistakes of historical fact in his discussion of post-war sympathy for Nazism, but those mistakes are irrelevant to what Berman legitimately calls the “simple and modest point” he is making—namely, Ramadan’s failure to repudiate Hasan al-Banna’s pro-Nazi legacy (pp. 112-13). Despite the blustering tone of his review, Ruthven concedes this “simple and modest point” in its sixteenth paragraph, only to ignore it thereafter.

²² See Joseph Algazy’s interview with Ramadan in “My Fellow Muslims, We Must Fight Anti-Semitism,” *Ha’aretz*, May 26, 2002, accessed online at: <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/my-fellow-muslims-we-must-fight-anti-semitism-1.44158>.

²³ Quoted in Caroline Fourest, *Brother Tariq: The Doublespeak of Tariq Ramadan* (New York: Encounter, 2008), p. 5.

which is what Ramadan refuses to do.²⁴ Having dug himself into a hole, Ramadan digs deeper: “[al-Banna’s] commitment also is a continuing reason for my respect and admiration.”²⁵ Since al-Banna was committed to making excuses for the Nazis, Ramadan’s claim suggests that his respect and admiration extends to pro-Nazi excuse-making. Digging yet deeper: “I have studied Hassan al Banna’s ideas with great care and there is nothing in this heritage that I reject. His relation to God, his spirituality, his mysticism, his personality, as well as his critical reflections on law, politics, society, and pluralism, testify for me to his qualities of heart and mind.”²⁶ If there is really *nothing* in al-Banna’s heritage that Ramadan rejects, he cannot complain when his critics infer that there is nothing in the pro-Nazi parts of it that he rejects, either.

Pressed to repudiate al-Banna and his “heritage,” Ramadan has consistently refused to do so: “[al-Banna] was living in the ‘30s and ‘40s. He was against British colonization. He built schools. He was promoting a vision. There are things with which I agree, and others, that put into context, I may disagree. But I’m not condemning him. He never killed someone.”²⁷ The first four claims might well have been made of Adolph Hitler. The last claim echoes Adolph Eichmann’s pathetic attempts at self-exoneration. All seven claims evade the fact that al-Banna had expressed praise for a member of the Third Reich who had voluntarily participated in mass murder (p. 94). We are left to believe that Ramadan may disagree with such praise (or may not), but cannot bring himself to condemn it. Again: “I will not waste my time here trying to defend myself. I have no desire or time for this.”²⁸ That gives us an indication of Ramadan’s priorities, but it doesn’t address the issue. Elsewhere, Ramadan claims that that his critics are ill-motivated, that no one has provided “clear evidence” of his equivocations, that his “detractors find it difficult to state precisely the so-called ambiguities in what I say,” and that the criticisms made against him are illegitimately genetic or racial in character.²⁹ These

²⁴ Contrast Ramadan’s evasions with Achcar’s exemplary and very different “contextualization” of al-Banna and other “reactionary and/or fundamentalist pan Islamists” in *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, pp. 56, 163-64, and generally, chap. 4.

²⁵ Quoted in Fourest, *Brother Tariq*, p. 5.

²⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

²⁷ Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, “On U.S. Speaking Tour, Once Banned Muslim Scholar Tariq Ramadan Shares His Vision of the Future,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 2010, accessed online at: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-04-23/news/ct-oped-0423-ramadan-20100423_1_muslim-brotherhood-muslim-scholar-american-muslims.

²⁸ Ramadan, *What I Believe*, p. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 15, 19.

claims are transparent falsehoods. They are not the assertions of a man interested in truth, candor, or historicity, but of one who has made dishonesty the standard operating procedure of his career as a public intellectual.

Though there is no evidence that Ramadan is himself an anti-Semite,³⁰ the fact remains that his highly generalized, in-principle condemnations of anti-Semitism do not rise to the sort of specific and explicit repudiation that al-Banna (or Qaradawi) deserve. And his positive refusal to repudiate them compounds the offense. Like Berman, I think it is fair to demand such a repudiation of Ramadan, and like Berman, I interpret Ramadan's refusal to meet the demand as a morally culpable evasion—culpability that extends to his defenders' refusal to “push” him on the issue.

Berman's third legitimate point is his discussion of the notorious “stoning debate” of 2003. The debate in question took place on French television, pitting Ramadan against Nicolas Sarkozy, then France's Minister of the Interior. Exploiting the fact that Ramadan's brother Hani had endorsed stoning women to death as a punishment for adultery,³¹ Sarkozy had asked, shrewdly, where Tariq stood on the issue. Ramadan responded that he favored a “moratorium” on the practice. Berman reproduces the ensuing conversation.

Mr. Sarkozy: A moratorium... Mr. Ramadan, are you serious?

Mr. Ramadan: Wait, let me finish.

Mr. Sarkozy: A moratorium, that is to say, we should, for a while, hold back from stoning women?

Mr. Ramadan: No, no, wait... What does a moratorium mean? A moratorium would mean that we absolutely end the application of all those penalties, in order to have a true debate. And my position is

³⁰ Given Ramadan's patent dishonesty on the topic of al-Banna, many writers, Berman included (pp. 157-69), have been tempted to accuse Ramadan of anti-Semitism on the basis of his notorious online essay, “Critique of the (New) Communitarian Intellectuals” (first published online on October 3, 2003 at Oumma.com), accessed online at: <http://www.islamophobia-watch.com/islamophobia-watch/2003/10/3/critique-of-the-new-communitarian-intellectuals.html>. But such claims are unwarranted: there is no evidence of anti-Semitism in the essay, and some truth to Ramadan's complaint that Muslim political allegiances are held to a higher level of scrutiny than Jewish ones in the European and American media.

³¹ The debate over “stoning women for adultery in Islam” is made confusing by at least five facts: (1) The Qur'an explicitly prescribes whipping rather than stoning for adultery, and does so for both men and women (Qur'an, 24:2). (2) Nonetheless, some orthodox versions of Islamic law prescribe stoning for adultery, both for men and women. (3) Despite (1) and (2), some authoritatively Islamic traditions seem to prescribe stoning for women *rather than* men. (4) All versions of Islamic law are constrained by rules of evidence that make punishments for adultery difficult to enforce. (5) “Adultery” is itself an ambiguous term. Unfortunately, Berman erroneously refers to stoning as a “Koranic” prescription (p. 213), and Sarkozy misleadingly formulates his question as one about the stoning of women, but these technical errors do not invalidate the general legitimacy of Sarkozy's query.

that if we arrive at a consensus among Muslims, it will necessarily end. But you cannot, you know, when you are in a community... Today on television, I can please the French people who are watching by saying, 'Me, my own position.' But my own position does not count. What matters is to bring about an evolution in Muslim mentalities, Mr. Sarkozy. It's necessary that you understand. (p. 214)

At this point, Sarkozy demanded an unequivocal condemnation, to which Ramadan offered the following response:

Mr. Sarkozy, listen well to what I am saying. What I say, my own position, is that the law is not applicable—that's clear. But today I speak to Muslims around the world and I take part, even in the United States, in the Muslim world...You should have a pedagogical posture that makes people discuss things. You can decide all by yourself to be a progressive in the communities. That's too easy. Today, my position is, that is to say, 'We should stop.' (p. 215)

Berman is right to find Ramadan's response culpable, but is not, I think, clear enough about why. Note first that Ramadan describes stoning as a "law" that no longer *applies*, leaving open the possibility that it once did. His claim thereby implies not that stoning is wrong, but that it is outdated—a claim that saves Ramadan from having to judge or condemn those who first promulgated the "law," arguably the Prophet Muhammad himself.³² Second, Ramadan falsely implies that if a moratorium is now imposed, he can somehow predict that a consensus against stoning *will* emerge. But there is no way to predict that, a fact he essentially concedes in his recent book *Radical Reform*.³³ In any case, he fails to acknowledge that if no consensus were to emerge, the

³² Cf. *Sahih al Bukhari*, vol. 3, sec. 50: conditions #885, accessed online at: http://www.quranenglish.com/hadith/Sahih_Bukhari/050.htm. Ramadan dances around this issue, but never directly addresses it; see Tariq Ramadan, "International Call for a Moratorium on Corporal Punishment, Stoning and the Death Penalty in the Islamic World," April 5, 2005, accessed online at: <http://www.tariqramadan.com/An-International-call-for.html>. Instead, in an assertion of incredible irresponsibility and hypocrisy, Ramadan accuses Muslims *en masse* of complicity, by virtue of their inaction and silence, in all corporal punishments undertaken in the name of Islam (ibid., p. 4). Apart from directly flouting the Qur'anic principle of strict individual responsibility before God for one's *own* actions (53:38-39), Ramadan's claim surely raises the following question: If the average Muslim is complicitous in a range of injustices by virtue of his or her *inaction and silence*, how could Hasan al-Banna be innocent of complicity in Nazism despite his *active apologetics* for Amin al-Husseini?

³³ Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 4, 274-77.

moratorium would have to be lifted, and the punishments would have to resume. He also fails to make clear that if he lacks the authority unilaterally to put a stop to stoning, he lacks the authority unilaterally to demand a moratorium on it.

At a deeper level, however, we should pay close attention to Ramadan's peculiar confession: "My position doesn't count." It is hard to think of a clearer, more explicit avowal of *sacrificium intellectus* than this one sentence. In making it, Ramadan makes clear that he is not to be interpreted as the autonomous moral-intellectual agent he often claims to be, but as a political functionary, beholden to a notional set of quasi-legal constituencies that dictate what he can or cannot say. His avowal of this view fully justifies Berman's verdict, in some of the best writing in *Flight*, that Ramadan "cannot think for himself. He does not believe in thinking for himself" (p. 241). Many critics have ridiculed that claim, but none have refuted it.

4. What *Flight* Gets Wrong

Berman's book has, as remarked above, been pummeled by a small handful of zealously antagonistic critics. There is plenty in *Flight* worth criticizing, some of it discussed by some of these critics, but on the whole, the criticisms made of *Flight* are remarkably weak. Berman's critics have to a surprising degree contented themselves with misrepresenting his claims, attacking his character, changing the subject, pulling academic rank, and vehemently missing his point. Very few have, to my mind, criticized *Flight* for the things in it that most clearly deserve criticism.³⁴ As I see it, the book's weaknesses fall into two categories, which might be described as its formal defects and its substantive ones.

As to the formal defects, *Flight* lacks the clarity and grace of the best of Berman's earlier writing, and suffers on the whole from disorganization, digressiveness, and an irritating tendency to name-dropping. While the book contains a great abundance of citations to the secondary (mostly French) literature, Berman's references to this literature do little to clarify the most important issues, and often just drag the reader through pages of verbal tedium. So do his references to medieval Islamic philosophy. Problematically, he shows little familiarity with contemporary academic work in philosophy, comparative politics, or Near East/Islamic Studies from the English-speaking world, despite its relevance to his arguments. The result is a book that often ends up preaching to the converted, and sometimes seems intended to.

³⁴ Two notable exceptions to this generalization are long, mixed-verdict reviews of *Flight* in relatively obscure online journals by non-experts from outside of the academy. See Marc Tracy, "Seasonal Migration of the Intellectuals," *n+1*, September 9, 2010, accessed online at: <http://nplusonemag.com/Seasonal-Migration>; and Hussein Ibish, "Intellectual Flights and Narrative Wars," *The Common Review*, January 4, 2011, accessed online at: <http://www.thecommonreview.org/article/archive/2011/01/article/intellectual-flights-and-narrative-wars.html>.

Even when Berman is merely discussing Ramadan's books for purposes of exposition, he seems to have trouble staying on topic for long enough to explain what a given book is about, and what he thinks is going on it. It is, for example, an important question whether Ramadan's political theorizing amounts in the end to a convoluted defense of theocracy. Chapter 5 of *Flight* correctly looks for an answer to that question in Ramadan's 2004 book, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, but Berman's digressive ruminations in that chapter fail to come to grips with what Ramadan is actually saying there. One gets the impression that Berman is too bored with *Western Muslims* to make sense of it, but what he offers up is a maudering jeremiad that makes no coherent point at all. What might have been a trenchant critique ends up as a lost opportunity.

Worse perhaps than the book's formal defects are its substantive ones—among them a moral high-handedness that is a serious problem in a book that places so high a premium on the imperative to pass moral judgment in intellectual life. *Flight* is littered with oversimplifications, exaggerations, double standards, innuendo, and conspiracy theorizing that undercut the moral authority that Berman might otherwise have had. He repeatedly castigates Ramadan for being a kind of crypto-terrorist and crypto-misogynist, prepared to use force against the innocent in pursuit of his theo-political aims. But one can't successfully make such claims unless one makes explicit arguments for them, and one can't make explicit arguments unless one has a clearer grasp of the distinction between licit and illicit uses of force than Berman evidently has.

Take the issue of terrorism. I don't doubt that Ramadan has a culpable sympathy for terrorism, but to make that charge stick, one has to do a better prosecutorial job of it than Berman manages in the chapter of *Flight* devoted to the task (Chapter 6). After a brief discussion of Ramadan's *Jihad, Violence, Guerre et Paix en Islam (Jihad, Violence, War, and Peace in Islam)*, and criticism of what he takes to be its equivocations, Berman levels his main charge against Ramadan: "[O]n one level, Tariq Ramadan has said more than once that he disapproves of terrorism. But there is a cost in structuring an argument on more than one level" (p. 196). The punchline? "The cost to Ramadan in all of this is a dark smudge of ambiguity, and the smudge runs across everything he writes on the topic of terror and violence" (p. 197). So Berman's objection implies that Ramadan's discussion of "the topic of terror and violence" is *complex*. But that would only be an objection if the topic were itself very simple.

The flash point here is Israel. Berman is eager to demand that Ramadan abjure the use of violence against Israel. At times, one wonders whether Berman thinks that *any* violence against Israeli civilians is "terrorism" (p. 196). He is much less eager to give serious thought as to why anyone might justifiably want to use violence against Israelis, civilian or otherwise. If Berman prefers unambiguous talk, he might reflect on the fact that the Israeli government is guilty of three decades of armed, state-sponsored expropriation in the West Bank, and that it has, as a matter of state

policy, used a combination of heavily armed civilians (a.k.a. “settlers”) and military forces to effectuate this aim.³⁵ One way of dealing with expropriation of this sort is to acquiesce in it. Another way is to resist. When the expropriation is violent, and one lacks legal recourse to respond to it, the most effective form of resistance would seem to involve independent retaliatory violence. Is all such violence terrorism?

Though his book seems by default to suggest that the answer is “yes,” Berman himself alludes elsewhere (rather cryptically) to Israel’s “crimes”—appropriately enough, since “state-sponsored expropriation” is essentially a synonym for “armed robbery.”³⁶ Doesn’t the commission of a crime like armed robbery justify violent self-defense by the victim? The answer in every jurisdiction of the United States is “yes,” and in many jurisdictions, the right of self-defense permits one to “stand one’s ground” whenever one is unjustly attacked on “ground” that is one’s own by right. What if one’s “ground” is attacked for thirty years by thousands of armed thugs who insist on the right to take it by force, and are systematically backed by military force in doing so? In a case like that, the laws of self-defense appropriate to a settled and well-ordered regime like the United States will tend to understate what self-defense really requires. John Locke tells us in his *Second Treatise* that where there is “no common superior on Earth to appeal to for relief”—and in the West Bank, there often isn’t—I may *kill* a thief who sets out to rob me.³⁷ It’s an interesting question what the exercise of such a right would look like if put into practice by Palestinian victims of Israeli expropriation. Of course, discussion of that question presupposes an inquiry into questions about rightful ownership, something that Berman seems reluctant to discuss. But an author reluctant to discuss rightful ownership in

³⁵ Geoffrey Aronson, *Creating Facts: Israel, Palestinians & the West Bank* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987); Robert I. Friedman, *Zealots for Zion: Inside Israel’s West Bank Settlement Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, *Lords of the Land: The War Over Israel’s Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967-2007* (New York: Nation Books, 2007). See also B’Tselem’s reports, *Land Grab: Israel’s Settlement Policy in the West Bank* (May 2002), accessed online at: http://www.btselem.org/publications/summaries/200205_land_grab; and *By Hook and By Crook: Israel’s Settlement Policy in the West Bank* (July 2010), accessed online at: http://www.btselem.org/publications/summaries/201007_by_hook_and_by_crook. For further background, see Isabel Kershner, “Israel Intensifies Training of Settler Security Teams,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2011, accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/31/world/middleeast/31israel.html>.

³⁶ “Nazi Sheikhs,” interview with Paul Berman by Joel Whitney in *Guernica*, May 2010, accessed online at: http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/1756/berman_5_15_10/.

³⁷ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, UK Cambridge University Press, 1988), sec. 19 (p. 280).

the West Bank should be equally reluctant to turn “ambiguity” into a term of opprobrium in judging the use of violence in the Arab-Israeli dispute, especially after beginning his book with a paean to “the principle of moral complexity.”³⁸

Or take Berman’s discussion of the so-called French headscarf ban:

[T]he French government adopted a law mandating a dress code in the public schools, and the law ignited a fractious debate. The law banned the display of showy religious symbols in the schools. By the provisions of the law, Christian students could no longer wear large crucifixes to school and Sikh boys could no longer wear their turbans, and Jewish boys could no longer wear their yarmulkes. But everyone knew that, in the end, the law was aimed at Islamic headscarves or veils. (p. 207)

Strictly speaking, Berman offers no position in *Flight* on the headscarf ban: a dark smudge of ambiguity, we might say, runs across his writing on the subject. My best guess, on the basis of passages like this one, is that he is in favor of it:

A good many people came to think that ultimately the issue was not whether Muslim girls had a right to wear headscarves in the schools, but whether Muslim girls had the right not to wear headscarves. The purpose in proposing the law was not to crush Islam. The purpose was to transform the public schools into a zone beyond the control of an authoritarian movement. (p. 211)

Berman does not tell us whether he agrees with the “good many people,” but suppose for argument’s sake that I am a Muslim “girl” engaged in conversation with them.³⁹ I voluntarily wish to wear a headscarf in a French

³⁸ From the Preface to *Flight* (unnumbered pages).

³⁹ Though I’ll stick to “girls” in the text, it’s worth noting that some of the “girls” covered by the law are in fact adult women: the law applies to *everyone* in the French public schools, including adult staff or faculty who might wish to wear a headscarf. Berman fails to mention that one fundamental justification for the law was the supposedly “ostentatious or provocative character” of the headscarf itself. According to an authoritative legal analysis by the General Assembly of the French *Conseil d’Etat*, if Aisha and Antoinette are in an enclosed space, and Aisha wears a headscarf, Aisha is guilty of a form of *assault* against Antoinette, the headscarf presumptively signaling an implicit threat against Antoinette’s person. Apparently, the sheer presence of a headscarf violates rights, but a law compelling its removal does not. See the Wikipedia entry on “French Law on Secularity and Conspicuous Religious Symbols in Schools,” accessed online at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_law_on_secularity_and_conspicuous_religious_symbols_in_schools. For an example of the desperate lengths to which advocates of the ban will go, see Claire

public school. My parents ratify my wish. I am now stopped by law from wearing my headscarf even if no one *at* the school has a problem with it. If I am sufficiently defiant, I will eventually be “educated” by an armed law enforcement officer who is instructed to tell me (using force if necessary) that I must take my headscarf off, because having been “forced” to wear it, I must be “liberated” from my oppression. Suppose that I respond that since I *wasn't* forced to wear it, I'm not being “liberated” at all. I'm just being coercively prohibited from wearing something that I'd like to wear. My headscarf belongs to me, and so does my head. The officer has not given me an intelligible reason for thinking that my headscarf cannot go *on* my head, except for the falsehood that I am made free by not being allowed to put it there. Why then is it that *my* rights are not “the issue”?

For all his insistence on moral unambiguity, Berman's claims on this topic are a transparent evasion. He insinuates that no Muslim girl could in fact be in the situation I've described, because no Muslim girl could ever voluntarily wish to wear a headscarf: “Islamists demanded headscarves. Schoolgirls did as they were told. Headscarves became a symbol of Islamist power” (p. 210). These clipped asseverations are supposed to convince us that every schoolgirl in France lives under a reign of Islamist terror that precludes voluntary choice. Given this, every act of headscarf-wearing is by definition involuntary no matter how strenuously a given girl makes the reverse affirmation.

Berman's argument turns on one of two claims:

- (a) Either every apparently voluntary act of headscarf-wearing in France is involuntary, despite apparent evidence of its voluntariness, or
- (b) some girls' voluntary decisions to wear the headscarf are to be overridden because *other* girls' apparently voluntary decisions to wear it are coerced.

Berman offers no evidence for (a) and no argument for (b). Apparently, it is as obvious to Berman as it was to Rousseau that when you force people to do what they don't want to do, you are liberating them.⁴⁰ He neither pauses to question the adverse effects of the law on non-Muslims, nor pauses to wonder

Berlinski, “Ban the Burqa,” *National Review*, August 2, 2010, accessed online at: <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/print/243587>, which likens the Muslim headscarf to “Klan robes or Nazi regalia,” and makes its case against veiling on grounds that Berlinski *herself* regards as spurious, hypocritical, and “without doubt a terrible assault on the ideal of religious liberty.” The article thus invites us to believe that veiling is a greater threat to “the cause of liberty” than actual assaults on liberty based on avowed lies.

⁴⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans., Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's, 1978), I.7, p. 55.

about the legitimacy of a law that cynically targets one minority group by treating the rights of other groups as collateral damage. He criticizes American reporting on the French law (p. 211), but doesn't seem to notice that headscarf-wearing girls and women populate *American* classrooms without inviting the need for the sort of Ataturk-like paternalism exercised by the French government. Neither does it occur to him that by the standards of First Amendment jurisprudence, French *laicite* (secularism) is as obviously "an authoritarian political movement" as is French Islamism. Evidently, for Berman, sixty million Frenchmen really *can't* be wrong, no matter how many rights they violate.

The most unfortunate patch of Berman's book are its last two chapters, devoted for some fifty pages to the development of an ill-considered contrast between Tariq Ramadan on the one hand, and the apostate Muslim writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali on the other (pp. 243-99). In these chapters Berman insists that Hirsi Ali is as important an intellectual figure as Ramadan's defenders have claimed him to be, and that the criticisms of her made by such critics as Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash are somehow problematic or even dishonest. He manages in a particularly crazed passage to equate mere criticism of Hirsi Ali with Stalinism, theocracy, mob violence, anti-Semitism, and misogyny (pp. 263-64).

I am not a fan of either Buruma or Garton Ash's journalism, but in fact, the criticisms they have made of Hirsi Ali are very mild and mostly justified, as far as they go. None of the criticisms of Hirsi Ali quoted in or alluded to in *Flight* even approximate slander (p. 263). Unfortunately, it is Berman's attacks on Hirsi Ali's critics that are slanders. The fact is, Hirsi Ali's views eminently deserve criticism.

The irony is that Berman's defense of Hirsi Ali flouts her own criterion for the evaluation of her work. Devoting page after page to the description of Hirsi Ali's sufferings (pp. 244-47, 257, 260-62) and implying that those sufferings confer authority on her arguments, he forgets that she herself rejects that approach to her work: "I would like to be judged on the validity of my arguments, not as a victim."⁴¹ Consumed by her victimization, Berman forgets how irrational some of her arguments are. He forgets that Hirsi Ali believes in a "war" against all Muslims as such, which would ideally result in their all being "crushed" (a view she has not revised in light of the Anders Breivik killings of July 22, 2011). She thinks that Muslims' free-speech rights should be violated at will, that their schools should be closed down without probable cause (or without even the need for a specific accusation of wrongdoing), and that the U.S. Constitution should be amended to facilitate the easier violation of Muslim rights.⁴² It's not hard to see why the

⁴¹ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (New York: Fress Press, 2007), p. 348.

⁴² "The Trouble Is the West," interview with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Reason*, November 2007, accessed online at: <http://reason.com/archives/2007/10/10/the-trouble-is-the-west/singlepage>.

First, Second, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, Ninth, and Fourteenth Amendments would have to be abrogated or re-written to accommodate Hirsi Ali's "war," why Article VI's ban on religious tests for public office might suffer a similar fate, and why her view leads directly to recent legislative proposals to turn adherence to Islamic doctrine into a redefined form of treason.⁴³ Apparently, by Berman's lights, sharp criticism of any of this is an "unprecedented" attempt to foment an anti-Semitic, Islamo-Stalinist lynch mob.

Berman may regard Hirsi Ali as a reliable guide to Muslim-American life, but she herself candidly confesses to having too little experience of the United States to know very much about the texture of life here, cheerfully conceding that what little she knows contradicts the need for draconian restrictions of Muslim-American rights.⁴⁴ And yet she insists that those rights have to be violated all the same, in defiance of the Constitution, in defiance of common sense, and even in defiance of what she herself has claimed to learn about life in this country. Unsurprisingly, her claims about the recent backlash against Muslims in the U.S. are as presumptuous as they are uninformed: "There is," she tells us, "little evidence to suggest that such a backlash is happening, but despite this lack of evidence, the perception among Muslim immigrants persists and is fanned by radicals."⁴⁵ Apparently, Hirsi Ali's inexperience of and lack of unimpeded access to American life don't stop her from dismissing the claims of people who, unlike her, were born here, have lived here for decades, and enjoy ready access to the mosques, schools,

⁴³ See the text of Tennessee's proposed Senate Bill 1028, sponsored by Tennessee State Senator Bill Ketron, accessed online at: <http://www.capitol.tn.gov/Bills/107/Bill/SB1028.pdf>. The bill later passed in a much-amended form. For background, see Andrea Elliott, "The Man Behind the Anti-Shariah Movement," *The New York Times*, July 30, 2011, accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/us/31shariah.html?pagewanted=all>. See also Anne Barnard and Alan Feur, "Outraged and Outrageous," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2010, accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/nyregion/10geller.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁴⁴ "The Trouble Is the West."

⁴⁵ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Nomad: From Islam to America, A Personal Journey Through the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Free Press, 2010), p. xv. For some contrary evidence, see Eli Lake, "The 9/14 Presidency," *Reason*, June 2010, pp. 24-29; Jesse Walker, "Forced to be Free," *Reason*, November 2010, pp. 66-70; Cathy Young, "Fear of a Muslim America," *Reason*, August/September 2011, pp. 20-26. See also the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee's reports for 2000-2007 at the website of Hussein Ibish, accessed online at: <http://www.ibishblog.com>; and reports of the Anti-Defamation League, "Anti-Muslim Bigotry Intensifies in the U.S.," accessed online at: http://www.adl.org/main/Extremism/muslim_bigotry.htm.

businesses, civic organizations, community centers, neighborhoods, and homes that she judges from afar.

One of the depressing features of Berman's indiscriminate valorization of Hirsi Ali is its similarity to the PR campaign he criticizes in the rest of his book—the indiscriminate valorization of Ramadan. Like Ramadan's defenders, Berman regards criticism of his hero as a form of treason to the Cause. Like them, he is willing to overlook malfeasances of a sort that would get a less exotic person laughed off the stage. Like them, he is obsessed with "Islam," but like them, he relies for his understanding of it on a slick but unreliable media star whose illiberal political agenda he does his best to ignore. The unfortunate result is a book whose worst features tend to obscure its best ones.

5. Ramadan's *What I Believe*

It is, to be blunt, hard to take Tariq Ramadan's book seriously enough to write a review of it. Even if one makes allowances for the oversimplifications necessary to write a book for a general audience, the fact remains that this book says so little, and says it so poorly, that it gives a reviewer very little to discuss, even in the way of criticism. A cynic might be inclined to say that Ramadan, who is fully capable of writing substantive and theoretically sophisticated books, has deliberately written this one for those readers least inclined to ask probing questions about his views. Judged by that standard, the book is a success. But not by any other.

I criticize above what I call the formal defects of Berman's *Flight*, but next to Ramadan's book, *Flight* is a paragon of lucidity and style. In fact, *What I Believe* is a nearly unreadable book, whole swatches of which seem deliberately to have been written so as to defy the requirements of clarity or intelligibility. This would be bad enough in a book that describes itself as "a work of clarification" (p. 1), but it's worse in a book that claims to "present the substance of my thought beyond controversy and polemics" (p. ix). Taken literally, the latter task is impossible, and Ramadan doesn't make the least effort to live up to it. In nominal compliance with his "no polemics" rule, Ramadan attacks his critics, but refuses either to dignify them by name or to cite, describe, or summarize what they have actually said in criticism of him. His engagement with them consists either in sullen refusals to respond to their objections or well-poisoning insinuations intended to impugn their motives or character. Though widely described in the press as a "philosopher," Ramadan lacks even an undergraduate philosophy major's capacity for summarizing and responding to critical objections.

And then there is the book's problematic relationship to the realm of fact. Generally, Ramadan writes in a gauzy prose bereft of references to named individuals, dateable events, or determinate causal processes. When he does deign to discuss empirical phenomena, things go desperately wrong. Almost none of his generalizations are referenced. Almost none of his statistics have sources. Bizarre assertions are tossed off as self-evidencies, and obvious phenomena get tortuously implausible explanations. In discussing

controversial topics, his claims exemplify the dictionary definition of “tendentiousness”—front-loaded to force the unsuspecting reader to Ramadan’s conclusions, and indifferent to the most obvious objections that a better informed reader might make. A typical sentence: “After being useful to American goals in Afghanistan, [the Taliban] became everybody’s enemies as soon as the Bush administration changed their mind about them” (p. 109). It is unclear which Bush Administration Ramadan has in mind. If he means the first one, he ignores the fact that the Bush Administration cut funding to the anti-Soviet resistance (“*mujahidin*”) in 1989 and left office in 1992, and that the Taliban, one faction of an anti-Soviet resistance that included anti-Taliban factions, came to power in 1996. If he means the second Bush Administration, it is unclear how they could have “changed their mind” about a regime with which they were, from the first day of their administration, on explicitly hostile terms, and whose legitimacy as a government they refused to accept for the duration. Ramadan ignores the fact that the *mujahidin* and Taliban were distinct entities, that *any* assistance to the Afghan resistance would have assisted radical elements, and that it makes perfect sense for changes in mind to follow changes in fact. He doesn’t tell us whether he thinks that the Afghans ought *not* to have resisted the Soviets, and doesn’t venture to argue that the Americans ought *not* to have assisted the Afghan resistance. Nor does he bother to square his casual sarcasm about the Afghan resistance with his own support for the Iraqi insurgency (see discussion below), or his sympathy for the Islamist side in the Algerian civil war.⁴⁶ It seems not to matter to Ramadan how obvious these objections are: the book seems to be written for a readership incapable of thinking of them.

If the book has a thesis, it is that adherence to Islam is compatible with liberal politics. Such adherence does not, Ramadan claims, lead to theocracy, misogyny, or terrorism, as is often charged; where such phenomena have emerged among Muslims, they have done so despite, not because of, adherence to Islam. His argument turns on his adoption of what he calls Salafi reformism, a revisionist or reformist approach to the interpretation of canonical Islamic texts like the Qur’an, the various *hadith* collections (sayings of the Prophet), and the *sira* (hagiographies of the Prophet’s life). Though Ramadan summarizes this approach very briefly in the book, he suggests that if carried out thoroughly and systematically, Salafi reformism can generate a version of Islam that is friendly to (or at least compatible with) liberalism. He goes so far as to suggest that Salafi reformism can generate a conception of Islam that allows Muslims to see their Islamic identity as but one identity alongside others, including liberal citizenship (pp. 35-45).

Ramadan’s argument turns on a distinction between two species of Salafism—his own “reformism,” and “literalism,” the view of his co-religionist antagonists. The distinction is not a particularly clear one, and

⁴⁶ Tariq Ramadan, *Islam, the West, and the Challenges of Modernity* (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2001), pp. 278-82.

Ramadan does little to clarify it. Any two species of a common genus will bear some generic similarity to one another, so it makes no sense for Ramadan to suggest that reformism and literalism are *totally* opposed to one another. Literalist claims may involve a literal interpretation of the texts, but reformist claims will still have to involve interpretations somehow tied to the same texts: a reformist claim cannot simply indulge in flights of hermeneutical fancy or metaphorical explainings-away of literal meaning.

The main advantage of literalism is its claim of absolute fidelity to sacred texts—an obvious virtue for a theology that claims to be articulating God’s verbatim prescriptions for mankind. Ramadan’s readings conspicuously lack this virtue. He tells us that no civilization has a monopoly on the truth (p. 22), but ignores the fact that the Qur’an proclaims Islam to be a “perfect” doctrine with precisely such a monopoly (e.g., 3:104, 3:110, 5:3). He tells us to “resist the temptation to reduce one’s identity to a single dimension that takes priority over every other” (p. 37), but ignores the fact that the Qur’an repeatedly tells us to subordinate this life to the next (e.g., 2:200-202, 3:14, 3:185-86, 4:74, 6:32, 29:64, 37:61, 75:20)—from which it follows that a genuinely Muslim identity subordinates or reduces this-worldly aspects of life to a single dimension that takes priority over them. He criticizes literalists for erecting a “binary world of good and evil” (pp. 48-49), but ignores the fact that the Qur’an repeatedly does the same thing (e.g., 3:30, 3:179, 99:7-8). He accuses literalists of ahistoricity (p. 63), but ignores the fact that the canonical Islamic texts claim timeless authority as repositories of God’s eternal will (e.g., Qur’an, 3:100-109). He accuses literalists of projecting their own values onto the text, but himself projects values onto it in a language entirely foreign to it (p. 63); he thereby manages to produce a version of Islamic *sharia* so secularized that a norm counts as “Islamic”—literally, “in submission to God”—even if it makes no reference whatsoever to God (p. 57). He tells us re-assuringly that his interpretation of *sharia* jettisons “the old traditional binary categorization of the world into ‘the abode of Islam’ and the ‘abode of war’,” but gives no reason for the rejection besides the question-begging claim that “no significant organization uses those concepts anymore” (p. 51). He forgets to mention that he *himself* explicitly uses and affirms “those concepts” in an earlier book, describing capitalism as “*alam al-harb* (world of war)” and describing war-like resistance to it as Islam’s unique “field of activity.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, p. 176, with p. 248 nn. 2 and 4, the latter of which cites Qur’an 2:278-79. Ramadan’s argument here is expressed in a fashion that might well lead an incautious reader to infer that he is, in the case of capitalism, *denying* the application of the “binary categorization” described in the text. But that is a mistake, a mistake that Ramadan must surely have known incautious readers would make. Ramadan asserts explicitly that *riba* (usury) is essential to capitalism, and that the practice of *riba* puts its practitioner “at war with the Transcendent,” i.e., with God and with Islamic values (pp. 175-76). It follows that capitalism is at war with Islam. At any rate, Ramadan just tells us, explicitly, that capitalism—“the neoliberal system as a whole and the logic that underpins it” (p. 176)—is “*alam al-harb* (the world of war),” which stands in opposition to *alam al-islam* (the world of Islam). What he denies is

These hermeneutical objections are almost beside the point, however, given where Ramadan's reformism ultimately takes him. He tells us that "Islam has no problem with women" (p. 62), but discreetly avoids any sustained discussion of passages from the Qur'an that would suggest a problem, including one notorious passage that commands domestic violence against disobedient wives (4:34-35).⁴⁸ He enjoins respect for homosexuals, but concedes parenthetically that homosexuality defies "the divine project established for all human beings" (p. 103); he doesn't explain how worshipful veneration of that project is compatible with respect for those who willingly flout it, with the Qur'anic description of homosexuality as an "outrage" deserving punishment (7:80, 4:16), or with his own "reservations about homosexual couples marrying or adopting children" (p. 103). He tells us that *sharia* requires obedience to the laws of a non-Muslim polity, but (in a very convoluted and ambiguous sentence) makes this obedience conditional on what he calls the non-instrumentalization of secularism and religious neutrality by "ideologues or political trends opposed to any presence of religion" (p. 52). It's anyone's guess what this assertion ultimately means. Elsewhere, Ramadan has argued that laws only bind us when "the socio-

merely that this distinction is to be understood in geographical terms. Thus, when Ramadan asserts that "the old categories of *dar al-harb* (the abode of war) and *dar al-islam* (the abode of Islam) . . . have fundamentally collapsed and become totally inoperative" (p. 175), he does *not* mean to be denying that capitalism is at war with Islam or vice versa. He means only to claim that given the globalization of capitalist markets, the capitalist enemy has been dispersed in such a way as to be describable only in non-geographic terms. Hence the old geographic term *dar al-harb* is to be replaced by the non-geographic term *alam al-harb*. But "*harb*"—the state of war—remains a constant in both the traditional formulation and in Ramadan's supposed revision. Thus Ramadan's supposed rejection of the traditional teaching is cosmetic, not substantive, and it is precisely false to claim, as he does, that he is not using the traditional *concepts*. Inexplicably, Nicholas Tampio, in a discussion of *Western Muslims*, claims that Ramadan "provides a genealogy to denaturalize the *dar al-Islam—dar al-harb* distinction," and concludes, erroneously, that Ramadan has rejected the distinction (Tampio, "Constructing the Space of Testimony," pp. 617-19). It is unclear how one "denaturalizes" a distinction that claims supernatural authority, or what follows from the attempt to do so. In any case, Ramadan's claims on pp. 175-76 of *Western Muslims* flatly contradict Tampio's reading of the text. Tampio neither cites those pages in his discussion, nor makes any mention of their relevance to his interpretation of Ramadan.

⁴⁸ The Qur'anic word for "disobedient" is *nushuz*, which might literally be translated "uppity." Ramadan makes a half-hearted attempt to explain away the passage, but ends up with the incoherent claim that an injunction to hit wayward wives that is explicitly prescribed by God in the Qur'an somehow "contradicts Islamic teachings" (p. 3).

political context (*al waqi*)” favors their application, leaving as an open question when it is that such conditions actually obtain, if they ever do.⁴⁹

The preceding points may seem academic, but the fact is, while Ramadan defends the idea that Muslims should become active citizens in European and American politics (pp. 72-73), he also prescribes armed “resistance” to American forces in Iraq (p. 139 n.37). Having enjoined on American Muslims the view that they should side with the Iraqi insurgency against their fellow citizens, he then takes umbrage at the suggestion that anyone might ever question the loyalty of those who take his advice (pp. 38-39, 70). But siding with the enemy in wartime is about as close to treason as one gets without committing it. Indeed, it is scarcely clear how Ramadan differentiates his view from that taken by, say, Nidal Hasan, the perpetrator of the massacre at Fort Hood, Texas in November 2009. Ramadan tells us that while armed resistance against American forces in Iraq is justified, “innocents” should be spared. But what if Hasan’s point was that his victims *were*’t innocent, and could more effectively be “resisted” by killing them before they deployed? I would be curious to know what Ramadan thinks of this reasoning, assuming that a journalist can be found willing to “push” him on it.

And what of Ramadan’s position on Hasan al-Banna’s pro-Nazi apologetics? Berman’s objections on this issue were first put in print in 2007, and have been posed many times since then. Ramadan has had more than ample time to respond, but has repeatedly insisted that he has no obligation to respond, re-affirming his support for al-Banna in tendentious and convoluted prose like the following:

The Muslim Brothers began in the 1930s as a legalist, anti-colonialist and nonviolent movement that claimed legitimacy for armed resistance in Palestine against Zionist expansionism during the period before World War II. The writings from between 1930 and 1945 of Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Brotherhood, show that he opposed colonialism and strongly criticized the fascist governments in Germany and Italy.⁵⁰

These claims do not address Berman’s criticism. The question is not whether al-Banna condemned colonialism or made objections to fascist regimes. One can do both and yet still offer praise for an active participant in the Holocaust. The question is whether Ramadan is willing to condemn Hasan al-Banna’s

⁴⁹ Ramadan, “International Call for a Moratorium,” p. 5 (item #3).

⁵⁰ Tariq Ramadan, “Whither the Muslim Brotherhood?” *The New York Times*, February 8, 2011, accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/09/opinion/09iht-edramadan09.html?pagewanted=all>.

complicity in genocide. Evidently, the answer is “no.” It is unclear to me why a person incapable of such a condemnation deserves credibility as a moral or intellectual spokesman or reformer for anything, especially when he offers so little in the way of independent reason for it.

6. Conclusion

Ramadan has devoted the whole of his career to the task of defending an unapologetically theological conception of philosophy, politics, and culture. Since he is by reputation and training a philosopher, the *fundamental* questions to be asked about him are not the biographical or even political questions that Berman raises in *Flight*. They are instead philosophical: What reason is there to think that any of Ramadan’s philosophical theorizing is *true*? And what grounds has he ultimately given us for making a claim on our credence?

It’s a remarkable fact that such questions have decidedly not been at the center of discussion about Ramadan. Journalists don’t ask them because they don’t think philosophical truth is their business. Specialists in Near East Studies don’t ask them because they regard philosophical truth as being outside of their area of specialization. Practitioners of Religious Studies often avoid them because questions about truth would turn their pleasantly ecumenical discipline into an unpleasantly sectarian one. As for philosophers and political theorists, the English-speaking world is dominated by Rawlsians for whom the keyword is “public reason,” not truth. And since Rawlsian “public reason . . . neither criticizes nor attacks any comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, except insofar as that doctrine is incompatible with the essentials of public reason and a democratic polity,” the Rawlsian philosopher’s task is not to inquire into the truth or falsity of Ramadanian doctrine, but to find ways to demonstrate its compatibility with “the essentials of public reason and a democratic polity.”⁵¹ As for non-Rawlsians, they are obliged, as Robert Nozick put the point decades ago, either to “work within Rawls’s theory or explain why not.”⁵² Given that assumption, non-Rawlsians come to the discussion bearing an involuntarily heavy burden of proof: in order to discuss the truth of Ramadan’s claims, they must first explain where they stand vis-à-vis Rawls’s conception of public reason. But that seems an unrewarding endeavor.

Thus, whatever its flaws, Berman’s *Flight* brings a strange truth to light. As far as views like Ramadan’s are concerned, the Anglo-American academy is perversely structured so as *not* to encourage direct inquiries into the soundness of his arguments. It is structured to do many *other* things. It can mount a credible defense of his civil rights. It can forestall uncomfortable

⁵¹ John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” in John Rawls, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 574.

⁵² Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 183.

inquiries into his past, and delegitimize embarrassing questions about his views. It can enlist him in a civilizational “bridge-building” exercise, circle the wagons around his works and reputation, deride his critics, and make a Kantian or Rawlsian liberal of him. What it cannot seem to do is to demonstrate the truth of his claims, explain why anyone should believe them under that description, or just refute him outright. Nor can it focus in a sustained way on the most problematic parts of his message—or allow anyone else to do so with impunity. It cannot, in other words, treat Ramadan’s work the way it regularly treats the work of “Western” philosophers with similar views. It is a puzzling state of affairs, involving some problematic double standards. Whatever its flaws, *Flight* deserves credit for bringing the relevant phenomena to our attention, and for demanding that “the intellectuals” make better sense of them than they so far have.⁵³

⁵³ Thanks to Fahmi Abboushi, Hussein Ibish, Ibn Warraq, Aftab Khawaja, and Fawad Zakariya for helpful conversation on the issues of this review. Special thanks to Carrie-Ann Biondi for hours of helpful discussion on, and editing of, the manuscript itself. None of the preceding should be construed as agreeing with me, or can be held responsible for anything I say here.

