Truth, Politics, and Diversity:
A Muslim Response to Modern Liberalism

by

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ABSTRACT

We commonly assume that religion is simply part of a person's identity, a preference, or a choice. This is a result of the modern liberal rejection of all but empirical knowledge and the corresponding public rejection of metaphysics. This makes it impossible to make philosophically coherent arguments that humans have real moral duties. Yet, given persistent human diversity, questions of morality and justice, decisions about which power and authority are often called on to enforce, will only become more intractable to the extent that we are unable to identify a sure basis on which to decide them. To find such a basis, we must abandon the modern liberal prejudice against all non-empirical knowledge and reconsider how we could actually learn anything that is true from any of the different so-called religious traditions in our midst, which unanimously affirm that people have real moral duties, and if so, what we might learn. Since Islam represents one of the most significant, theologically and philosophically comprehensive alternatives to modern liberalism, I ask what we can learn from Islam that can be shown to be true in any way that could provide a sure basis for deliberating about the truth of different moral and ethical claims, without presupposing any particular kind of faith or belief. With a view to answering this question, I offer a comprehensive study of the political thought of Tariq Ramadan. Unlike many contemporary Muslim thinkers who try to make Islam appear fully compatible with modern liberalism, Ramadan critiques aspects of liberalism and seeks to enrich the West with direct reference to Islam. I argue that he articulates a radical and compelling philosophy of pluralism derived from his understanding of Islam

that provides a clear criterion for determining the morality of any given moral claim. This criterion, I argue, is grounded in a claim about the nature of ultimate reality that can be shown to be true. Building on his work, I show how this is so, demonstrating how it is possible to take questions about ultimate truth and the relationship between truth and politics seriously, despite modern liberal claims to the contrary.

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I would especially like to thank Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Professor Tariq Ramadan for graciously agreeing to be interviewed for this project and for providing me with valuable, personal insights on their work. While I chose to focus on Ramadan's thought exclusively in this thesis, Professor Nasr's ideas make a brief appearance and I have no doubt I will revisit his work in the future.

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research and thus make significant contributions, not only to academic literature, but society as a whole. I would also like to give a special mention to Florian Bail, a regular part-time instructor in the Department of Political Science at Dalhousie University in Halifax and my former undergraduate thesis supervisor. He was the one who first encouraged me to study the work of Tariq Ramadan and helped me carve out a niche for myself in the study of religion and politics and he remains a great inspiration to me. Also, I would like to thank my parents, Ian and Linda MacDonald, for their love and support throughout the years, and for all the support they provided when I decided to return to university in 2004.

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NOTE ON SPELLING AND TRANSLITERATION

Except for proper names for which a commonly accepted English spelling exists and in quotations from other texts, where I retain the spelling in the original source, I follow the guidelines of the American Library Association and Library of Congress for the Romanization of Arabic words and phrases in this text (see American Library Association and Library of Congress 2011).

For Shannon and John,

with all my love.

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PREFACE

One of my favorite authors is Aldus Huxley. In his book *The Doors of Perception*, in which he recounts his experience taking the psychedelic drug mescaline, there is a passage that has always resonated very strongly with me and which I had been reflecting on when I first came to Carleton University in 2008:

> We live together, we act on, and react to, one another," he writes, "but always and in all circumstances we are by ourselves. ... By its very nature every embodied spirit is doomed to suffer and enjoy in solitude. Sensations, feelings, insights, fancies — all these are private and, except through symbols and at second hand, incommunicable. (1994, 3)

What better argument could there be for compassion, I thought. How absolutely monstrous it is when people mistreat and neglect each other, I thought, given that we can never know the profound, private suffering our actions may cause. It would be absolute Hell, I thought, living in a world where you could not rely on anyone's compassion, especially knowing that the reason was that no one else could feel your private pain and thus it did not ultimately matter to anyone but yourself how much you were suffering. I thought this should be enough to compel anyone to be compassionate. I was sure that, anyone reflecting on this, would see how monstrous it would be to disregard the suffering of others, considering that, never being able to know the full depth of their suffering, the right thing to do is obviously to be compassionate. And then I read Friedrich Nietzsche. I had read him before, but I had never directly confronted the implications of what he says. Why should we care about others, he asks, at least as long as their suffering is to our

benefit? All greatness requires suffering. God is dead, after all, so what is compassion except fear of greatness, which is necessarily worldly greatness for Nietzsche?

Then, I found myself as a Teaching Assistant to a Nietzsche scholar who pressed me harder for an answer on this. Why should we care about the suffering of others? He dismissed every answer I gave him as typically English. I was frustrated. Could he not see the fragility of human life, the demand that suffering places on our compassion? This is what that demigod of modern liberalism, Jeremy Bentham, says, after all. And then I looked deeper, and I found something disturbing. All modern liberal arguments for compassion, for human rights, for moral duties, seemed to amount to a utilitarian calculus, whether or not they were self-consciously utilitarian: do unto others as you would have them do unto you, as long as you know they will reciprocate or face legal or other worldly consequences if they do not. In other words, do unto others such that you uphold the terms of the social contract, which you ultimately enter into only for your individual private good. Almost echoing this sentiment, Nietzsche seemed to be saying: if you can get away with treating others however you like, while getting them to treat you the way you want to be treated, and you do not even try because of some moral compulsion, you are simply acting like a slave and, sooner or later, someone is going to crush you. Then I wondered, how might Locke, Bentham, or Mill respond? How might Kant respond? What about Rawls, or any other liberal thinker for that matter? Could any of them give me a solid, coherent reason why I should treat others the way I would like to be treated, even at the expense of my own worldly utility and power? The Jesus of the

Christian gospels says we should love everyone, including our enemies, for the sake of a great reward from God after we die. Yet clearly, a modern liberal must reject this argument, given that modern liberals, by definition, must reject arguments about public morality grounded in tradition and non-empirical statements about ultimate reality. To my dismay, I found that, not only could no modern liberal thinker as such do this, but that, to be philosophically coherent, modern liberalism must affirm that it is better if you can get away with treating others however you like while getting them to treat you the way you want to be treated. All that stands between you and greatness through selfishly overpowering others is the technological means to get there.

Yet clearly, I saw, this is not how most people behave or act. Most people seem relatively compassionate. But then, as our societies become increasingly diverse, as people come to hold often starkly different values, always subject to change, I wondered: what does the absence of a philosophically coherent basis for moral truth portend for the future? Of course, virtually all traditions that we call religious affirm that humans have real moral duties to each other. These are the very same traditions, I observed, that constitute the diversity we so often celebrate today, including Islam, which I had been particularly interested in for some time. Yet we almost never ask whether or not we could learn anything that is actually true from the content of any of these traditions. This seemed to be a big problem, considering the possibility that one of them may be able to offer a philosophically coherent basis for moral truth, if only we could understand. What, for example, I wondered, could we possibly learn from Islam that could be shown to be

true? Could we possibly learn something that might help us out of the mess I was becoming increasingly convinced modern liberalism had gotten us into?

So, with this broad question in mind—what can we learn from Islam without presupposing any particular kind of faith or belief—I begin my text with a critique of various modern liberal arguments that humans have real moral duties to each other that supersede considerations of individual utility and power, and thus can know things to be objectively moral or immoral. I conclude that modern liberalism, by definition, cannot affirm that humans have real moral duties to each other. I am aware that this is a highly controversial position to take, but I think I back it up sufficiently. I then observe that, in all manner of religious traditions, we find different arguments that humans have real moral duties to each other. I further observe, however, that we rarely ask if any of these arguments may be true in any sense, usually because we assume that religion is simply an idiosyncratic identity, preference, or choice. We forget, I argue, that it usually also is an expression of a person's acceptance of a particular claim about what is ultimately true. This is a direct result of the modern liberal rejection of metaphysics. Yet, as I argue, this is far too facile.

Having demonstrated the problem with modern liberal arguments that humans have real moral duties to each other, I turn to Islam and ask why the Muslim tradition affirms that humans have real moral duties to each other, what those duties are, and whether or not this can this be shown to be true. In other words, is there something of social or political significance in the revealed message of Islam that humans—regardless

of their identities and where they live—can learn and that can be shown to be true, without presupposing any particular kind of faith? I turn to Islam because it appears to represent the most philosophically and theologically serious and comprehensive alternative to modern liberalism. I conclude that, based on a particular understanding of the message of Islam, Islam does indeed offer a philosophically coherent argument that humans *qua* humans have real moral duties to each other, unlike modern liberalism.

As I point out in my introduction, a number of thinkers argue that the revealed message of Islam is unique in that it speaks of the religious, moral, ethical, and cultural diversity—indeed, all diversity—that exists among humans as being divinely mandated. Yet we rarely ask what we may actually be able to learn from Islam, even, or perhaps especially, if we are not Muslims. This is precisely what I attempt to do. To ask what we can learn from Islam that is true may at first seem like an impossible task, however. What is Islam, after all? Surely, there are almost as many understandings of Islam as there are Muslims. Thus, I further narrow my focus to the work of Tariq Ramadan, one of the most prominent and controversial contemporary Muslim thinkers. Ramadan, unlike many Muslim thinkers who simply try to convince non-Muslim, Western readers that Islam is somehow perfectly compatible with modern liberalism and is therefore nothing to fear, draws on aspects of the Muslim tradition to critique modern liberalism with a view to enriching the West, which he calls home. He neither apologizes for Islam nor attempts to justify it in liberal terms.

In my text, I build on Ramadan's ideas and his particular understanding of Islam.

I attempt to do so free of any confessional baggage, although an observant reader may pick up on hints that I come from a liberal Protestant Christian background. Still, I aim to offer a synthesis of Ramadan's thought and arrive at a conclusion about what he says Islam teaches that can be shown to be true without my work being too heavily affected by my personal background. I further try to maintain neutral but respectful language when referring to certain human figures, especially Jesus and Muhammad, the central figures apart from God in Christianity and Islam respectively.

In Ramadan's understanding of Islam, I find a radical and compelling alternative to all modern liberal theories of pluralism and arguments for toleration of human diversity. This alternative, I argue, simultaneously addresses the question of justice and moral duties and the question of how to understand and deal with moral and ethical diversity. In fact, it highlights the necessary relationship between diversity and justice, which are linked in Ramadan's thought through humility, which itself is both the product of and coextensive with revelation. This, as far as I know, is a unique insight that not even Ramadan expresses directly.

In my work, I attempt to show that Ramadan's Muslim philosophy of pluralism is radical because, unlike modern liberal theories, it is premised on a truth claim about the nature of ultimate reality that is not, strictly speaking, empiricist. This is the claim that we should accept human diversity of virtually all kinds, within certain philosophically coherent limits, because it is divinely mandated; that we must learn to live and deal with it and each other—to accept others and their differences—not because doing so is simply

prudent or respectful of some transient, contingent human understanding of human dignity, but because the nature of Ultimate Being, or God, demands it. It is compelling because, I argue, the claim about ultimate reality that it rests on can be shown, to a limited but sufficient extent, to be true. This is partly because Ramadan's understanding of the divine and the nature of the relationship between Ultimate Being and all aspects of existence, including humans, does not presuppose faith and thus does not seem to rely on any private experience of faith or any human convention or institution. In a sense, I argue, it is logically, necessarily true. Moreover, Ramadan's understanding of the divine is such that, contrary to what appears to be the dominant perception in the West, reason and revelation are naturally complementary and there is no necessary tension or incompatibility between the two. I argue that this understanding of the nature of the divine, revelation, and ultimate reality, and the moral anthropology Ramadan derives from it, while not necessarily entirely novel, represent something concrete and politically significant that we can learn from the revealed message of Islam about how to understand and live with diversity, and so with each other.

PART ONE

The Human Predicament

CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

> Far best is he who knows all things himself;
> Good, he that hearkens when men counsel right;
> But he who neither knows, nor lays to heart
> Another's wisdom, is a useless wight.
>
> **—Hesiod (quoted in Aristotle 1980, 6, 1095b6)**

> The views concerning *the essence and origin of man* have, at no other time, been less sure, less determinate, and more varied, than in our own. ... In approximately ten centuries of history, this is the first in which man finds himself completely and utterly "problematical," in which he no longer knows what he is and simultaneously *knows that* he does not have the answer.
>
> **—Max Scheler (1958, 65, original emphasis)**

At the heart of this text is a deceptively simple question: What, if anything, of social or political significance can we learn from the revealed message of Islam that could be shown to be true, assuming we do not presuppose any particular kind of faith or belief? But who are we? What is Islam? What do we want or need to learn from Islam? How can we know? Paradoxically, I turn to Islam for help with these questions as well.

In the West, we often celebrate religious diversity, but we rarely ask what, if anything, we could learn from the content of the traditions that constitute this diversity that could actually be shown to be true. We assume that religion is simply part of a person's identity, a preference, or a choice. We forget that it usually also is an expression

of a person's acceptance of a particular claim about what is ultimately true. Of course, since the Enlightenment, people who do not consider themselves religious have confidently asserted that there is nothing in any so-called religion that is actually true, and therefore right,[1] that cannot be discovered through unaided human reason—that religion, as such, is at best a purely private matter that should have no bearing on political practice, or at worst a dangerous delusion. Yet this is far too facile.

If we are to have more than superficial relationships with each other, it is worthwhile considering anew whether or not we could actually learn anything that is true from any of the different traditions in our midst and, if so, how, and what the social and political implications of this would be. I am not talking about learning from different religions as such, and in fact I argue that we should forget about the concept of religion entirely. This is because, as I discuss below, a fixation on religion, an all too modern concept, at least so far as the questions that concern me here, erects artificial epistemological walls around people that prevent us from engaging in dialogue with

[1] By true, I mean an accurate, however perhaps necessarily partial or provisional, statement about the nature and structure of ultimate reality. Thus, to be more precise, I mean to refer to ontological truth. As discussed in Chapter Two, the modern liberal distinction between fact and value rests on a particular understanding of ultimate reality that itself relies on a measure of faith (see my discussion of faith in Paul Tillich's thought in Chapter Two) such that moral and ethical values can never be said to be objectively true. I question this, but in order to counter the claim that we cannot have objective knowledge of morality, I must be able to show that an alternative vision of ultimate reality is, in fact, accurate, which can in turn show us that certain things are objectively right and other things are objectively wrong (objectively in the sense of demonstrably, perhaps philosophically, not necessarily empirically). Thus, truth does not mean simply an apparently accurate description of reality as it presents itself to us through our five senses or as we understand reality through all manner of social constructions, conventions, and language. Rather, truth refers to what is ontologically, and especially metaphysically, true. Whether or not any philosophically coherent demonstration of the ontological truth of any claim about ultimate reality is possible remains to be considered, though I argue that this is possible, building as I do on the thought of Tariq Ramadan later in this text.

others, considered to somehow belong to different so-called religions or else be non-religious, that aims at anything more than finding common ground, however wrong, or journalistic trivia. Instead, I argue, we need to focus on the question of truth itself. Regardless of why a person claims that something is true—original sin, or certain moral obligations, for example—we need to be able to ask directly whether or not it is actually true and how or even whether or not we can determine this. This is especially important since, as our societies become increasingly diverse, questions of morality and justice, decisions about which power and authority are often called on to enforce, will become increasingly intractable to the extent that we are unable to identify a sure basis on which to decide them. In other words, unless we can identify a sure basis on which we can actually learn from each other and seriously deliberate about moral truth, we will continue to be limited to talking about our different, otherwise irreconcilable opinions, with no end in sight. Unfortunately, as I discuss below, modern liberal moral philosophy and modern liberalism in general leave us with no alternative. As a result, until an alternative is found, it will remain impossible to provide wholly satisfactory, philosophically coherent arguments to show that certain things are moral, just, or ethical and certain things are not when challenged by people who disagree with us. As some of my undergraduate students put it, quite to my dismay, in a class on religion and politics that I taught: if a majority of people decide that child abuse is okay, then it must be okay, since, my students were convinced, there is no other basis for saying that it is truly wrong. As I discuss in detail in Chapter Two, this is the logic of modern liberalism,

notwithstanding special pleading and the fact that virtually no self-described liberal thinker argues that child abuse is ever right. For modern liberalism as such, however, nothing can be decisively wrong as long as it serves my individual interest in maximizing my utility and power, and any idea to the contrary is merely an unfounded opinion. Ethics, they say, is purely subjective. But is it? Does it have to be?

What if a specific tradition based on ostensibly revealed truth—but not necessarily a common or axiomatic understanding of revelation or truth—could show us a basis for morality and therewith a basis for deliberating about truth, justice, ethics, and politics that could itself be shown to be true? This would not only mean that we could learn something of social and political significance from such a tradition, but in fact something that could help us determine how and to what extent we may learn from other traditions—as opposed to simply compiling lists of different otherwise irreconcilable beliefs and practices. While many different traditions could surely show us such a basis, I focus on Islam.

The specific question I ask of Islam, from which I hope to derive a basis for morality, and for understanding and deliberating about truth, is the most serious, fundamental problem for all political philosophy: should we treat others the way we would like to be treated, even if it means compromising our individual, worldly utility and power, and if so, why? This is simply another way of putting the question of justice and, with it, the question of whether or not we have real moral duties to each other and, if so, why, and how we can know this. As I will show, modern liberal thinkers are unable to

provide a philosophically coherent answer in the affirmative to this question, despite their best efforts. This is because they reject the idea of divinely revealed truth and privilege empirical knowledge to the exclusion of all other forms of knowledge. As a result, and despite special pleading to the contrary, they privilege a particular understanding of individual liberty that does not allow for any limits on human action that are not grounded exclusively in empirical evidence—thus, moral arguments appealing to duties to others or higher goods are inadmissible. Freedom, for them, necessarily means a person's ability to acquire as much or as many of whatever worldly goods, qualities, honors, or experiences as physically possible he or she desires, unimpeded by tradition or whatever other people may say or do to try to prevent it. Thus, to be philosophically coherent, modern liberal thinkers must ultimately affirm that it would be better if we could get away with treating other people however we like, while simultaneously getting them to treat us the way we want to be treated. In other words, given the nature of reality, as modern liberalism understands it, it is always better, ultimately, to relate to others instrumentally—as means to your own, private ends. This is simply to invert Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative. As I show in Chapter Two, Kant cannot show that his categorical imperative is truly imperative because he assumes that actual justice, not apparent justice, is what ultimately matters, without proving this to be so.[2]

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[2] I should emphasize here that my intention is in no way to create a liberal straw man in order simply to demolish him. My argument is that, to the extent that any moral argument appeals to an idea of human dignity or any other not strictly empirical, putative fact and presents it as objectively, ontologically true, such an argument is not a properly modern, liberal argument because it violates the distinction between fact and value that is the bedrock of modern liberalism. Alternatively, as I show in Chapter Two, self-consciously

As John Locke argues, there are only three possible, philosophically coherent reasons why someone might accept a given moral proposition: God demands it, another human actor or group of humans will punish you if you do not adhere to it, or to act otherwise would be beneath human dignity (1979, 68, Book 1, Chapter 3, § 5). None of these, however, shows that it is somehow objectively or evidently true. The first and third imply this, but they require the prior acknowledgement of either both the existence and authority over humans of some divine being or force or forces, or an objective standard for determining what constitutes human dignity and therefore what is and is not worthy of humans—both of which demand a coherent understanding of what it means to be human in general, of what a human is. In the absence of one of these, there can be no entirely adequate, philosophically coherent reason given for why we should accept any given moral proposition, assuming we can somehow escape any physical consequences of not adhering to it. This leaves us with utility, and all the problems associated with it as a basis for morality. Intuitively, this may strike many people as problematic, but in the absence of a philosophically coherent alternative, we cannot even show that it is a problem. Maybe Nietzsche is right that life is nothing but will to power and all philosophy amounts to special pleading. Maybe we have no real, pre-conventional or non-conventional moral duties to each other—at least none that can be proven. I turn to Islam in the hope of learning of a possible, philosophically coherent alternative.

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liberal arguments like those advanced by John Rawls and Richard B. Miller that humans have real moral duties that supersede the maximization of individual power and utility do not withstand philosophical scrutiny and ultimately rely on a kind of liberal faith that they do not defend philosophically.

I could simply say that I focus on Islam because it is one of the many traditions that constitute the diversity we often celebrate and that I am therefore interested in seeing if we can learn anything meaningful from it. This is not the main reason, however. I focus on Islam because a number of thinkers argue that the revealed message of Islam is unique in that it speaks of the religious, moral, ethical, and cultural diversity—indeed, all diversity—that exists among humans as being divinely mandated. Indeed, the Qur'ān explicitly does, in contrast to most other theocentric scriptures that, at most, imply this. Sohail H. Hashmi, Professor of International Relations at Mount Holyoke University and Senior Editor of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam*, for one, says "we could go so far as to say that the central 'problem' with which the Qur'ān grapples is the presence of moral and religious diversity among human beings" (2003, 81). Also, Islam appears to represent the most serious and comprehensive alternative to modern liberalism, both as a result of the sheer number of observant and professed Muslims in the world, and the apparent coherence and comprehensiveness of the alternative it presents. At the same time, the revealed message of Islam appears to advance a single idea of morality and justice, or simply the Good. This, in turn, is based on a single, ostensibly ontologically grounded understanding of the human being and the relationship between humans and the divine. This understanding appears to differ in important respects from Jewish, Christian, and most modern ideas about the human being, person, and self, and the divine. For example, the idea of original sin is explicitly rejected. Also, as I argue below, the idea that God is wholly and utterly distinct from creation is equally, albeit more implicitly, rejected.

Finally, Islam most definitely affirms that we should treat others the way we would like to be treated—that we have real moral duties to each other that go beyond maximizing our utility and power—yet for reasons that may not be identical to those of similar teachings in other traditions and that may be based on a very different ontology and metaphysics.

I considered studying the work of different contemporary Muslim thinkers with a view to answering the question I pose of Islam, including Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im (2008), Khaled Abou El Fadl (2002, 2004, 2005), and Abdulaziz Sachedina (1988, 2001, 2009). Yet I felt that these authors, like many other contemporary Muslim thinkers writing in English or French, appeared to be on a mission to prove that Islam is nearly, if not fully, compatible with modern liberalism, largely in response to popular and scholarly opinion to the contrary. I wondered how much I could possibly learn from an author trying to convince me that Islam is fully compatible with the underlying philosophical premises of modern liberal society. Oddly, as Saba Mahmood, Associate Professor of Sociocultural Anthropology and specialist on religion and politics at the University of California, Berkeley, notes, we rarely ask what it would mean "to take the resources of the Islamic tradition and question many of the liberal political categories and principles for the contradictions and problems they embody" (2004, 75). She believes "the reason these kinds of questions are seldom pursued is the hegemony that liberalism commands as a political ideal for many contemporary Muslim intellectuals" (ibid., 76). I would add

that this partly explains why there appears to be almost no Western scholarship on what non-Muslims or the West in general might learn from Islam.

Tariq Ramadan and Seyyed Hossein Nasr are striking exceptions to the rule Mahmood observes; each draws on aspects of the Muslim tradition to critique modern liberalism, in whole or in part, with a view to enriching the Western societies they call home. They neither apologize for Islam nor attempt to justify it in liberal terms, as if liberalism is the standard by which Islam should be judged. Also, writing as Muslims, Ramadan and Nasr represent Islam, which today appears to present the most serious and comprehensive alternative to modern liberalism. After reading Nasr's work extensively and interviewing him in his office at The George Washington University in Washington, DC, however, I decided to focus on Ramadan exclusively. Nasr is a serious thinker who has written much about Islam and tradition in general, often with a view to critiquing modernism and secularism in light of tradition and the revealed message of Islam specifically. In Ramadan, however, I found an admirable combination of personal dedication to rigorous philosophical and theological discussion and commitment to civic engagement that I did not find as strong in Nasr. In my interviews with Ramadan, I was also struck by his humility, his willingness to reconsider his positions, and his willingness to look at things from different perspectives. It was clear to me that Ramadan was on a quest. He was struggling to be righteous, in the sense of putting things right, not simply to prove that he is right. I soon concluded that Ramadan's ideas alone would give me enough to wrestle with and that, perhaps, my inquiry would be more fruitful if I focused

on his work alone. The reader can decide whether or not I made the right decision.

Ramadan is a self-described Western Muslim and one of the most prominent and controversial contemporary Muslim intellectuals. He appears to present an alternative to the logical philosophical outcome of modern liberalism—which is that there is no sure basis for condemning any human action as immoral, as much as we may beg to differ—with an admirable combination of fidelity to the revealed message of Islam as he understands it; appreciation of the insights non-Muslim thinkers have offered on the relationship among religion, revealed truth, and politics; and a strong commitment to the practicability of the alternative he presents. Ramadan appears genuinely committed to meaningful dialogue, in that he is just as eager to learn from non-Muslims, as he is to share the lessons of Islam with others.

In this text, then, I focus on and, to an extent, build on Ramadan's ideas and his particular understanding of Islam as reflected in his written works, public lectures, and interviews I have conducted with him. To be methodologically consistent, and to avoid presuming too much, I do this first with a view to simply discovering whether or not, or otherwise confirming that, according to him, as per the revealed message of Islam, we should treat others the way we would like to be treated. Obviously, it takes almost no effort to find that, like virtually all traditions of divinely revealed knowledge, Islam affirms that we have real moral duties to each other that supersede considerations of power and utility. As such, Islam affirms that we should treat each other the way we would like to be treated. Of substantially more interest to me is why, or at least why

Ramadan says, the revealed message of Islam says we must. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, I find that the reason he gives is not altogether the same as other arguments that appeal to God, notably the argument Jesus is said to give in the Gospel of Luke—although it is not strictly incompatible with these. I further ask whether or not Ramadan's answer, unlike at least a superficial understanding of Jesus's answer, can be shown to be true and, if so, how. In the process, I seek to identify what, in the revealed message of Islam, could be shown to be true such that we could learn something truly socially or politically significant from it. I conclude that Ramadan articulates a radical and compelling alternative to all modern liberal theories of pluralism and arguments for toleration of human diversity. This alternative, I argue, simultaneously addresses the question of justice and moral duties and the question of how to understand and deal with moral and ethical diversity. In fact, it highlights the necessary relationship between diversity and justice, which are linked in Ramadan's thought through humility, which itself is both the product of and coextensive with revelation.

Derived from his understanding of the revealed message of Islam, I show that Ramadan's philosophy of pluralism is radical because, unlike modern liberal theories, it is premised on a truth claim about the nature of ultimate reality. This is the claim that we should accept human diversity of virtually all kinds, within certain philosophically coherent limits, because it is divinely mandated; that we must learn to live and deal with it and each other—to accept others and their differences—not because doing so is simply prudent or respectful of some transient, contingent human understanding of human

dignity, but because the nature of Ultimate Being, or God, demands it. It is compelling because, I argue, the claim about ultimate reality that it rests on can be shown, to a limited but sufficient extent, to be true. This is because Ramadan's understanding of the divine and the nature of the relationship between Ultimate Being and all aspects of existence, including humans, does not presuppose faith and thus does not seem to rely on any private experience of faith or any human convention or institution. In a sense, I argue, it is logically, necessarily true. Moreover, Ramadan's understanding of the divine is such that, contrary to what appears to be the dominant perception in the West, reason and revelation are naturally complementary and there is no necessary tension or incompatibility between the two. I argue that this understanding of the nature of revelation, the divine, and therewith ultimate reality, and the anthropology Ramadan derives from it, while not necessarily entirely novel, represent something concrete and politically significant that we can learn from the revealed message of Islam.

Any answer to the question of whether or not we should treat each other the way we would like to be treated must tell us who we are, both in ourselves, our personhood, or whatever concept it uses to conceive of the entities the nature of whose existence is in question, and in relation to all other aspects of creation or existence. In other words, it must provide a sure, ontologically grounded moral anthropology that can serve as a ground for all subsequent human convention—an anthropology that does not itself rely on our acceptance of any particular human convention, such as deference to a particular human authority or institution. To answer this question in the affirmative, we must be

able to show that it would not be better if we could somehow get away with treating other people however we like while simultaneously getting them to treat us the way they, or at least we, would like to be treated. Thus, to answer it in the affirmative, we must be able to show that what is ultimately real or true is morally, ethically, and politically decisive; it is not enough to show that the life of the apparently just man is better than the life of the apparently unjust man. We must show, as Glaucon demands of Socrates in Plato's *Republic*, that the life of the perfectly just man who nonetheless appears perfectly unjust is better than the life of the perfectly unjust man who nonetheless appears perfectly just—something Socrates never quite succeeds in doing.

At the core of Ramadan's writings is an ostensibly sure and ontologically grounded anthropology derived from his understanding of the revealed message of Islam. This includes a specific understanding of the nature of ultimate reality or Ultimate Being (which Ramadan sometimes uses interchangeably with God)—in other words, metaphysics. In an interview I conducted with him, he suggests that this understanding of the human being, and consequently this understanding of ultimate reality and Ultimate Being (without which his understanding of the human being is incomplete), is the one most significant thing that Muslims and non-Muslims alike stand to learn from Islam that might contribute to the positive transformation of their societies. He contrasts this understanding of the human being with Greek, Jewish, Christian, and modern understandings as he sees them. He further suggests that there is something in the revealed message of Islam that allows it to reconcile ethical diversity (diversity in

particular ethical ideas, such as whether or not active euthanasia should be practiced) with moral unicity (the idea that different, otherwise incompatible ethical principles, may in fact be legitimate avenues to a single understanding of justice, morality, or simply the Good). This certainly sounds promising.

As a secondary school teacher in Geneva in the early 1990s, Ramadan wrote three books in collaboration with his students: *The Split Hourglass*, about the elderly and memory; *In Red, in the Margin*, about marginalization and academic failure; and *A Common Point, Difference*, about diversity. Since then, he has written more than twenty books and hundreds of articles and essays, mostly on issues related to diversity and pluralism and especially Islam and the challenges of being (a)[3] Muslim in the West. He currently holds the position of HH Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Oxford University and he is also a Research Fellow at St. Antony's College, Oxford. He is multilingual, speaking fluent Arabic, French, and English. Known for his charisma and intellectual prominence alike, he is regularly invited to speak at academic and other conferences around the world and makes frequent appearances on television and radio programs,

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[3] I maintain a distinction between being a Muslim and being *muslim*. The former refers to a person's identity or profession of a specific, named faith (Islam), while the latter refers to a more general sense of submission (*ʾislām*) to God or Ultimate Being and the peace that accompanies this. As Ramadan says, "We know that in the Qurʾān the word *islam* has two meanings. The first is universal and generic: all the elements ... are in 'submission' to God because they respect the order of creation; in the same sense, all the revelations and prophets came with a message of the oneness of God and the need to 'submit oneself' to him" (2004b, 206). Thus, people who endeavor to submit to God, whatever they understand this to mean and in whatever way, can be said to be at least attempting to be *muslim*, though they may not otherwise identify as Muslims specifically. This distinction is important because my focus is truth, not religious identity.

especially in Europe, when different issues related somehow to Muslims or Islam make the news. He has engaged in a number of high profile, public debates with different thinkers and public figures. For example, on 20 November 2003, he went head-to-head in a televised debate with then French Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy. During the debate, Sarkozy was visibly infuriated and frustrated by Ramadan's refusal to call for more than a moratorium, as opposed to an outright, unconditional ban, on corporal punishment, and especially stoning, in the Muslim world. Although the French press generally declared Sarkozy the winner, Ramadan's celebrity only seemed to benefit from the debate, no matter the outcome.

Ramadan also maintains a website (www.tariqramadan.com) where he posts short articles on current events and moral, ethical, religious, and cultural matters every few days. This website also contains video and audio recordings of some of his public lectures and other public appearances on different radio and television programs. Meanwhile, interviews with him and articles about him have been published in virtually every major news and popular public interest publication in the world and his picture has graced the covers of numerous magazines. In a 2004 article for *The Washington Post*, Paul Donnelley suggests that Ramadan's book, *To Be A European Muslim* (2003), "is perhaps the most hopeful work of Muslim theology in the past thousand years" (2004). He goes on to hail Ramadan as "a Muslim Martin Luther," a moniker that graces the covers of several of Ramadan's books and which is often repeated, although sometimes legitimately questioned. In 2000, *Time* magazine named him one of the one hundred most

important innovators of the twenty-first century. Then, in 2004, it named him one of the one hundred most influential people in the world. Despite this, he was barred from entering the United States from 2004 to 2010, presumably over concerns about his ideology or his supposed connections with different groups and individuals.

With the sheer volume of his scholarly output; the attention lavished on him by the popular press and other media outlets; the controversy he seems to garner wherever he goes; the increasing international prominence of Islam and Muslims in general and his prominence among contemporary Muslim thinkers and public intellectuals; and debates over diversity, pluralism, and religious identity and accommodation continuing to rage in many countries, which his ideas speak to, it is surprising how little serious scholarly attention his work has received, especially from political theorists. This is doubly surprising considering the almost incredible attention he has received from critics and outright polemicists.

A number of authors, writing largely for popular, Western, non-Muslim audiences with little or no familiarity with either Ramadan or Islam, argue that he is some kind of retrogressive, radical Islamist in disguise, despite sometimes appearing to be a more or less liberal, modern Muslim reformist. While it pays lip service to his thought, this popular literature is rather myopically focused on who Ramadan really is and what he may be trying to hide, not what he actually says. It is no secret that he is the maternal grandson of Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949), founder of the Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt. Does this make him a radical, fundamentalist Islamist intent on infiltrating the

West and eventually imposing Islamic law on an unsuspecting Western population? Can he be trusted? This line of inquiry, while perhaps understandable in today's political climate, especially where Islam and Muslims are concerned, is ultimately misguided and misplaced where Ramadan is concerned. As Andrew F. March asks rhetorically, "what are we trusting Ramadan *with*? He is not a candidate for European Minister of the Interior, or even some 'European Integration Czar.' He does not command a militia. He is not using Muslim communities (never mind the threat of violence) as a bargaining chip in exchange for political power for himself or a party. In fact, he is not using his prestige or authority per se to *demand* anything" (2011, 197, note 4). This has not so far deterred the polemicists, however.

French feminist writer and journalist Caroline Fourest, with her incendiary book *Frère Tariq : Discours, stratégie et méthode de Tariq Ramadan* (2004) (published in English as *Brother Tariq: The Doublespeek of Tariq Ramadan* (2008)), and self-described independent specialist on Islam Paul Landau with his possibly more alarmist *Le sabre et le Coran : Tariq Ramadan et les Frères musulmans à la conquete de l'Europe* [*The Sword and the Qur'ān: Tariq Ramadan and the Muslim Brothers Toward the Conquest of Europe*] (2005), are surely some of Ramadan's fiercest critics. Fourest, for her part, insists on calling Ramadan a preacher, not a thinker, and the title of Landau's book here cited gives away his position. American writer and journalist Paul Berman's *The Flight of the Intellectuals: The Controversy Over Islamism and the Press* (2011), meanwhile, is more balanced in tone and somewhat more thoughtful, though no less

critical and ultimately condemnatory. Indeed, he hits upon some key aspects of Ramadan's thought that I will be discussing in detail in this text. For example, he rightly observes that, for Ramadan, the idea of *tawḥīd*, or the absolute oneness of God or Ultimate Being, does not admit of any ontological distinction, let alone tension, between the sacred and the non-sacred. Thus, Berman writes, it does not "allow for a Promethean spirit of rebellion" or "a sense of the tragic" (ibid., 130).

Although he does not discuss these ideas in any detail, Berman is clearly apprehensive about Ramadan's claim to have no doubts about God, which follows from these ideas. "Doubt, in Ramadan's interpretation," Berman writes, "can exist only within the limits allowed by *tawhid*—meaning that, for a *proper Muslim*, doubts about God are literally inconceivable" (ibid., 131, emphasis added). Apart from his philosophical misuse of the phrase literally inconceivable, what Berman fails to realize, which I attempt to clarify in this text, is that not only does the idea of *tawḥīd* in Ramadan's thought admit of no distinction or tension between the sacred and the non-sacred, it is not ultimately theistic (God as a wholly and utterly distinct existent entity) but rather panentheistic (implying the interpenetration of God and existence such that the divine is not a being as such but at the same time is distinct from creation).[4] As such, any distinction between the sacred and the non-sacred is rendered philosophically incoherent. Furthermore, Ramadan

[4] Granted, no author before me that I am aware of makes this claim about Ramadan's thought, and Ramadan does not make this claim explicitly. It is not inconsistent with traditional Muslim metaphysics (on which, see Nasr 1964), and especially Sufi metaphysics (on which, see Schimmel 1975 and Ibn Al-ʿArabī 1980), however. This introduction is not the place for a detailed discussion of it, but I refer my readers to later chapters where I discuss it in detail.

does not distinguish between so-called proper and improper Muslims, let alone claim that having doubts about God is a sign of not being a proper Muslim. For him, anyone who "feels Muslim" is a Muslim, "irrespective of the extent to which he or she adheres to the principles of faith and how strictly observant he or she is" (2002b, 208). Thus, he is clearly *not* saying that a *proper Muslim* should not have doubts about God. He is saying that the true nature of reality and Ultimate Being are such that doubts about God are logically inconceivable, because God is not an isolated, wholly and utterly distinct entity whose existence or non-existence can be coherently questioned. As long as a person holds to the view that God is an imagined or posited being that exists wholly and utterly apart from the rest of existence, he will not be able to fully understand what Ramadan is saying. Unfortunately, Berman never engages with this rather complex discussion, which I take up in later chapters. Thus, Berman's book ends up being more polemic than serious inquiry, more journalism than scholarship. In the end, he rather comically concludes that Ramadan "cannot think for himself. He does not believe in thinking for himself" (2011, 241).

While it may be puzzling, if not discouraging, that most of the discussion about Ramadan to date has focused more on the question of who or what he is than his ideas themselves, a couple of political theorists have recently taken note of Ramadan and have written some excellent articles on specific aspects of his thought. For example, in his article "Constructing the Space of Testimony: Tariq Ramadan's Copernican Revolution," Nicholas Tampio, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Fordham University who

writes, among other things, about Kant's influence on Anglo-American, continental, and contemporary Muslim political thinkers, makes Ramadan out to be a sort of Muslim, and therefore non-secular and not purely rationalist, Kant (2011, 603). On the idea that Ramadan is a Muslim Martin Luther, he makes the following, quite insightful, comment:

> ... it is extremely problematic to label a Muslim political thinker—especially one who appeals to political liberals—as a Muslim Martin Luther. One reason is that Luther himself was "one of the most intolerant of men," in John Rawls's terms, who contributed to the development of European reasonable pluralism only by accident. Additionally, the Protestant Reformation splintered the church at the cost of decimating the European economy, political structure, culture, and populace—including the death of approximately 20 percent of the population of the Holy Roman Empire during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). To call Ramadan a Muslim Martin Luther, then, reinforces the worst fears of Ramadan's critics that he intends to lead a religious war against European civilization. This gloss also fails to explain key aspects of Ramadan's project—particularly its vindications of theoretical creativity and political pluralism. (Ibid.)

Tampio picks up on Ramadan's suggestion in *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* that Muslims reappropriate "the universality of the message of Islam" so as to "produce a true 'intellectual revolution' in the sense intended by Kant when he spoke of the 'Copernican revolution'" (2004b, 53; also cited in Tampio 2011, 603). He applauds Ramadan's willingness to incorporate different concepts associated with Kant into his political theory, "such as autonomy, critique, and universal morality" (2011, 604).[5] He

[5] In this text, I attempt to honor Leo Strauss's distinction between political theory and political philosophy (see Strauss 1957, 2007). For Strauss, political philosophy denotes the search for truth and therewith the attempt to determine what the good life consists of. Political theory, meanwhile, denotes a decidedly lower-order of theoretical knowledge of

then proceeds to discuss Ramadan's notion of *dar al-shahādah*, the space or abode of testimony. Simply put, this is Ramadan's idea that it no longer makes sense to refer to non-Muslim-ruled lands as *dar al-ḥarb* (the abode of war), as distinct from *dar al-ʾIslām* (the abode of Islam), as classical Muslim scholars did. Rather, he argues, to the extent that Muslims are free to live their faith in non-Muslim-majority or non-Muslim-ruled countries, such countries can be considered part of *dar al-shahādah*, in that they constitute spaces in which Muslims can freely live their faith and fulfill the promise they make in pronouncing the *shahādah*, the basic Muslim profession of faith. Tampio argues that developing this concept of *dar al-shahādah* is an example of Ramadan enacting "his Copernican revolution to construct a new term for [the] religious-political landscape" Muslims face in the West today (2011, 617), a concept that allows Muslims to reconcile being fully Muslim with being fully engaged citizens of non-Muslim-majority or Muslim-ruled countries. "One of the most pressing questions of contemporary political theory—and politics," Tampio writes, "is how to discover or create more nuanced concepts to facilitate mutually beneficial pluralism" (ibid., 601). In Ramadan's concept of *dar al-shahādah*, he thinks he has found one possible concept, at least as far as believing Muslims are concerned.

Meanwhile, March, an Associate Professor of Political Science at Yale University

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politics and the political world. This, in turn, is premised, as Strauss puts it, on the "by no means self-evident" (2007) idea that there is or can be "such a thing as *theoretical* knowledge of things *political*" (ibid.). I study Ramadan's thought as political philosophy, or perhaps better, political theology, not simply political theory. Ramadan is clearly searching for truth and wishes to know what the good life consists of; he is not simply interested in acquiring theoretical knowledge of politics or the political world or looking for a way to cope with reality on a particular theoretical understanding of it.

specializing in contemporary philosophical liberalism, Muslim political thought, and the relationship between religion and political theory, finds "there is very strong reason to regard" Ramadan's "main political views as fully supportive of a liberal political order," although he says this by no means resolves "the question of whether his vision of Islam in Europe, taken in its entirety, gives enduring principled Islamic support for a liberal political order" (2007, 412). Then, in a later pair of articles—"Law as a vanishing mediator in the theological ethics of Tariq Ramadan" (2011) and "The Post-Legal Ethics of Tariq Ramadan: Persuasion and Performance in *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*" (2010)—he contends that, with his book *Radical Reform*, Ramadan has "effected a rather stunning shift in theology and metaethics," displacing "Law from the centre of Islamic normative inquiry" and substituting it "with a much more elusive conception of 'ethics'" (ibid.). March also does well to emphasize that one of the truly significant ideas Ramadan advances, which I discuss in some detail in this text, is the idea that creation or the universe itself and prophetic or prophetically-mediated revelations like the Qur'ān constitute two mutually complementary forms of revelation, "each normatively and epistemically co-equal" (ibid., 192).

For all that they contribute to the scholarly discussion of Ramadan's thought, however, both Tampio and March approach Ramadan's thought as if it were exclusively part of an intra-Muslim discourse; that it is simply an example of a Muslim thinker advancing ideas of theological and practical significance only to professed Muslims, from which non-Muslims can simply learn about, instead of from, the others in their midst.

This approach, I argue, limits us to learning what Ramadan says Muslims should consider when, for example, trying to reconcile being Muslim with being citizens of Western liberal democracies, or what Ramadan says Muslims should consider when trying to honor their faith and live according to the will of God as understood in Islam. It can show us how his ideas may differ from those of other Muslim thinkers and why, and it can even show us, as Tampio tries to, how he borrows ideas from different non-Muslim thinkers like Kant. It cannot show us, however, what is true in what he says, or what non-Muslims may be able to learn from his ideas. It cannot tell us if Ramadan perhaps has valid reasons for recasting the ideas of the sacred and the non-sacred, reason and revelation, that may in turn show us something true about the nature of ultimate reality and, in turn, what it really, truly means to be human, regardless of whether or not we profess to be Muslims. In other words, this approach will not do for the type of inquiry I pursue in this text.

Apart from the scholarly articles just mentioned, the only serious book-length, reasonably comprehensive study of Ramadan's ideas to date that I am aware of is Roman Catholic theologian Gregory Baum's book *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan: A Catholic Perspective* (2009). While this is a highly readable, somewhat popular account and discussion of some of Ramadan's key ideas, the focus of Baum's work seems to be simply finding common ground between Christianity and Islam, where these are understood specifically as religions. As a result, it is largely a typical exercise in so-called inter-religious dialogue, aiming, in part, to quell fears about Islam, rather than show us

anything that we could actually learn from Islam that is true. As I discuss in Chapter Two, this is one of the unfortunate legacies of the modern concept of religion. It is the same trap scholars like Tampio and March seem to have fallen into.

As a result of the way scholars and the public alike have been trained and conditioned to understand and talk about religion and all things religious, it seems virtually all claims about ultimate truth that appeal to non-empirical evidence are reduced to the category of religion, and this, in turn, is understood to mean an idiosyncratic identity, preference, choice, or value. As a result, religion, as such, is reduced to an indefeasible, groundless opinion and therefore ultimately considered of no more than journalistic interest to so-called non-believers.

In my work, I reject this approach. Instead, I seek to confront directly the truth of different claims about ultimate reality and truth itself on their own merits. I am not concerned ultimately with what Muslims believe, what Tariq Ramadan believes, or how what they or he believes differs from or is similar to what we and I believe. I am interested simply in learning something from Ramadan, as a person who accepts the truth of a particular tradition of ostensibly divinely revealed knowledge—making no presuppositions about what this means—that may actually be true. I want to know what the revealed message of Islam may have to teach us that does not presuppose faith or rely on any particular human convention for its legitimacy. I am not aware of any contemporary thinker or scholar who has addressed this question in this way before, and certainly not any contemporary, non-Muslim thinker who has ever seriously asked if

there might be something in the revealed message of Islam, howsoever understood, that may actually be true. In my work, I suggest some limits and possibilities for doing this. In the process, I also suggest a different way to understand religious diversity, a way that I hope will point the way toward less superficial inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue and reopen the possibility of taking the idea of revealed truth seriously on a social and political level and in a philosophically rigorous way.

Thus, in this text, I attempt to do several related things. I attempt to approach a fundamental problem in political philosophy in a new way; to address related questions about human moral and ethical diversity in a new way; to illustrate some of the problems with the concept of religion and especially the way people commonly understand and use the word religion, specifically as these relate to addressing the question at the heart of this text; and to offer one of the first serious, comprehensive theological, philosophical, and political studies of the work of Tariq Ramadan. As the title promises, I look at the relationship among truth, politics, and diversity, both in general and in one of the particular traditions that constitute the diversity that so pervades virtually all societies today. It is my sincere hope that this work will help enrich the scholarly and, potentially, the popular discourse on Islam, God, religion, truth, morality, ethics, politics, and diversity, in however small a way, as well as the more specific scholarly discussion of Tariq Ramadan's political theology.

On a more practical level, I attempt to show how recognition of the true nature of ultimate reality as Ramadan presents it, and the moral and ethical implications of the

moral anthropology he derives from it, provides a firmer basis than anything modern liberalism has to offer for deliberations and relations among people, and especially among people with diverse moral and ethical ideas. With a new and sure awareness of who we are as human beings, or who we are called to be, I argue, we may be able to come to more moral decisions about all manner of things, including property, economic distribution and redistribution, progress and what constitutes human progress, and in a word, justice. Indeed, the practical political stakes of this work are high.

In a remarkable commentary for the *New York Times*, Professor John McCumber of the Department of Germanic Languages at the University of California, Los Angeles, argues that a particular variety of individualism is dominant in the United States, and I would add much of the Western world, today. This form of individualism, McCumber argues, arose out of rational choice theory, and specifically its "mathematical account of individual choice" (2011). It is strikingly at odds with Ramadan's ontology and moral anthropology. Rational choice theory, McCumber says, defines "individualism as the making of choices so as to maximize one's preferences," without, he notes, specifying those preferences (ibid.). Such preferences may be material or social, but in no sense does rational choice theory pass judgment on them. It is ethically neutral, given that it takes for granted that empirical reality is the only reality, although this may include the observable (and therefore presumably empirical) reality that people have different social and other non-material preferences, thus upholding the modern, positivistic distinction between fact and value. Today, on the basis of rational choice theory, McCumber writes,

"governments and businesses across the globe simply assume that social reality is merely a set of individuals freely making rational choices." Even religious organizations, he points out, appear to compete with each other in a so-called religious marketplace that assumes that people choose whether or not to pledge adherence to a particular religion on the basis on an individualistic cost-benefit analysis (ibid.).

Yet, if rational choice theory is a branch of economics that simply studies how people seek to maximize their preferences, McCumber argues this has resulted in the dominance of a particularly pernicious rational choice philosophy in the West. "Rational choice philosophy," he writes, as distinct from rational choice theory, owing to the latter's absolute ethical neutrality, "promulgates a clear and compelling moral imperative: increase your wealth and power!" (ibid.). This has devastating consequences for social justice, and the notion of justice as a whole. For example, if humans have no real moral duties to each other, which the imperative to maximize individual wealth and power implies, there is no basis except imagined, individual utility for economic redistribution to help the less-fortunate in society, assuming that wealthy people and those in positions of power imagine that they can maintain a satisfactory level of comfort, security, and fulfillment without providing or allowing for such redistribution. One way the wealthy and powerful may achieve this, in fact, is by appealing to aspects of rational choice philosophy itself and specifically the idea that what people do not earn themselves by their own work or labor, they do not deserve, no matter the human consequences and no

matter the complex social relations that allow for wealth in the first place.[6] People are just as free to go hungry, as they are to work for their food, one may argue. Such arguments should be familiar to anyone with any knowledge of the political discourse today, especially in the United States and perhaps to a slightly lesser extent in Canada. As long as we make individual choice an absolute value, however, as McCumber says rational choice philosophy does, there is no basis for saying they are wrong. Also, it makes it impossible to identify a sure basis for determining what does and does not constitute progress, that objective toward which modern society, almost by definition, self-consciously aims. This becomes clear when we consider that what one person considers progress may impoverish or otherwise harm thousands of others (outsourcing, automation, deregulation, and union-busting with a view to cutting costs, are all things that may be viewed simultaneously as progressive by some and regressive by others, and there is no universally accepted, philosophically coherent standard to determine whether they are actually progressive or regressive—the best we can say is that they are more or less efficient, though to what end remains an open, problematic question).

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[6] The principle underlying the Muslim practice of *zakāt*, meaning that which purifies and which consists of giving a portion of your wealth to the less fortunate annually as an obligatory act of piety, is that humans owe everything they have first to God and then to the community in which they live. Thus, a person's wealth is neither exclusively nor finally hers, and she has a moral obligation to give of her wealth to those less fortunate people in her community without whom the community that allows for her wealth in the first place would not exist. Since this relationship between community and individual is understood in Islam to be divinely ordered to the extent that it partly defines what it means to be human, there is never a question of attempting to overcome this responsibility to others through technology. In modern liberalism, however, there is no basis for saying that attempting to elude or deny any such responsibility is wrong, and to the extent that modern liberalism supports free, individual choice unencumbered by tradition, it must recommend such an effort if it is likely to be conducive to the maximization of one's power and utility.

As Leo Strauss observes, there is no clear, undisputed modern understanding of what progress necessarily means (1981, 24). Indeed, it seems there could not be, since, as Strauss points out, progress "presupposes that there is something which is simply good, or the end, as the goal of progress" (ibid.), something which modern liberalism stubbornly refuses to settle on. Indeed, there is furthermore no sure criterion for determining how the benefits of progress should be distributed in society, which is part of the problem of defining progress itself, except the rational choice idea that whoever worked to maximize his or her individual advantage should alone benefit, or be able to make the final decision about who any benefits are shared with, even if this harms others. Yet, as McCumber sees, this makes individual choice, implying infinite variety, *the* absolute value in modern liberal society, rendering moral arguments virtually incomprehensible and certainly politically inconsequential.

The problem, McCumber rightly argues, is that, as long as philosophers make choice an absolute value within philosophy itself, they cannot critique it anywhere or in any form. Yet, to deny the rightness of infinite choice, to affirm that some preferences are better that others and that some are outright wrong, which would be to deny the foundation of rational choice philosophy, requires a sure criterion for determining the Good, something modern liberal thought is, by definition, unable to provide, at least apart from utility. Building on Ramadan's thought, I argue that such a criterion can be found in the revealed message of Islam. While Ramadan does not state this explicitly, I do: there is a statement about the nature and underlying structure of ultimate reality and our place in

it that is true and can be shown to be true; that is expressed in the revealed message of Islam as Ramadan understands it, though it is found in other traditions as well; and that affirms that humans *qua* humans have real moral duties to each other that supersede considerations of individual power and utility. Modern liberalism cannot say as much.

CHAPTER TWO

Truth, Politics, and The Tyranny of Modern Liberty

> We did indeed offer the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains: but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: but man undertook it—he was indeed unjust and foolish.
>
> **—The Qur'ān 32:72**[7]

The claim that modern liberalism cannot account for real moral duties is a bold one indeed. In this chapter, I argue that modern liberalism, to the extent that it upholds a particular understanding of individual freedom, and therewith of the individual, cannot offer a philosophically coherent argument that humans have real moral duties to each other. By virtue of the distinction between fact and value, I argue, modern liberalism cannot prove that humans or any other resource have any intrinsic value, and thus cannot say that humans have philosophically coherent moral claims against each other. In effect, I argue, modern liberal arguments against things like torture and cruel and unusual punishment are either inspired by earlier religious traditions and classical, Lockean liberalism, which is heavily indebted to Martin Luther's Christianity, or else can only be made if we assume that it will never be possible to get away with torturing others without facing any negative consequences ourselves. The former is an argument that presupposes and relies on faith, the latter is a contingent argument concerned with the maximization of individual utility and power and thus is not, strictly speaking, a moral argument at all.

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[7] All quotations from the Qur'ān are from 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī's translation, *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'ān: New Edition with Revised Translation and Commentary* (1991) unless otherwise indicated.

In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate how this is so.

I begin by identifying what I take to be the dominant modern liberal understanding of human freedom, by way of a short analysis of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Following this, I offer a critique of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, which is probably the most serious liberal response to my charge that modern liberalism cannot show that we have real moral duties to each other, let alone that we must be actually just and not simply apparently so. I further elaborate on this critique with reference to some of the most significant thinkers who attempt to discover an objective basis for human morality and ethics, notably Max Scheler. Finally, I arrive at John Rawls and offer a critique of his quintessentially modern liberal attempt to derive a binding political conception of justice without recourse to metaphysics. After this exhaustive survey, it should be evident that the public rejection of metaphysics or even the possibility of metaphysics, which is to say knowledge of ultimate reality, is one of the chief reasons modern liberalism is not able to settle upon a coherent understanding of what it ultimately means to be human, and thus demonstrate that humans have real moral duties to each other. I thus propose to consider an alternative way of looking at the problem from a Muslim perspective, through a synthesis of the political thought and political theology of Tariq Ramadan, to be developed in subsequent chapters. Yet, I argue, one of the biggest challenges to this is the modern concept of religion. Thus, after offering a critique of the way scholars often use the concept of religion and how this limits our understanding, I discuss why I propose to analyze what Ramadan says the

message of Islam has to teach humans solely with a view to what in this message can be shown to be true, not what people can somehow learn from something called religion. In other words, can what Ramadan says a human being is or what the nature of ultimate reality is or what moral duties humans have to each other be shown, somehow, to be accurate, and therefore objectively true? How? Why or why not? What are the limits and possibilities of undertaking such an inquiry? I argue that this represents an almost entirely new way of understanding what is otherwise simply reduced to the category of religion, that it has significant implications for how we understand difference, and thus has significant implications for how we can reconcile or learn to live with our differences, and so with each other.[8]

In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, the character Father Zossima expresses grave concerns about what he considers a distorted, all-too-modern, uniquely Western idea of freedom. "Interpreting freedom as the multiplication and rapid satisfaction of desires," he laments, modern

> men distort their own nature, for many senseless and foolish desires and habits and ridiculous fancies are fostered in them. They live only for mutual envy, for luxury and ostentation. To have dinners, visits, carriages, rank, and slaves to wait on one is looked upon as a necessity, for which

[8] This goes well beyond the confines of moral and ethical theory. For example, it calls into question the dominant modern understanding of the concept of religion, and thus the distinction between the religious and the secular. As I discuss below with respect to the work of William T. Cavanaugh, to the extent that the distinction between the religious and the secular is socially constructed, by virtue of there being no objective definition of either, and to the extent that this distinction serves a political function, any alternative perspective that denies the validity of this distinction risks disrupting the political function otherwise served by this distinction. This has implications for the legitimacy of the modern liberal nation-state, as I allude to below, although this is beyond the scope of the present work.

> life, honor, and human feeling are sacrificed, and men even commit suicide if they are unable to satisfy it. We see the same thing among those who are not rich, while the poor drown their unsatisfied need and their envy in drunkenness. ... I ask you, is such a man free? (1993, 69)

Zossima is convinced that modern, Westernized men and women are so enamored with the humanistic promise of the Enlightenment that they cannot see how their all too modern idea of freedom isolates them from each other and binds them to so many fleeting, and ultimately meaningless and unsatisfying, man-made desires. Modern men, he concedes, "have succeeded in accumulating a greater mass of objects, but the joy in the world has grown less" (ibid., 70). To be free to do nothing but pursue our individual, private, material ends, without interference from tradition or other people, is no freedom at all for Father Zossima. Rather, it is the "tyranny of material things and habits" (ibid., 70). As Robert Gascoigne puts it, however, this is precisely what a liberal society is—"a society in which the invocation of tradition is not sufficient to constrain or limit individual freedom" (2009, 7).

The idea that this is all it means to be free, and that defending any alternative idea of freedom is simply an anachronistic or chauvinistic attempt to frustrate and limit true freedom, is the tyranny of modern liberty. This seems to be what prevents the character Ivan, to whom Dostoevsky seems to imagine Father Zossima responding, from seeing how any person could truly love his neighbor. Such love, Ivan is convinced, "is a miracle impossible on earth" (Dostoevsky 1993, 7). It is human nature, he believes, to despise and envy others—to attempt to become God and lord it over others, up to and including

torturing others purely for fun. Thus, as long as humans are free, they are apt to be cruel; Ivan never questions that the conditions that allow humans to be so cruel promote true freedom. The nature of the world is such that, while many people are able to satisfy at least most of their desires, many more must suffer. This, Ivan concludes, implicates everyone in the suffering of others, although it seems he feels that most people are not as troubled by this as he is. "Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy at the end," he asks his brother Alyosha, "... but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fists, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?" (ibid., 16). His brother, understandably, says no. The only viable solution Ivan sees, however, is to reject life entirely—to commit suicide. He says he does not deny the God that supposedly created this world, but simply that he rejects the world itself because he does not want to be implicated in the suffering of others by virtue of the fact that he enjoys life.

In Ivan's famous legend of The Grand Inquisitor, which he recounts to his brother, he implies that there are only two alternatives to suicide, neither of which he finds appealing. As the Christ figure in his story seems to suggest, although he never says a word, we should respect human freedom; it is enough to urge people to be more Christ-like. This, Ivan seems to suggest, implies that Christ is ignorant of human nature and erroneously imagines that humans are at all capable of being like him. This is consistent, of course, with Ivan's view that humans cannot be at all like Christ. Alternatively, as the

Grand Inquisitor, who represents the Roman Catholic Church in Ivan's tale, has it, people are weak and need to be subdued for their own good. Thus, the Church must assume responsibility for outright lying to people about God and actively persecuting those who speak out against the Church—up to and including Christ himself, as far as Ivan's story is concerned—all in the purported interest of human happiness, albeit at the expense of both truth and freedom. This, of course, implies that the Grand Inquisitor is an atheist, or at least an agnostic, and that the Church is nothing but a purely human institution; at best, it seeks human happiness by arbitrary fiat, and at worst, seeks nothing but power and material gain. The choice, then, for Ivan, is between freedom, which leads to unimaginable suffering, implicates everyone in the suffering of others, and, because of human nature, cannot possibly be conducive to any significant measure of Christ-like love among humans, or submission to a lie, which robs humans of their dignity and artificially sets some humans above others. As his Grand Inquisitor puts it, defending the latter alternative, "Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering" (ibid., 28).

Father Zossima's indirect response appears to be simply this: what if no lie is necessary, because freedom means something entirely different? What if freedom implies guilt and suffering? Cutting through Ivan's dichotomy between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, Father Zossima responds in typical Eastern Orthodox fashion: of course we are all, every one of us, responsible for each other's suffering, but this is a call to take responsibility, to work for justice—not to reject life. Freedom is found, not in the

individual pursuit of material and private goals, but in community with others and especially in *kenosis*, or simply Christ-like self-emptying, acceptance, and humility. To live any other way is not to be free, then, but to be less than human. This, as we shall see, is very similar to the argument Ramadan makes, although his argument does not presuppose faith, as Zossima's seems to.

How satisfactory could Zossima's response possibly be to modern man—to Ivan, for instance? Zossima tells his comrades,

> look around you at the gifts of God, the clear sky, the pure air, the tender grass, the birds; nature is beautiful and sinless, and we, only we, are sinful and foolish, and we don't understand that life is heaven, for we have only to understand that and it will at once be fulfilled in all its beauty, we shall embrace each other and weep. (Ibid., 53)

Yet as poetic and beautiful as this passage may be, at the very least Ivan would say that most people clearly do not understand. Why should they embrace each other and weep, after all, when they can strive to overpower each other and win? Would this really be beneath them as human beings? Is egoistic individualism really slavery? Is this not in fact real freedom—to pick and choose whom you embrace and whom you attempt to crush? Why should we be humble? Why should we accept responsibility for each other? How can we know this to be true, such that we may legitimately claim that someone acting otherwise is acting wrongly? Father Zossima does not answer these questions, because his response presupposes faith.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells his followers to treat all people, not just their friends and neighbors, as they would like to be treated. "Love your enemies," he says.

> Treat others as you would like them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what thanks can you expect? Even sinners love those who love them. ... Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount. Instead, love your enemies and do good, and lend without any hope of return. You will have a great reward and you will be sons of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. (Luke 6:27 and 31-35)[9]

Luke's Jesus says we should treat others, including our enemies, the way we would like to be treated because a great reward awaits us if we do, presumably after our earthly deaths. This is something neither the world nor any of the people or other creatures in it could honestly promise by themselves. Indeed, loving one's enemies could have disastrous worldly consequences if they do not reciprocate. Faith in such a proposition, to use Paul Tillich's understanding of faith, means to make the promised reward and its source our ultimate concern, and to act with confidence that this promise will be fulfilled (1958, chapter one). In other words, to be concerned with being "sons of the Most High" and receiving a "great reward" from the Most High more than anything else, and acting with confidence that there is a "Most High" of which we could be called "sons" and that will confer a "great reward" on us for so acting. Faith in such a proposition, which is at root to say in its justifying source—in this example, the Most High, or simply God—implies that one accepts that it is true. It is not a matter of mere opinion, but it is in fact true that we have a real duty to treat others the way we would like to be treated based on the evidence Jesus gives—namely that a great reward from a particular source awaits us

[9] All Biblical quotations are from the *Jerusalem Bible* (1966) unless otherwise indicated.

if we do, and we risk losing this reward if we do not.[10]

A person that denies that any such reward awaits us (a person who may conceive of the divine or ultimate reality quite differently), or that any divine source exists that might reward or punish us if we act a certain way (an atheist or a deist), or that we can prove or otherwise know the existence of any such source (an agnostic), must reject Jesus's argument. For any such person, the idea that people should do anything, or refrain from doing anything, simply because a wholly and utterly distinct,[11] higher power

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[10] This comes close to what Tillich calls the intellectualistic distortion of the meaning of faith, but this is not my intention. For Tillich, faith "is participation in the subject of one's ultimate concern with one's whole being. Therefore," he argues, "the term 'faith' should not be used in connection with theoretical knowledge, whether it is knowledge on the basis of immediate, prescientific or scientific evidence, or whether it is on the basis of trust in authorities who themselves are dependent on direct or indirect evidence" (1958, 32). Faith, for Tillich, implies both certainty and risk: "certainty about one's being, namely, on being related to something ultimate or unconditional," and the risk that one may "surrender to a concern which is not really ultimate and may be destructive if taken as ultimate" (ibid., 34-35). "This," he rightly points out, "is not a theoretical problem of the kind of higher or lower evidence, of probability or improbability, but it is an existential problem of 'to be or not to be'" (ibid., 35). Thus, faith is not belief and belief is not faith. To accept that something is true is not to have faith that it is true. Be that as it may, moral teachings that have as their basis any understanding of ultimate reality that one could theoretically have faith in necessarily present themselves as true, and thus are always justified by pointing to something said to be true in the very understanding of ultimate reality that ostensibly justifies them. Unless we are to say that faith of any kind in anything is both necessary and sufficient for morality—which would be absurd—we must either say that a particular kind of faith in a particular object of ultimate concern, or objective proof of the truth of a particular moral proposition, is necessary for morality. But if we do that, we are still left with the question: which kind of faith in which particular object can show that a particular moral proposition is true? This is simply to ask what is morally true, and how we can know?

[11] The idea that the Most High, or God, is a wholly and utterly distinct being is only implied in the passage from Luke quoted above. This, however, is the most common understanding of the basic nature of and relationship between the divine and existence. We commonly imagine that "God" is a wholly and utterly distinct being that is considered divine or sacred by simple virtue of being somehow higher and thus set apart from all other beings. This gives rise to, and in fact significantly impoverishes, the apparently intractable and not particularly enlightening debate that continues to rage over the "existence of God." As I discuss below, this is the result of a fallacy I call presupposing the demonstradum. I take this idea from Leo Strauss, only to accuse him of committing it himself in claiming that there is a necessary tension between reason and revelation, which is to say between man and God (see Chapter Four).

supposedly says so, amounts to an unconscionable limit on individual freedom justified by a dubious human convention at best. It is therefore not a legitimate reason for compelling people to act in a certain way or for arguing that acting otherwise is in any sense objectively wrong. Without further qualification, this assumes that egoistic individualism is the very definition of freedom—that neither tradition, nor the conflicting, individual interests of other people, can have any legitimate hold on a person's conscience. This is the idea of individual liberty that modern liberalism seeks to protect at nearly all cost and that, as we saw earlier, Dostoevsky decries through the character of Father Zossima. Yet where else can we find knowledge of justice and morality except tradition, except in teachings like Jesus's?

Nothing in nature seems to directly show or tell us what is morally wrong and right, unless we think that might always makes right and that life is nothing but will to power, as Nietzsche has it. Indeed, this is as much as we can say about morality in the absence of a philosophically coherent argument or proof of some alternative—something Nietzsche, for one, thought was impossible, and which it seems no thinker since has been able to give. It is one thing to wax poetic or appeal to faith, like Father Zossima, or appeal to anecdotal evidence that people generally share a common moral and ethical vision and thus are able to work things out themselves in any given context. It is quite another thing to prove what is right and what is wrong in the face of someone who disagrees. Unfortunately, in the absence of such a proof, being able to declare that any action is truly immoral or unethical remains philosophically impossible, and this presents

a problem whenever power and political authority are invoked to enforce a given moral or ethical decision.

An excellent, practical example of this problem can be found in an article on religion and justice in American politics by John Duncan (2006), an avowed atheist and Director of the Ethics, Society, and Law program at Trinity College at the University of Toronto. In the article, Duncan advises "secular progressives" to partner with "religious progressives" so as to counter the "religious right" and "avoid a repeat of the 2004 election" in which George W. Bush was re-elected. "There are ridiculous views outside as well as inside the churches," he writes. Thus, he argues, "The right criterion for alliance on the left is not secular belief, but rather common commitments to the legitimate claims of justice." But what are the legitimate claims of justice? The legitimate claims of justice, he writes, are "always being debated, tested, and revised." Yet if the legitimate claims of justice are never clear and certain, how can the extent to which a person's views are consistent with them help one determine whether or not to ally oneself with that person? Indeed, how can we even say coherently that a person's views are or are not consistent with something that is not fixed and is in fact constantly being debated, tested, and revised—that a person's views are or are not ridiculous? This is not to say that people do not work out precisely these kinds of understandings on an individual, day to day basis, however ultimately philosophically groundless they may be. The problem, though, is that to the extent to which people are more and more diverse, yet otherwise must live together, we must directly confront the question: how and on what basis should

we relate to others, and with what end in mind? Why should I not simply try to overpower others, if I think I can get away with it? Can I justify the use of force in stopping others from attempting to do this for more than the simple reason that I do not want to be one of the people overpowered? Perhaps this is the best we can do, although philosophers as diverse as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Burke, Rousseau, Scheler, and Rawls, among others, as well as virtually every religious tradition, aim a great deal higher.

From at least Kant onwards, virtually all arguments that we have real moral duties to each other that are not specifically presented as theological arguments and do not rely explicitly on particular metaphysical positions have failed. Meanwhile, scholars have generally dismissed theological arguments because they appear to rely on presumably non-falsifiable, and apparently incredible, metaphysical claims. As a result, it has become virtually impossible to take the question of justice seriously on anything more than a superficial, journalistic, subjective, or emotional level, let alone determine what is and is not just or whether or not and, if so, how we could ever know for sure. The idea that this problem is caused by our apparent inability to take theological arguments and metaphysical claims seriously may cause some people to think that the problem is utterly indissoluble, since for some, theological and metaphysical arguments are obviously non-falsifiable, incredible, and therefore of no significance to philosophy or politics. Yet if we look at the source of the problem somewhat differently, perhaps we can find good reason to reconsider this position. This is what I attempt to do here, and the conclusions I draw from this justify the rest of my deliberations in this text.

I argue that the problem is really due to the combination of the tyranny of modern liberty and the distinction between fact and value. This leads people to dismiss theological and metaphysical arguments out of hand, but that is not the whole story. The tyranny of modern liberty, as we have seen, is the tyranny of a particular, uniquely modern understanding of what liberty is, such that all other ideas about what liberty is, or might be, are effectively silenced. The distinction between fact and value, meanwhile, amounts to the assertion that the only certain knowledge we can have is empirical knowledge. The modern idea of liberty assumes a tyrannical character to the extent that the distinction between fact and value is used to define and support it. This calls for some explanation.

Since the Enlightenment, liberty in the West has essentially meant the freedom to attempt to maximize one's worldly utility and power as one sees fit, in ways unencumbered by arguments from tradition and normative arguments not based exclusively on empirical evidence—which is to say no normative arguments at all, and certainly no explicitly theological or metaphysical arguments. As a result, we cannot know what justice truly is, much less whether or not we have a duty to uphold it. It is not difficult to see how this makes it almost impossible to seriously discuss the question of justice, the question of moral duties. This is because this question cannot ultimately be answered, at least not in a way that affirms that we have real moral duties to each other, if individual liberty is our absolute, overriding, ultimate concern, and empirical evidence is the only evidence that counts. This is because, to say that we have real moral duties to

each other, in the absence of a sure, ontologically grounded anthropology that does not rely on any form of human convention to justify it, is simply to place, potentially or theoretically if not actually, arbitrary limits on individual human freedom. To state the obvious, this is verboten in modern liberal society, to the extent that it defines liberty as individual freedom from restrictions on human behavior and action that are not grounded in arguments derived exclusively from empirical evidence.

What is justice and do we have a real duty to actually uphold it—and not simply apparently uphold it[12]—even at the expense of our individual utility and power? How do we know what justice is and how do we know whether or not we have a real duty to uphold it? In other words, what is true about our rights and responsibilities with respect to each other and how do we know this? What role can truth possibly play in politics? Today, it seems all we can have are opinions about justice, and it appears we have quite a variety of them. The problem is possibly more acute now than ever before because, with the modern rejection of God and any coherent idea of divine revelation altogether, it seems it has become almost impossible to coherently show why this is even a problem. Without some idea of ultimate reality that we can coherently defend as true without relying on human convention—by which I mean norms, human authorities, and institutions that are neither questioned nor proven to be objectively true—it seems we cannot even properly articulate the question of justice or understand why it remains so serious. As a result, we seem to have lost the ability to talk seriously about truth and

[12] A distinction already mentioned and which I discuss further below.

politics and we are *ipso facto* given over to our baser selves.

Since at least Plato, political philosophers and thinkers have wrestled with the question of justice. Most problematic of all is whether the appearance of justice is enough, or whether something demands that we be actually just. Is it enough to appear just while being actually profoundly unjust, or must we be just even if we appear unjust, thus compromising our individual worldly utility and power? Immanuel Kant's response that we must act only in accordance with whatever maxims we would will to become universal laws—his famous categorical imperative—is probably the most serious liberal response to my charge that modern liberalism as such cannot ultimately prove that we have real moral duties to each other, let alone that we must be actually just and not simply apparently so. Yet for a number of reasons, but especially in light of Martin Heidegger's observations about technology, it too proves inadequate.

Kant gives two reasons why we must honor the categorical imperative—and actually, not simply apparently, honor it. First, it is practical. For example, it would be counterproductive to act such that it becomes a universal law that people may freely assault each other, since this would leave one open to assault and without recourse to any coherent argument that this is wrong. But what if we could somehow get away with treating others however we like, while ensuring that we are protected? Technology, Heidegger points out, allows us to do this, at least theoretically. The essence of technology, he says, has convinced us so thoroughly that we can master absolutely everything, including each other, such that everything, including other people, appears to

us as a mere object, a resource to be used and consumed. Thus, as we see more and more today, efficient productivity, even at the expense of the well being of at least some humans, is valued above virtually everything else. Second, not to act according to the categorical imperative, according to Kant, would be philosophically incoherent. If he can demonstrate this, it would certainly bring us closer to a philosophically coherent argument for the alternative—that we should act according to the categorical imperative, and thus we should treat others the way we would like to be treated, not as objects or mere resources. As he puts it in his discussion of whether or not borrowing money on the pretense that you will repay the loan when you know that you will be unable to do so,

> For supposing it to be a universal law that everyone when he thinks himself in a difficulty should be able to promise whatever he pleases, with the purpose of not keeping his promise, the promise itself would become impossible, as well as the end that one might have in view in it, since no one would consider that anything was promised to him, but would ridicule all such statements as vain pretenses. (2005, 82)

To the extent that we can successfully deceive people, however, promises may at least continue to appear possible and thus to act in this manner, contrary to Kant's categorical imperative, is not necessarily philosophically incoherent—provided we can imagine some technological means to obviate any incoherency. This is what companies do every time they rely on branding instead of actual quality to convince customers that their products are worth buying, a strategy that seems to work a lot of the time. It is also what consumers do when they excuse their culpability in the mistreatment of the people in far away lands that make the products they consume by appealing to the alleged wisdom and

goodness of the free market, pleading ignorance, or claiming there is nothing they can do about it. In all such cases, real, meaningful compassion and empathy never seem to take hold, even though, like promises, these remain a theoretical possibility.

It turns out that Kant's categorical imperative is but a failed attempt to provide a pre-conventional, formal ground for human convention and ethics. Upon reflection, it is not truly pre-conventional, since it relies on the convention that humans will not, or at least should not, act under the influence of the essence of technology to circumvent the rule without introducing practical or philosophical contradictions. In effect, he assumes that actual justice, not apparent justice, is what ultimately matters, without proving this to be so.

If there is to be any meaningful relationship between truth and politics, we must ask, as Heidegger insists, how we can have any truth at all. But why must we ask this? Even assuming there is such a thing as truth, perhaps we cannot know it to any extent that is politically significant. Perhaps modern, liberal thinkers abandoned the question of ultimate truth for good reason. Perhaps the material progress we witness everyday is the best we can hope for. Yet, as Heidegger points out,

> The technological-scientific rationalization ruling the present age justifies itself every day ... by its immense results. But this says nothing about what first grants the possibility of the rational and the irrational. The effect proves the correctness of technological-scientific rationalization. But is the manifest character of what *is* exhausted by what is demonstrable? Does not the insistence on what is demonstrable block the way to what is? (2008, 448)

To show how we can have any truth more than the fact of material progress, then, we must be able to show something that is not itself revealed in the fact of material progress. This is a seemingly impossible task, though one I undertake here by recurring to Aristotle. In the process, I wish to highlight a possible response from Aristotle to my all too brief critique of Kant—a response that is not entirely satisfactory, but is nonetheless illuminating.

Humans, as such, are not self-sufficient, Aristotle informs us; we rely on each other. Thus, we are not gods. Since we do not live by instinct alone, we are also different from other creatures; we occupy a middling position between gods and beasts. As a result, Aristotle finds that humans have the potential to be "the best of animals when completed," yet "when separated from law and adjudication ... the worst of all" (1984, 37–38, 1253a130). Humans are complete, for Aristotle, when they live in partnership or community with other humans, because it is only in partnership with others that humans can not only live, but also live well. Not all human partnerships are conducive to living well, however. Aristotle calls the smallest possible human partnership or community that is fully self-sufficient, and thus conducive to living well, the city, or *polis*. Cities, he writes, "while coming into being for the sake of living," exist "for the sake of living well" (1984, 37, 1252b129). Aristotle does not have the modern idea of a city or state in mind, but rather a particular kind of human partnership that exists for a particular reason and which rests on a particular type of foundation—though not necessarily a particular foundation as such. For Aristotle, being fully human implies living well, not simply

existing. By living well, he does not simply mean having all of our bodily needs met and all of our narcissistic desires satisfied; he has something higher in mind. Cities, as Aristotle understands them, make it possible for us to live well, and not simply exist, because they allow us to deliberate and agree on and subsequently adopt and live by those virtues, and especially the virtue of justice, which conduce to living well, which is to say, living virtuously.[13] Such deliberations and agreements are made possible by our shared capacity for speech, as distinct from voice.

By virtue of the natural capacity for speech and the fact that humans are not self-sufficient, Aristotle argues that the city is "prior by nature to the household and to each of us" (ibid., 37, 1253a120). Humans are thus political animals by nature. This is because, Aristotle assumes, we are not endowed with any capacity that nature has not given us for a particular function. Nature, he sees, has given humans, uniquely, the capacity for speech. This, he surmises, is so that they can deliberate among themselves to determine the conventions that will govern their interactions with one another—especially conventional, human understandings of what is ultimately good, or at least that good which the community should ultimately aim for. "For it is peculiar to man as compared to the other animals," he writes, "that he alone has a perception of good and bad and just and unjust and other things [of this sort]; and partnership in these things is what makes a household a city" (1984, 37, 1253a115). In other words, humans have ideas not only

[13] Note the tautology: living well requires deliberating about what is virtuous and subsequently living according to what we consider virtuous, in partnership with others who share the same understanding of what it means to live virtuously, which is to say, live well.

about what it means to live, but also what it means to live well, and "partnership in these" is what makes a city. But it is clear that knowledge of what it means to live well, and what, precisely, is required to achieve this goal, is not clearly given by nature. Thus, for Aristotle, humans are, paradoxically, given by nature to live in partnership with each other according to convention. This is because, while nature endows humans with the capacity for speech, it seems the content of that speech is not given by nature (1984, Book 1, *passim*).

Yet, if we are given by nature to live according to convention, we still do not know which conventions we should live by. What is right, what is wrong, what is good, what is evil, what is just, what is unjust? What does it mean to live well? What is virtue, what is vice? That we must live in community owing to our self-insufficiency, and that we are meant to live by convention, implies that the basis for living in community is utility, or what is the same, mutual, but nonetheless individual, benefit. Thus, utility also appears to be the basis for the conventions that structure the community. Human relationships so constituted would clearly violate Kant's categorical imperative, since it would imply that every person is merely a means to every other person's private ends. Aristotle recognizes this, and reminds us that human relationships based on utility leave much to be desired. "[W]ithout friends," he writes, "no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods" (1980, 1155a25). "But the friendship of utility," he continues, "is full of complaints; for as they use each other for their own interests they always want to get the better of the bargain" (1980, 1162b14). Thus, it seems a political community

based on utility, no matter how harmonious one imagines everyone's interests to be, in principle, robs humans of the prospect of and the hope for that genuine friendship without which Aristotle believes no one would choose to live. If people could develop technologies or technological approaches in Heidegger's sense to free themselves of their reliance on other human beings, or ignore the suffering of others, then perhaps they would no longer need each other just to live. This, of course, leaves open the question of living well. Can we live well if we see other humans only as instruments for the satisfaction of our bodily needs and narcissistic desires and not as friends and partners in virtuous living? While some manner of utility may be served by those conventions that constitute a given political community, it cannot be their primary ground, unless we can live without true friends. It cannot be the basis of a partnership that is necessary to live well, and not simply exist, unless living well has nothing to do with virtue or some idea of a higher Good. And yet clearly we all have some notion, some idea, of the Good, though we may not be able to apprehend it fully or precisely identify it as an objective reality.

Aristotle, Kant, and many others, seem to share the idea that humans need friends to live a good and full life, and the idea that such friendships must be genuine and therefore cannot be based primarily on utility. The question remains whether or not it matters if such friendships are actually genuine or only apparently so, and if so, why. There is, of course, the further problem of distinguishing between actually genuine and apparently genuine friendships. If this cannot be done, then the question of whether or not

it matters which type of friendship obtains in a given relationship is moot. Before we can distinguish them in practice, however, we must be able to show that we can distinguish them in theory. If we can do this, we will perhaps then be able to distinguish, in principle, between real justice and only apparent justice and thus be in a better position to see what justice is and to determine whether or not it matters if we are truly just. Such a theoretical distinction between real friendship and apparent friendship, and therewith between real justice and apparent justice, is implicit in Max Scheler's distinction between being-as-act and being-as-object, which forms the basis of his non-formal ethical personalism.

Scheler opens his book *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Value: A New Attempt Toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism* with a promise to his readers of another book yet to come: "In a major work planned for the near future I will attempt to develop a non-formal ethics of values on the broadest possible basis of phenomenological experience" (1973, 5). Unfortunately, he never published any such work, and thus his non-formal ethical pluralism remains underdeveloped. Nevertheless, he delivers what he promises his readers in *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Value*. "As long as Kant's terrifyingly sublime formula," he writes, "with its emptiness, remains valid as the only evidential result of all philosophical ethics, we are robbed of the clear vision of the fullness of the moral world and its qualities as well as of the conviction which we might have that this world is something *binding*" (ibid., 6, original emphasis). Kant's ethics, and especially the hold it had on so many people at the time, presents an obstacle to his work, he claims. Therefore, in this book, he simply

promises to "set forth some criticisms of formalism in ethics in general—especially of Kant's arguments in support of it" (ibid., 5). This is not the place for an exhaustive analysis of Scheler's critique of Kant's ethics. It is, however, in *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Value* that Scheler gives his most detailed account of the human person, as he understands it, which is significantly different from the way Kant understands the person. Scheler critiques what he calls modern, bourgeois liberalism, which he associates with Kant. Kant was wrong, he argues, in thinking of the human person as an object, albeit a living, breathing, and, most importantly, rational one—as just one more thing among so many other things. Far from being an object, the human person, for Scheler, exists only as a "concrete unity of all possible acts" (ibid., 29); "The person exists solely in the pursuance of his acts," he argues (ibid.). Thus, humans exist as unities, not of matter, but of acts, which is quite different from the way virtually all other things exist.

Stephen Frederick Schneck, Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at the Catholic University of America, argues that Scheler's concept of the human person "suggests a new ground on which to understand the political subject and the political community so as to outline a politics and political theory which transform the ego-based politics of modern liberalism and Marxism" (1987, 1–2). Meanwhile, Peter H. Spader, Professor of Philosophy at Marywood University, attempts to finish the job Scheler set for himself in *Scheler's Ethical Personalism: Its Logic, Development, and Promise* (2002), a magisterial study of

Scheler's ethics. He does this by tying together various strands of Scheler's thinking to reveal a more fully developed Schelerian non-formal ethical personalism. Thus, Spader's book can be considered both a secondary source on Scheler's ethical personalism, and a primary source that articulates and defends an ethical personalism derived from Scheler's ideas but never fully or explicitly articulated by Scheler himself. Like Schneck's work, Spader's task relies heavily on Scheler's anthropology and the moral implications of it. The human person is clearly central to Scheler's ethics.

In conceiving of the human person as a unity of acts, or existing in the mode of being-as-act instead of the mode of being-as-object, Scheler offers us an anthropology that demands that we not treat each other as mere objects, that we not relate to each other purely instrumentally. Humans, conceived as objects, have no intrinsic value, no dignity, and no corresponding coherent moral claims against others, just as footballs have no moral claims against humans, no matter how violently we kick them. As an alternative, Scheler proposes a perhaps appealing, if not wholly satisfactory or accurate, conception of the human person that transcends objectification, and thus promises a basis for real moral claims among humans. His idea of the human person counsels and imagines the possibility of shared recognition of and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person among people living in community with each other. It further assumes that people, universally, want to be actually, not just apparently, recognized by others as more than objects, as having intrinsic dignity and worth that legitimately demands to be respected. This is because the distinction between relating to someone or something as either

existing as an object or existing as a unity of acts is a distinction in attitude or what Scheler, following Kant, calls moral tenor, on the part of the person recognizing and relating to another. It is not enough to make it look like I am treating someone as a unity of acts, as opposed to an object; I must actually have this attitude in mind when I interact with him, otherwise I risk making the distinction philosophically incoherent and practically meaningless. As Kant might say, this would make the idea that someone could genuinely respect another's inherent dignity impossible, despite the fact that a person might long for such respect herself, just as in his example of the person who makes a promise he knows he cannot keep, resulting in promises themselves being rendered impossible. In Scheler's words:

> The basic moral tenor permeates all levels of a deed up to its success with its own value-content. Therefore it can come to an *appearance* in a deed and can be *intuitively* given without our having to 'conclude' anything. It is peculiar to the basic moral tenor to remain *constant* throughout changes in the qualities of conation, as well as throughout differences in the conation's intention towards *reality*. Its *content* appears not only in intentions, acts done on purpose, and deeds, but also in wishes and their expressions. It permeates the fantasy-world of conation far into reveries and dreams. (1973, 115, original emphasis)

Yet for all this, Scheler acknowledges that, while education cannot change a person's moral tenor, it can "*hide* its true nature in a person" (ibid., 116, original emphasis). Thus, we may believe that a person's intentions are good, when in reality they are not. We may think someone is our friend, when in fact he or she is not.

Scheler argues that to view others as objects is simply to ensure that a person will be seen as such by others, thus guaranteeing that he or she will never be sure of achieving the recognition and respect Scheler assumes people so deeply desire. But what if at least some people are fully satisfied, or imagine themselves to be, with simply being treated as if they were more than objects, even if, ultimately, they are in fact being objectified? This is the notorious problem of other minds. What could you possibly say to such people to show that something they are doing or intend to do is wrong because it consists of using others as means to their own ends? This is why the distinction between actual justice and apparent justice is both so vexing and so important. If perception is all there is, and our perceptions of situations can, theoretically, be manipulated infinitely through any number of devious or insidious tactics and strategies, then we can neither say absolutely that we must treat others the way we would like to be treated, nor can we say that this is a problem. At any rate, this conceives of humans as being tragically trapped in a prisoner's dilemma, where it is impossible to be sure of the cooperation of your fellow prisoners and, therefore, you must act exclusively in your own best interests, given that you may not be able to rely on anyone else. As a result, everyone suffers, but in a profound way that modern liberal contract theory was never meant to remedy directly.

Only a sure, ontologically grounded anthropology that is not ultimately derived from objective experience and which also overcomes the problem of other minds, it seems, can offer a coherent, meaningful alternative. In other words, only an anthropology that is not only non-objective, as Scheler's is, but which also goes beyond Scheler's non-

objective human person to locate the pre-conventional or non-conventional criteria for determining our true moral and ethical responsibilities, can serve as the basis for making a philosophically coherent argument that humans have ontologically true duties to each other and the rest of creation or existence. Politically, it is only on the basis of such an anthropology that conflicting moral and ethical propositions may be adjudicated such that we may not only be able to say, yes, we should treat others the way we would like to be treated, but explain why. Or not. In the absence of such a conception of the human being or person, not only can we not say that we have any real moral duties to each other, but we cannot even argue that this is a problem. This would mean, however, that there is no ultimate ground for political philosophy as such, and thus philosophy would remain, in Nietzsche's words, "the personal confession of its author" (1989, 13, aphorism 6).

Despite these epistemological problems, modern liberal thinkers persist in defending different conceptions of justice and therewith different ideas about what humans should and should not do. These almost always imply a defense of the liberal idea of freedom, which is to say they start from an egoistic perspective. Thus, modern liberal thinkers often end up trying to do the logically impossible: defend a materialistic and individualistic ideal of freedom that does not allow for any conventional or traditional limits on human action, while at the same time argue that we do have real duties to and rights against each other with reference to nothing but empirical reality or formal logic. John Rawls is probably the one modern liberal thinker who has done more than any other to advance the cause of modern liberalism and defend a particular liberal

understanding of justice that he believes can be defended without recourse to metaphysics or any particular understanding of ultimate reality. If he can truly defend such a conception of justice without recourse to metaphysics or human convention, and demonstrate that it truly captures what justice is and what justice demands, then perhaps we do not need God, or metaphysics, to posit the possibility of and need for a meaningful relationship between truth and politics after all.

In *Political Liberalism* (2005), Rawls says he intends to address a serious problem he overlooked in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). It is worth quoting his description of this problem at length:

> A modern democratic society is characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. No one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally. Nor should one expect that in the foreseeable future one of them, or some other reasonable doctrine, will ever be affirmed by all, or nearly all, citizens. Political liberalism assumes that, for political purposes, a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime. Political liberalism also supposes that a reasonable comprehensive doctrine does not reject the essentials of a democratic regime. Of course, a society may also contain unreasonable and irrational, and even mad, comprehensive doctrines. In their case the problem is to contain them so that they do not undermine the unity and justice of society. ...
>
> The main conclusion to draw from these remarks ... is that the problem of political liberalism is: How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines? Put another way: How is it possible that deeply opposed

> though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and all affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime? What is the structure and content of a political conception that can gain the support of such an overlapping consensus? (2005, xvii–xviii)

In fact, for Rawls, doctrines are never reasonable or unreasonable, rational or irrational, only people are. Furthermore, he sharply distinguishes between what is reasonable and what is rational, belying the impression the forgoing statement makes that an unreasonable comprehensive doctrine is necessarily irrational. Still, his intention is clear enough, although he restates it in different ways throughout the text.

Given the fact of persistent diversity[14] in modern democratic societies, Rawls attempts to address two fundamental questions. First, the question of "the way the basic institutions of a constitutional democracy should be arranged if they are to satisfy the fair terms of cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal" (2005, 4). Second, "How might political philosophy find a shared basis for settling such a fundamental question as that of the most appropriate family of institutions to secure democratic liberty and equality?" (2005, 8). Not only is his starting point clearly constitutional, liberal democracy, he writes as if this were beyond reproach. Thus, rather than seriously attempting to answer in the abstract and in a philosophically coherent manner the

[14] I distinguish between pluralism and diversity, but Rawls does not. Diversity, as I use the word, is simply a synonym for variety; it refers to the brute fact of diversity of all kinds among humans, unless a particular kind of diversity is specified. Pluralism, as I use the word, refers to a condition, theoretically or in practice, which, at a minimum, allows for the coexistence of people with different ideas about various things, but especially justice, morality, ethics, and truth. As such, pluralism assumes the shared recognition and acceptance among people living in relation to one another of a particular underlying idea that gives them, no matter how diverse they may otherwise be, a sure basis for their interactions and relationships with each other.

questions posed, his intention seems to be simply to defend the legitimacy of a particular vision of constitutional, liberal democracy. While his defense of such a vision may be philosophically coherent to the extent it is consistent with the assumptions he derives from modern liberal democracy, he does not provide a philosophically satisfactory defense of modern liberal democracy itself. As Sebastiano Maffettone, who first met Rawls when he was preparing the Italian translation *A Theory of Justice*, puts it, "Rawls presents a kind of meta-theory of political legitimacy, based on liberal tolerance" (2010, 215).

Rawls implicitly accepts the modern liberal view that the primary, if not sole responsibility, of any constitutional, liberal democratic state, is to ensure commodious living among its citizens. Society, he says, is nothing more or less than a system of cooperation—it is explicitly not a community. He then attempts to develop a political conception of justice, building on his earlier idea of justice as fairness, that will identify the configuration of basic institutions most likely to ensure the individual freedom and equality such a commodious society requires.

Reasonable citizens, Rawls says, will necessarily affirm a variety of conflicting, irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines in any given modern democratic society, and he says this is not only a permanent feature of such societies but also a defining and indeed laudable one. In other words, people will never agree completely on what a good life consists of or how to live a good life, and this, in some sense, is good. Not only that, but Rawls speaks of comprehensive doctrines as if they are mutually exclusive, as if people

who affirm one comprehensive doctrine could never be open to learning from another comprehensive doctrine without completely abandoning theirs. There is no theoretical allowance for a non-exclusive comprehensive doctrine or perhaps a meta-doctrine. Furthermore, it is not the state's job, according to Rawls, to privilege one comprehensive doctrine and its idea of the good life over any other. This, in turn, limits the state's prerogative to promoting material cooperation among its citizens with a view to commodious living.

The problem for Rawls is that "a continuing and shared understanding on one comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine can be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power" (2005, 37). Rawls assumes that such a use of state power would not "satisfy the fair terms of cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal," because it would constitute the oppression of otherwise free, equal, and reasonable citizens in the name of a comprehensive doctrine that could in no way be proven to be superior to the comprehensive doctrine those being oppressed subscribe to. He assumes, furthermore, that it is impossible to demonstrate the truth of any comprehensive doctrine, owing to what he calls the burdens of human judgment. While he is certainly correct that human understanding is always fallible, he perhaps goes too far is saying that, as a result, we can only affirm the most elementary principles of justice, and that the best we can hope for is a comfortable life free of strife and greatness alike to the greatest extent possible.

As a result of this, according to Rawls, any political conception of justice that can

serve as the standard by which to determine whether or not a particular configuration of basic institutions is just, to the extent that it secures individual, democratic liberty and equality, "must allow for a diversity of doctrines and the plurality of conflicting, and indeed incommensurable, conceptions of the good affirmed by the members of existing democratic societies" (1985, 225). It must, therefore, he says, be a political, not a metaphysical, conception of justice. This is because, if such a conception of justice relies on any principle that cannot be derived exclusively from observable, material reality, then it must rely, in part, on a metaphysical position the veracity and authority of which Rawls assumes could not be absolutely and indisputably proven, let alone fully or properly understood by necessarily fallible humans, whether in whole or in part. As mentioned previously, this is because of the significant problems that the burdens of human judgment present, especially when judging metaphysical positions, which, by nature, do not rely exclusively or ultimately, if at all, on empirical evidence—although, contrary to the opinions of some scholars, they may be partly derived from empirical evidence, as I discuss in later chapters (see, especially, the chapter on the relationship between humanity and God in Ramadan's thought).

Since human understanding is always fallible, no single human understanding of anything that cannot be concretely and empirically proven or otherwise relied on should be privileged politically and enforced through the oppressive use of state power, according to Rawls. Yet be that as it may, does Rawls actually succeed in articulating a truly non-metaphysical, purely political conception of justice, the enforcement of which

through the oppressive use of state power could be justified because it truly captures what justice is and what justice demands of us? He certainly does argue that it is reasonable to enforce his political conception of justice through the oppressive use of state power (since, as discussed below, his vision of society relies in part on the redistribution of wealth, he must at least imagine that some form of coercion to effect this redistribution is legitimate and is grounded in a political conception of justice that is, in some sense, true). Yet in what follows, I argue that he does not present a truly non-metaphysical conception of justice. Thus, he fails to present political liberalism as anything more than one comprehensive doctrine among many, despite his best efforts to avoid this conclusion. I further argue that his failed attempt to do so, despite his valiant efforts, suggests the impossibility of doing so. The answer, I propose, is not to give up on the question of justice. Rather, I suggest that we revisit the question of the truth of different metaphysical positions, which is to say the truth of revelation and human understandings of it. Is there really no way to justify the political acceptance and corresponding enforcement of a given understanding of human moral and ethical duties, derived from an understanding of ultimate reality that relies on a particular understanding of revealed truth, without threatening justice and morality themselves?

First articulated in his book *A Theory of Justice* (1971), Rawls proposes his conception of justice as fairness in response to the question of "the way the basic institutions of a constitutional democracy should be arranged if they are to satisfy the fair terms of cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal" (2005, 4). The two

principles of justice that follow from this conception of justice as fairness are:

> a. Each person has an equal claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme for all; and in this scheme the equal political liberties, and only those liberties, are to be guaranteed their fair value.
> b. Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society. (Ibid., 5-6)

These are the principles, Rawls claims, any reasonable person would accept if he or she had to decide on a just configuration of political and social institutions from a hypothetical original position. Simply stated, the idea is that, if people had to decide what configuration of basic institutions they would consider just from behind what Rawls calls a "veil of ignorance," meaning they had no knowledge whatsoever of the position they would occupy in society, they would inevitably adopt these two principles. In other words, if I do not know whether or not I will be born to a poor family or a rich family, or born a man or a woman, or born with a neurological defect or without such a defect, or born with or without legs, it would be irrational for me to consider a particular configuration of basic institutions just if I knew it would disadvantage me as a poor person, a rich person, a man, a woman, or a handicapped person. Instead, from behind the veil of ignorance, the only rational thing I can choose is a configuration of basic institutions that will ensure that, whatever position I ultimately occupy in society, I will be guaranteed a certain minimum "scheme of equal basic rights and liberties" that will seem just, although possibly far from ideal.

Interestingly, Rawls includes knowledge of the religion a person belongs to[15] among those things people in the original position do not know. This is to adopt a uniquely modern understanding of religion, which denies the possibility of actual divinely revealed truth. This is because it assumes that religion has everything to do with identity and nothing to do with a person's individual experience and independent apprehension and acceptance of a given truth. Thus, it precludes, *a priori*, any legitimate role for revealed truth in politics. Rawls thus sets for himself an impossible task: to show that something other than brute, material reality observed through the five human senses is true with reference to nothing but empirical evidence, which is to say brute, material reality observed through the five human senses. Perhaps this makes Rawls the quintessential reluctant empiricist.

Rawls readily admits that "justice as fairness starts from within a certain political tradition and takes as its fundamental idea that of a society as a fair system of cooperation over time, from one generation to the next" (2005, 14). Yet is it true that everyone, from the original position, would say they would prefer to live in relation to others in a system of cooperation, as opposed to a deeper, perhaps more meaningful relationship? The cooperation Rawls imagines society exists to facilitate is clearly intended to secure freedom and equality for its members. This is dictated by the liberal political tradition that inspires Rawls's conception of justice as fairness. But what do these concepts mean

[15] I question the idea that people can meaningfully "belong to a religion" in any sense other than some formal membership arrangement or agreement with a human institution acting in the name of a supposed "religion," just as people "belong" to a particular organization by virtue of formal membership in that organization. See my discussion below of the problems with the concept of religion.

in the original position? Furthermore, what makes Rawls think that, in the original position, a person would necessarily privilege these values over things like truth, virtue, or goodness? For that matter, what does language mean in the original position? Does Rawls imagine that people in the original position do not know if they are men or women, but yet they all somehow speak English? Does he thus assume they share similar understandings of different concepts expressed in the English language specifically that exist to understand different human phenomena or ideas, like religion, freedom, and justice—things that can only be observed, experienced, or meaningfully conceived of beyond the veil of ignorance? It seems that otherwise, the concepts of religion, freedom, equality, and justice would be empty in the original position and thus could not direct the deliberations of people in this position, contrary to what Rawls argues.

From this, it seems clear that Rawls's conception of justice as fairness and the twin principles of justice derived from it rely on an unspoken metaphysical proposition about the nature of humanity and ultimate reality. As a result, despite his best efforts, Rawls does not articulate a truly freestanding political or moral conception of justice. He fails to prove definitively what justice is, and therefore what justice demands of us, and as a result he cannot even begin to show whether or not it matters if we are actually just or simply appear just, or how this might matter. Revealed truth, howsoever understood—indeed, its very possibility—is rejected *a priori*.

Rawls is by no means the end of the story, however. In the introduction to her book *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*, Cheryl Misak, Professor of

Philosophy, vice-president, and provost at the University of Toronto and Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, argues that "Judgments about what ought to be done, what is good, and what is just can be true or false" (2001, 2). She implies that they can also be shown definitively to be true or false, without relying on metaphysics or any other conception of ultimate reality. Thus, she promises a non-foundationalist, pragmatist defense of moral and ethical truth. In the end, however, she concedes that, "when it comes to offering knock-down arguments against those who are doing wrong, philosophy can only go so far" (ibid., 126). It turns out that, while judgments about right and wrong may indeed be objectively true or false, reason alone cannot determine this definitively. In other words, something may be ontologically true, but we are limited in our ability to know this, and thus the potential role for actual truth in politics is severely circumscribed at best. In our search for a pre-conventional or non-conventional ground for human convention, and thus proof of a necessary link between truth and politics, it is worthwhile to consider how and why Misak reaches the conclusion she does, so we do not fall into the same trap.

The best modern philosophy can offer, according to Misak, is a "reason for being critical" of anyone doing something considered abhorrent; "a reason I can offer to myself, above the hurly-burly of first order reasons, so that I can take my reasons to triumph decisively over his" (ibid., 126). "This," she remarks, "is what philosophy is good for in the face of evil" (ibid.)—which she does not bother to define, let alone prove. This is a direct result of her rejection of "the idea that we might find a foundation for our

principles of right belief and of right action in some infallible source" (ibid., 2), while trying to maintain that such an anti-foundationalist move does not necessarily mean "the source for, and the status of, our judgments, theories, and principles is altogether human and therefore arbitrary" (ibid.). Instead, she argues, we can determine whether or not a particular moral proposition is true according to the methodology used to defend it.

She begins by arguing that all genuine moral claims purport to be genuinely true, not simply justified in arbitrary human terms. It is not simply my unconsidered opinion that child abuse is wrong, for example; I honestly believe it is truly wrong. Similarly, a devout Jew may sincerely believe it is true that God requires him to circumcise his infant son, a practice other people sincerely believe is actually child abuse. To the extent that I act in a way consistent with nothing but my concern for the truth of any moral position I hold, Misak would say I am right, as distinct from justified, in acting that way. As soon as I act in a way that shows that I am more concerned with someone accepting the position I hold than with the truth of that position, Misak would argue, I may or may not nonetheless be justified in so acting, but I can neither claim that my position is genuinely true nor that it genuinely aims at truth. Thus, if I have a reasoned discussion with someone who is about to do something to a child that I consider abuse, with nothing in view but determining the truth of whether or not the intended action actually constitutes abuse, then I am right in so acting. If, instead, I act peremptorily to prevent someone from doing something I truly consider child abuse, even if the other person considers it right, Misak would say I can no longer claim to be acting in the interest of truth and thus I

cannot say that I am right in so acting, although I may justify my actions at least to myself.

Misak provides two criteria for determining whether or not the moral ideas a person holds are, in fact, beliefs that genuinely aim at truth, and thus whether or not a person's actions are morally right. First, moral positions must be responsive to reality as the person who holds them experiences them. Second, they must be defeasible—open in principle to revision or annulment—in the face of reasons that might be given against them by any other person. Following from the second criterion, any person holding a particular moral position that genuinely aims at truth, wishing nothing more than to know the truly correct position to hold, must, *ipso facto*, be open to listening to all reasons for and against the position he or she holds until such time as the parties agree that they cannot imagine improving upon their inquiry and that the moral position in question must therefore be decided. This allows Misak to argue that a person may be justified in imposing their morality on another person if, and only if, the other person is acting in a way that precludes the kind of reasoned deliberation that would, theoretically, result in the determination of the truth of the matter. Yet, at the point that someone acts to impose their morality on another person, the person so acting can no longer claim that the moral position they are acting upon genuinely aims at truth, and therefore he or she cannot claim that it is morally right. The most one can claim is that it may be justified to oneself. For example, Misak writes,

> To the neo-Nazi who is about to commit some real atrocity, we shall observe the evil of the proposed actions and do what we can to intervene.

> If we are in a position to talk to him about it, we shall offer what we think might get him to see things right—concerns about equality, impartiality, cruelty, autonomy, suffering, and so on. It is only when, or if, those reasons fail to get a grip on him, that we invoke the thought (and given our failure to persuade him, we will be invoking it mostly to and for ourselves) that he has adopted a method of deliberation which betrays the commitment he incurs by claiming to hold a belief which is oriented at the truth. It is only then that we discount him as a moral inquirer, always pending his enlightenment. (Ibid., 124)

Yet by acting peremptorily to stop someone from doing something I consider a "real atrocity," I will also be adopting a "method of deliberation" which "betrays the commitment" I incur "by claiming to hold a belief which is oriented at the truth." Thus, while I may claim that I am justified, at least to myself and other like-minded people, in discounting the perpetrator of said atrocity as a "moral inquirer," I must also admit that, in so acting, I may no longer legitimately claim to be a genuine moral inquirer myself. As a result, I cannot defend the argument that my position is right and the other person's is wrong, only that I am justified to myself—as a result of which, to be philosophically coherent, the perpetrator must be justified to himself as well. This is clearly unsatisfactory, but can we do any better?

Leo Strauss, for one, says no. An historian of philosophy and an influential twentieth-century political thinker in his own right, for whom the problematic relationship between the theological and the political was a major concern, Strauss declares that, "No alternative is more fundamental than this: human guidance or divine guidance" (1953, 74). No synthesis is possible between the two, he argues, for "All

arguments in favor of revelation seem to be valid only if belief in revelation is presupposed; and all arguments against revelation seem to be valid only if unbelief is presupposed" (ibid., 75). In his discussion of Spanish Jewish physician, poet, and philosopher Judah Halevi's (1075–1141) *al-Kitāb al-Khazarī* [*The Book of the Khazars*], "It is the impossibility of converting a philosopher to Judaism," he writes, which Halevi "demonstrates *ad oculos* by omitting a disputation between the [Jewish] scholar and the philosopher" (ibid., 105). "The philosopher," he continues, "denies as such the premises on which any demonstration of the truth of any revealed religion is based" (ibid.). Thus, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, Strauss says philosophy is radically atheistic. Strauss concludes his discussion of Halevi's dialogue by stressing Halevi's concern with the danger philosophy poses to morality:

> Halevi could find a sign for the necessity of the connection between morality and revelation in the fact that the same philosophers who denied the Divine lawgiver, denied the obligatory character of what we would call the moral law. In defending Judaism, which, according to him, is the only true revealed religion, against the philosophers, he was conscious of defending morality itself and therewith the cause, not only of Judaism, but of mankind at large. His basic objection to philosophy was then not particularly Jewish, nor even particularly religious, but moral. He has spoken on this subject with remarkable restraint: not being a fanatic, he did not wish to supply the unscrupulous and the fanatic with weapons which they certainly would have misused. But this restraint cannot deceive the reader about the singleness of his primary and ultimate purpose. (Ibid., 141)

Strauss is certainly right that if, and only if, reason and revelation, philosophy and revealed truth, are considered utterly distinct and mutually exclusive, morality that issues

from divine guidance must presuppose faith or belief in revelation and its source, understood as utterly distinct from reason. Since revelation, on this understanding, is by definition not discerned, or even supported, empirically, however, it seems the only way to defend any morality that issues from such revelation in the face of philosophy, which is to say reason as distinct from revelation, is to appeal to the authority of a particular human interpretation, which is to say human convention. Since the legitimacy and authority of such a conventional interpretation cannot be immediately justified or proven empirically, however, it seems we cannot know what is truly moral and what only appears moral but in fact is the arbitrary exercise of human power. The Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, is either the authoritative channel of the Holy Spirit, which is real, on earth, or it is not. No empirical evidence can prove or disprove this claim, however, and it seems that acceptance of it relies initially, if not ultimately, on acceptance of the theoretically, always fallible, claims of human authorities. By positing this understanding of reason and revelation and the distinction and mutual hostility between the two, then, Strauss, like so many others, guarantees a permanent tension between them. He implicitly adopts the agnostic position that we can never know the truth, or even if anything is true at all, and thus there is no legitimate role for any idea of ultimate truth in politics outside human convention, and when that fails, arbitrary power.

But what if reason and revelation are not mutually exclusive? What if reason and revelation mean something other than what Strauss imagines? What if we could find a

way to talk about truth that did not presuppose faith[16] in anything particular? First, we would have to overcome what I argue is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to any philosophically coherent discussion of truth and politics: the modern concept of religion. Indeed, one of the biggest stumbling blocks to understanding what I am trying to do in this text is to erroneously assume that I am asking what we can learn that is true from a religion called Islam. Instead, what I am asking is what we can learn that is true from a particular tradition of ostensibly revealed knowledge of the truth, of ultimate reality—a tradition that can be called Islam, but that I have no intention of confining to the category of religion, as distinct from any other knowledge that may be considered non-religious (a problematic, damaging distinction if there ever was one). Another way of putting it is this: in the Qurʾān, God is said to be the light of the heavens and the earth. After positing the existence or presence of such a light, howsoever this may be understood (and it could even be, or perhaps especially, understood metaphorically), I would simply like to ask how, and to what extent, it may illuminate, or may be understood to illuminate for us something that is true, such that we may come to know anything as true. The modern concept of religion and the incredible baggage that accompanies it make this question nearly incomprehensible in all but the most superficial sense. Thus, it is vitally important to explain just how the modern concept of religion does this so as to ensure proper understanding.

All manner of appeals to ostensibly divine revelation and revealed truth try

[16] In Tillich's sense, as opposed to belief.

explicitly to show or at least tell us that, ultimately, life is more than simply will to power—that we have duties to each other that supersede utility. This may sometimes look like Nietzsche's idea of slave morality, but it is not necessarily so. We remain blind and deaf to such arguments and teachings, however, to the extent that we confine all appeals to revelation to the category of religion and persist in assuming, and sometimes insisting, that religion is nothing but a private experience, identity, preference, choice, or value. Scholars who ignore the fact that almost all traditions that are typically called religions actually aim, in part, to convey something true and demand to be taken seriously—something that the very concept of religion as a discrete category makes it all too easy to do—misunderstand the fundamental political and philosophical significance of what is normally called religion. Ironically, then, those scholars who wish to talk in more than a journalistic fashion about so-called religion must abandon the concept of religion entirely. Instead, they must start talking about truth.

One author who does not exactly shy away from this is Richard B. Miller, a Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, focusing on the intersections of moral theory, political philosophy, cultural and social criticism, and Western religion. He is also Director of the Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions. In his book *Terror, Religion, and Liberal Thought*, Miller offers what he calls a liberal social critique of ostensibly religiously authorized acts of violence, notably the infamous attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia on 11 September 2001. He asks, "whether

(and on what basis) we may evaluate actions justified on terms that invoke religious warrants" (2010, 12), and, as a specific example, "whether citizens aggrieved by the attacks of 9/11 may justifiably feel morally indignant and expect their grievance to warrant respect (and potential action) from others" (ibid.). Although he uses the adjective religious, he simply means to ask whether or not and on what basis it is possible to determine the moral rightness or wrongness, or simply justification, of a particular action when such an action is justified on the part of the actor by an appeal to some ostensibly divinely revealed truth or command. The implication of this is that if, using his criteria, we determine that a particular action is morally wrong, which is to say not justified, we may conclude definitively that any ostensibly divine revelation that an actor may persist in appealing to in justification of his or her actions can be only one of two things: either it is not, in fact, any kind of truly divine revelation at all, or whether or not it is truly a revelation of divine origin, it has no right to direct human action because it violates a particular human conception of morality.[17] Think of the intellectual courage this takes. For example, instead of simply reporting that Joshua led his people in storming the gates of Jericho and massacring its inhabitants because they believed God had promised this land to them, Miller might well find reason to say that this action was morally wrong, irrespective of how much Joshua and his people claimed that God authorized it, or even if

[17] The distinction between something being true and something being justified is important. Miller adopts the language of justification, as distinct from truth. As such, he is concerned with whether or not human persons *qua* human persons can justify their various moral positions according to an acceptable standard of human rationality, not necessarily whether or not they are in any sense actually, ontologically true (which the language of justification implies may be impossible to determine, or even distinguish from truth).

there actually is a God that did authorize and direct it. But on what basis could Miller possibly say that this action was morally wrong, or that the attacks of 11 September 2001 were morally wrong?

Miller argues that it is indeed possible to say that certain actions are objectively morally wrong and morally right, and that the basis for making such judgments is sound. This basis, he argues, is equal respect for human dignity. This is a standard modern liberal position to adopt. An action may be considered justified, Miller argues, only to the extent that it respects human dignity, which is to say only when it respects "the rights of life and security," which he defends "in liberal terms." According to Miller, as human persons, we have inherent dignity "by virtue of our moral subjectivity, our capacity to deliberate about, establish, and revise our ideas of the good life" (ibid., 13). On this account, any action that prevents a person from actualizing his or her moral subjectivity, which is to say acting autonomously to live life according to what he or she estimates is good, is *ipso facto* unjustified and therefore morally wrong. "I want to emphasize that the right to equal liberty imposes duties on everyone," he writes,

> generating the duty of toleration premised on the norm of respect for persons. On this view, we have grounds to expect others, including violent religious extremists, to tolerate persons whose ends they do not endorse within constraints implied by equal liberty.
>
> Again, there are two related reasons to justify that expectation. One is epistemological, premised on the burdens of judgment; the other is ontological, premised on the 'distinctive dignity of moral personality'. The first reason helps to explain why persons see the world differently, the second reason indicates why we should respect persons who see the world differently and why we are justified in expecting others to reciprocate that

> respect. Different persons and worldviews lay claim to toleration at a *prima facie* level owing to the humility implied by the burdens of judgment as well as the norms of respect for human dignity and equal liberty. (Ibid., 82)

As it stands, and without further qualification, there are several problems with this. First, Miller assumes that tolerant respect or lack thereof is reflected exclusively in the direct, physical effects of a given action. He would therefore presumably not consider things like public ridicule of a person's deeply held religious beliefs or persistent attempts to disprove the religious beliefs a person holds intolerant. On this way of looking at things, people have just as much freedom to believe whatever they want that can withstand however much is published or broadcast that ridicules it. This is only truly respectful of human dignity in Miller's sense, however, if we are only concerned about whether or not our various moral positions can be coherently justified, not about whether or not they are actually true. This is because, in the face of ridicule, a person may abandon certain beliefs prematurely, even if they are, in fact, ontologically true. This, of course, would rob them quite insidiously of their supposed right to autonomy by virtue of their moral subjectivity, considering the psychological effect of ridicule of deeply held beliefs.

Quite apart from this, however, and while it will likely sound reasonable and commonsensical to most readers, Miller's liberal defense of these "basic human rights" amounts to special pleading. It is thus philosophically unsatisfactory and ultimately incoherent. He cannot say whether anything is actually wrong or not, he can only offer a liberal defense of particular criteria for moral justification that can give someone the

confidence to assert that he is justified in acting in a particular way, in the same way faith is all the justification many people need to act differently. Perhaps this is the best we can hope for, but it is certainly less than what virtually every appeal to divine revelation purports to offer. Unlike Misak, who does not discuss religion or revelation to any great extent, I expected more from Miller, since he at least claims to want to determine the morality of actions justified in so-called religious terms. In the end, however, Miller's strategy appears to be to simply ignore the fact that certain actions are said to find warrant in divine revelation. In effect, he tries to determine the morality of different ostensibly metaphysically grounded positions without recurring to metaphysics himself. I suspect that he did not imagine that this would be a problem, since he implicitly accepts the modern idea that religion is an analytically useful concept or category that points primarily to an identity, preference, choice, or value. As such, it never occurs to him to inquire into what different traditions of ostensibly revealed knowledge of the light of the heavens and the earth say about the nature of ultimate reality and humanity's place in it—and whether or not there might be anything to learn from them that is actually true. Thus, he cannot speak to such traditions on their own terms. This is one of the many unfortunate legacies of the modern concept of religion—the inability to take seriously, and on their own terms, different arguments about ultimate reality, grounded in some or another understanding of divine revelation, such that we might actually learn something from the content of any of the traditions that such arguments come from.

It was partly for this reason that, in 1962, Canadian professor of comparative

religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith, just before becoming director of Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions, argued that scholars and the general public alike should dispense with the word and concept of religion and the notion of there being different religions as such entirely. "I suggest that the term 'religion'," he wrote,

> is confusing, unnecessary, and distorting ... I have become strongly convinced that the vitality of personal faith, on the one hand, and, on the other hand (quite separately), progress in understanding—even at the academic level—of the traditions of other people throughout history and throughout the world, are both seriously blocked by our attempt to conceptualize what is involved in each case in terms of (a) religion. (1962, 50)

Few scholars seem to have heeded his call, however. People throughout the world continue to use the words religion and religions (and etymologically related words in other languages generally denoting the same things)[18] as if they were entirely unproblematic. Today, the lists of all major publishers include a growing number of titles dealing with religion, religions, religion and politics, and what is often called the global resurgence of religion, as if it were perfectly clear what religion and religions refer to. Legislation in a number of different jurisdictions increasingly refers to religion *tout court*. As of 15 March 2004 and the introduction of law 2004-228 in France, for example, article L141-5-1 of the French *Code de l-éducation* stipulates that, "Dans les écoles, les

[18] I stress the importance of etymological affinity among cognate terms in different languages. This is because there are words in languages other than English, such as *al-dīn* in Arabic, that are often translated as religion but which have different connotations and specific meanings in the original language. Such differences are much less pronounced among etymologically related, cognate terms in different, generally Western, languages, such as the words *Religion*, *religion*, and *religione*, in German, French, and Italian respectively.

collèges et les lycées publics, le port de signes ou tenues par lesquels les élèves manifestent ostensiblement une appartenance religieuse est interdit" [In public schools, colleges, and universities, wearing signs or clothing by which students ostensibly manifest a religious affiliation is prohibited] (République Française 2004).[19] The law and corresponding article in the French code of education assume that it is perfectly clear what constitutes a sign or article of clothing whereby a student "manifests a religious affiliation," as distinct from any other sort of affiliation. At the very least, it assumes that the wording is sufficient to guide courts and other authorities in determining such things. This assumes that certain affiliations are clearly religious in nature and others are clearly not religious in nature—and that there is an unambiguous, universal standard by which to judge whether or not any particular action, symbol, or style of dress is religious in nature. This, however, is not at all clear, and there is no philosophically coherent, universal standard by which to determine whether or not anything is distinctly religious in nature. For example, a woman may wear a headscarf as an article of faith, or simply because she believes it is the proper way for a woman to dress if she wishes to be modest. We would do well to finally heed Smith's advice—and perhaps go even further.

Social scientists who study what they call religion and politics typically fall into

[19] Some journalists and scholars refer to this as a prohibition against ostentatious or overt religious symbols. The French word *ostensiblement*, however, is identical in meaning and etymological origin to the English word *ostensibly*, which does not have at all the same meaning as either ostentatious or overt. Law 2004-228 is even more vague, stipulating simply that it manages or regulates (*encadrant*) "le port de signes ou de tenues manifestant une appartenance religieuse dans les écoles, collèges et lycyées publics" [the wearing of signs or clothing that manifest a religious affiliation in public schools, colleges, and universities]. All translations from French are mine unless otherwise indicated.

one of three broad categories: those most interested in determining the factors that contribute to greater or lesser individual religiosity, often with a view to explaining the apparent global resurgence of religion; those most concerned with the relationship between religion and violence and political action in general; and those preoccupied with the challenge of accommodating different religious and cultural practices in diverse societies and facilitating dialogue and harmonious relations among people of different religions. Almost all such scholars assume that religion is primarily an identity, preference, choice, or value. Some, like political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004), use the terms religion and culture interchangeably, effectively reducing religion to any idiosyncratic belief or practice considered culturally specific, irrational, or non-rational and therefore not at all objectively true. While it is of course true that humans interpret supposedly divinely revealed texts and other experiences considered somehow religious in a particular social context, equating religion with culture ensures that those who are not embedded in the particular social context of a given religious community are limited in their ability ask if, let alone learn whether or not, there is anything demonstrably true in the supposedly revealed texts and other traditions of knowledge of the divine that such a community claims to possess. This is not normally seen as a problem, since few, if any social scientists, seem to take seriously the idea that the traditions they call religions actually aim, in part, to convey something true, not just to the specific community in question, but about the very nature and structure of reality and all things, including humans, in it.

As we know, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and so on, originally had nothing to do with religion in the modern sense of the word, and fundamentally still do not. How else, without contradiction, could the Apostle Paul have also been Jewish, the Qur'ān say that Jesus was Muslim, Siddhartha Gautama have understood and heeded the call of Brahma to teach others what he had discovered, or Guru Nanak declared without obvious confusion that there is neither Hindu nor Muslim? Any manifestation of so-called religion that is more than simply an assertion of group identity and preference is not ultimately specifically or meaningfully religious, as opposed to not religious, at all—it concerns truth. Yet because modern liberal thinkers, as such, dismiss all talk of God and ultimate truth as meaningless theological babble, they miss the point and cannot truly understand the philosophical and political significance of religion and, especially, the so-called global resurgence of religion, today. Moreover, they think they do not have to. Instead, they focus on identifying instances of religion and studying religion and its relationship with all manner of other, presumably discrete, human phenomena. They do this with a view to answering a very limited set of questions—so limited because of the theoretical vocabulary they have adopted and especially the assumptions they make about what religion means.

The assumption that religion is primarily an identity or at least only politically significant as an identity serves the ostensibly secular, modern liberal task of limiting and

controlling religion, or ideas and practices deemed religious, in public and social life.[20] By virtue of this assumption and the modern liberal disavowal of all non-empirical knowledge and thus the rejection of religion as such, modern liberal approaches to religious diversity are generally limited to the effective management of apparently conflicting or potentially threatening so-called religious practices said to be integral to the practitioners's identities (Akan 2009; Kymlicka 1995). This is accomplished through a combination of accommodation, toleration, and discipline—never by acknowledging that what is usually called religion typically aims, in part, to convey something true, and then asking whether or not there is anything we could learn from it that is, in fact, true.

The most insidious way this is achieved is by equating religion, already considered primarily an identity or at best a choice, with other concepts, such as ethnicity, further distancing the so-called religion in question from any claim to truth. Will Kymlicka, Canada Research Chair in Political Philosophy at Queen's University and co-director of the Multiculturalism Policy Index Project, for example, writes that a number of "ethnic groups" in liberal states, including "Jews and Muslims in Britain," "Sikh men in Canada," "Orthodox Jews in the United States," and "Muslim girls in France," have sought various "exemptions from laws and regulations that disadvantage them, given their religious practices" (1995, 31). Conflating ethnicity and religion in this manner further reduces religion to an explicitly cultural identity having nothing at all to do with truth, at least not in a universal sense. This renders the question of the truth of

[20] The concepts of the public and the social, following Hannah Arendt (1959), are not synonymous.

any particular tradition utterly nonsensical.

Assuming that a headscarf, for example, is an explicitly religious or even ethnic or cultural symbol, instead of an article of clothing worn because a woman believes it is true that she should dress modestly in this fashion regardless of any explicit religious affiliation, distorts our understanding of what many people are doing when they act in ways that get labeled religious or adopt particular moral positions on ostensibly religious grounds. A person who is absolutely opposed to abortion, for instance, because she believes human life begins at conception and that it is a sacred duty to protect that life may adopt such a position because of the teachings of a particular so-called religious institution or authority or as a result of being moved by a particular experience or as a result of reading a particular so-called religious text. That does not make it any less objectively true for her, however. For her, it is not simply an idiosyncratic preference or choice that human life is, in fact, what she believes it is, and that we have a real duty to protect that life. This is not to suggest a conspiracy on the part of scholars who discuss religion in these terms, just to show one effect of such a discourse on our understanding and suggest the need for a different approach.

While it is certainly true that many people identify strongly with particular traditions, Joshua Mitchell, Professor of Political Theory at Georgetown University, for one, argues that at a fundamental, primordial level, what we call religion is more than an identity. As he puts it,

> If religion corresponds to an 'identity,' it is only as a sort of *mimetic trace*, which alerts us to a domain of liturgical practices passed down generation

> to generation, the concern of which is to point to an ineffable mystery that cannot be cordoned off and contained by such practices. (2007, 359)

Mitchell does not abandon the concept of religion, as Smith counsels. Rather, he seeks to deepen our understanding of the nature of religious experience, and in turn deepen our understanding of and ability to explain human action and behavior that stems from such an experience. For him, religion, or at least what he calls biblical religion, amounts to a particular kind of experience. Social scientists are especially guilty, he argues, of misunderstanding the nature of this experience. He argues that people experience religion not, fundamentally, as an identity, preference, choice, or value. Rather, religious experience, in essence, is a movement of the soul, which changes a person's entire outlook on life and relationship with creation and which animates human conduct in ways that mere preferences, choices, or interchangeable identities cannot. Failure to recognize this, he argues, results in what he calls "a 'problem of uncomprehended amplitude.' That is, our understanding of the phenomenon at hand is liable to seriously underestimate the amplitude of what is likely to transpire" (ibid., 360). According to Mitchell, this has serious consequences for scholars who wish to better understand the relationship between religion and political action. "The complete failure of the social scientists to anticipate, let alone predict, the Iranian revolution, for example," he writes,

> may have been due, in no small part, to the terminology that was used. In American politics, it is difficult to imagine Martin Luther King standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial saying 'I have a *preference* today.' He did not have a 'preference,' he had a *dream*—one that only made sense in light of a religious hope of deliverance from bondage that moved souls in powerful ways. In both cases, rendering what happened in terms of

> preference or choice would have led to serious underestimation of what actually transpired. (Ibid.)

Here, Mitchell is interested in helping social scientists better understand and explain the role of religion and religious experience in political action, and he certainly offers a powerful critique of modern social scientific assumptions about religion and religious experience. Despite this, he has very little to say about the question of the truth of any particular religious experience for anyone but the individual who experiences it as a private movement of the soul. Part of the problem, I suspect, is his continued acceptance of religion as an analytically useful term.

As William T. Cavanaugh, Professor of Theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, rightly points out, "there is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion" (2009, 3). In fact, he argues,

> the attempt to create a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is essentially prone to violence is one of the foundational legitimizing myths of the liberal nation-state. The myth of religious violence helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject. This myth can be and is used in domestic politics to legitimate the marginalization of certain types of practices and groups labeled religious, while underwriting the nation-state's monopoly on its citizens' willingness to sacrifice and kill. (Ibid., 4)

Today, many, though not all, liberals trumpet some variant of multiculturalism, often under the guise of moderating the liberal universalist position (Young 1989). As Kymlicka observes, speaking of the globalization of multiculturalism,

> Older models of assimilationist and homogenizing nation-states are

> increasingly being contested, and often displaced, by newer 'multicultural' models of the state and citizenship. This is reflected, for example, in the widespread adoption of cultural and religious accommodations for immigrant groups, the acceptance of territorial autonomy and language rights for national minorities, and the recognition of land claims and self-government rights for indigenous peoples. (2007, 3)

None of the various more or less liberal conceptions of multiculturalism, however, imply that liberalism has ceded any ground to so-called religious traditions as such or the truth they purport to reveal; in public, at least, these must remain under some measure of liberal control (Kymlicka 1995, 2007; Okin 1998; Phillips 2007; and Song 2005). Standard liberal conceptions of interfaith dialogue, for instance, are limited to exercises in getting to know the others in liberal society (Bouchard and Taylor 2008, 20), not learning anything substantive from them as part of a broader understanding of who is a legitimate part of any given society and thus not an 'other' and certainly not with a view to discovering truth. Thus, the liberal dichotomy of the religious versus the secular maintains the 'us' versus 'them' division in society that Cavanaugh describes and which he feels is so pernicious.

The idea that there is a "transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion waiting to be separated from the secular," Cavanaugh rightly points out, is false (2009, 69). "The problem," he says, "with transhistorical and transcultural definitions of religion is not just that all phenomena identified as religious are historically specific, but that the definitions themselves are historical products that are part of specific configurations of power" (ibid.). While he does not suggest that the concept of religion is entirely

analytically useless, he argues that it is not useful in the way many scholars assume. "Instead of searching—in either a substantivist or functionalist mode—for the timeless, transcultural essence of religion," he writes,

> let us ask why certain things are called religion under certain conditions. What configurations of power are authorized by changes in the way the concept of religion—and its counterpart, the secular—are used? What changes in practices correspond to changes in these concepts? Why deny that the natives have religion at first, then assign some of their practices to the category of religion? What practices become religion, and why? Why deny that Marxism is a religion? Why accept that Marxism is a religion but emphatically deny that U.S. nationalism is? (Ibid., 119)

This use of the concept of religion bears no resemblance to most modern scholarly applications of the term. While it is more analytically coherent, however, it is of no use in inquiring about the truth of any supposedly divinely revealed, non-utilitarian basis for human convention, or the question of the relationship between ultimate truth and human convention or simply politics. While it is certainly true that such putative truths are almost universally expressed in what is generally considered religious language, labeling them as religious serves no analytical purpose and in fact, as Smith would see immediately, distorts our understanding. As such, the concept of religion is analytically useless, or at least redundant, for those who wish to seriously and directly confront the question—both ontological and epistemological—of ultimate truth and the relationship between truth and morality and politics, which is to say truth and human convention.

In *Bound by Recognition*, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago Patchen Markell argues that the recognition multiculturalists like

Kymlicka wish to extend to all manner of named groups of individuals, and the manner in which they wish to extend it, all in the name of justice, may not, in fact, be just. He is certainly right in saying that "people who are able to identify themselves relatively unproblematically with the 'larger society' and its institutions are also typically better able to set the terms under which any exchange of recognition with less powerful and more vulnerable others will occur, making their own desires and needs into nonnegotiable items" (2003, 6). This, he continues, includes the idea that politics is a matter of recognition in the first place. The "state and those who speak on its behalf," he writes, "... are often the actors who make politics into a matter of recognition in the first place, and whose own demands for recognition, tacit and explicit, create powerful incentives for others to frame claims about democracy, justice, inequality, and subordination *as* recognition claims" (ibid.). Instead of a politics of recognition, he suggests an alternative, which he calls a politics of acknowledgement. "In this picture," he writes,

> democratic justice does not require that all people be known and respected as who they really are. It requires, instead, that no one be reduced to any characterization of his or her identity for the sake of someone else's achievement of a sense of sovereignty or invulnerability, regardless of whether that characterization is negative or positive, hateful or friendly ... It demands that each of us bear our share of the burden and risk involved in the uncertain, open-ended, sometimes maddeningly and sometimes joyously surprising activity of living and interacting with other people. (Ibid., 7)

In other words, it serves but particular interests to characterize someone as belonging to a

particular religion and thus having a particular religious identity, and not necessarily the interests of those so characterized and identified. Recognizing someone as a capital-M Muslim, for example, always comes at the expense, whether partial or total, of acknowledging her implicit claim to be attempting to live as a small-m *muslim*, which is to say someone who genuinely wishes to submit to God and know that peace that comes with knowing something of God's truth. This, in turn, means that we are also apt to fail to acknowledge that she may have something to tell us that may, in fact, be true, or at least which demands to be acknowledged as a claim about what is true that we could, theoretically, learn something from. Recognition keeps us safely in our own separate boxes, and others in theirs. This may have its advantages for some, but it comes at the expense of truly living with instead of simply living in relation to other people. Unfortunately, Markell concludes rather dishearteningly that the politics of acknowledgement he envisions may be impossible to achieve. In the end, he is not able to provide a philosophically coherent basis for why those who benefit from it should not promote and engage in a politics of recognition. This is because he sees that "every attempt to specify the set of agents to whom an issue of justice pertains will itself, as an act of identification and recognition, be a potential site of injustice" (ibid., 179), while at the same time implicitly acknowledging that there is no uncontested standard by which to determine the identity or essence of human, or any other, agents. As I attempt to show in later chapters, Tariq Ramadan articulates precisely such an understanding of the human person that could serve as the pre-conventional foundation for a politics of

acknowledgement, to use Markell's language.

Like Jesus, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and several passages in the Qur'ān uphold the moral principle that we should treat others the way we would like to be treated. On the surface, the reason is the same: God will reward us if we do, and punish us if we do not. My reading of the Qur'ān, in light of Tariq Ramadan's thinking, suggests a different possible reasoning, however; an alternative, I argue, that, while not incompatible with Jesus's argument that we should love all people because we will be called children of the Most High and ultimately receive a great reward,[21] may not be susceptible to the modern liberal critiques leveled against Jesus's metaphysics, to the effect that we cannot prove the existence of God. To understand this alternative, it helps to phrase the proposition negatively: we must not treat others in any way that we would not like to be treated. Fundamentally, this means that we must not treat others purely as instruments, or means to our own ends, since no one likes being treated this way. But the question remains: why not? Jesus, like Muhammad, might say because, if you do, you will not earn any great reward, and might even be punished somehow by God. Yet the other reason, implied in the revealed message of the Qur'ān and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, is that not to do so would be to willfully deny and seek to conceal something that is true. This is what is meant by the often-misunderstood Arabic concept of *kufr*, which is usually translated as unbelief but really means to willfully conceal the truth. To treat others purely instrumentally, which is to say in a manner you would not

[21] Except in Jesus's emphasis on loving one's enemies as well as one's neighbors and friends, the injunction to "love your neighbour as yourself" in Leviticus (19:18) is justified for the same reason: because God commands it.

like to be treated yourself, is to be guilty of *kufr* in a fundamental sense. This is because, by doing so, you willfully conceal the truth that nothing in creation exists for purely instrumental reasons—to serve as a means to the end of any other aspect of creation. All of creation, and every aspect of it individually, are intrinsically sacred and do not exist primarily to serve as instruments for others. To act as if this were not true is to willfully conceal this truth. The questions remain, of course: how do we know this? Is this actually true? I shall address these questions in due course, but for now, it is sufficient to see that this suggests an alternative to Jesus's argument for why we should treat others the way we would like to be treated. It also suggests a more serious, philosophical effort to demonstrate the truth of this than what Dostoevsky's Father Zossima offers. This alternative is not necessarily incompatible with Jesus's argument, and there are certainly other readings of Jesus's teachings that are consistent with it. It is also very close to Father Zossima's argument and perhaps the Eastern Orthodox tradition generally. Nevertheless, I suggest that the argument I find expressed in Ramadan's work, while not necessarily novel, may well be more philosophically comprehensive and coherent. This, in turn, suggests that there really is something that we can learn of political significance about justice from the revealed message of Islam that can be shown to be true. The rest of this text advances this claim, but first I will address the question of who Ramadan is and why I have chosen to focus on his thought specifically.

CHAPTER THREE
Who is Tariq Ramadan?

I want to be an activist professor.

— Tariq Ramadan (quoted in Buruma 2007)

Tariq Ramadan is a bit of a mystery. There are at least two ways of approaching any intellectual biography of him. One is to provide a more or less chronological discussion of the facts of his life and his various accomplishments, of where he has been and what he has done over the years. Where and when was he born? Where and when did he study? What degrees does he hold? What was he like as a student? What is he like as a professor? What books has he written? When did he get married? Another approach is to ask who he *really* is, as opposed to who he says he is. His critics almost universally adopt the latter approach, while most magazines and newspapers seem to favor a combination of the two. I am not interested in simply rehashing what other authors have already said about who, or what, Tariq Ramadan is. But for readers who may be unfamiliar with him, and those who may still want to know more about why I focus so much on him in this text, I will cover many of the things already written about him and that he has written and said himself so as to contextualize the major themes of his thought, which are discussed in detail in subsequent chapters. Since my reasons for focusing on Ramadan are not so much related to what he has done, however, but rather what he says, and since I argue that what he says has more to do with who he is than what he is, I start by asking: who is Tariq Ramadan? Not who is he *really*, which is an impossible task to achieve for anyone,

but who is he as a person, as a fragile, imperfect human being. What are his reasons for living, for doing what he does, and how do these find expression in his work?

Ramadan is driven by a dual sense of spiritual and political duty. As he puts it,

> A vrai dire, j'ai le sens d'une dette dans mon rapport à la spiritualité. ... Je dispose aussi en Occident d'une liberté de parole qui me permet de poursuivre la dénonciation des dictateurs. Ma dette et donc également politique [To tell the truth, I have a sense of debt in my relationship with spirituality. ... I also benefit in the West from a freedom of speech that allows me to pursue the denunciation of dictators. My debt is thus equally political]. (Gresh and Ramadan 2000, 28)

This sense of debt, or responsibility, that Ramadan has is no doubt an expression of an idea that is central to all his thinking. He calls this a simple and foundational proposition: "loin de toute idée de culpabilité, l'être humain porte une responsabilité devant Dieu" [far from any idea of guilt, the human being has a responsibility before God] (ibid., 41). This idea of humans being innocent but nonetheless responsible before God is not only absolutely central to the entirety of Ramadan's moral, ethical, and political theology, but it is also the one thing he says the message of Islam reveals that may well serve to profoundly transform society for the better. It "transforms the whole understanding of human being," he says (personal interview 1).

Ramadan conceives of a tripartite, ostensibly sure and ontologically grounded, anthropology, derived from the revealed message of Islam. The idea that humans are not guilty by nature, but rather called to be responsible—to God, which is to say Ultimate Being, themselves, and each other—emerges from this. First, he says, humans are "naît vierge de toute faute; il n'existe pas de 'pêche originel' en Islam" [born free of any fault;

there is no 'original sin' in Islam] (Gresh and Ramadan 2000, 164). Second, despite common misperceptions that "l'Islam conçoit tout sur le plan communautaire et néglige l'individu" [Islam conceives of everything in terms of the community and neglects the individidual], "L'axe essentiel, en Islam, se fonde sur l'individu, son cœur et sa conscience : c'est d'abord la réalité d'une responsabilité de soi à Dieu, de soi à soi, de soi à la communauté" [The key focus in Islam is based on the individual, his heart, and his conscience: it is first the reality of a responsibility of self to God, self to self, and then self to community] (ibid., 165). Third, "les catégories du sacré et du profane sont, en Islam, absolument différentes de ce qu'elles ont pu être, et sont encore, dans la tradition catholique dominante en Europe" [the categories of sacred and profane are, in Islam, absolutely different than those that could have been, and still exist, in the dominant Catholic tradition in Europe] (ibid., 165). As discussed, the categories of sacred and profane, if they exist in any meaningful sense at all in Islam, are never mutually exclusive or clearly distinct. *In toto*, this clearly represents an ontologically grounded moral anthropology that could serve as a ground for all subsequent human convention—that could show us that we have real moral duties to each other, that could help us determine which human conventions thought to be just actually are. The question, as always, is whether or not it is true, and how we can know, but this will come later.

The evolution of Ramadan's thought partly helps trace this question. It can also be seen as the intellectual manifestation of a profoundly personal, continuing struggle, or *jihād*, to understand the nature of the responsibility he says humans have to God,

themselves, and each other, and to learn how to live up to it himself. In his many books, articles, lectures, and recordings, it is clear that Ramadan is seriously and courageously struggling with an incredibly personal dilemma. How can he reconcile a deep, personal conviction in the truth of a particular divinely revealed text, and a particular understanding of revelation itself, with life in a world that outwardly denies this truth but that he believes is deeply in need of it? He does not propose that everyone should profess to be Muslim, but rather everyone should have the opportunity to know the truth about ultimate reality, themselves, their responsibilities, and their role in and connection to Ultimate Being, and to willingly submit to this reality—to be *muslim* in a profound, philosophical sense.

Ramadan was born 26 August 1962 in Geneva, Switzerland. Eight years before, in April 1954, his father, Saïd Ramadan, along with his mother and two older brothers, had fled Egypt. Saïd was the son-in-law of Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt, and had played an active role in the organization for many years. In light of Gamal Abdel Nasser's infamous crackdown on members of the Society of Muslim Brothers, which had begun just three months earlier, Saïd chose to leave Egypt with his family, never to return. They landed first in Syria, where they lived for two years before moving to Lebanon for another six years, before finally settling in Geneva. In Geneva, Saïd founded the Islamic Centre of Geneva and became a spokesperson for the Society of Muslim Brothers in exile (ibid., 14).

Tariq grew up in Geneva, speaking Arabic at home but learning French at school. He was immersed in both the European culture of Geneva and his family's Muslim Egyptian culture. In 1978, when he was sixteen years old, he finally had the opportunity to visit Egypt for the first time. He says he felt at home there, but he was struck by how little it resembled the mythologized Egypt he had envisioned as a result of stories he heard growing up. He soon returned to Switzerland and, in 1980, when he was just eighteen years old, started teaching French, and occasionally mathematics, in Geneva (ibid., 37). He soon became actively involved with various organizations seeking to help developing countries throughout the world, but especially in Africa and the Middle East.

Ramadan explains how his rapport with the various activist organizations he had been involved with during the 1980s and early 1990s changed when he started to be more open publicly about his faith. In the beginning, he says, he made a conscious effort to keep his faith to himself because he did not want it to create any tension between himself and the other people he was working with. "As a practicing believer in my private life," he writes, "I respected professional discretion in my public position: I never put forward my religious affiliation" (2010, 8). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, he describes how he felt he was not being true to himself by playing down his faith; why should he not be proud to call himself a Muslim and to assert that there is no incompatibility between being a Muslim and a Swiss citizen actively engaged in work for social justice? Unfortunately, he says, people reacted negatively and became suspicious of him, as they often were of Muslims. As a result of this experience, he says, he began

speaking and writing about the challenges of being a Western Muslim, addressing questions of identity, but also questions about the compatibility between certain moral, ethical, and political ideas in the revealed message and tradition of Islam and life in a modern, liberal, more or less secular democratic country. Could a person be fully Muslim and fully Western? Ramadan wanted to say yes, but so many people seemed to be telling him no.

As an undergraduate student at the University of Geneva, Ramadan studied philosophy and French literature. He went on to complete a master's in philosophy, writing a dissertation called *The Notion of Suffering in Nietzsche's Philosophy*. His doctoral dissertation, *Nietzsche as a Historian of Philosophy*, seems to have met with some resistance from the members of his doctoral committee, however, and he ended up receiving a doctorate in Arabic and Islamic Studies, with a dissertation later published as *Aux sources du renouveau musulman: D'al-Afghani à Hassan al-Banna, un siècle de réformisme islamique* [*Towards the Sources of Muslim Renewal: From al-Afghani to Hassan al-Banna, a century of Islamic reform*] (2002a). Then, in 1992 and 1993, he studied with different scholars at al-Azhar University in Cairo.

During the 1990s, Ramadan rose to prominence throughout Europe, but especially in France. He formed alliances with disparate Muslim organizations, published books, attended conferences, engaged in debates with other intellectuals, and wrote opinion pieces for different newspapers and magazines. But despite his success, including increasingly numerous appearances on French television programs and magazine covers,

one question seemed to continually puzzle academics, scholars, intellectuals, and media commentators alike: what, precisely, was he saying? As Berman remarks, "as his triumphs became even 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" (2011, 16). Some people loved him because of what they thought he was saying, while other people reviled him because they thought he was saying something entirely different. This remains largely the case today.

Today, Ramadan teaches at Oxford University. He is a prolific writer and he travels extensively to lecture at a wide variety of academic and other conferences, usually about Islam and Muslims in the West, the challenge and promise of human diversity, and sometimes politics in the Middle East. He is also a polarizing figure; people have called him everything from a Muslim Martin Luther to a radical Islamist terrorist in disguise. He has been accused of engaging in a double-discourse, telling non-Muslim Western audiences one thing and devout Muslims something quite different. Part of the suspicion that he cannot be trusted has to do with his family history. His father, Saïd Ramadan, was a major figure in the Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt and founder of the Muslim World League. He is also the maternal grandson of Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Society of Muslim Brothers. Given the common impression in the West that the Society of Muslim Brothers, or Muslim Brotherhood, is a radical Islamist political party predisposed to violence, it is somewhat understandable that some people would be skeptical of Ramadan's intentions. Still, his relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood is

tenuous and, at any rate, the Brotherhood officially renounced violence years ago. Ramadan, however, makes no apologies for admitting that he is inspired by his grandfather's writings, though he is quick to emphasize that al-Banna never endorsed non-defensive acts of violence. This leaves some people uneasy.

Caroline Fourest is easily Ramadan's most vociferous critic and one of the first to publicly claim that he engages in a dangerous double-discourse. She is wrong, but at the same time it is clear why she thinks he does this. Fourest wishes Ramadan would simply tell Muslims and non-Muslims alike that Islam is exactly the same as modern liberalism, that Islam calls Muslims to embrace all the values of modern, liberal, secular democratic society, and nothing more. She wishes he would tell Muslim women that they do not have to wear the *ḥijāb*, that any idea about morality of justice that the Qur'ān expresses that in any way conflicts with modern, liberal, secular ideas about justice is flatly wrong. He does not. But he also does not argue that everyone must "become Muslim." This is confusing for Fourest, as I am sure it is for many people, because it seems that Ramadan is doing two incompatible things. First, he says Islam as articulated in the Qur'ān and exemplified by the life of the Prophet Muhammad is true and that Muslims should be proud of their heritage. He calls on Muslims to work to transform the societies they call home, with explicit reference to Islam. But then he says Muslims should respect the societies they call home, they should participate actively in the civic life of their communities, they should seek a deeper appreciation of the values of the societies they live in. Are these ides not incompatible? No, they are not. Fourest and many of

Ramadan's other critics do not understand this because they have no patience for listening to a Muslim who says there are problems with modern liberalism and who dares to suggest that something in Islam, or what Ramadan calls the "Islamic universe of reference," may be able to contribute something meaningful and significant—something that may challenge some aspect of modern liberal society, and that could be shown to be true. This would require that they stop thinking of Islam as exclusively "a religion," and simply ask: is there something Ramadan is saying that is true, that could be shown to be true, that we had not considered before or considered in the same way, and if so, how might it be relevant to society? Instead, Fourest thinks it is enough to say that, because Ramadan does not openly and uncritically embrace modern liberalism, he is clearly a retrograde fundamentalist who cannot be trusted. She would have Ramadan be a Muslim only to the extent that he never suggests that anything is revealed to us that shows that there may be problems with the underlying philosophical premises of modern liberal, secular society. In other words, there is no question of being fully Muslim and fully a citizen of any given country; whether you are a Muslim or not must remain a purely private matter because, of course, there is no God!

Yet if Ramadan is clearly not the radical Islamist Fourest and others make him out to be, he is also clearly not an entirely modern, liberal, or secular Muslim. Situating him on the spectrum of Muslim thought is somewhat complicated by where and why he has placed himself on the rare occasions when he has been asked directly to do so. In his interview with Ian Buruma for the *New York Times Magazine*, for example, he describes

himself as a "Salafi reformist" (quoted in Buruma 2007). In his book *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (2004b), he identifies six major tendencies in Muslim thought, from scholastic traditionalism to liberal, or rationalist, reformism. Among these, he identifies three forms of Salafism, referring to those who self-consciously attempt to follow the example of the *salaf*, "the Companions of the Prophet and pious Muslims of the first three generations of Islam" (ibid., 25). Salafi reformism, where he places himself, falls between what he calls Salafi literalism and political literalist Salafism. For him, Salafi literalism is associated with a rejection of "the mediation of the [traditional Muslim] juridical Schools and their scholars when it comes to approaching and reading the Texts [Qur'ān and Sunnah]," isolation from the rest of society, and "a literally applied religious practice protected from Western cultural influences" (ibid.). By political literalist Salafism, he means a political, reactionary movement that weds reformist ideas of social and political action with "a literalist reading of Texts with a political connotation concerning the management of power, the caliphate, authority, law, and so on" (ibid., 27). "The aim" of Salafi reformism, meanwhile, he says, "is to protect Muslim identity and religious practice, to recognize the Western constitutional structure, to become involved as a citizen at the social level, and to live with true loyalty to the country to which one belongs" (ibid.).

Berman, for one, makes a lot out of the fact that Ramadan calls a number of Muslims Salafi reformists whose ideas have been linked to all sorts of violence, and whose writings appear to justify all kinds of violence on the basis of a strictly literal

reading of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah (the practice of the Prophet Muhammad) (Berman 2011, 134–35). Berman infers from this that "Salafi reformism turns out to be, in short, the philosophical underpinning of political Islamism" (ibid., 135). Yet, while it is true that Ramadan calls such Islamist bogeymen as Pakistan's Syed Abul A'ala Mawdudi, Egypt's Sayyid Qutb, and Iran's Ali Shariati Salafi reformists, he is careful to note the striking differences among so-called Salafi reformists. What unites them, for Ramadan, and so them with him, is nothing but what he calls "a very dynamic relation to the scriptural sources and a constant desire to use reason in the treatment of the Texts in order to deal with the new challenges of their age and the social, economic, and political evolution of societies" (Ramadan 2004b, 26).

Perhaps Berman is right in saying that Ramadan does not do enough to distance himself from other, more literal-minded Muslim thinkers like Sayyid Qutb, whose ideas lend themselves all too easily to violence and extremism. I would certainly question the extent to which Sayyid Qutb has a "very dynamic relation to the scriptural sources," considering his focus on immediate social and political action guided by a strictly literal reading of scripture with a view to political power. Still, that does not make Ramadan a literalist, and least of all a violent extremist. Indeed, Ramadan, in his book *Aux sources du renouveau musulman* [*Towards the Sources of Muslim Renewal*], distances himself from what he calls Qutb's "*posture réactive*" [reactionary posture] (1998, 419, original emphasis). Yet he sympathizes with Qutb to an extent, explaining that the reactionary character of at least Qutb's later writings is understandable, given that they were written

while he was in prison. In the end, however, my concern is not to fit Ramadan into a neat little box, and Ramadan certainly does not appear to be a reactionary, despite what Berman may think.

Perhaps it is better if we follow Baum (2009) in placing Ramadan in the *al-nahda*, or Muslim awakening or renaissance, movement. This is a broad, somewhat ambiguous reform movement in Islam that began in nineteenth century Egypt. Two prominent Muslim thinkers associated with this movement and with whom Ramadan has expressed some affinity are Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838–97) and Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905). At least we can say that Ramadan is neither a radical Islamist extremist nor a modern liberal secularist. From all appearances, he is trying his best to be a pious, righteous Muslim. In any event, it does not necessarily matter a great deal where we place Ramadan on the spectrum of Muslim political thought, if what we are interested in is whether or not anything he says can be shown to be true in any meaningful way.

"La foi est pour moi primordiale," Ramadan says, "et il n'y a pas de foi sans combat pour la justice" [Faith, for me, is primordial, and there is no faith without fighting for justice] (Gresh and Ramadan 2000, 40). Thus, for Ramadan, fighting for justice is always an expression of faith. But what is justice? What is the relationship between morality, or justice, and ethics, human convention, and politics? In November 2006, Ramadan gave a lecture in Glasgow, Scotland. In it, he claimed that, "There is no such thing as Islamic justice and non-Islamic justice; justice is justice" (2006). In his book *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*, he claims that active euthanasia is

explicitly forbidden because it says so in the Qur'ān (2009b, 174). I asked him if this meant that, on the basis of the Qur'ānic text, he was arguing that active euthanasia was always unjust, and as such should be illegal. From what he had previously said, it seemed reasonable to assume that, if things are either just or unjust, things must be either ethical or unethical. His answer surprised me. He simply said no. Then he explained to me that, for him, "justice is the end and ethics is the way to get to it" (personal interview 1). As such, he was saying that a Muslim, who wishes to remain true to the Qur'ānic revelation, should not ask to be actively euthanized. But active euthanasia, in itself, may not always, or even ultimately, be unjust; for some, it may be the most just thing to do. Thus, different ethical positions can in fact be ethical to the extent that they are consistent with a single understanding of morality, which itself is determined by an ontologically grounded anthropology and an overarching metaphysics. Thus, we have the outline of a basis for saying that we have real moral duties to each other, despite—and possibly even because of—our differences.

Clearly Ramadan is a prolific writer and a prominent, controversial thinker. But is he a philosopher? Is he a profound thinker? Do his ideas merit the extended study I offer in this text? There seems to be some doubt about this. Scholars have so far been slow to study his work in any great depth. Some scholars and writers have been decidedly unimpressed by what he has to say. For example, John Gray, Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics and Political Science, dismisses Ramadan's book *The Quest for Meaning* as "bad poetry" (2010). Meanwhile, George Packer, writing

in the *New Yorker*, declares that Ramadan "is not a philosopher, or an original thinker," claiming that what Ramadan "has to say about most subjects is garden-variety European leftism" (2010). The way Ramadan writes and speaks may sometimes give the impression that he is being deliberately vague, or else that he is not a particularly deep thinker. I argue, however, that his writings reflect a deeply personal struggle that he is trying his best to face up to. That is the struggle to search for, affirm, and live truth in a world and age that comes very near to denying the word altogether, let alone the yearning for it. This is a world that reduces truth to opinion and the movement of one's soul to just another preference, choice, or identity. This is what Ramadan is fighting against. The problem is that, once you abandon even the idea of truth, a genuine, purposeful struggle for truth may be difficult to distinguish from bad poetry.

In our first interview, I asked Ramadan what, in the revealed message of Islam, could be shown to be true that even a person not predisposed to accept the truth of Islam could accept and learn from. The Muslim understanding of the human being, he responded. But he continued, perhaps a little testily: "of course, for the Muslims, the oneness of God is the truth, but we are not going to waste our time in a postmodernist society about, you know, is there a truth or not—of course, for the Muslims, there is one ..." But is this a waste of time? Perhaps that is why he is sometimes a bit too vague. Perhaps he worries that otherwise, everything he says, everything he feels, everything he believes, would be dismissed as a waste of time and so much bad poetry. As I tried to demonstrate in Chapter Two, however, the world is in desperate need of truth, of ways of

taking the question of truth and politics seriously. Postmodern skepticism and criticism only get us so far. At some point, we have to confront what Ramadan is only obliquely, and thus perhaps imperceptibly, asking us to confront: who are we as human beings, and what does this tell us about truth and our true obligations to each other? Far from being a bad poet or simply parroting what the European left has to say, whatever that means, Ramadan makes a compelling argument about the necessary relationship between truth and politics. If he is perhaps sometimes too vague, or difficult to pin down intellectually, I suggest that scholars have so far been wrong to focus on him myopically as a specifically Muslim thinker whose ideas are of purely journalistic interest to non-Muslims. Rather, I argue, while his ideas may not be entirely novel—which is no criticism at all if a person presents something in a new way to meaningful effect—they represent a well-developed, philosophically and theologically rigorous critique of modern liberalism and speak to the possibility of a philosophically coherent, comprehensive alternative. Ramadan has not given up on the possibility of a politics genuinely oriented to truth, yet one that at the same time does not herald an end to diversity. The possibility of such a politics rests in the way Ramadan recasts the ideas of reason and revelation and their relationship to each other and to politics. This is the foundation for his political theology, although it is the one aspect of his thought that heretofore seems to have been overlooked or misunderstood by most scholars who have bothered to take his work seriously, for reasons already discussed.

Beginning with a discussion of the ideas of reason and revelation and their relationship in Ramadan's thought, the rest of this text aims to show that a serious consideration of the possibility of a truth-oriented politics such as Ramadan seems to long for is far from being a waste of time, no matter how postmodern the world may be. Rather, for reasons discussed in Chapter Two, it is vitally necessary, lest we are prepared to admit that there is no sure basis for saying that anything is objectively right or wrong and that life is no more than simply the will to power.

PART TWO

Truth

CHAPTER FOUR
Reason and Revelation

But for Him and but for us,
That which has become would not be.
We are servants in very truth,
And it is God Who is our master.
But we are of His very essence, so understand,
When I say "man"
And do not be deceived by (the term) "man,"
For He has given you a proof.
Be divine (in essence) and be a creature (in form),
And you will be, by God, a compassionate one.
We have given Him what is manifest in us through Him,
As He has given to us also.
The whole affair is shared, divided,
Between Him and us.
He Who knows by my heart
Revived it when He gave us life.
In Him we were existences, essences,
And instances of time.
In us it is not permanent,
But only intermittent. (But it gives us life).

— Ibn Al-ᶜArabī (1980, 179)

Whoever looks at the world because it is God's work, and knows it because it is God's work, and loves it because it is God's work, does not look save to God and does not know save God, and does not love save God, and he is the true unifier (*muwaḥḥiḍ*) who does not see anything but God, nay who does not even look at himself for his own sake but because he is God's servant—and of such a person it is said that he is annihilated in unification and that he is annihilated from himself.

— Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazzālī (quoted in Schimmel, 1975, 146)

For Ramadan, nothing is revealed to us ultimately except through reason. Yet reason and revelation remain distinct ideas in his thought. For him, that which engenders a movement of the soul, of the heart, that reason can understand and accept is revelation. "Blaise Pascal," he writes,

> had an apt expression: 'The heart has reasons that reason does not know', thus differentiating the two realms of faith and reason ... From an Islamic point of view, the relationship of the heart (where the first longing, the first breath toward faith takes place) and the intellect (which responds to the call of this breath and takes up the quest) might rather be expressed this way: the heart has reasons that reason will recognize. Apart from the expression, the difference is profound. (2004b, 17; also see Ramadan 2009b, 91)

Evidently, what Ramadan means by revelation is fundamentally different from what many people today assume revelation, as distinct from reason, means. For Ramadan, far from there being any necessary tension between reason and revelation, they are mutually complementary.

It is common knowledge that Muslims, including Ramadan, consider the Qurʾān the verbatim, authoritative, and final record of the word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel (*Jibrīl*). This may give the impression that revelation, at least in Islam and for Ramadan, is limited to prophetic oral or textual revelation—extra-rational teachings revealed from a higher source and channeled through human agents. Yet prophetic revelation, while real, according to Ramadan, is neither the only way Ultimate Being reveals itself to us nor the primary one. This will surely make sense to Christians who believe Jesus was God incarnate. For them, God revealed himself

in the flesh, in one specific human being, not simply through prophets. This is not at all what Ramadan has in mind, however.

Because Ramadan's understanding of revelation and the relationship between reason and revelation is so different from the way many people, especially in the West, understand these concepts, and because revelation is the starting point for everything he says about truth, the divine, creation, humanity, diversity, and politics, we must start here. So what, according to him, is revelation? What is its source? Who is it for? What purpose does it serve? How, precisely, is it related to human reason? How can we know these things? It may be helpful to compare the idea of revelation in Islam with two ideas that clearly and unambiguously distinguish it from revelation in traditional Christianity.

The majority of non-Muslims in the West understand revelation, and consequently the relationship between reason and revelation, in a primarily Christian, if not modern Christian or now even atheistic (which is to say a rejection of traditional Abrahamic theism), idiom. Thus, this comparison will hopefully help us see more clearly just what Ramadan has in mind when he refers to revelation and what is so different about his understanding of revelation. First is the Muslim position that all humans are originally innocent before God; they are not guilty of any kind of so-called original sin through Adam and Eve, as Augustine and other Christian thinkers have it. The corollary of this is what Ramadan calls the priority of permission, and thus of freedom, in Islam. This he calls original permission (*al-ibāḥa al-aṣliyya*). Second is the Muslim insistence that, although Jesus was a real historical figure, and although his mother, Mary, was a

virgin, he was in no sense the incarnation of God; he was a human being like any other human being and was divine in essence only as much as all other creatures are imbued with the divine and only so much as all humans are called to honor their primordial covenant with God forged in human nature.[22] Muslims accept that God singled Jesus out to be a prophet and bear a particular message from God to his people, just as all the prophets before him were called to do—but in no sense do they accept that he was God.

Already, if Muslims do not believe that Jesus was in any sense the incarnation of God on earth, we can see that the divine revelation said to be rendered through Jesus is of a completely different order and type in Islam than in Christianity. In Islam, Jesus reveals something to humans through his words and actions, animated as they are said to be by God; he serves as a moral model for humans. As Ibn Al-ᶜArabī so beautifully puts it, he was a living example of a person who was divine in essence and a creature in form, and thus fully, and perfectly, human—but not God. In traditional Christianity, Jesus himself is the revelation; he is not simply a moral model, the perfect human being, or a wise teacher, although admittedly many Christian thinkers, especially in the modern period, effectively reduce him to this.

The Muslim position is not simply that Jesus was not God incarnate, however, but that it was not and is not necessary for God to incarnate himself in a single person on earth to reveal anything necessary to humans or to facilitate their salvation. Furthermore,

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[22] A covenant alluded to in the Qurᵓān (32:72), cited in Chapter Two above and discussed in detail below. Even if, for Muslims, Jesus is not the incarnation of God, he may be seen, as Ibn Al-ᶜArabī has it in his *Bezels of Wisdom* (1980), to be a special, or perhaps uniquely perfect, channel for the Spirit (*al-rūḥ*) of God who serves as a model human being who is perfectly divine in essence while being a creature in form.

the Muslim denial of the incarnation in Jesus means that the crucifixion and the resurrection have no absolutely unique and special significance, if such things ever actually occurred. Indeed, by some accounts, the Qurʾān says that Jesus was not actually crucified, although there is some dispute among Muslim scholars over the proper understanding of this.[23]

As for prophets, "A fundamental aspect of the Islamic tradition," Ramadan writes, "is the recognition of the accomplished cycle of prophecy and all the prophets who preceded Muhammad. And one can only understand their meaning and function in human history if one has a clear idea of the Islamic conception of humankind" (2004b, 19). This suggests that, to understand revelation, we should begin with a discussion of humankind, or the nature of the human being. Nevertheless, I begin with a discussion of the idea of revelation itself, not the human being as such. This is because knowledge of the fundamental, primordial nature of the human being (*al-fiṭrah* in Arabic) ultimately comes from, and in a paradoxical way constitutes part of, revelation, at least in Ramadan's thought. Before I get to a discussion of revelation as such in Ramadan's thought, however, it is important to discuss an idea that, if not properly understood, will make it difficult to understand what Ramadan is actually saying, and consequently what the revealed message of Islam is actually trying to teach us according to him.

For Ramadan, as for most Muslim thinkers, God, creation, humanity, and revelation, although conceptually distinct, cannot be understood in isolation from each

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[23] On this, see Larson 2009.

other; they can only be understood relationally. In the modern West, by contrast, we commonly imagine that God is, or is at least posited as, a wholly and utterly distinct being that is considered divine or sacred by simple virtue of being somehow higher and thus set apart from all other beings—each considered utterly distinct from each other. Thus, we limit ourselves to asking whether or not such a being exists, and if so, what its nature is, what it demands of us, and how the relationship among God, creation, and humans is constituted. Otherwise, we decide that no such God exists and that true freedom lies in abandoning the strictures of all-too-human traditions that tell us to act a certain way in the name of some nonexistent god or gods. This is not the way Ramadan and, according to him, the Qurʾān and what he calls the Islamic universe of reference, conceives of the divine. Indeed, for Ramadan, the question of God's existence or non-existence is never an issue, because God does not exist even remotely in the way we commonly say something or someone exists.

For Ramadan, God is not an existent entity but rather the creative force behind and the principle underlying Being itself, and subsequently all beings. This is not necessarily an unorthodox position among Muslims in general and it is discussed in great detail in many classical, especially Sufi, texts (see Al-Ghazālī 1998; Ibn Al-ʿArabī 1980; Nasr 1964; and Schimmel 1975). At the same time, God is conceptually distinct from existence, such that we may pray to and worship God. Yet, praying to, or worshiping God, in Islam, is possibly better likened to an act of remembrance and homecoming than worshiping a being that is somehow higher than other beings and that exists utterly apart

from creation. God, for Ramadan, is Ultimate Being, which is to say God is in the unified nature of things, the unity of all Being. Paradoxically, then, God is neither a single existent thing nor a multiplicity of things, neither in a single existent thing nor in a multiplicity of things, and yet permeates everything. The idea is that God alone, or simply the unifying principle all Being, is the only thing that is itself not created and the only thing that is Ultimately Real—although many things, including the world as we know it, are transiently real. All existence subsequently relies on this divine force and principle of the divine for both its existence and justification. In other words, existence is neither self-sufficient nor self-justifying, a fact manifest in existence itself. To the extent that we see that this fact is manifest in existence, we see that God, which is to say the creative force and unifying principle underlying all existence, is also manifest in creation, while at the same time distinct from and utterly beyond creation itself.

As I discuss below, this suggests that Islam is panentheistic, not theistic, in that God is simultaneously in everything and beyond everything. This is consistent with the idea of the mutual permeability of God and creation, or the oneness of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), found in the works of many Muslim thinkers, notably Sufi thinkers like Ibn al-ᶜArabi, and also in a similar, but not identical sense, in Christian thinkers like Thomas Aquinas. As Ibn Al-ᶜArabī so beautifully and enigmatically puts it in the epigraph above, "But for Him and but for us / That which has become would not be." It is important to note, however, that the idea that Islam is panentheistic in no meaningful way contradicts the claim that Islam is strictly monotheistic. In fact, it is to make the stronger claim that

God, or Ultimate Being, is one by logical necessity and that the idea that God does not exist is literally absurd (irrational). Known as *tawḥīd*, this is the core of Muslim metaphysics. Thus, the idea that there are or could be multiple gods is utterly impossible. Furthermore, as Berman rightly observes but seemingly wrongly understands, doubts about God are rendered meaningless (2011, 131). This is not to say that doubts about what this means for living our lives will not persist, but for Ramadan, such doubts are in fact simply further proof, further revelation, of our need for God, and so necessary. To the extent that we accept this, Ramadan implies, we find peace; to the extent that we are driven by hubris to deny our need for God, we ultimately find nothing, because nothing apart from God ultimately is. I shall pick up this somewhat abstract discussion below. For now, we must return to the question of revelation itself.

If God, creation, humanity, and revelation can only be understood relationally, we clearly cannot fully grasp what revelation is without having a clear idea of its source, which we can call God or the Transcendent or simply Ultimate Being. Meanwhile, we cannot know God except in relation to creation and humanity specifically. Yet to know the nature of this relationship and its constitutive elements, we must begin with revelation. Of course, an attentive reader will see that this is somewhat of a tautology; to know God in any sense in relation to creation and humanity implies that we can know God through creation, and humanity as an integral part of creation (at least from humanity's perspective). Thus, creation itself, including humans, is part of revelation, in that it reveals something to us. This, in turn, implies that we reveal something to

ourselves in ourselves and to each other in relationship and presence, yet something that is paradoxically beyond us. In fact, as I discuss below, the idea of creation itself as revelation is key to how Ramadan understands revelation, and it has profound implications for the relationship between reason and revelation. Once we have a clear, albeit necessarily partial, idea of the Muslim, or at least Ramadan's, understanding of revelation, and what revelation teaches us about existence or creation and humankind, we can then inquire further into the nature of the relationship between the transcendent, divine, or simply ultimate source of revelation, existence or creation, and humanity, in the process deepening our understanding of all three.

Now, to ask what revelation is may seem to presume, without justification, that there is something higher than human reason, or at least that reason is insufficient and we must look for a revelation of some kind to reveal something novel to us. This, of course, assumes one has not already accepted the truth of something considered to be a particular revelation as such. Once we identify some supposedly extra-rational revelation, it would be all too easy for a skeptic to complain that we have identified no such thing; that all we are really doing is asserting that our fallible opinion is somehow proved correct by an extra-rational, indefeasible revelation that cannot be subject to rational, empirical inquiry. This is an all too common, axiomatic understanding of revelation, as distinct from reason, today, especially in the West. I would not be surprised at all if many readers began reading this discussion of revelation with this common understanding of revelation, and its relationship to reason, in mind. As a result of this understanding of revelation, an

irreconcilable tension is imagined between reason and revelation. As discussed in Chapter Two, Strauss maintains that this tension is real and truly and logically irreconcilable. It is worth returning to this discussion to see how Strauss represents one particular and very common understanding of revelation and its relationship to reason, but not necessarily the only coherent one. This, in turn, will guide us in deciding what to look for in an alternative idea about revelation, such as Ramadan's.

On 8 January 1948, Strauss gave a lecture to a group of theologians at Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut. "Speaking as a non-theologian to theologians," he intoned, "I shall not presume to define *revelation*" (2006, 141). He then proceeded to make "Only one point," in the process offering a partial definition of revelation that reflects and relies on particular Greek, Jewish, and Christian ideas and assumptions about revelation, the nature of God, and the nature of the relationship between God and humanity, at least as he sees these. It is worth quoting his thoughts on this at length, because they bear directly on the discussion to follow in this chapter on the concept of revelation in Islam and Ramadan's thought, and the discussion of the relationship among God, creation, and humanity in the chapter to follow:[24]

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[24] Different thinkers and scholars have offered severe and sophisticated critiques of Strauss's understanding of reason and revelation and the relationship between the two. Eric Voegelin, specifically, takes issue both with Strauss's idea that reason and revelation are utterly distinct and with Strauss's idea that there is an irreconcilable tension between the two (see Cooper and Emberley 1993). David Walsh argues that this is because the two thinkers hold different views about what reason is, and, as a result, what revelation is (1993). While this is probably true, this discussion is beyond the scope of this text. Furthermore, despite Voegelin's critique, I argue that Strauss's is the more common view in the West today. In any event, since it is so different from Ramadan's view, I have chosen to discuss it at some length so as to highlight the differences, in the hope that this will help readers better understand the alternative Ramadan presents.

Regardless of whether revelation is understood as revelation of a *teaching* or as a *happening*, the claim of revelation becomes noticeable first through a *teaching based* on revelation. Faith in revelation necessarily issues in preaching or proclaiming the message of revelation and therefore ultimately in a teaching—if in a teaching which always falls short. Those who present that teaching cannot *disregard* the claim of philosophy which is incompatible with the claim of revelation. And they cannot leave it at anathem[at]izing or at forbidding philosophy: they have to refute its claims. This necessarily creates a serious problem. If we assume on the basis of the account of the Fall that *the* alternative for man is philosophy *or* obedience to God's revelation, a refutation of philosophy would seem to be tantamount to a *proof* of the truth of revelation. But such a proof is considered by the most radical theologians as incompatible with the very idea of revelation. The response to revelation is faith, and faith is knowledge, if a particular kind of knowledge.[25] Every attempt, not merely at *replacing* the certainty of faith by any other certainty, but even at *supporting* the certainty of faith by any other certainty, contradicts the nature of faith; every attempt of this kind amounts to substituting trust in flesh for trust in God. There cannot be any evidence in favor of revelation but the *fact* of revelation as known through faith. Yet this means that for those who do not have the experience of faith, there is *no shred of evidence* in favor of faith; the unbelieving man has *not the slightest reason* for doubting his unbelief; revelation is nothing but a factum brutum; the unbeliever can live in true happiness without paying the slightest attention to the claim of revelation: the unbeliever is excusable—contrary to what Paul clearly teaches. One cannot leave it then at the notion that there is no shred of evidence outside of the fact of revelation in favor of revelation. While a *direct* proof of revelation contradicts the nature of revelation, an *indirect* proof is inevitable. That indirect proof consists in the proof that the philosophic position is *inconsistent*, i.e. *absurd*. This proof is not based on faith, does not do away with the difference between the knowledge of faith and merely human knowledge. For the alternative: 'philosophy or obedience to revelation' is not complete: the third alternative is escapism

[25] Here, Strauss is guilty of what Tillich calls the intellectualistic distortion of the meaning of faith. See Chapter Two, page 36, note 9.

> or despair. The refutation of the claim of philosophy leads, not to faith, but to despair. The transformation of despondent man into a believing and comforted man is the action, not of man, but of God's grace. (Ibid., 141–42, original emphasis)

Strauss seems to be saying that revelation first makes itself known to humans because some humans teach other humans something that is said to be of divine origin. The humans attempting to impart this ostensibly revealed knowledge claim that they themselves learned of it either by way of interpreting a particular happening such that they understand it to have revealed or to be continually revealing something novel and of divine origin, or because it was revealed to them in comprehensible language from a source ultimately understood to be divine. It seems, from Strauss's point of view, that people accept or reject such teachings only to the extent that they have faith in them, which is to say they have a special kind of private experience that leads them to accede to them or they otherwise take some kind of Kierkegaardian leap of faith.

Philosophy in its original sense, Strauss argues, directly challenges revelation to prove itself, to offer a concrete demonstration of its truth. In the end, he says, this cannot be done. At the very least, he claims this is because any such demonstration would necessarily appeal to nature, thus substituting trust in an aspect of the created world for trust in the putative creator of the world and source of revelation. In other words, trust in reason, not revelation—always assuming the two are utterly distinct and mutually exclusive. Genuine philosophers, Strauss says, attempt not only to know the truth but also to demonstrate it, quite apart from historical contingencies and prejudices. This attempt,

if successful, he argues, destroys the very idea of revelation, at least as he understands it. This is because, if everything is demonstrable and therefore at least theoretically accessible to unaided human reason, there is no need for God at all, let alone any kind of special, divinely revealed knowledge.

With the distinction between what is natural and what is artificial—which is to say that which requires human forethought and is subsequently made, or directly effected, by humans—philosophers, according to Strauss, discovered nature. Surmising that through natural things not produced by human forethought they might come to better understand the nature of ultimate reality, philosophers, in Strauss's original sense, sought to demonstrate the truth, not merely assert it as mythmakers, storytellers, or prophets. The discovery of nature, which is not itself the product of human forethought, did not, Strauss is careful to say, preclude the possibility that nature is the product of divine forethought, only that this must now be demonstrated. As he puts it,

> The characteristic outcome of the discovery of nature is the demand for rigorous demonstration of the existence of divine beings; for a demonstration which starts from the analysis of phenomena manifest to everyone. Since no demonstration can *presuppose* the demonstradum, philosophy is *radically* atheistic. (Ibid., 145–46, original emphasis)

Thus, he claims, while philosophy cannot absolutely refute the claims of revelation—understood as teachings of ostensibly divine origin—it cannot demonstrate their truth either. By implication, for those who do not accept a particular teaching said to be divinely revealed, and in the absence of a concrete demonstration of or experience suggesting its truth, such a teaching amounts to a questionable human convention. At the

same time, philosophy cannot provide an irrefutable demonstration that revelation is not true. There is thus, in Strauss's mind, a permanent tension between philosophy, which "is originally the quest for truth, for *the* truth—for *the* beginnings of all things" (ibid., 145, original emphasis), and revelation, which is a teaching that purports to reveal *the* truth without appealing to nature directly.

"What to the classical philosophers appeared as the perfection of man's nature, is described by the Bible as the product of man's disobedience to his Creator," Strauss asserts. He continues:

> When the classical philosophers conceive of man's desire to know as his highest natural desire, the Bible protests by asserting that this desire is a temptation. To the philosophic view that man's happiness consists in free investigation or insight, the Bible opposes the view that man's happiness consists in obedience to God. The Bible thus offers the only challenge to the claim of philosophy which can reasonably be made. ... The alternative between philosophy and revelation cannot be evaded by any harmonization of 'synthesis.' For each of the two antagonists proclaims something as the one thing needful, as the only thing that ultimately counts, and the one thing needful. (Ibid., 149)

But what if there was no fall, no original sin, such that, contrary to what Strauss appears to accept, the alternative for man is *not* philosophy *or* obedience to God's revelation? What if there were no necessary tension between reason and revelation? What would revelation mean then? Would this not simply amount to the vain attempt to achieve a synthesis between the two, which Strauss says is impossible? It seems that Strauss cannot conceive of revelation in any other way because he presupposes that nature—the field of demonstration—is utterly distinct from the hypothetical demonstradum—God, or as he

has it, divine beings. As a result, he must presuppose a particular understanding of divinity, thus himself committing the fallacy of presupposing the demonstradum. In this case, Strauss presupposes that that which one is attempting to prove the existence of through a demonstration appealing to nature is a being that can be isolated from or understood apart from its relationship with nature, and that can be shown to be a superior, creative, and sustaining force of some kind. If, on the other hand, it turns out that there is an identifiable creative and sustaining force behind nature, and indeed all of creation—or even that we can simply imagine one—but that it cannot be identified and understood except to the extent that it permeates nature and nature permeates it, then we must approach the effort to identify and understand this in a different way.

For example, we might ask what we can learn from the fact that there are things that are not, at least as far as we can tell, the result of human forethought. Logically, this should lead us to ask whether or not anything is ultimately the product of human forethought, of human will, or at least whether or not anything can be known absolutely to be solely the product of human forethought and will in an ultimate sense. The answer, surely, is no. But then is this not a revelation of something novel, something not immediately the product of unaided reason alone but nevertheless only comprehensible to reason? Would this not suggest a different understanding of revelation, and therewith a different understanding of the relationship between reason and revelation—indeed, the very identity of these? Strauss never appears to consider this possibility. This, however, seems to be precisely what Ramadan has in mind when he speaks of revelation. It is a

very different notion of revelation than Strauss's, and probably quite different from what a lot of people think of when they imagine revelation—certainly committed atheists and anyone who persists in thinking as Strauss does.

For Ramadan, nature, which is to say creation itself, is *the* primary revelation. It is, first and foremost, an undifferentiated revelation of the awesome fact of existence itself (or, for the postmodernists among us, at the very least the fact of perception). This, he tells us, is Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazzālī's idea of *al-kitāb al-manshūr* (the outspread book of the universe, "the theological as well as physical mirror of the Qur'an"), which complements *al-kitāb al-mastūr* (the written book, the Qurʾān, and presumably all other authentic prophetic revelations combined) (2009b, 88). The fact of Being itself is a revelation of Being to itself, in both its singularity and its infinite multiplicity, of which humans are a part. Revelation, then, is not primarily a specific teaching, as Strauss has it—it is a fact, just as much as Being is a fact, that must nonetheless be felt by the heart and apprehended and processed through human reason and intellect to be properly understood. Only once we appreciate this primary fact, after we acknowledge this primary revelation, can we know how to respond to the teachings of different people said to be prophets imparting wisdom that they have somehow received from a higher source. Prophecy, for Ramadan, is a form of revelation consisting of teachings in human languages and examples and models of righteous human behavior and action. It is meant to complement the primary revelation of creation, or existence, itself, but it is not the be all and end all of revelation, as Strauss seems to imagine. For Ramadan, revelation, and,

as I discuss below, faith, are not defined, as they are for Strauss, by their utter distinction from nature and reason, they are primordial facts. On Ramadan's account, the Muslim tradition teaches that faith itself is a defining aspect of human nature that preexists any experience that gives rise to its realization in a person's life; in fact, it constitutes part of revelation, which is normally what we say gives rise to faith. This is both an incredibly simple and complicated idea, especially considering how different it is from the common modern Western, and specifically Christian, understanding of revelation and faith.

Ramadan reminds his readers "that the early revelations in the Quran ... constantly refer to the created Universe, to the elements in Nature, and to the 'signs' that pervade it. From the outset," he continues, "the revealed text establishes a link between the written Revelation, knowledge, and the surrounding Universe, as three dimensions testifying to God's presence." These three dimensions, which he says are reflected in the text of the Qurʾān, are, first, "the fact that God has created humans and that He has taught them 'by means of the pen,' which directly refers to the Revelation of the Book—the book of learning—that begins with those words." In other words, oral and textual revelations rendered through human prophets are teachings that remind "humankind of the blessings surrounding its creation" (2009b, 88). Such revelations, while necessary, are neither primary nor sufficient, since they only exist by virtue of the need to remind humans of and point humans toward the primary revelation in creation itself. The second dimension Ramadan identifies is the idea that the universe or creation itself is "a witness to the Creator's presence—both on the spiritual level and as the material expression of his

natural order." The third dimension, meanwhile, is the link between creation and creator, between existence and the principle of Ultimate Being, "that speaks to the mind and the heart and reveals the meaning of Creation" (ibid., 87-88). This link is evident in creation itself, Ramadan avers, but humans are forgetful creatures. Thus, prophetic revelation serves to remind humans of this link. Yet since this link can only be truly recognized through human reason, reason is necessary for revelation—and ultimately its source, whatever that might be—to actually reveal anything at all. Moreover, if reason is a faculty possessed by creatures who themselves, along with everything else that exists, are the product of a creator that reveals Ultimate Being in different modes, then reason is, by definition, a form of revelation in creation. Thus, there is no tension whatsoever between reason and revelation, because without one, you could not have the other, and there could be no truth whatsoever.

Far from being wholly and utterly distinct, mutually exclusive, or in permanent tension, reason and revelation, for Ramadan, "echo each other" (ibid., 91). The purpose of textual, prophetic revelation, according to Ramadan, is not, as Strauss has it, to replace human guidance with divine guidance, but to liberate the human mind. Prophetic revelation, Ramadan argues, recognizes in us and exists to direct us in

> the universal natural quest for meaning that is so set in human beings, the Quran calls *al-fitra*: beyond the self, the materiality of the world and the realities of time, it is the natural longing for the transcendent, whether intimate or metaphysical, which is expressed in the question 'why'. The revealed text actually encounters and welcomes this human quest—this essential need for meaning—and thus liberates human intelligence and invites it to seek, observe, analyze, interpret, and understand. (ibid., 91)

As we strive with our minds to discover how things are, Ramadan argues, we are forced to encounter the question of why things are—why anything is. In the process, he says, "the two Revelations"—creation and text—"will echo each other and be unveiled to each other" and the heart will discover "reasons that reason will recognize" (ibid.).

As if in direct response to the likes of Strauss, Ramadan insists that,

> The revealed text does not impede human reason: on the contrary, it opens manifold, diverse horizons for the exercise of an autonomous active rationality. Several levels of discourse can be perceived throughout the text, referring either to the natural order or to the specificities of human societies, but always calling on human intelligence to observe and understand. It thus emerges that in the order of the Universe as well as in that of the revealed text, some laws are universal and definitive laws and some others are contextual, changing, and immersed in history: here again, the two orders echo each other. (Ibid.)

One important lesson Ramadan says both forms of revelation together teach us, in their very complementarity, concerns human diversity. "Together with the common immutable human condition reflected in the stages of life and the inevitable death of everyone," he writes, "one should however observe—as a law of nature—the diversity of beings and forms" (ibid., 93). This obvious fact of diversity in nature is part of the undifferentiated, primary revelation in creation, and this, Ramadan points out, is affirmed in the Qurʾānic revelation: "*And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: in that indeed there are signs for those who deeply know*" (The Qurʾān 30:22, translated by and quoted in Ramadan 2009b, 93, original emphasis). But what, precisely, does this fact reveal? Here is what Ramadan says

it reveals:

> Beyond the principle of tolerance, presented as a choice offered human beings, the principle of diversity, established beforehand, requires human conscience to *respect* the natural order by ordering it to live with and approach differences with great acumen. That is confirmed by the fundamental principle, stated as a superior and universal general law, of respect for freedom of conscience: *"No compulsion in religion."* (Ibid., 94, with Ramadan's translation and original emphasis of the first line of The Qur'ān 2:256[26])

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[26] The 256th *āyah* of *sūrah al-baqarah* here cited by Ramadan is often quoted as evidence of the Qur'ān's favorable position on freedom of religion. Sometimes the Arabic word *ikraha* is translated as coercion instead of compulsion, and it also connotes haste and feelings of distress and worry. This is not especially problematic. The Arabic word *al-dīn*, however, usually translated as religion, normally refers to a total way of life. Thus, it does not correspond exactly to the modern concept of religion, which did not even exist in its modern form in any language at the time the Qur'ān was ostensibly revealed (610 to 632 CE). If we take *al-dīn* to refer to a particular, total way of life, which seems more accurate, it gives new meaning to the line that follows. This is usually translated "truth (*al-rrushdu*) stands out clear from error (*al-gha*)." Here, *al-rrushdu* can also mean commonsense, as opposed to folly. Yet this makes the relationship between this *āyah* and the modern idea of freedom of religion less clear. This is because it implies that the question of the distinction between truth and error, not religion as such, is what does not admit of any compulsion or coercion. In fact, it calls into question the extent to which this *āyah* can be said to have anything to do with the modern concept of religion. This is partly because it suggests that, once a person sees that a given way of life is obviously true and clearly distinguished from error, it may be legitimate to compel that person to not abandon that way of life, ostensibly for his or her own good, since this would be to compel a person to reject ostensibly manifest error, which nothing in this *āyah* unambiguously forbids. The question, then, is what the scope is for the content of the truth that the Qur'ān says stands out clear from error, and on what basis it says truth stands out clear from error. The concluding lines of this *āyah* may clarify things a bit. These are usually translated "... whoever rejects evil and believes in *Allāh* (the God) hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold, that never breaks. And *Allāh* heareth and knoweth all things." Clearly, this *āyah* proclaims *Allāh* the support that is necessary to sustain one's rejection of evil. Yet it does not explicitly identify *Allāh* or state what evil is. Instead, it relies on the idea that evil, or error, is manifest and clearly distinct from truth and, presumably, *Allāh*. Only if we know the true nature of *Allāh*, how such knowledge is revealed to us, the scope of the truth that the Qur'ān imagines "stands out clear from error," and the basis on which it claims it does, can we know the extent to which the Qur'ān upholds a person's absolute freedom of conscience, at least to the extent that a person acts on the dictates of his conscience in this world. As I discuss in Chapter Six, based on my reading of Ramadan, the basis on which the Qur'ān claims that truth stands out clear from error is *al-fiṭrah*, man's primordial nature, which constitutes part of the primary, undifferentiated revelation of creation or existence itself. Thus, the Qur'ān appears to imagine that a person properly attuned to her true nature, which is to say her divine essence, will immediately recognize that which is not consistent with the

I shall return later to Ramadan's discussion of reason, revelation, and human diversity, especially as it concerns what justice, morality, and ethics are, and how we ought to deliberate about different moral and ethical positions and relate to each other generally. This, in turn, will lead to a more substantial discussion of the relationship between truth and politics, which is the major theme of this text. For now, we return to the idea of *al-fiṭrah*—the fundamental, primordial nature of the human being that, according to Ramadan, is directly linked to revelation.

Recall, as mentioned above, that Ramadan insists that one can only understand the function of prophets, which is to say oral and textual revelation, "in human history if one has a clear idea of the Islamic conception of humankind" (2004b, 19). Now that we have a basic understanding of revelation as Ramadan sees it, which includes certain facts about or universal, natural longings in human beings as part of the primary revelation in nature, we can begin to consider the moral anthropology Ramadan says the Qur'ānic revelation gives us, albeit with reference to certain facts about the human being that Ramadan would say should be obvious and immediately accessible to human reason because they are natural—and therefore constitute part of revelation.

In the Qur'ānic revelation, according to Ramadan, there are "two fundamental teachings" about the human being "that clearly have consequences for the lives of

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full realization of her divine essence and reject it. Paradoxically, however, as I discuss throughout this text, but especially in Chapters Six and Seven, Islam, according to Ramadan, is pluralistic, in that it teaches that it is only through diversity that we can recognize and truly appreciate our natural yearning for God or Ultimate Being that is the foundation of *al-fiṭrah*. Thus, the question of the scope of that truth that stands out clear from error remains open. I confront this question directly in Chapter Seven.

Muslims wherever they are, for they are the basic factors that constitute how to be in the world" (ibid., 18). Presumably, however, if these teachings about the human being are indeed true, they have consequences for all human beings, not just professed Muslims, for how to be in the world—and how not to be. "The first teaching," he writes, "tells us that humans are not made up of morally antithetical elements: the spirit, the breath (*al-rūḥ*) breathed into the body, which becomes *al-nafs*, the heart, the reason, the body where the emotions live, are, so to speak, 'neutral elements' that invite individuals to the awareness of their responsibilities" (ibid., 18). This is to say that nothing that is natural is, *per se*, good or bad, according to the revealed message of Islam. This is not to say that acting on natural urges is never wrong, simply that the urges themselves, by virtue of being natural, are, as Ramadan says, morally neutral. For example, one may have an urge to commit adultery because he or she has been naturally tempted through sexual attraction to someone other than his or her spouse, but that does not in any way make committing adultery right or somehow morally neutral. Conversely, however, just because a person derives physical pleasure from sex, sexual attraction and sex itself are not inherently bad. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad, as discussed below, is said to have told his followers that even sex can be a kind of prayer, of worship.

"The second teaching," Ramadan continues, "concerns the different states of human life." He explains this as follows:

> In the beginning, one's *innocence* is absolute: one *is*, indwelt by the breath, and is soon inevitably searching. Becoming aware of this state immediately makes one a *responsible* and in fact *free* being. Before God, and before their own consciousness, all people must take charge of

> themselves, knowing that the Only One is expecting them to know Him, to liberate themselves from all objects of adoration and idols (*tawhid al-uluhiyya*) that would not be He, and to recognize Him, intimately. To accomplish this, He has implanted, with the first spark, 'the need of Him' and for 'signs' of His presence. It is for humankind to learn to read these signs and to try to satisfy this need: such is the first dimension of human responsibility. In this perspective, the most serious deficiency in a free and responsible being in not moral error as such, but pride—to suffocate the 'need of Him' and to think that one's intellect alone can know and read the universe. By marrying the two states of innocence and responsibility, humility is the state that allows the human being to enter into its humanity. Humility is the source of ethics. (Ibid., 18, original emphasis)

Thus, Ramadan tells us, the Qur'ān first teaches that nothing natural is in itself good or bad. For example, it is not necessary to deny oneself bodily pleasure to be good. On this, he relates and expounds on the following story about an exchange between Muhammad and some of his companions:

> "Enjoining good is charity, forbidding evil is charity. In having sexual intercourse with your spouses there is charity." The Companions, surprised, asked: "O Messenger of God, when one of us satisfies his [sexual] desire, does he also get a reward?" Muhammad replied: "Tell me, if one of you had had illicit intercourse, would he not have committed a sin? That is why he is rewarded for having lawful intercourse." He thus invited them to deny or despise nothing in their humanity and taught them that the core of the matter was achieving self-control. Spirituality means both accepting and mastering one's instincts: living one's natural desires in the light of one's principles is a prayer. It is never a misdeed, nor is it hypocrisy. (2009b, 112-13)

Following from this is the idea that humans are born in a state of absolute innocence and are guilty of no such thing as the Christian idea of original sin. As he puts it,

"l'humanisme islamique est fondé sur une conception de l'innocence originelle de l'homme. Il est innocent par essence et ne devient responsible qu'à partir de l'âge de raison, l'âge de la conscience. Jusqu'à alors il est en harmonie avec la création comme l'oiseau et la nature le sont" [Islamic humanism is founded on a conception of the original innocence of man. Man is innocent in essence and does not become responsible except after the age of reason, the age of conscience. Until then, he is in harmony with creation, just as the bird and nature are] (Neirynck and Ramadan 1999, 32).

Humans, Ramadan tells us the Muslim tradition teaches, are party to a primordial pact with God forged in human nature and decidedly outside historical time (as distinct from the covenants between God and humans in the Jewish and Christian traditions) that both ensures our original innocence and provides a constant reminder of God through a persistent desire for connection with Ultimate Being. As he explains:

> ... selon la tradition musulmane il existe, dans le cœur de chaque être, une aspiration naturelle vers la transcendence (*fitra* en arabe). Elle pourrait s'apparenter à l'idée énoncée par Mircea Éliade, bien que par incidence seulement, lorsqu'il affirme que la dimension spirituelle participe de la structure de la conscience humaine. En islam, cette dimension existe dans le cœur de chacun et meme de celui qui plus tard la niera. L'aspiration vers le transcendant reste. En d'autres termes, la foi n'est pas quelque chose qui s'ajoute, mais quelque chose qui préexiste et qui peut se voiler. C'est un point fondamental sur lequel on n'insiste pas assez alors qu'il met en evidence une conception très particulière de l'homme [... according to the Muslim tradition, there exists, in the heart of every being a natural longing for the transcendent (*fitra* in Arabic). This could belong to the idea advanced by Mircea Éliade, even if only by implication, when he affirms that the spiritual dimension participates in the structure of human consciousness. In Islam, this dimension exists in the heart of everyone,

> even of those who later deny it. The longing for the transcendent remains. In other words, faith is not something additional, but something preexistent that can be obscured. This is a fundamental point on which we do not insist enough since it evinces a very particular conception of the human being]. (Ibid., 31–2)

As we mature, Ramadan asserts, we discover that we are free to act however we like, given the limits imposed by the human condition. Newly aware of our freedom, we see, if only dimly, the responsibility this implies. How should we act? Why? We feel liberated, yet we are somehow alone; we long for our original breath, our original innocence, and our source. This is a longing that is said to define us in *fiṭrah*. Who are we, after all? Who should we be? These questions come naturally to all humans, Ramadan says, which for him prove of our natural and primordial longing for the transcendent. The natural longing to know our selves is, at the same time, a natural longing to know God, which is to say our primordial source.

The two fundamental teachings about the human being Ramadan identifies in the Muslim tradition—the original, moral neutrality of all things in creation, and our original innocence and corresponding responsibility to God—are meant to orient people toward the divine—the nature of which we have not yet fully explored—and "carry persons to an understanding of the meaning of their obligations before any affirmation of their rights" (2004b, 18). These teachings, he says, affirm that,

> It is the role of humankind to manage the world on the basis of an ethic of respect for creation not only because people do not own it but, more deeply and spiritually, because it is in itself an eternal and continual praise addressed to the Most High. We are speaking here of a true spiritual

> ecology, an ecology that existed before ecology, which imposes on persons the awareness of limitations so that they may have dignified access to the meaning of their freedom and their rights. (Ibid., 18–19)

Humans are thus endowed with a natural longing for the Most High. This, according to Ramadan, is a revelation in itself. A person fulfills this need to the extent that she honors her responsibilities to herself and creation, through an awareness of her need for God and an awareness of God's presence in creation and in her very being. Paradoxically, then, that which one is truly is that which calls one into authentic being. It is only in light of the manifold signs in creation, however—indeed, the sign *of* creation itself—including prophetic revelation, but also our natural longings, that we can realize this. Everything in creation is thus a sign, an undifferentiated revelation, but we remain blind to this to the extent that we hubristically deny our need for God. This, as I earlier suggested, may be the most profound example of *kufr*, the deliberate concealing of something known to be true. Since it is human reason that ultimately, if not always successfully, decides the question of how we are to understand any natural longing for God, and thus the extent to which we imagine we can do without God, nothing is clearly revealed to us except through reason, and thus reason and revelation are necessarily mutually complementary. The question, then, is finding the right balance between reason and revelation, between the light of revelation and the human capacity to understand.

The Qur'ān refers to God as the Light of the Heavens and the Earth.[27] This is a fantastic metaphor. The further an object stands from any effective source of light the sharper will be the outline its shadow casts. Yet this also makes it more difficult to accurately imagine the object itself. Looking at the object itself in the same light and no longer just its shadow, it too appears sharper, but only because the shadows littering its surface as a result of its texture are darker and more mysterious. This is a result of it being further from the light, irrespective of the intensity of the light. The closer we get to the light, the more clearly we can begin to see the true nature of things, up to the point where all shadows disappear and we can see nothing but the light, not even ourselves. The challenge, then, is to find the proper balance between dark and light—the penumbra, the almost shadow, the liminal space wherein we can see things most clearly for what they are and get closest to the truth. A world with too many shadows is a dark, disturbing place. A world utterly awash in light would be invisible and quite unlike our own. In a world with absolutely no light at all, there could be no word for light. That we have a word for light, and that we can imagine light even in total darkness, should be a clue as to the nature of ultimate reality. If nothing in existence is *per se* good or bad, yet all material things in existence are ultimately transient and can potentially cause us harm, finding the requisite balance is clearly imperative.

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[27] "Allāh is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a niche and within it a lamp: the lamp enclosed in glass; the glass as it were a brilliant star: lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! Allāh doth guide whom He will to His light: Allāh doth set forth parables for men: and Allāh Doth know all things" (The Qur'ān 24:35). For an illuminating and fascinating traditional Sufi meditation on this passage, see Al-Ghazālī 1998.

The proper balance between light and dark depends on nothing more or less than who we are. This is because the question really amounts to what the proper balance is, given who we are. But who are we? "It is assumed that the meaning [of *Islam*] is obvious, understood, and immediately accessible," Ramadan says,

> whereas one cannot truly apprehend the meaning of 'submission' or of 'peace' in the Islamic universe of reference if one does not study, even if only a little, what is meant at the heart of the Muslim tradition by the realities of 'God,' the 'human being,' and 'Revelation.' If the 'act of faith' is in itself *simple*, and considered, in Islam, as *natural*, it is because it is born in the depths of time and mind and is considered an *essential* dimension of the human being, or, more precisely, the being that is becoming human. (2004b, 11, original emphasis)

According to a Prophetic tradition Ramadan relates, "Every newborn child is born in *fitra*: it is his parents who make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian." To be born in *fiṭrah* means nothing more or less than to be born in a state of Islam. As we have seen, this is, according to Muslim tradition, man's primordial nature (The Qur'ān 7:172), born of the primordial covenant related in the Qur'ān between God and Adam's descendants (The Qur'ān 30:30). To be human, then, which is to become human, is nothing more or less than to return to our original state in *fiṭrah*. To become aware of this, one should take possession of it and attune one's thoughts, speech, and deeds to its principles.

So who are we in *fiṭrah*? According to Ramadan's understanding of Islam and the Muslim tradition, as we have seen, we are beings that naturally long for the transcendent, that long and are indeed actively called to return to that original state of *fiṭrah* in which we were conceived. This longing, for Ramadan, is a revelation itself. "Created by the

One," he writes, "humans must go in search of the unity of their own being—their heart, their soul, their mind, and their body" (2004b, 14). He is quick to point out, however, that this is not to express any kind of opposition between soul and body, which would contradict his earlier claim that nothing in creation is *per se* good or bad. Light and dark, soul and body, necessarily complement each other and could not exist without each other; the exoteric revelation is just as real and true as the esoteric, and indeed the esoteric could not exist without the exoteric. "The ethical crux is not in the opposition of two elements that are separate and ethically fixed," he writes,

> but rather in controlling and guiding them toward their necessary merger, their inevitable union. From the beginning, the Islamic tradition rejects this kind of antithetical dualism and bases the measurement of moral categories on the ability of human consciousness to take responsibility for finding balance, establishing harmony, making peace. (Ibid., 14)

Humans are called, in the popular Sufi expression, to do the beautiful. Since visual beauty depends largely on the proper balance between light and dark, not the absolute negation of one by the other, humans are called to find a balance in this world that allows them to get as close to the light as possible without losing sight of the beautiful and without being prematurely blinded. Revelation, which cannot reveal anything except through reason and intellection, tells us this. The Muslim understanding of God, expressed in the concept of *tawhid* or simply oneness, and the Muslim understanding of revelation, and of course, revelation itself, are designed to help us find this balance and so become the human beings God, or simply Ultimate Being, means for us to be.

Ultimately, according to Ramadan, we are called to humility, "the state that allows the human being to enter into its humanity" (ibid., 18). "Humility," he continues, "is the source of ethics" (ibid.). Thus, if I understand him correctly, textual revelation is not, ultimately, the source of ethics. It cannot be, since we must always rely on fallible human understanding to interpret supposedly revealed texts. In other words, just because a particular text says that such and such is wrong and such and such is right, does not, in itself, make it so. What makes something ethical or unethical for Ramadan, then, is the extent to which it corresponds to our innate humanity, animated by the breath of God. We can only know what is ethical to the extent that we know our true selves and we can only know this in humility—which we can only have as a result of our awareness of the profoundly humbling revelation that is all of creation and existence.

Yet by humility, Ramadan clearly has something more specific in mind than simply a modest view of our own importance. Rather, it seems that he means the humility and consequent liberation that can only come from recognizing the longing for the divine, which is to say Godlike, within us, from recognizing our own self-insufficiency. This is the opposite of any desire we might harbor to be Gods, replace God, or obviate the need for God. It is the expression of that supposedly natural desire Ramadan imagines and the Muslim tradition teaches all humans have for the Absolute, that union with God that comes only when we get so close to the Light that we disappear. In other words, the closer we get to our true selves, the closer we get to God, which is to say, the more human we become. The more human we become, the less we distinguish between the

imagined light in us and the darkness we imagine in everyone else. On the contrary, the more human we become, the more we recognize our potential humanity, which is to say the divine breath, in the other, and we cannot help but relate to each other with humility and love. Relationships among humans so constituted are not, ultimately and in principle, premised on utility, but rather on a humble recognition of the divine in ourselves and all other beings and, further, recognition of the shared human yearning for the Absolute, for God.

"If we know where we come from, we know our way," Ramadan writes (2010, 5). "The origin is always the axis and/or refuge of those who believe in meaning," he continues (ibid., 6). For Ramadan, the Muslim tradition clearly reveals our common origin in God. Knowing this, we can easily follow the map he believes God has provided us in nature and through prophets. Yet, he writes, "If life is an accident, a chance event—or a mistake—then origins express nothing more than its brute, unfathomable reality: it is an event of which nothing can be said and from which nothing can be learned" (ibid.). Life, Ramadan affirms, is not an accident.

So how can we determine whether or not what the Muslim tradition, at least according to Ramadan, is correct in characterizing humans the way it does? How do or can we know what our origin is in any sense that could be said to be true? Is life not simply an accident, a chance, meaningless event? Are these simply interesting ideas and opinions, or is there any sense in which we can say that something has been genuinely revealed to us that is, and can be shown to be, true? Presumably, if reason and revelation

are not in tension, reason must be able to tell us. In the next chapter, I consider what Ramadan has to say—and what he says the revealed message of Islam says—about the nature of the relationship between Ultimate Being, God, or the divine, and creation, and especially humans. What does the combination of revelation in creation and nature and revelation through prophets tell us about the nature of Ultimate Being and thus our place and role in Being as such? How does it tell us this, and does this amount to anything more than a human convention, wishful thinking, or an interesting, indefeasible idea? Could it actually be true? And if so, what might recognition of this truth mean for political life?

CHAPTER FIVE
God, the World, and Humanity

> Such is the most beautiful and the most difficult lesson of Islam: you find God only by rediscovering your own nature, and the essence of your nature is the only thing that can free you from its appearance.
>
> **—Tariq Ramadan (2004b, vii)**

What if everything, even your own reflection, were a reminder of God? As we saw in the previous chapter, the Qur'ānic revelation, according to Ramadan, tells us that everything, from the chair you might be sitting on to the feeling of your bare feet running through the grass, the rising and setting of the sun, the smile of a stranger, or a child's kiss, is a reminder—a revelation in itself, a sign, an *āyah* (pl. *āyāt*)—that we are not alone; we live and breathe in a sacred, enchanted world not of our own making, but whose creative and nourishing force—God, or *Allāh*—surrounds and sustains us, and for which we have a natural longing. This world is not enchanted in the Weberian sense of a world believed to be home to any number of supernatural spirits that may be influenced through magic, but enchanted in the sense that it is innately sacred. It is enchanted not by virtue of any distinction between the natural and the supernatural, but by virtue of its very existence. This world and all things in creation thus constitute a continual, undifferentiated revelation, which is necessarily prior to the various messages God is said to have revealed to humans through every prophet, from Adam to Muhammad, and through whatever other forms of inspiration and direct revelation we may imagine. As we saw in the previous chapter, the fact of Being is said to be itself the primary revelation. By all

appearances, it is open to pre-theoretical, phenomenological apprehension—most fundamentally, the pre-theoretical apprehension that Being itself is indivisible and thus, for all intents and purposes, one. This is the principle of radical monotheism, or panentheism, at the core of the revealed message of Islam. This, Ramadan suggests, is both a humbling and empowering revelation and is the wellspring of Muslim conceptions of morality, justice, and ethics. If, as he says, "Humility is the source of ethics" (2004b, 18), the fact of Being itself, and therewith the knowledge that existence can neither explain nor justify itself with reference to nothing but the brute fact of its existence is the source of humility and awe. Perhaps this is why the Prophet Muhammad was reportedly brought to tears and wept for an entire night when it was first revealed to him that "In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for all those endowed with insight" (The Qur'ān 3:190). A later revelation adds "... in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of humankind; in the rain that God sends down from the skies, and the life which He then gives to the earth after it had been lifeless; in the beasts of all kind that he scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between the sky and the earth; [here] indeed are signs for a people who are wise" (The Qur'ān 2:164).

In averring that everything in existence or creation is a reminder of God and a revelation in itself, Ramadan seems to be in good company. "Each creature participates in some way in the likeness of the divine essence," Thomas Aquinas tells us (quoted in Fox

2003, 75).[28] "Divinity is the enfolding and unfolding of everything that is," Nicholas of Cusa teaches (quoted in Fox 1988, 76). "Every creature is a word of God and is a book about God," says Meister Eckhart (quoted in Fox 1988, 35). As the Mystic Chorus in Johann Goethe's *Faust* puts it, "What is destructible is but a parable" (1963, 503). Or, as Alexander Gillies reads it, "All transitory things are symbols of the eternal" (1957, 219). In his poem "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman asks rhetorically, "Why should I wish to see God better than this day?" He answers himself:

> I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and
> each moment then,
> In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own
> face in the glass,
> I find letters from God dropt in the street—and every one is
> sign'd by God's name,
> And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er
> I go,
> Others will punctually come forever and ever. (1938, canto 48, 83)

Yet despite such similar ideas and sentiments, Ramadan maintains that his is a vision of the world as revelation that "is so near and so different at the same time" to the Jewish

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[28] Fox's translation essentially paraphrases Aquinas, although quite nicely. A more literal or perhaps traditional translation reads as follows: "Inasmuch as [God] knows His own essence perfectly, He knows it according to every mode in which it can be known. Now it can be known not only as it is in itself, but as it can be participated in by creatures according to some degree of likeness. But every creature has its own proper species, according to which it participates in some degree in likeness to the divine essence. So far, therefore, as God knows His essence as capable of such imitation by any creature, He knows it as the particular type and idea of that creature; and in like manner as regards other creatures. So it is clear that God understands many particular types of things and these are many ideas" (Aquinas 1947, part I, question 15, reply 2). In likening God to an agent among other agents as he does, however, Aquinas does not seem to be fully in agreement with Ramadan, and traditional Muslim metaphysics. Still, the idea that the divine somehow participates in the essence of creation and, conversely, creation participates in the divine essence, is similar in both.

and Christian visions (2001, 213). It is a vision, he says, in which the very meanings of faith and God are different than those commonly held by Jews and Christians today and, by extension, the majority of people in the modern West in general. As such, it is a vision of the world that imagines the nature of and relationship among the divine, the created world, and humanity in a fundamentally different way than many people may otherwise imagine.

In the world as the revealed message of Islam envisions it, according to Ramadan, nothing is profane or mundane and the idea that someone might rebel against or deny God altogether is logically inconceivable—since this would mean to deny Being itself, to deny one's own self. This is not the same as Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's idea that it is now possible for people in the West to deny the existence of God entirely, to affirm outright and absolute atheism, when just five hundred years ago it was not really possible to even imagine this (2007). It is the fact that the particular idea of God such a conception of reality assumes makes it utterly nonsensical to deny God—or whatever a person prefers to call Ultimate Being or the Transcendent—irrespective of the extent to which a person considers the world somehow enchanted in a Weberian sense.

In such a world, in contrast to the dominant vision of the world in the West as Ramadan sees it, and certainly as Strauss imagines it, people make choices and act within an innately sacred, not consecrated, world—not, as Ramadan says is common in the West, "for" or "against" the sacred (2001, 211). This is because, in such a world, the ordinary is miraculous, the profane is sacred, and we are constantly reminded that life is

wondrous. It is not so because of our efforts or because we say so, but rather, it must be the result of some other, higher, transcendent force; something that transcends the very distinction between subject and object such that we can say, with Meister Eckart, that "isness is God."

That being said, we may wonder how the sacred is constituted. Certainly in practice certain things, times, and places are considered sacred, or at least more sacred, relative to others. Paradoxically, it seems the idea, so foreign to modern minds trained to make clear distinctions between the sacred and the non-sacred, is that those things that better help us become aware of the sacredness of all creation, such as prophetic revelation, prayer, and other rituals, may be considered provisionally, or contextually, more sacred than other aspects of creation, yet only to the extent that they bear the message that in fact everything is sacred. For example, the Prophet Muhammad famously declared that the entire world was made a mosque for him. Yet mosques are considered especially sacred spaces. The question of which place, the world or the mosque, is more sacred, makes no sense in light of Muhammad's claim about the world being a mosque, except to the extent that a mosque as a specific, physical place, somehow contributes more to the remembrance of God. Thus, it is only provisionally more sacred, in a world where in reality nothing is by nature profane. As we saw earlier, in Islam, even sexual intercourse can be considered a prayer, a form of worship, and therefore a sacred act.

This idea suggests that, to the extent that God is nevertheless conceptually distinguishable from creation, existence is God's ecstatic experience as much as the

experience of God through all aspects of creation, including our very selves, is ours. These ideas are developed more fully in the discussion to follow. For now, it is enough to see that everything in such a world is sacred, not because humans say so but, in fact, because nothing ultimately exists as a result of human will and forethought, and yet here we are. Perhaps this is the lesson in the fact that nothing set apart as miraculous, except receipt of the Qur'ānic revelation, was ever attributed to the Prophet Muhammad; who is to say what is miraculous and what is not, what is sacred and what is not, in a world so wondrous yet shrouded in so much mystery?

But what, if anything, can people learn from this that they might legitimately accept as true and which might, as a result, serve to guide them in a way that would have real social and political consequences? Can any of these ideas play any legitimate role in politics? Can any of them help us determine what justice is and whether or not we have real moral duties to each other? For it is surely the case that this vision of the world is either ontologically true or ontologically false, although whether or not it could be proved or disproved is an open question. For that matter, is it really all that different from the visions of the world that Judaism and Christianity have traditionally held and perhaps currently hold? If so, which vision is the correct one? If not, why bother with it? To answer these questions, it would be helpful to consider what people learn from the opposite ideas, and to what extent people actually hold the opposite ideas today:

- that not everything, or perhaps nothing, is a reminder of God, who is perhaps simply not real at all;

- that some things are sacred and others are not—or that perhaps nothing is objectively or inherently sacred at all;
- that our knowledge that we live in a world not of our own making is not total, or that it is possible for us to remake the world, and ourselves, entirely—that we can theoretically master everything through technology and eventually control our destiny fully;
- that rebellion against or denial of God is not only conceivable, but may in fact be the ultimate expression of the realization of human freedom, and thus makes perfect sense—unless we are by nature guilty before God and thus, by some perverse logic, must propitiate God as a result of our very birth;
- and that the world may, after all, be entirely disenchanted and any statement to the contrary may be but wishful thinking, special pleading, or pious nostalgia.

Such a vision of the world, or some variant of it, does appear to be more common among people in the West today than Ramadan's vision, despite similarities between his and those of other thinkers. This is certainly true for people who do not consider themselves particularly religious or spiritual, but also for people who, though they consider themselves religious or spiritual, make clear distinctions between that which is sacred and that which is not. It is clearly the vision of the world that popular, avowed atheist writers like Richard Dawkins (2006), Sam Harris (2005), and Christopher Hitchens (2007)

accept. For them, God amounts to nothing but a pernicious human convention, a lie that allows some people to illegitimately wield all manner of power over others, and therefore something to reject outright.

This is the tragic, if not confused, vision of the world that Ramadan says the collective heritage of the Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian traditions, along with thinking during the Renaissance, Romantic, and Enlightenment periods in Europe, has bequeathed to the modern, or postmodern, West. It has a great affinity with the vision of the world implied by what Matthew Fox calls the fall/redemption model of spirituality "that has dominated theology, Bible studies, seminary and novitiate training, hagiography, psychology for centuries" (1983, 11). Fox is one of the most prominent and controversial contemporary American Christian theologians. A former member of the Dominican order in the Roman Catholic Church, Fox was expelled from the order in 1993 over concerns about his writings. He subsequently became an Episcopal priest. Fox is a great champion of what he calls creation spirituality, which he contrasts directly with what he calls fall/redemption spirituality. The fall/redemption model of spirituality, he writes,

> ... is a dualistic model and a patriarchal one; it begins its theology with sin and original sin, and it generally ends with redemption. Fall/redemption spirituality does not teach believers about the New Creation or creativity, about justice-making and social transformation, or about Eros, play, pleasure, and the God of delight. It fails to teach love of the earth or care for the cosmos, and it is so frightened of passion that it fails to listen to the impassioned pleas of the *anawim*, the little ones, of human history. (1983, 11)

In the fall/redemption model of spirituality, according to Fox, faith is in the intellect and is conceived as thinking with assent, not trust; miracles are explicitly outside intervention and by definition contravene the law of nature; humility means to despise oneself; and humans are conceived first and foremost as guilty sinners. For Fox, the essence of such a model of spirituality and the vision of the world it implies is nicely captured in the Augustinian idea that "The soul makes war with the body," or Thomas à Kempis's statement, "Every time I go into creation, I withdraw from God." This is antithetical to what Fox claims is the much older, creation-centered vision of the world and understanding of spirituality, which imagines, with Eckhart, that "The soul loves the body." These two models of spirituality, Fox rightly asserts,

> are not saying the same thing. Only a mushy and basically sentimental mind would say they are of equal value. We must choose. ... The West has been traveling the fall/redemption path for centuries. We all know it; we all have it ingrained in our souls; we have given it 95 percent of our energies in churches both Catholic and Protestant. And look where it has gotten us. Into sexism, militarism, racism, genocide against native peoples, biocide, consumerist capitalism, and violent communism. (1983, 28)

Yet if the fall/redemption model of spirituality has nevertheless found a home in Christian churches and been the dominant model for much of the history of Christianity—and because of this, one assumes it finds some support in some traditional Christian points of reference—it has always been explicitly rejected by the revealed message of Islam, as Ramadan does well to emphasize.

The vision of the world that the fall/redemption model of spirituality, to use Fox's terminology, implies, Ramadan argues, is wholly at variance with the Qur'ānic vision of

the world, and the corresponding Qur'ānic revelation about the place of humanity in the world and the relationship between God—the ultimate creative and sustaining force of all existence—and humanity. Humans, Ramadan insists, are responsible before they are guilty; there is no such thing as original sin. This, he implies, is immediately understood if, through a right understanding of revelation, one comes to know something of the actual structure of reality, the place of humanity and the rest of creation in it, and the relationship between God, or Ultimate Being, and creation.

If Ramadan and Fox are right about the dominant vision of the world and the relationship between God and humanity in the West, and if Ramadan is right about the difference between this vision and the Qur'ānic one, this suggests that something in this aspect of the Qur'ānic revelation and the Muslim tradition, or what Ramadan calls the Islamic universe of reference, as a whole, may have something concrete, meaningful, and positive to contribute to life in predominantly non-Muslim, Western societies—something that could transform these societies for the better. This is not to suggest that this vision of the world is entirely novel or that it is not analogous to different Jewish, Christian, and other visions of the world, but simply that, in articulating such a vision in a perhaps somewhat novel way, Ramadan is showing how it may be possible to draw on the revealed message of Islam to remind humans of something true that they may have forgotten. Fox is clearly also trying to do this by drawing primarily from various traditions loosely associated with Jesus, but this is simply not my concern here.

Ramadan draws a stark contrast between the Qur'ānic vision of the world, humanity's place in it, and the relationship between God and humanity, and that envisioned, in particular, in Greek mythology, the Hebrew Scriptures, and Christianity as traditionally understood, though perhaps more as different Christian existentialist authors have reflected upon it. He further contrasts the Qur'ānic vision of the world and understanding of the relationship between God and humanity as he sees it with modern Western ideas about freedom and progress and attempts to draw out the moral, ethical, social, and political implications of this. Grasping the nature of at least the essentials of this contrast, which, despite the complex differences and interrelationships among the different traditions he refers to amounts to a single contrast for him, will help us better understand exactly what the practical implications of this are, according to Ramadan. This, in turn, will help us decide in what, if any, way we might want to say people could learn something true that is socially or politically significant from this understanding of the Qur'ānic vision of the world, and so learn something potentially socially or politically transformative from Islam.

It is significant that "we do not find in Muslim points of reference a figure similar to Prometheus," Ramadan writes (2001, 213). Ever since men imagined that the demigod Prometheus, one of the Titans of Greek mythology, stole fire from Zeus, thereby liberating humans from the tyranny of the gods, people in the West, Ramadan argues, have been conditioned to imagine a permanent tension between God and humanity. Such a tension is certainly imagined in the fall/redemption model of spirituality as Fox sees it.

"The figure of the titan," Ramadan writes, "in that it represents the expression illustrating best the rejection of an imposed Divine order and the affirmation of human autonomy and greatness, traverses the ages and fashions the complex and strained relation which exists between God (in the Christian re-reading) and men" in the West (ibid., 206). This has subsequently colored Western ideas about God, humanity, the world, faith, freedom, morality, justice, ethics, progress, choice, rebellion, sin, and mistakes. This is the seed that grew into the Western notion of a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane, mundane, or secular, and the idea that human freedom means liberation from any imposed, divine order. It is worth quoting some of Ramadan's thoughts on this at length:

> What should be noticed is ... the decisive presence, in the texts of Aeschylus and then in the Bible but more clearly in the mentalities beginning from the Renaissance, of a tension between the domains of the sacred and the profane. Such presence had consequences on the expression of Faith. The idea of sin, culpability, suffering, and Salvation by the Saviour are as many references that marked the Christian, and in a broader sense Western, mentality. This is, moreover, also the case with the notion of 'the elected people' of the Jewish tradition. Whether one likes it or not, there are two poles in man which tear him apart to the point of tragic anguish. One should attach oneself to the sacred or free oneself from it. This is Camus's 'All or Nothing'... But ... to say 'God' is still not to attain serenity. On the contrary, the conscience of culpability gives rise to tension and suffering that give meaning to Faith. The Promethean myth finds, on a private plane, an echo in the history of Abraham as reported in the Bible: to live is tantamount to accepting distress, or liberating oneself by means of rejection. The alternative does not offer any other outlet: the Western history of mentalities imposes this reading. (2001, 212-13)

To illustrate what he means by saying that "the Western history of mentalities imposes" the reading that the choice for humans is always and exclusively between rebellion against God or perpetual distress in the face of one's culpability, Ramadan emphasizes a contrast between the Biblical and Qur'ānic accounts of God's demand that Abraham sacrifice his son (Isaac in Genesis, Ishamael, at least on Ramadan's reading, in the Qur'ān[29]). Here, he says, we can clearly see the difference between the Jewish and Christian understandings and the Muslim understanding of God, faith, and the relationship between God and humanity. It further highlights what he claims is a difference in attitudes and ideas about "doubt, rebellion, guilt, and forgiveness," which naturally shapes the respective Western (whether modern or at least post-Enlightenment Jewish or Christian) and Muslim discourses "on faith, trials, and mistakes" (2007, 6).

The full account of this momentous event in Genesis reads as follows:

> [God said to Abraham], "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son."

[29] For an interesting discussion of the debate in Muslim exegetical literature about whether Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac or Ishmael, given that the Qur'ān does not explicitly and unambiguously identify the intended sacrificial victim, see Firestone 1990, especially chapter 16, "Isaac or Ishmael?"

> He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked together.
>
> When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide." ...
>
> The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars in heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore ..." (Genesis 22:1–17)

Ramadan points out that, in this account, Abraham responds elliptically to his son's direct question about the animal to be sacrificed, never telling him the full truth, at least as he would presumably have understood it at the time.[30] Ramadan stresses that here, Abraham "*alone* answers God's call" (2007, 6, original emphasis). He further claims that "This tragic solitude of the human being facing the divine underlies the history of Western thought from Greek tragedy (with the central figure of the rebel Prometheus facing the Olypian gods) to existentialist and modern Christian interpretations as exemplified in the works of Søren Kierkegaard" (ibid., 6). Whether he is entirely correct in saying this or

[30] But see my discussion of Maimonides's interpretation of this account below.

not remains to be considered. For now, it is important to see how profoundly different he says the Qur'ānic account is, and what he says the consequences of this are for people who accept one or the other account as the authoritative revelation or emblematic of the dominant paradigm to be accepted or rejected.

> The Qur'ān recounts much the same story, but in the following way:
>
> "O my Lord! Grant me a righteous (son)!" [Abraham said] So We [God] gave him the good news of a boy ready to suffer and forbear. Then, when (the son) reached (the age of) (serious) work with him [Abraham], he said: "O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice: Now see what is thy view!" (The son) said: "O my father! Do as thou art commanded: thou will find me, if Allāh so wills, one practicing Patience and Constancy!" So when they had both submitted their wills (to Allāh), and he had laid him prostrate on his forehead (for sacrifice), We called out to him "O Abraham! Thou hast already fulfilled the vision!"—thus indeed do We reward those who do right. For this was obviously a trial—And We ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice [traditionally, a ram]: And We left (this blessing) for him among generations (to come) in later times: "Peace and salutation to Abraham!" (37:100-109)

Apart from its relative brevity and lack of specificity about the location for the intended sacrifice and the details about the preparations for the sacrifice, Ramadan draws our attention to two main differences he, at least, sees between this and the Genesis account. First is the fact that, in the Qur'ānic account but not, apparently, in the Genesis account, Abraham tells his son outright what he has been commanded to do. Indeed, it seems in the Genesis account, three days pass before his son even puts the question to him. Second is that, in the Qur'ānic account but not, apparently, in the Genesis account, Abraham's son comforts him and confirms his father's faith by pledging to willingly submit to the

sacrifice, concurring with his father that it is truly a command from God. In the Qur'ān, Ramadan writes,

> the story of Abraham is reported in terms which, at the onset, give a particular flavour to the rapport between man and the Divine order. Certainly, there is the trial of having to sacrifice the most beloved being, his son, in order to give witness of his Faith. But the tragic experience, solitude, and allusive response are absent here. Abraham speaks to his son who, having the same Faith, reassures his father, submits himself with the same kind of submission and joins his witness of Faith to that of his father.
> ...
>
> ... There is no solitude, no figure of style and no struggle between the two loves, 'both have submitted'; the son's patience echoes the intimate fidelity of the father. The trial of faith is, far from tragic tension, one of patience and acceptance. If, on the other hand, everyone has to give an account of his actions, alone [as Ramadan imagines is implied in the Biblical account]; [in the Qur'ānic account] Faith is lived with the other, whose love and fraternity accompany one, appease one's heart and vivify one's conviction. Shared Faith, the brotherhood of Faith—which is the foundation of Islam—is opposed to any idea of tragic consciousness. (2001, 212-13)

The other, with whom the revealed message of Islam invites us to live our faith, as Ramadan puts it, can be extended to include all of creation and ourselves. This vast other, which paradoxically includes ourselves, is then simultaneously conceived as distinct from that transcendent or unifying creative and sustaining force we can call God, and part of a continual, undifferentiated revelation that issues from this force or principle and is thus animated or otherwise called into being by it. This appears to be wholly at odds with any dualistic reading of the Genesis account of the sacrifice of Abraham's son, such as Kierkegaard's.

Yet while Ramadan's reading of the Genesis account of the sacrifice is certainly consistent with Kierkegaard's and similar readings, and in this sense is quite different from the Qur'ānic account, it is by no means the only plausible reading. To begin with, at least one group of Midrash legends has it that Isaac made no protest when learning about the command that his father sacrifice him to God (Genesis Rabbah 56:11, cited in the *New Encyclopedia of Judaism* 2002, 47), which is largely consistent with the Qur'ānic account. From this alone, we can see that at least one Jewish legend about this momentous event can easily be understood in the same way as Ramadan understands the Qur'ānic account. Thus, it seems Ramadan cannot maintain that the difference between the Biblical and Qur'ānic accounts of this specific story is necessarily emblematic of any intrinsic, fundamental contrast between the Muslim and traditional Jewish and later traditional Christian understandings of revelation, faith, and the relationship between humanity and God—or that such a fundamental contrast even exists traditionally. In fact, we can see from this some of the problems that arise when we insist on labeling various ideas or positions "Jewish," "Christian," or "Muslim." The question should not be: What is the Jewish or Christian or Muslim understanding of the relationship between humanity and God and of human faith in God, and how are they different from each other? The question needs to be: What *is* the nature of the relationship between humanity and God, or simply Ultimate Being? Is it one of tragic solitude or tragic consciousness or not? In fact, this is what Ramadan wants to do. He does not argue that the Qur'ān or the entirety of what he calls the Islamic universe of reference reveals anything entirely novel,

something that bears emphasizing. Muslims can perhaps make a great contribution to society, he told me in our first interview, not necessarily by "coming with something which is completely new," but perhaps by reminding people of "something which is old but neglected, old but forgotten, or even something which is new in the way you deal with, for example, this perception that there are values and there are ends that are important when it comes to understand that human beings are responsible before being guilty." This brings us back to the relationship between humans and God. Does my responsibility to God override my responsibility to my son? And if I disobey God's command to put my duty to him above my duty to my son, am I not guilty before God? Is rejecting God not the only way to be truly free, albeit at the possible risk of damnation? These are vexing questions in the Western tradition, according to Ramadan, but not in the Muslim tradition. In the Muslim tradition, he argues, they are but false dichotomies; to be faithful is precisely to live up to one's responsibilities in this world.

Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) offers one of the more interesting traditional alternatives to Ramadan's perhaps more modern reading of the Genesis account of the sacrifice. Maimonides's reading is essentially an inversion of Ramadan's, or else he offers a macroscopic sort of reading. He argues that the story of the trial of Abraham is not actually the account of a genuine trial at all, at least of either Abraham or his son. Rather, the story itself and the event it describes are signs from God—revelations—for Abraham's people. The Genesis account, as Maimonides has it, assumes God's perfect knowledge of Abraham's faith, and by implication his son's faith, and thus imagines that

both Abraham and Isaac and the apparent trial they must endure are collectively a revelation from God to Abraham's people, not a revelation of anything new from God to Abraham or his son and not a trial of Abraham or his son at all. In his *Guide of the Perplexed*, he writes,

> the notion of a *trial* consists as it were in a certain act being done, the purpose being not the accomplishment of that particular act, but the latter's being a model to be imitated and followed. Thus the interpretation of its dictum—*To know whether ye do love*—is not: in order that God should know that, for He already knew it; but the meaning resembles that of its dictum—*To know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you*—the meaning of which is: in order that the religious communities should know. In the same manner [Scripture] says: If a man claiming prophecy arise and if you see his suggestions tend to make one believe in the truth of his claim, know that God wished to make known hereby to the religious communities the extent of your certitude with regard to His Law, may he be exalted, and your apprehension of its true reality; and also to make known that you do not let yourselves be deceived by the deceptions of a deceiver and that your faith in God cannot be disturbed. (1963, 498, volume III, chapter 24, original emphasis)

Thus, whereas for Ramadan the focus is on the difference between the Biblical and the Qurʾānic accounts to the extent that they each appear to tell a different story of a personal trial of faith, Maimonides rejects the idea that the Biblical account is the account of a personal trial at all. Rather, for him it is a sign from God, revealing to Abraham's people that Abraham was truly faithful to God and that he was indeed one of God's prophets. Nevertheless, in at least one sense, there remains a strong affinity between the implications that can be drawn from Ramadan and Maimonides's respective understandings of this event. For both, the actions of others constitute an aspect of God's

revelation to humanity, and thus, it would seem, both accept that God speaks to people not only though prophets, but through creation.

Despite alternative readings of the Genesis account of the sacrifice of Abraham's son, Ramadan's portrayal of the dominant modern Western understanding of the tense and tragically solitary nature of the relationship between humanity and any imagined God, revelation, and faith, does seem to be accurate, and it is certainly consistent with his reading of the Genesis account of the sacrifice—which is essentially Kierkegaard's. I suspect he is also right in arguing that Christian existentialist interpretations of this story have played a pivotal role in galvanizing people in the West to this particular understanding of the nature of God, revelation, faith, and the relationship between humanity and God, along with the fall/redemption model of spirituality as Fox describes it.

It is common in the West today to imagine that nature is simply a resource, albeit an instrumentally valuable one; it is not sacred in any meaningful sense. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr rightly points out, "Only if life is *really* sacred can one talk of the sacredness of life in anything more than a journalistic sense" (1996, 6, original emphasis). This is clearly, logically true, making the following statement of his equally true: "In a world in which the very category of 'sacredness' as applied to nature is meaningless, to speak of the sacredness of life is little more than sentimental thinking or hypocrisy" (ibid.). In such a world, humans, like all other aspects of existence, reveal themselves to us as nothing but resources, as Heidegger says; they do not themselves, in

their very existence, immediately reveal anything else to human consciousness, owing to the peculiar understanding of God that Enlightenment thinkers accepted and subsequently rejected and that has subsequently been adopted as the paradigmatic conception of God in the West. This is the theistic idea—and I realize this is a gross oversimplification—that God is an imagined or posited being that exists apart from the rest of creation, demanding certain things of humans that may or may not be consistent with human ideas of right and wrong or rationality, revealing morsels of knowledge through human prophets and revealed texts, and, from a Christian perspective, taking human form in the person of Jesus Christ at a specific point in history and subsequently submitting to human (in)justice in propitiation for the original sin committed by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, which continually redounds to all humans. This is the God that the fall/redemption model of spirituality imagines, as Fox understands it. This is a God that exists utterly apart from creation or existence and who is only knowable through faith that is ultimately decided in the tragic solitude Ramadan describes and that Kierkegaard seems to imagine is natural, though it is certainly celebrated in communion with others. How different is Ramadan's understanding of revelation and, in turn, the nature of the relationship between humanity and God in the context of creation as we know and experience it.

[31]Ramadan uses the concepts of the proprietor, or owner, and the gerent, or manager, to describe the relationship between humanity and God (*rabbānīah*), and the corresponding responsibilities humans have with respect to each other and the whole of creation. "The existence of the One, Creator God is the dogma of Islam," he writes. "The principle deriving from this is that the whole universe belongs to God Who is, by essence, the Owner" (2001, 18). As such, the whole of creation is sacred, every aspect of which is a reminder of God. Because the relationship between humans and God in Islam is not mediated through an institutional Church, Ramadan says, no part of creation is considered profane or otherwise not sacred. "Western history," by contrast, he writes, "is marked by the way in which it represents the rapport with God through the institutionalisation of its terrestrial Church" (ibid., 88). The Church abused its power, he contends, and thus engendered a backlash that fundamentally altered the relationship between humans and God in the West. "The Church ... acted as if it retained not only gerency but also property of the world and reality," he writes (ibid.). This eventually precipitated a process of secularization whereby the gerents attempted to reclaim their rights "after being long suppressed by the authority of the Church" (ibid., 89). In the process of opposing the Church, however, which had usurped God's proprietorship of creation, people abandoned God altogether.

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[31] The following two paragraphs originally appeared in a slightly different form in my unpublished undergraduate thesis, *A World Divided By God: Postmodernity and the Encounter Between the West and Islam in the Political Theologies of Sayyid Qutb and Tariq Ramadan.*

"The democratic principle" in terms of social organization, according to Ramadan, is a consequence of this process of secularization in response to the abuses of the Church in the West. Democracy, he argues, "is founded on the idea that nothing should be imposed upon men except that which men decide amongst themselves," and therefore God is left out. Liberty thus conceived is "formed against authority" and aims to free the gerent absolutely and, in the process, make him the proprietor. "When Muslim theologians oppose democracy," he continues, they are opposing this philosophy that secular liberal democracy implies (ibid.). For Muslims, the authority of God does not suppress, but rather "awakens and stimulates" (ibid.), according to Ramadan. This is because, in Islam, God, the Proprietor, is not present in a domineering, institutional Church, but rather creation itself and in specific instances of prophetic revelation. Thus the revealed message of Islam teaches that humans in fact enjoy a more intimate, permanent, and rational relationship with the divine than that typically imagined in Western Christianity and certainly the modern West. Thus, abandoning God by denying the reality of his proprietorship of creation is unthinkable in Islamic society. "The process which liberated the gerent of all tutelage in Western history," Ramadan continues, "does not have its counterpart in the history of Islamic civilization" (ibid., 90). On the contrary, the authority of God in the Islamic tradition is not only conceived of as rational, but accepted as permanent. In the Islamic tradition, human liberty, according to Ramadan, is not upheld by a rebellion against God, as he claims it is in the West, but

rather the realization of humanity's obligations before God and the freedom that derives from submission to Ultimate Being.

Ramadan, then, presents a clear alternative. If this is similar to earlier traditional Jewish and Christian understandings, as some will say, or Fox's Christian-oriented creation spirituality, this does not mean there is nothing to be gained from a deeper appreciation of the revealed message of Islam as Ramadan sees it. After all, the Qur'ān never claims to reveal anything wholly novel. Rather, as Ramadan told me in our first interview, the idea is not that Muslims necessarily seek to contribute anything that is entirely new, but rather to "come with something which is old but neglected, old but forgotten." Fox, for example, offers an introduction to what he calls creation spirituality that describes the nature of revelation and the relationship between humanity and God in a remarkably similar way.

In his book *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality*, Fox writes that, "what religion must let go of in the West is an exclusively fall/redemption model of spirituality" (1983, 11), which, as discussed above, he says has been the dominant religious paradigm in the West for several centuries. Just as Fox is trying to articulate an alternative paradigm from within the Christian tradition as he understands it, the revealed message of Islam, Ramadan would say, clearly offers an alternative paradigm—and has never offered anything but a single, alternative paradigm. While there appears to be a great affinity between Fox's Christian creation spirituality and Ramadan's understanding of Islam, there are reasons I suggest people in the West would do well to consider

Ramadan's ideas by themselves. My reason is that there are problems I see in Fox's account. The main one, as I see it, is his retention of the language of traditional fall/redemption Christianity, and therefore his attempts to retain concepts like original sin, the incarnation, and Christ (whether historical or cosmic). As a result, I argue that the clarity of Fox's arguments suffers and thus the political and social impact of his ideas is greatly diminished. Rejecting the ideas of original sin and the incarnation outright, but at the same time recognizing the historical Jesus as a prophet, Ramadan, reading the revealed message of Islam, presents an alternative paradigm that is remarkably similar to Fox's, but without the problematic language and theological contortions Fox must submit to.

Although Fox does not outright reject the doctrine of the incarnation of God in Jesus, as Ramadan does, he reads it in a way that Ramadan would likely have little trouble accepting: "The doctrine of the Incarnation," Fox writes, "is an invitation to all believers to love the earth, cherish it, find the divine in it" (ibid., 15). While this may strike some readers as pantheism, Fox maintains that his position, while not theistic, is not pantheistic either. Rather, he calls it panentheistic, implying the mutual penetration of God and the universe. Again, this is not far from Ramadan's position, and is indeed perfectly consistent with the thinking of classical Muslim scholars like Ibn Al-ᶜArabī, as briefly mentioned earlier. If this were it, there would be little problem. In his discussion of the concept of the Cosmic Christ, however, Fox maintains that, "A theology of the Cosmic Christ must be grounded in the historical Jesus" (1988, 79). The problem with

this is that Fox himself says that the Cosmic Christ, was, for example, "in Israel and in the Hebrew Bible principally as cosmic wisdom" (ibid., 83)—at a time prior to the earthly existence of the historical Jesus. Is he saying that any theology of a Cosmic Christ that existed at that time was not or was at best poorly grounded? I suspect not, since he later writes: "The Cosmic Christ is the *divine* pattern that connects in the person of Jesus Christ (but by no means is limited to that person)" (ibid., 135, original emphasis). But if the Cosmic Christ is "by no means" limited to the historical Jesus, is it not simply "the *divine* pattern that connects?" Indeed, it seems this is precisely what Fox is saying, but then the language of Christ complicates things unnecessarily. It certainly prevents anyone who denies, for whatever reason, the historicity of Jesus, from seeing whatever truth there may be in what he is saying.

For Ramadan, the very fact that people call on God is sufficient to prove that God is real—although not necessarily in the usual sense of a single higher being or power existing wholly and distinctly apart from the rest of creation. In fact, he implies that calling on God constitutes part of revelation, in the connection between humans and the divine that it manifests. He is well aware, however, that a rationalist or atheist would consider such a supposed proof of God simply "as confirmation of what he had always believed: 'God is the refuge of the destitute, the hope of the hopeless, a consolation, a reassuring invention!'" (2004b, viii). Yet, he insists, this is not at all what it means to call on God. Just because a person may be consoled in calling on God, does not mean that God is simply a reassuring, human invention to console us. "To call on God is not to

console oneself," he writes, "it is to rediscover the condition God originally wanted for us—the spark of humility, the awareness of fragility" (ibid.). He continues:

> To be with God is to know how to keep this state: a humble acceptance of your fragility, a comprehension of your dependence—going back to the beginning. In fact, the temptation to pride consists in thinking that man can cut himself off from his nature and attain total intellectual autonomy to the point where he can take on his own suffering, deliberately and alone. Pride is to affirm outward independence by maintaining the illusion of liberty at the heart of one's being. Humility is to rediscover the breath of the primordial need of Him at the heart of our being, in order to live in total outward independence. (Ibid.)

The quest for meaning, Ramadan attempts to show us, according to the Qur'ān, is inscribed on every human's heart. It is so inscribed by virtue of the humility that naturally comes from the awareness of diversity and our self-insufficiency. The quest for meaning calls us back to our true selves, then, which is to say, God.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger asks, "Is there in Dasein an understanding state-of-mind in which Dasein has been disclosed to itself in some distinctive way?" (1962, 226, H. 182). For all intents and purposes, Dasein refers to humanity in itself. "If the existential analytic of Dasein is to retain clarity in principle as to its function in fundamental ontology," he continues,

> then in order to master its provisional task of exhibiting Dasein's Being, it must seek for one of the *most far-reaching* and *most primordial* possibilities of disclosure—one that lies in Dasein itself. The way of disclosure in which Dasein brings itself before itself must be such that in it Dasein becomes accessible as *simplified* in a certain manner. With what is thus disclosed, the structural totality of the Being we seek must then come to light in an elemental way." (Ibid., original emphasis)

In other words, how does humanity reveal itself to humanity in the most far-reaching and most primordial sense? Although rather abstruse, this is a critical question. This is because, if we are to fully understand what it means to be human without relying on convention, and thus identify a truly pre-conventional basis for human convention, we must identify that which is innately human that is capable of revealing what it means to be human to humans themselves. At first, Heidegger says, this will reveal humanity, or Dasein, in a simplified manner. From this, however, we may derive what he calls the structural totality of humanity, and subsequently Being itself.

That which is innately human and serves to reveal Dasein, or man, to itself, according to Heidegger, is the phenomenon of anxiety. The anxiety through which Heidegger argues humanity is revealed to itself is analogous to the innate longing for the transcendent Ramadan says the Muslim tradition teaches all humans have. God does not leave us to wander alone in darkness, however, according to Ramadan. Rather, God reveals himself to us in two distinct, complementary ways. First, through the created universe, which constantly serves as a reminder of a mystery that is completely beyond us. Second, through specific instances of revelation where God speaks to us more directly so as to guide our understanding of the signs he has set before us in creation. Thus, we are always connected to God, and to each other—but we can only know this if we recognize God's signs; as the Qurʾān explicitly states at least twice, creation is but a sign for "men of understanding" (3:190) and "seekers after truth" (12:7). How we can do this will occupy us in the next two chapters, as we consider what justice and morality are, and

how we can know what the right thing to do is amidst so much human moral and ethical diversity. As we shall see, this diversity, which appears to make the problem of deciding what to do and what not to do so intractable, is in fact part of revelation itself, for Ramadan. Paradoxically, it is what ultimately leads us back to truth, and justifies the philosophic quest for truth.

PART THREE

Politics

CHAPTER SIX
Justice and Morality

> When there is no eternity, no eternal perspective, there are left no absolutes or abiding principles by which to evaluate human actions and values.
>
> **—Abid Ullah Jan (2007, 324)**

According to Ramadan, "There exists an essential, fine link in Islam between Faith and the exactness of justice: God willed that human beings do not share the same Faith; that is to say that dialogue is incumbent upon them in order to make them respect a justice from which all humanity can benefit" (2001, 236). But what is this "justice from which all humanity can benefit?" What does it have to do with dialogue? Ramadan relates the advice of the Prophet Muhammad on the question of morality:

> To a Companion who asked him what is "the good," the Prophet (peace be upon him) responded: "You have come to enquire about the good?" "Yes," answered Wasiba. "Consult your heart," said the Prophet, "for the good is that which appeases your soul and calms your heart. Sin is that which troubles you inwardly and causes embarrassment and vexation in your heart, even if people provide you with all possible juridical justification." (Ibid., 236-37)

On the surface, it may seem that Muhammad is not concerned with whether or not any embarrassment a person may feel is socially conditioned and therefore potentially not in fact evidence of sin. Note, however, that he emphasizes embarrassment and vexation in a person's heart specifically. He is clearly not talking about outward embarrassment, like the kind of embarrassment many academics feel at expressing, or even the prospect of

expressing, any sense of religiosity in today's Western and all too secular universities. The idea seems to be that a healthy soul will immediately recognize that which is foreign to it, that which is not consistent with the full realization of the divine in it, and thus reject it as sin. Indeed, the Qur'ān, and the broader Muslim tradition generally, consistently imply that the Good, the right path, and the truth are obvious; sooner or later the light of truth will overpower falsehood, and that it is enough to search our hearts for the imprint of God to see this. This, in turn, presumes that one is attuned to his or her *fiṭrah*, one's true, divine, essential nature.

The Qur'ān, Ramadan emphasizes, does not purport to reveal anything entirely novel, although it certainly presents some things in a new way. "Islam and its message," he writes, "came to confirm the substance of a treaty that human conscience had already independently formulated" (2007, 22). This is an allusion to the original, pre-creation bond forged in human nature, or *al-fiṭrah*, between God and humans. As discussed above, this is the putative source of the natural human longing for the divine and the basis for the argument that humans are predisposed to recognize the divine within them, provided they exert the required effort. Searching one's heart should be enough to know God. This is not the same as the post-creation covenants said to have been agreed between God and humans in the Jewish and Christian traditions. In Islam, it is not a question of humans being created, existing, disobeying God, forever after being guilty by nature (but not necessarily in their essence, as per Augustine), and then entering into a series of covenants with God in the hope of renewing and solidifying their relationship to God and

securing his trust or otherwise being somehow assured of his grace. Rather, it is a question of recognizing the divine breath in our selves and listening to our hearts such that we thereby hear the sweet whisperings of Ultimate Being and come closer to our true being. As the Prophet Muhammad is sometimes reported as saying, "Whoso knows himself, knows his Lord."[32] The Qurʾān, for its part, tells us that God is nearer to man "than his jugular vein" (50:16).

To the extent that we do not recognize or honor the divine breath in us, and in others, however, we are lost—we are less than human and remain ignorant of what justice truly is and what it requires of us. We are thus incapable of knowing all things ourselves, as Hesiod says is best. But what if our souls are unhealthy or misguided? Blinded by material progress, we may well remain ignorant of our ignorance itself. Yet, as we saw in Chapter Two, Heidegger points out that, just because "technological-scientific rationalization" has achieved such immense, material results, does not prove that this exhausts the potential for truth—that this is all we can know. "[I]s the manifest character of what *is* exhausted by what is demonstrable?" he asks. "Does not the insistence on what is demonstrable block the way to what is?" (2008, 448). Clearly, every revelation considered divine, by this very fact, answers first no—"the manifest character of what *is*" is *not* "exhausted by what is demonstrable"—then yes—"the insistence on what is demonstrable" *does* "block the way to what is," which is to say the ultimate truth.

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[32] Ibn al-ʿArabī (1980, 272), among other mostly Sufi thinkers, attributes this saying to the Prophet Muhammad, although it is not found in any of the six traditional Sunni collections of *ṣaḥīh*, or authentic, *ahadīth* (reports of the words of the Prophet Muhammad).

Modern liberal thought answers first yes, then no, insisting that nothing *is* that is not demonstrable, therewith precluding, without demonstrable ground, the possibility of any revelation that might show us what actually *is* or could or should be. This, of course, leaves us with nothing but utility to rely on, inverting David Hume's dictum in the process; such that what *is* ought to be, since there is no basis for arguing that it should be otherwise as long as utility is served.

Mercifully, Ramadan says, we are not alone; we can and must aspire to more than the maximization of our individual power and utility. God, through the pen, so the Qurʾān tells us, "taught man that which he knew not" (96:5)—or at least attempted to do so. Thus, there is hope that we will not simply become like Hesiod's useless wights, who neither know all things themselves, nor lay to heart another's wisdom. But how are we to listen, when so many people make so many apparently incompatible, irreconcilable claims about God, truth, justice, morality, and ethics? How do I know that something someone says or something I read is truly the word of God and not simply an attempt to subdue me and enslave me to yet another human, all too human, convention? I can search my heart, as the Prophet Muhammad advises, but what if my heart needs direction, as prophetic revelation suggests, or worse, has been led astray? How would I even know if my heart were led astray? Whose guidance should I accept? Should I take Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Nietzsche, or Richard Dawkins as my moral model or my spiritual guide? What is justice, after all? It seems there is something standing in our way. For Heidegger, that something is the essence of technology. This bears some discussion, since it seems

this is precisely what we must overcome if we are to address the question of justice and morality adequately.

As already mentioned, Heidegger argues that, deluded by the promise that humans will inevitably come to master everything through modern science and technology, people are apt to see everything, including other humans, as nothing but standing reserve. Technology no longer simply refers to craft, according to Heidegger, but in fact constitutes a sort of mental disease that alienates us from each other and, ultimately, all of creation. "The essential unfolding of technology," he writes, "threatens revealing, threatens it with the possibility that all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that everything will present itself only in the unconcealment of standing-reserve" (339). In other words, technology, in Heidegger's sense, threatens to blind and deafen us to any revelation that might show us or teach us that everything is not simply standing reserve, that people, for example, are not simply resources to be exploited, that there is a higher reason than utility for us to do and not do certain things or for us to relate to each other in particular ways or with a particular attitude. We need to learn how to listen to truth again, to be able to distinguish it from falsehood. But how? Where do we start?

Ramadan implies that we can only know justice through dialogue; that we can only know ourselves through others. This is a gigantic clue to what he says justice and morality are, what the relationship between justice and ethics is, and consequently, what the relationship between truth and politics is, or at least should be. It also suggests how, for him, we may come to know these things, how they may finally reveal themselves to

us. But so far it is only a clue. The question remains: what is justice? As we have seen, Ramadan insists that there is no such thing as Islamic justice and non-Islamic justice; justice is simply justice. So what, according to him, is it? How can we know? How can we reconcile the idea of a single notion of morality or justice with the fact of a multiplicity of ethical voices and positions that Ramadan says is divinely mandated and whose continued existence appears necessary for us to engage in that dialogue that Ramadan says is necessary to know justice? What are the political implications of such an argument? In other words, what is, can be, or should be, the relationship between, on one hand, revealed truth about morality and justice, and, on the other hand, human convention, which is to say different, potentially fallible human ideas about how or whether or not to honor any particular understanding of justice in practice and the way such ideas are expressed in practice? To put it more abstractly, what is the proper relationship between ontology—what is ultimately real and true—and epistemology—how and what we think we know?

The next two chapters are devoted to answering these questions, at least from Ramadan's perspective. This will lead to my final statement in this text about what Ramadan says we—working with his understanding of who we are—can learn from the revealed message of Islam concerning the relationship between truth and politics, or revealed truth and human convention, which itself can be shown to be true. I argue that this reading of Islam gives us a radical, compelling, and philosophically coherent argument for why we should treat others the way we would like to be treated and for how

we should understand and deal with human diversity. Even if this argument is not absolutely unique to Islam, I argue, it nonetheless represents something that we can learn from Islam. Indeed, as mentioned previously, neither the Qur'ān nor the Prophet Muhammad ever claims to reveal anything entirely novel—just something potentially forgotten.

For Plato, justice is nothing more or less than giving to, or asking of, each person or thing only what it is fitted for. This is the original meaning of the English word righteous, meaning right condition or state. This is probably the best and certainly the most concise definition of justice we have. But it presupposes a particular ontology, and therewith a particular understanding of the human being as well as all other beings. Indeed, only if we know what a human being is can we know what any human being is fitted for. For example, if human beings are not essentially different from rocks and other material resources, as English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes has it, then perhaps there is no reason for them to relate to each other as more than mere resources, as more than means to their own individual, private ends. That is to say, instrumentally, even if relatively peaceably under a social contract.[33] Of course, there are emotional and sentimental reasons, but these are notoriously unreliable and cannot provide a philosophically sound basis on which to confront someone who is not otherwise moved by them. For example, I can try to convince someone to stop torturing dogs by appealing to his sense of compassion; by pointing out that it clearly causes great suffering; by

[33] I suggest below that one lesson of Islam, from Ramadan's reading, is that we are not even justified in relating to rocks purely instrumentally, but much needs to be explained before we get to this.

threatening to forcibly restrain him, whether by law or not; or by irritating him with as many emotional appeals as I can. I may even succeed in getting him to stop, but I will not have thereby proven that torturing dogs is wrong. If a majority of people decides that torturing dogs is acceptable, I may have nothing meaningful to say to them and will probably not be able to do much to stop the ensuing canine suffering. Peter Carruthers, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Maryland, for instance, suggests that the only reason we ought not to "treat animals as we please" may be the existence of "indirect duties towards animals arising out of the legitimate concerns of animal lovers" (1992, 1–2). Yet he fails to explain what legitimates these concerns, besides some sympathetic peculiarity in the mind of the individual animal lover.[34] As a result, it seems the only duties we have to each other, let alone dogs, are not real duties after all—they are simply whatever responsibilities we imagine we have at any given time and in any given context in response to emotion and self-interested rationalization. This is most definitely to see through the proverbial glass darkly. But must we, as the Apostle Paul suggests, wait to polish it even one little bit? Is this the best we can do, or the most we are allowed?

As we have already seen, the key contribution Ramadan thinks the revealed message of Islam can make to any society is its particular understanding of the nature of the human being—innocent, not guilty, and called to be humble and responsible, which is to say, righteous. Indeed, according to him, consistent with traditional Muslim teaching,

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[34] These lines originally appear in my unpublished essay, "Can they *suffer*? Animal Rights and the Moral Claims of Suffering."

nothing is originally guilty, and everything in creation is born in *fiṭrah*, which is to say born *muslim* in that it submits, of logical necessity, to Ultimate Being. Where the idea of humans being originally guilty or sinful before God holds or once was held only to be rejected through outright atheism, Ramadan, echoing Fox, as we saw above, finds a misplaced concern with propitiating a particular theistically understood God, or else denying God altogether, that colors all human actions. This, he argues, again echoing Fox, perverts the true nature of the relationship between humans and Ultimate Being, which translates into a palpable tension between a desire to honor God's commands in atonement for one's imagined original sin and the desire to emancipate oneself entirely by denying God which, if Ramadan is correct about the true structure of ultimate reality, is nothing but to deny your true self. Specifically, Ramadan argues, humans, on his particular understanding of what it means to be human, are called to be just, and to work for justice in partnership with others, not to do anything specifically with a view to propitiating God in the hope of forgiveness for any kind of original sin.

This presumes a particular idea of what it means to be just, to be moral. It presumes that, despite all manner of diversity among humans, there is something that is true that can be known and that is universal—the principle of justice. But Ramadan does not start from nothing. If humans are originally innocent and called by nature to be both humble and responsible, then to relate to other humans as though they are innately guilty or as though they are not called to be responsible would be quite unfitting; that is to say, following Plato, unjust. Meanwhile, to think of oneself as originally guilty, to be proud,

to attempt to rebel against that before which one imagines he or she is guilty, or to deny any duty to others, would be equally unfitting. This tells us that, at the very least, we should not relate to each other as mere resources. As Kant and Scheler might say, the moral tenor of our actions must not only be at the highest possible pitch—something that, as we saw in Chapter Two, can be disguised and conditioned through education, according to Scheler—but must resonate with the proper timbre, which is not, in the end, possible to fake, although it requires a good, sensitive ear to detect.

Humans, then, are called to be humble and responsible, to live with each other respectfully and patiently. As for rocks, they are certainly not humans, and so we may do things to rocks we should not do to humans. This does not mean that we may treat them purely instrumentally, however. Ramadan explicitly argues that all living creatures have moral claims on humans, and that humans have corresponding moral duties to all living creatures by virtue of humans being God's vice-regents on earth (*khalifat Allāh*, pl. *khulafa*). More than that, however, the implication of what he says is that in fact all aspects of creation have moral claims on humans—including rocks. Rocks, of course, have but the most general, generic, and in fact only metaphorical moral claim on humans, since they are not living creatures. Rather, they have a claim as part of creation: humans do not own any part of creation, including rocks, and thus must always treat all aspects of creation with care and respect as managers would treat anything entrusted to their management by its owner.

As we saw earlier for Ramadan, humans are the gerents or managers who have been entrusted with God's creation. Thus, the claim of rocks against humans is not so much a claim of rocks as such, but rather the claim of the divine, of Ultimate Being, against humans as individual beings and as part of Ultimate Being itself. Animals, meanwhile, have the same claim, and also, by virtue of being living creatures, somewhat different and more complex claims, against humans, and humans have corresponding duties to them. Chief among these is the duty of humans to treat animals with respect and to take steps to alleviate an animal's suffering when slaughtering it for food. At the same time, humans must remember that meat, like all other food that nourishes their bodies, is meant to sustain them not so that they can pursue their own private ends exclusively, but so that they can play an active role in the self-revealing of Ultimate Being—so that they can know themselves, in humility and justice, and thereby know God. Indeed, Ramadan devotes a large section of his book *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* to a discussion of animal welfare. Here, he relates and expounds on the words of the Prophet Muhammad:

> As a man had immobilized his beast and was sharpening his knife in front of it, the Prophet intervened to say: 'Do you want to make it die twice? Why didn't you sharpen your knife [away from the animal's view] before immobilizing it?' Muhammad had asked everyone to do their best to master their range of skills: for a man whose task was to slaughter animals, this clearly consisted of respecting the lives of the animals, their food, their dignity as living beings, and sacrificing them only for his needs, while sparing them unnecessary suffering. ...The Prophet had threatened: 'He who kills a sparrow or any bigger animal without right will have to account for it to God on Judgment Day.' The Prophet thus

> taught that the animal's right to be respected, to be spared suffering and given the food it needed, to be well treated, was not negotiable. It was part of human beings' duties and was thus to be understood as one of the conditions of spiritual elevation. (2009b, 237)

So justice, it seems, for Ramadan, is not so much determined by what, specifically, is given to or asked of someone or something, or who or what is doing the giving or asking, but by the attitude, or, to extend the musical metaphor, the tenor and timbre with which something is given, asked, or received. Thus, rendering charity out of a sense of humility, love, or moral duty is true justice, while giving something to someone only because you expect a greater return, while perhaps benefiting the recipient, is not by itself truly just. In turn, one must be truly just, and not simply apparently just, if one is to live up to his or her responsibilities as a human, and so be truly and fully human. To fail to be truly just is to fail to be fully human. Note, however, that the justice or injustice of a person's actions is determined by his or her intention to be just, not necessarily the outcome alone. Since what leads a person to accept the responsibility of being just is the humility that comes from knowing that humans are neither self-sufficient nor perfect, failure to remain absolutely consistent in one's attitude and intention may be consistent with justice. Thus, mistakes, variances, and entirely different interpretations of what is consistent with justice at any given time and in any given context are allowed and to be expected—although not necessarily always accepted. Justice, then, may not just be in the attitude you have, but the attitude you intend or hope to have, with the recognition that others will have the same challenges as you. The key is whether or not people can

work together to discover what is truly just, and not simply work out a temporary consensus based on the best possible compromise among differing opinions.

It is only dialogue on this basis of humility, responsibility, and mutual respect that allows us to know justice. This, in fact, is the very definition of justice. But apart from directing us to a particular orientation, it is rather poor in content. It does not fix any specific limits on human action, except in the attitude we take. But it does provide a basis for determining whether or not different actions or proposed actions, in different contexts, are consistent with justice. As I will show in the next chapter, it also allows for different actions or proposed actions in the same context to be equally consistent with justice, under certain conditions. This is consistent with the fact of human fallibility and the corresponding duty to be humble, which at the same time demands that we work for justice. We cannot, as Dostoevsky's Ivan does, simply shirk this responsibility on the pretext that we do not want to be implicated in the suffering of others, because suffering is unavoidable.

According to Ramadan, it is only by considering the context in which a decision must be made and in which the teachings we look to for guidance were first developed or revealed that we can, through dialogue and deliberation, arrive at a satisfactory decision about what to do. This, however, requires that we share the same idea of what context refers to in any given deliberation. To complicate matters, it seems that, for Ramadan, context sometimes refers to objective reality or the reality of a particular situation, and at other times refers to our fallible human understanding of a given situation at a given time.

For example, in *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*, he talks about context, or *al-waqi*, which he further specifies as "human and social contexts," as a source of law. Yet is unclear whether he is referring to the objective reality of a given situation, or merely limited human knowledge of its reality. Speaking of traditional Muslim juridical practice, he reminds his readers that both Muslim scholars of fundamentals (*usuliyyun*) and law and jurisprudence (*fuqaha*) mention "human and social contexts (*al-waqi*) ... as a necessary reference and an inescapable dimension that must be taken into account in the implementation of law" (2009b, 101). Yet, he laments,

> for the jurists (*'ulama'*) specialized in texts, context mainly serves to shed additional light and act as a help—or sometimes a tool—in understanding the fundamental texts, which remain the sole sources of law and jurisprudence. Never indeed is the Universe, the unfurled Revelation, considered in its own right as an autonomous complementary source of law and its elaboration. (Ibid.)

This is a position no longer tenable, he claims, "because social and scientific knowledge has grown so vast that it can no longer be mastered and assimilated without highly specific specialization in one particular field of the exact, experimental, or social sciences" (ibid., 102). Under these conditions, he asks, "Can reference to the social and human context—about which the amount of knowledge available has grown so extensively—remain so secondary?" (ibid.). This new context, he says, forces us—and specifically Muslims—to reconsider the earlier position that privileged textual, ostensibly revealed knowledge, over human knowledge of the real context of a situation. But it is unclear what he means by context here. Is he talking about the intellectual context, in that

human knowledge of the natural and social world has become vastly more complex, if not more certain, such that we must consult with specialists? Or is he talking about the objective context, the reality of a given situation, which we may know with wildly varying degrees of certainty? If the former, we perhaps have a problem in that human knowledge, however specialized, is always fallible and imperfect. We also have the problem of what to do with whatever human knowledge could potentially inform our deliberations. For example, is social scientific knowledge that capital punishment does not deter crime as effectively as other strategies any argument against capital punishment? What if capital punishment does not, or should not, aim at deterrence alone? What should we do with people who transgress certain laws and why? How should we determine what laws we ask the state to enforce, for that matter? Neither human knowledge of human contexts, it seems, nor the actual context of a situation regardless of how poor our knowledge of it may be, seem to be able to tell us what goals we should seek to achieve. They may help us honor certain principles by showing us how best to achieve a particular result, but they cannot show us what, specifically, we should aim for.

There is also the problem of the status of context as a source of law, as Ramadan puts it, in an earlier time when human social and scientific knowledge was not so vast. Is he saying that only now, as a result of the vastness of human knowledge, we must give context and textual or revealed guidance equal weight? Would this not imply that, as human knowledge grows, we may eventually not need to refer to textual or revealed guidance at all? Muhammad Iqbal, who Ramadan speaks of in favorable terms in his

book *Aux sources du renouveau musulman: D'al-Afghani à Hassan al-Banna, un siècle de réformisme islamique* [*Towards the Sources of Muslim Renewal: From al-Afghani to Hassan al-Banna, a century of Islamic reform*] (2002a), says as much in his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (2008). "In Islam," Iqbal claims, "prophecy reaches its perfection in discovering the need of its own abolition" (ibid., 126). Muhammad, he continues, is the final prophet by virtue of the fact that the revelation he received was meant to convey, in part, the idea that prophecy is no longer necessary. Further, Iqbal claims that the Qur'ānic revelation requires that humans rely on their own resources, implying reason, and that, with it, "all personal authority, claiming a supernatural origin, has come to an end in the history of man" (ibid., 127). This is clearly not what Ramadan says.

Ramadan likens context to what he calls, following Al-Ghazzālī, the unfurled revelation. Thus, context is different from textual revelation only in form, not in essence. Recall that, for Ramadan, revelation does not mean the same thing it does for Strauss, and many others in the West. The Qur'ān, Ramadan writes,

> always sets general principles: laying out an initial framework, determining higher universal objectives, and making it possible to outline the Way of faithfulness (*ash-shari'ah*) through history. But still, everything in the Quran suggests that the unfurled Revelation, the book of the world, should be considered with the same importance, the same spiritual depth, and the same analytical and rational thoroughness as dealing with scriptural sources requires. ... Like a revelation of its own—conveying universal laws, constant principles, specific rules, and indeterminate areas—the Universe must be considered as an autonomous and complementary source of legal elaboration. (2009b, 102)

So, paradoxically it seems, the context in which we must deliberate, for Ramadan, is defined as both the objective reality of a given situation and our fallible human knowledge of the situation. This is a profoundly humbling revelation. It implies that diversity is not only the fact of reality it clearly is, but that it is in the nature of Being itself that only through struggling with and learning to live and deal with diversity and learn from it, that we can recognize the divine principle that unifies all Being and brings us to know ourselves. This means that we can only know justice through diversity, which means that we must be able to reconcile diversity—including ethical diversity—with moral unicity. Otherwise, the idea of justice would be wholly subjective and utterly meaningless.

Thus, while Ramadan avers that dialogue is incumbent upon us so that we may "respect a justice from which all humanity can benefit" (2001, 236), he does not presume to define justice as such. Paradoxically, this does not mean that he does not have a coherent idea of what justice is, or that the meaning of justice or morality itself is never fixed and always subject to legitimate debate and revision and thus theoretically infinitely malleable. Rather, for Ramadan, a human, to the extent that he or she is true to his or her own divine nature, will naturally recognize what is just and what is unjust. This, in turn, presumes a specific moral anthropology, one derived from the experience of the primary revelation in creation, of which every person is a part. Finally, he says, this can only be known through the humility and sense of individual insufficiency engendered in part by an awareness of the fact of diversity and the need to search for justice, and indeed the

divine, amid the chaos of live. Thus, for Ramadan, that which is just is what is most fitting, given a particular understanding of the human being, which is not itself infinitely malleable. Many different, seemingly incompatible things may be fitting, however, and so a variety of ethical positions may be equally consistent with justice and morality.

Thus, Ramadan reconciles the idea of moral unicity with ethical plurality by appealing to his understanding of the human being. He does not present this merely as an opinion but rather as a sure, ontologically grounded anthropology that is actually true. In the next chapter, I attempt to show how he thus brings truth and politics together through the principle of acceptance of ethical diversity on the basis of his argument about what a human being is. I also attempt to show how, in the process, he effects precisely this reconciliation between moral unicity and ethical plurality, thus giving us a new vision of a meaningfully truth-centered politics.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Ethics and Human Diversity

> ... la norme est au service du cœur et non pas le cœur au service de la norme. C'est un des messages, essentiel, que de nombreux amis chrétiens m'ont rappels sur la route [... convention exists to serve the heart, the heart does not exist to serve convention. This is one of the essential messages that many Christian friends have reminded me of along the way].
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> **—Tariq Ramadan (1999, 230)**

It is one thing to say that we should tolerate, if not accept, human moral, ethical, and cultural diversity because of the supposed impossibility of reconciling or adjudicating among apparently incompatible comprehensive doctrines, as Rawls imagines, or out of respect for some human idea of human dignity, as Scheler and Miller imagine, or even the idea that much human diversity is not socially or politically significant—and when it is there may be grounds for not tolerating it—as Locke imagines.[35] It is quite another

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[35] In his first *Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke offers his "Thoughts about the mutual Toleration of Christians in their different Professions of Religion," calling toleration "the chief Characteristical Mark of the True Church" (1983, 23). He does not call for toleration of moral diversity, only "Toleration of those that differ from others in Matters of Religion" (ibid., 25), where religion is coterminous with church. He defines a church as "a voluntary Society of Men, joining themselves together of their own accord, in order to the publick worshipping of God, in such a manner as they judge acceptable to him, and effectual to the Salvation of their Souls" (ibid., 28). Nowhere does he suggest that religion is anything but a church and he takes for granted that everyone understands what he means when he refers to God. While he argues that Christians should tolerate the various doctrinal and liturgical differences that divide them and which give rise to a multiplicity of churches, or sects, he insists that

> *Adultery, Fornication, Uncleanness, Lacsiviousness, Idolatry, and such things, cannot be denied to be Works of the Flesh;* concerning which the Apostle has expressly declared, that *they who do them shall not inherit the Kingdom of God.* Whosoever therefore is sincerely solicitous about the Kingdom of God, and thinks it his duty to endeavour the Enlargement of it

thing, however, to say that we should accept human diversity of virtually all kinds, within certain limits, because it is divinely mandated; that we must learn to live and deal with it and each other—to accept others and their differences—because the nature of ultimate reality demands it. Only the latter argument, which Ramadan makes, is truly philosophically coherent. Only it does not allow for the theoretical circumvention of the rule through technology or some idea of progress—for the theoretical possibility and desirability of human moral and ethical, if not cultural, homogenization, and potentially destruction. Only it does not ultimately privilege one particular comprehensive doctrine to the practical social and political, if not total, exclusion of all others. Only it can, at the same time, coherently affirm that we have a real moral duty to accept others and their differences, within philosophically coherent limits, and tell us what acceptance means. To see how Ramadan reconciles the idea of a single idea of morality and justice, or simply the Good, based on a single, ontologically grounded moral anthropology, with a diversity

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> amongst Men, ought to apply himself with no less care and industry to the rooting out of these Immoralities, than to the extirpation of Sects. (Ibid., 24)

But Locke cannot know any of these things to be wrong in any objective, universal sense unless he accepts in some politically meaningful way the truth of some divine revelation. Here, that seems to be the revelation in Jesus Christ as understood by the Apostle Paul and possibly Martin Luther. Thus, it is wrong to say that Locke counsels toleration of all types of diversity—moral, ethical, religious, cultural, and otherwise—arising from all manner of so-called religious, cultural, ethnic, and ideological differences. In relations among humans, there are certain things Locke accepts as morally wrong and morally right, as per the revelation in Christ. When it comes to an individual's necessarily private relationship with God, however, he insists that no one can tell anyone else that anything in the nature of his or her experience, understanding, and worship of God is in any sense objectively wrong. Moreover, he argues that any attempt on the part of any political authority to coerce anyone into worshiping God in a particular way is not only counter-productive but also both politically catastrophic and morally wrong. It is politically catastrophic because it inevitably leads to feelings of resentment and easily serves as a basis for rebellion. It is morally wrong because it effectively robs that person of any confidence in his or her salvation.

of legitimate, particular ethical positions, is to see how this is so.

Ramadan reminds us "that the Quran's message stipulates, as a primary, higher principle, the Creator's will to establish diversity among humankind, summoning the latter to respect it. This is precisely the meaning of the verse: *'Had God so willed, He would have made you a single community. ...'*" (2009b, 186, Ramadan's translation and emphasis of the Qurʾān 42:8). "If the One has willed the diversity of '*nations and tribes*'," he continues, "the plurality of religions, of skin colors and languages, of cultures and memories, it means that the universality, which according to Muslims emanates from the last revealed religion, is necessarily open, shared, inclusive, and dynamic, rather than fearful, exclusive, rigid, and closed" (ibid.). Addressing Muslims, he writes:

> We need to reconcile with an Islamic universality whose essence is pluralistic. The function of its truth, naturally acknowledged by believers, is not to standardize truths and values beyond Islam itself, but to establish correspondences, intersections, bridges. Confirming its universality as the last Revelation does not mean denying what came before it or what appeared elsewhere outside of its Universe of reference, but rather being able to say and repeat what was formulated in the past and/or establish positive interactions with what is produced by other traditions or civilizations today. (Ibid., 294–95)

In our first interview, Ramadan told me that his book, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (2009b), is written "really from within the Islamic frame of reference. ... It's ... Islamic applied ethics for Muslims." In the fourth and final section of the book, he discusses a number of specific, practical ethical questions relating, among other things, to contraception and abortion, euthanasia and organ transplantation, artistic

and cultural expression and censorship, the status of and relations between men and women, ritual slaughter and the status and treatment of animals, growth and sustainable development, and the economy. Clearly, these are all issues about which there is much disagreement, much of which is anchored in different, often apparently irreconcilable ideas about truth, God, ultimate reality, the human being, morality and justice, and, in a problematic word, religion. For instance, if murdering humans is illegal, should non-therapeutic abortion be illegal? That depends on what a human being is, or at least what people in positions to do anything about it think a human being is.

According to the *Criminal Code of Canada*, for example, "A child becomes a human being ... when it has completely proceeded, in a living state, from the body of its mother, whether or not (a) it has breathed; (b) it has an independent circulation; or (c) the navel string is severed" (Government of Canada 2011, Part VIII, 223, 1). "A person commits homicide," it goes on to say, "when he causes injury to a child before or during its birth as a result of which the child dies *after* becoming a human being" (ibid., 2, emphasis added). A fetus, therefore, is *not* a human being according to the *Criminal Code of Canada*, and so long as it is never born in a "living state," it never becomes one. Thus, at no point during pregnancy is abortion ever considered murder in Canada. United States *Public Law 108-212*, meanwhile, defines "a child in utero" as "a member of the species homo sapiens, at any stage of development, who is carried in the womb." It further stipulates that a person who intentionally kills or attempts to kill "a child in utero" so defined is guilty of "killing or attempting to kill a human being" (Government of the

United States of America 2004). This law, originally designed to protect women and their unborn children, has proven highly controversial, however, since it makes an exception for legal abortion. At any rate, this is enough to illustrate the extent of the disagreement over the question of what a human being is, and what rights and duties humans have—and the social and political implications of it—that is at the root of so many ethical debates.

Ramadan reaches some conclusions on some of these issues and recommends some ways of dealing with them, always grounded in his understanding of what he calls the Islamic universe of reference. Even if he writes from a specifically Muslim perspective for a specifically Muslim audience, however, the way and basis upon which he suggests Muslims should determine what is ethical and what is not, and what this means, should help us better see how he conceives of the relationship between morality and justice, on one hand, and ethics and human convention on the other, irrespective of a person's faith or religious identity (which may not always be the same thing). This, in turn, will help us better understand the argument he makes about the necessary relationship between truth and politics, and so truth and human convention, in the midst of so much natural, necessary, and divinely mandated human diversity. This will bring me to my final statement in this text about his argument for why we have real moral duties to each other, what these are, how we can and should honor these, and how we can know this to be true.

In the end, I argue, Ramadan presents a compelling argument that, if we do not all

identify as capital-M Muslims, indicating fidelity to the message of Islam rendered through the Prophet Muhammad specifically, we should at least recognize the nature of Ultimate Being for what it is, to the extent that we can know, and submit accordingly as *muslims*. Recasting such fundamental ideas as God, reason, revelation, and truth, his argument effectively renders atheism, secularism, any distinction between the sacred and non-sacred, and even questions about the existence or non-existence of God, philosophically incoherent. As mentioned in the Introduction, Berman is right when he points out that, for Ramadan, there can be no doubts about God. He is wrong, however, in thinking that this is just Ramadan's opinion about what a "proper Muslim" must believe; Ramadan shows that God is the principle of unity in all creation and in each one of us and, as such, to doubt God would simply be to doubt our selves. For now, however, we must return to the question of ethics and diversity.

Nothing is ultimately, or at least can be known to be, the product of human forethought. There is a profound lesson in this that is true, and a somehow salvific humility that comes from this, that together have real social and political implications. In other words, we may not always agree about whether or not abortion should be legal, under what circumstances, but we should at least be able to agree on, which is to say share a common awareness of, who we are and what basic responsibilities we have to each other and the rest of creation as beings who are called to be responsible, through humility, by nature. As a result of this awareness, on the specific issue of abortion, we must find that neither conception nor birth itself necessarily determines whether or not a

human being exists finally. Nevertheless, we must admit that, after conception, a specific human definitely exists *in posse*, if not *in esse*. Since there is no significant biological difference between a child a minute before it is born and a minute after it is born, however, we must also recognize that something happens *in utero* that marks the transition from a human being *in posse* to a human being *in esse*. Rather than reducing the debate over abortion to a question of a woman's supposed absolute right to choose versus an absolute prohibition against all abortions, humility and reverence should call us to a deeper understanding of the stakes involved and the importance of reconciling a woman's wants and needs with a recognition of our individual and collective responsibilities to Ultimate Being. In other words, at the very least, the question cannot be decided on purely instrumental grounds and absent a coherent moral anthropology. That is to say, it must be decided on the basis of awareness of and respect for the fact that a potential life hangs in the balance, and the fact that I cannot justify making such a decision for purely selfish reasons when I cannot even justify or explain my own existence with reference to simply the fact of my existence. This discussion, however, is beyond the scope of my deliberations here.[36]

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[36] See Ramadan 2009b, 167–73 on abortion and contraception in Islam. Ramadan concludes that "there is no formal, undisputed prohibition of abortion" in Islam (172). For example, he cites a *hadīth* (report) in which the Prophet Muhammad says "The conception of each one of you in his mother's womb is accomplished in forty days, then he becomes a clinging clot (*'alaqah*) for the same time, then a lump of flesh (*mudghah*) for the same time. Then an angel is sent to blow life spirit (*al-rūḥ*) into him." On the basis of this and similar *ahaadith* (reports), Ramadan tells us, "a majority of Hanafi along with a minority of scholars from each of the other schools ... state that abortion [is] permitted during the first hundred and twenty days for, the soul being absent, the embryo [cannot] yet be considered as a human being" (ibid.). Taking such an argument seriously, I argue,

As mentioned at the end of Part One, in *Radical Reform*, Ramadan claims that "assisted suicide or direct active euthanasia that consists of giving medication (with the intention to cause death) to patients who may or may not be at the end of their lives has been determined as strictly forbidden" (2009b, 174). He justifies this claim by citing two passages from the Qur'ān: "*And do not take human life—which God has made sacred—except for justice*" (ibid., Ramadan's translation and emphasis of the Qur'ān 17:33), and "*Do not kill yourselves: for verily God has been most merciful [infinitely good] to you*" (ibid., Ramadan's translation and emphasis of the Qur'ān 4:29).[37] I asked him if, on this basis, he is arguing that only Muslims should not actively and directly euthanize someone or ask to be so euthanized, or if, again on this basis, he is saying that there should be an absolute, universal ban on direct active euthanasia for all people—that it should be illegal, and perhaps considered murder, and that the state should enforce this rule. His

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instead of consigning it to simply one of many groundless opinions, may well advance the contemporary debate over abortion.

[37] Given the phenomenon of a minority of professed Muslims engaging in violent actions, deliberately killing themselves in the process (suicide bombers, if you will), some commentary on the apparent incompatibility between such actions and these passages from the Qur'ān may be in order. While an exhaustive review of Muslim legal opinions on this matter is beyond the scope of this text, there does appear to be a general consensus among Muslim scholars that such actions, which go beyond simply taking a risk to defend a just cause through force, are forbidden. One notable exception should be mentioned however. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a controversial Egyptian Muslim theologian and host of Al Jazeera's "Shariah and Life" television program, claims that what he considers defensive suicide bombing is sanctioned by Islam. In God's infinite wisdom, he says, "he has given the weak a weapon the strong do not have and that is their ability to turn their bodies into bombs" (quoted in Abdelhadi 2004). We may also note that Ramadan describes Al-Qaradawi as a "classical contemporary scholar" (2009b, 349) and, in other places, speaks highly of him. Yet the evidence, despite Berman's protestations (but see Berman 2010, 2011), is inconclusive as to the extent Ramadan is influenced by Al-Qaradawi, and Ramadan certainly appears genuine in denouncing acts of extremism, including suicide bombing. At any rate, I argue that the ontology and moral anthropology Ramadan derives from Islam do not allow for suicide bombing. Alas, a more substantive discussion of this is beyond the scope of this text.

answer was quite revealing:

> I am dealing here with applied Islamic ethics. So, from an Islamic viewpoint, when a Muslim is going to ask, "could we go for active euthanasia," from an Islamic viewpoint the answer is no, active euthanasia is not possible. Now, even if you are a Muslim and you go for it, we can't prevent someone from doing it. ... there are many answers, and many Christian answers about this, and many Islamic answers. So when I am saying this, specifically this, I'm not making it a universal truth for all, I'm just saying it is the Islamic applied ethics for Muslims, at the level of our knowledge today, that this is what we call active or passive, direct or indirect euthanasia. So not generalizing it for all, it's not an absolute truth. Ethics here is just the way we deal with our principles and trying to think— of course, I would say that, because I think it's the final message, it's the universal message, but my universal message is telling me you have to deal with diversity. So this is why, for example, there is something, which is very important in this book *Radical Reform*: I never speak about Islamic economy or about Islamic finance or about Islamic medicine; I am saying Islamic ethics in medicine, Islamic ethics in economy. So it's really us [Muslims] coming with our frame of reference and trying to find answers for ourselves. So, you would get an answer to this in a practical way in the book, the last one, which is *The Quest for Meaning*, where I am developing a philosophy of pluralism, where I am coming with this image of different routes to the top of the mountain. And I think this is where we are.

"In a lecture you gave in Glasgow in 2006," I reminded him, "you said there is no such thing as Islamic justice and non-Islamic justice. You said justice is justice. Is ethics not the same? Is there not simply something that is ethical and something that is not ethical?"

Again, his response was revealing:

> No. I think it's an interesting question, but justice is the end and ethics is the way to get to it. So, in fact, justice is the summit, and ethics is the way you are going to it. So when I am saying, at the summit you can qualify

> justice or freedom or whatever, but you can't qualify the way you are going to it. So [there is] an Islamic way to go to justice. ... I am not going to qualify Islamic justice, but I am going to qualify the routes towards it.

In other words, there is a single idea of morality or justice, as discussed in the previous chapter, but many possible ways to honor it. For Ramadan, there is at least one so-called Islamic way, for example, and presumably other, non-Islamic ways to honor justice, all of which are ethical. I shall return to an analysis of the argument he presents in *The Quest for Meaning*. For now, his answers here warrant some discussion.

In the two answers cited, he articulates at least four distinct, albeit related, ideas—ideas that are consistent with his written works, but nowhere articulated so directly. First, the idea that active euthanasia is forbidden according to the Qur'ān, or any other ethical proposition, is necessarily but one possible human, potentially fallible interpretation of the ostensibly revealed text of the Qur'ān. Second, any proscription against active euthanasia relies on knowledge of what active euthanasia consists of—knowledge that is not clearly provided by the text of the Qur'ān, and for which we must rely on fallible human understandings of the human body, life processes, and context. Third, given the ambiguity that the diversity of interpretations of any ostensibly authoritative text or human understanding of what active euthanasia is will inevitably give rise to, and given the fact of human diversity, we cannot say that it is an absolute, immutable, and universal truth that active euthanasia should at all times and in all contexts be forbidden, although some people believe this to be true.

This last point may make Ramadan sound a bit like a moral or ethical relativist.[38] Yet he surely is not claiming that every conceivable ethical proposition is mutable, that everything is potentially theoretically ethical. Furthermore, his claim that active euthanasia is "strictly forbidden," while also maintaining that this is "not an absolute truth," suggests that he is not a moral or ethical relativist. It may make it sound like he is contradicting himself, though, which is surely worse. How can an ethical proposition strictly forbid something while at the same time not be absolutely true? Can something be unethical and also ethical? Ramadan believes, after all, that the Qurʾān is truly a

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[38] I am conscious here of William E. Connolly's illuminating discussion of relativism, unitarianism, and pluralism. "Cultural relativism," he writes,

> is the view that you should support the culture that is dominant in a particular place. The terms *culture* and *place* are key, for relativism is most at home with itself when it is situated in a concentric image of territorial culture. Here culture is said to radiate from the family to larger circles such as neighborhood, locality, and nation. The largest circles of belonging in turn radiate back to the smaller ones, with each circle entering into relations of resonance with the others. Given such an understanding of culture, a relativist is someone who supports whatever practices and norms prevail in each concentrically ordered "place." Indeed, it is the concentric image of culture that allows you to support the content of each territorial culture so defined. I don't, in fact, know many cultural relativists, for many called "relativists" by others do not in fact embrace a concentric image of culture. Rather, absolutists are apt to support such an image of culture and then to project their own image back on those they define as relativists.
>
> A pluralist, by comparison, is one who prizes cultural diversity along several dimensions and is ready to join others in militant action, when necessary, to support pluralism against counter drives to unitarianism. ...
>
> Pluralists set limits to tolerance to ensure that an exclusionary, unitarian movement does not take over an entire regime, that is, to ensure that a territorial regime does not become too concentric and too closed. (280–81)

On this understanding, as discussed below, Ramadan turns out to be a pluralist, in fact arguing that the revealed message of Islam, which he says is pluralistic, recommends a pluralistic society along the same lines as Connolly: a society that "inculcates the virtue of modesty between proponents of different faiths and creeds" and which "seeks to limit the power of those who would overthrow diversity in the name of religious unitarianism" (280). As we shall see, however, Islam, according to Ramadan, recommends—indeed, demands—pluralism for very different reasons than Connolly.

revelation from God, and that his interpretation is correct to the best of his knowledge. Thus, for him, as he says, "it's the final message, it's the universal message." If, as he says, the Qur'ān forbids active euthanasia, and this is the word of God addressed to all people, then God must be telling all humans: I forbid you from actively euthanizing each other, and from asking to be euthanized (or, as in the Qur'ānic passages he cites, God forbids us from killing ourselves and from killing others unjustly). But at the same time, Ramadan says, "my universal message is telling me you have to deal with diversity" (personal interview 1). In other words, God is telling him that something is universally true, namely the fact of human diversity and the need to deal with it, and at the same time God is revealing particular ethical principles that must be interpreted (for example, *why* is killing ourselves forbidden?). This allows for different interpretations, all or most of which may be perfectly consistent with justice and morality, to the extent—and only to the extent—that they are consistent with humility, respect for the divine in everything, and respect for difference, through which we recognize the divine—the principle of unity in all Being. Ramadan would almost certainly say that it would be absolutely and universally wrong for someone to actively euthanize someone who does not wish to be euthanizaed (though this would probably not fit the strict definition of euthanasia itself), or to do so for crass financial reasons instead of out of care and compassion for the person.

"Diversity of religions, nations, and peoples" Ramadan writes, "is a test because it requires that we learn to manage difference" (2004b, 202). "Difference," he continues,

"might naturally lead to conflict; therefore, the responsibility of humankind is to make use of difference by establishing a relationship based on excelling one another in doing good" (ibid., 203). Of course, this presupposes knowledge of the Good and implies a universal standard for determining what it is to do or be good. Ramadan believes that the Islamic universe of reference, which is how he refers to the entirety of the Islamic religious heritage from which Muslims derive guidance and religious identity, contains a "corpus of fundamental principles that set, beyond the contingencies of time, a point of reference for faithfulness to the divine will" (ibid., 32). He asserts, however, that many values and norms of behavior in other religious traditions, like Christianity, and in non-religious traditions and philosophies as well, like secular humanism, are consistent with Islamic values and norms and thus, whether explicitly or implicitly, form part of the universal message of Islam. This is not to say, however, that only that diversity that is consistent with the specific ethical principles in the Qur'ān should be respected. Rather, all diversity that is consistent with the nature of ultimate reality as revealed in the Qur'ān, as well as creation itself, to the extent—and only to the extent—that we can know this to be true outside of any human convention or authority and without presupposing faith, is to be respected. This amounts to all moral and ethical positions that are consistent with the moral duty to treat others the way we would like to be treated, in the most profound meaning of this principle. This still leaves open the question of actually incompatible ethical principles that equally claim divine warrant, especially where questions of crime and punishment are concerned. To put the question as directly and possibly sensationally

as possible, should adulterers be stoned to death or not?

Recall that, in my first interview with Ramadan, he referred me somewhat obliquely to his book *The Quest for Meaning: Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism* (2010) for an answer to the question of how to deal with and possibly reconcile different incompatible ethical, and potentially legal, positions, decisions about which power and political authority may be sought to enforce (such as criminalizing euthanasia, abortion, homosexual relations, or adultery, and mandating specific punishments or other worldly consequences for such supposed crimes). A glance at some of the reviews of this book, however, reveals that many reviewers and scholars misunderstand what he is trying to say, especially about the nature of revelation and revealed truth, the relationship between reason and revelation, ethics and diversity, and the necessary relationship between ultimate truth and politics. It is vital that we see where others may have missed, or misunderstood, what Ramadan is saying, if we are to have any hope of seeing precisely what he has to say about diversity in specific ethical positions and so how to live with diversity in the interest of knowing and honoring truth. To put it more directly, if we misunderstand what he is saying about reason and revelation, truth and politics, we risk being unable to discern how he says we should respond to someone who puts forward an allegedly divinely mandated ethical proposition that supposedly demands to be enforced but that we strenuously disagree with or that may even be incompatible with an ethical proposition we believe is in fact divinely mandated.

"Ramadan's real aim," Kenan Malik declares in his review for *The Independent*,

"is to defend the sanctity of revealed truth" (2010). This much is true, but Malik clearly misunderstands what Ramadan means by revealed truth. He assumes, like Strauss and so many others, that revelation is something wholly and utterly distinct from and in permanent tension with reason; something indefeasible that can, or at least should, have no direct relevance to political practice. "Revealed truth," Malik wrongly says Ramadan tells us, "is 'clear and immutable' and its legitimacy cannot be challenged by reason" (ibid.). Ramadan does indeed say that what is revealed is "clear and immutable," but in presenting this idea out of context, Malik distorts what Ramadan is saying. This is what Ramadan actually writes in *The Quest for Meaning*, from which Malik quotes but three words:

> Faith (which means trust and conviction) and reason (which means observation and analysis) should therefore not be contrasted when it comes to authoritative knowledge, but should complement one another as terms of reference for action. This is the primary focus of al-Ghazāli's aptly named *The Balance of Action* (*Mizan al-'Amal*). Even before philosophical questions are asked about the nature of the relationship between faith and reason, we find in the Islamic legal tradition a methodological difference between the spheres of creed (*'aquida*) and ritual practices (*'ibadāt*) on the one hand, and social affairs (*mu'āmalāt*) on the other. A distinction is made, within the very reading of Revelation, between what is revealed, which is clear and immutable, and injunctions of general orientation, which must be interpreted and contextualized in rational terms. ... The realm of faith cannot do without the critical exercise of reason if it is to remain true to its own teaching: the union of the two is imperative, and harmony between the two is essential. (2010, 35)

Ramadan is clearly not saying that revelation is limited to an extra-rational or non-

rational teaching from some putatively divine authority whose existence may be subject to question and to which reason must always defer, assuming we believe it exists. As we have seen, for Ramadan, all of creation at all times constitutes an undifferentiated and primary revelation; God, or Ultimate Being, does not only reveal itself through prophets, which is to say men and the words they speak, much less human authorities, however much they claim or actually enjoy a divine mandate for what they do and teach.

Ramadan would not be surprised at Malik's reading, however. Indeed, he would probably see it as confirmation of his claim that the modern, or postmodern, Western understanding of revelation and its relationship with reason is completely different from the understanding the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, or practice, of the Prophet teach and imply. Unless people appreciate this understanding and the nature of the difference between it and the idea that reason and revelation are absolutely distinct and, by definition, irreconcilable, they will misunderstand what Ramadan is saying and, consequently, be limited in what they can learn from his understanding of Islam and the revealed message of Islam, especially concerning truth and politics and, what is my concern here, ethics and diversity.

Ramadan's articulation and defense of his understanding of revelation, and therewith the necessary relationship between truth and politics, has significant implications for living with others who may hold different moral values and ethical positions and who may have very different ideas about the ultimate nature of reality. Ramadan attempts to reconcile the idea that morality and justice are one and therefore

universal with the idea that there will always be, of necessity and by divine design, a variety of different, otherwise irreconcilable ethical positions that people may legitimately hold that may ultimately honor this single idea of justice. In reconciling these two ideas, Ramadan's theory of pluralism finally emerges. This, I argue, represents a significant alternative to any number of modern or postmodern theories of pluralism. This is because it offers a philosophically coherent defense of a pre-conventional or non-conventional understanding of revelation that does not presuppose any kind of faith. At the same time, this understanding of revelation theoretically allows for truth, not merely opinion or consensus, to guide politics, without the need for said truth to be channeled through human authorities such that people may legitimately claim that it is not truly pre-conventional or non-conventional. This, in turn, opens the possibility once again of taking revelation, albeit on a different understanding, seriously, and acknowledging a legitimate role for it in politics. As a result, it becomes possible to imagine a serious dialogue among people about moral and ethical ideas that would allow us to make determinations about the truth of different moral and ethical propositions. Should abortion or euthanasia ever be permitted? Is it ever legitimate for a person to conceal entirely his or her face in public? Should infant circumcision ever be permitted? Should adulterers be stoned to death? Should we stone them to death if they ask to be, as a woman reportedly asked the Prophet Muhammad, as I will discuss below? On what ground should such questions be decided? With Ramadan's philosophy of pluralism, we see a glimmer of the Light of the Heavens and the Earth that may help us come closer to

answering such questions. This by no means suggests that we will no longer encounter moral or ethical dilemmas, that we will never again question what is right and what is wrong. In fact, it is precisely such dilemmas, such questions, which can only arise through diversity, that humble us, and so call us to our humanity, to an awareness of the divine in us. Instead, Ramadan's philosophy of pluralism, derived from his understanding of the revealed message of Islam, reorients our thinking about such dilemmas, such questions, and all the doubts that go along with this. Instead of simply trying to find a temporary consensus for commodious living, it gives us a philosophically coherent argument that there is something true that we can know, and this, in turn, justifies a search for truth that is of a decidedly higher order than a search for mere consensus.

As for the specific question of profound diversity among ethical positions of grave significance, such as the idea that, in addition to whether or not something should be considered a crime, certain crimes deserve specific, possibly divinely mandated, punishments, this still does not tell us explicitly how to proceed. From a Muslim perspective, Ramadan's approach is to begin by reconsidering what is meant in prophetically mediated revelations, notably the Qur'ān and the Sunnah of the Prophet, by various, often minutely detailed worldly punishments for different crimes. For example, on the question of stoning and other punishments for adultery in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, "Certes ces peines sont mentionnées dans les textes de reference" [Certainly these punishments are mentioned in the reference texts], he writes, "mais elles sont accompagnées de clauses de conditionnalité qui déterminent leur application de façon

très précise et très rigoureuse" [but they are accompanied by conditional clauses that determine their application in a very precise and rigorous fashion] (Neirynck and Ramadan 1999, 105–6). In many cases, Ramadan argues, the conditions are such as to be almost never fully met and possibly nearly impossible to ever meet, thus meaning that the stipulated punishments can almost never be implemented legitimately. This, Ramadan suggests, may be especially so for adultery, which requires four witnesses.

This is almost beside the point for Ramadan, however, since he focuses on what such references in ostensibly revealed texts can teach us apart from specific punishments for specific crimes. In the end, he argues, the severity of the punishments described in the texts indicates the relative wrongness of the acts in question, quite apart from whether such punishments could ever be legitimately implemented on the sole basis of them being ostensibly revealed in the Qur'ān or through the Sunnah of the Prophet. In the case of the stipulated punishments for adultery, he writes, "Ce que pourtant elles révèlent comme enseignement, c'est que la fornication et l'adultère sont des choses très graves devant Dieu, de meme que sur le plan social" [What they reveal as instruction is that fornication and adultery are very grave things to God, and equally so in society] (ibid., 106).

I earlier raised the question of whether or not it could ever be right to execute a person for committing adultery if he or she asked to be. I did so because precisely such a scenario is recounted in the *hadith* literature and consideration of this question, however absurd it may sound to modern ears, may help us better see the practical implications of Ramadan's argument as a whole. Abul Husayn Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj tells us that a

woman came to the Prophet Muhammad after becoming pregnant as a result of committing adultery. "I have done something for which (prescribed punishment) must be imposed upon me, so impose that," she appealed to the Prophet. The Prophet told her master to treat her well and bring her back to him once she had given birth. Then, honoring the woman's request, Muhammad "pronounced judgment about her and her clothes were tied around her and then he commanded and she was stoned to death." Muslim's report continues, however. Muhammad, he says, "then prayed over her (dead body). Thereupon Umar said to him: Allah's Apostle, you offer prayer for her, whereas she had committed adultery! Thereupon he said: She has made such a repentance that if it were to be divided among seventy men of Medina, it would be enough. Have you found any repentance better than this that she sacrificed her life for Allah, the Majestic?" (Muslim, Book 17, Number 4207).

According to this account, the woman presumably believed that, having committed adultery, she would face a worse fate than being stoned to death when she eventually did die if she did not submit immediately to what she accepted was the divinely ordained punishment for what she had done. But was Muhammad right in honoring her request and having her executed? Would he have been wrong to refuse? Unless we adopt a virulently modern, atheistic stance, we must admit the possibility that for this woman, being executed was effectively euthanasia, since she believed her crime was so serious that no earthly forgiveness was possible. Yet, if this is correct, and if Ramadan is right that the Qur'ān forbids active euthanasia, what does this say about the

morality of executing this woman, even though she herself asked to be? Clearly, the issue is not as simple as either Qur'ānic literalists or modern liberals may like. It is obvious, however, that the solution lies neither in simply blindly honoring the woman's request, nor in prejudicially refusing to countenance it, nor in fanatically insisting on any such punishment regardless of the will of this, or any other, person. This leaves only one basis on which this, and any similar question, can be decided: provisionally, and acknowledging and honoring our shared human fragility and need for God and the divine in each other. This suggests that capital punishment may never be legitimate, and that Ramadan is right to focus on the ethical wrongness of the act in question instead of the literal applicability of different legal punishments stipulated in any given text, but this is a discussion for another day.

"Interreligious dialogue," Ramadan writes, "should be a meeting of 'witnesses' who are seeking to live their faiths, to share their convictions, and to engage with one another for a more humane, more just world, closer to what God expects of humanity" (2004b, 208). But what does God expect from humanity? Who or what is God? These seem to be the sorts of questions Ramadan thinks interreligious dialogue should aim to answer; it should not be limited to partial efforts to find common ground among a variety of mere opinions, all of which may be objectively wrong. But what about people who deny the existence of God or understand ultimate reality differently? While Ramadan certainly acknowledges that different people think different things are true and false, and despite his arguments about the divine mandate for all types of diversity among humans,

including belief and unbelief in God, he clearly advances a single truth that, because he believes it is the truth, he seeks to promulgate. This is the mystical idea that all being is one, which is another way of saying monotheism or, more accurately, panentheism. Humans, Ramadan argues, as we have seen, are born innocent and free of anything that might be called original sin. Later, they are inevitably called to take responsibility for their lives and their actions, which includes especially the responsibility to honor their moral duties and which, in turn, requires that they be humble. Humans are not innately guilty, according to Ramadan, in direct contrast to some Christian teachings, but they do have real duties to God, themselves, and their communities, which spring from the fact of the true nature of the relationship between God and humans and the rest of creation. For Ramadan, this is not a matter of opinion, choice, or even faith—it is an ontological, metaphysical fact. Thus, while there may be broad scope for different ways to honor one's responsibilities to God and creation, there is a universal truth no one can escape. The implication of this is that, to the extent that a person accepts and acts upon or as a result of an idea that contradicts this truth, that person will be more likely to act in a manner inconsistent with what God demands of him or her, and we may be able to justly condemn his or her actions on that basis.

The Qur'ān itself attests that the revealed message of Islam is not intended to call everyone to adopt Islam as interpreted, taught, and modeled by the Prophet Muhammad. For example, the Qur'ān says, "did not Allāh check one set of people by means of another there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues,

and mosques, in which the name of Allāh is commemorated" (22:40). This suggests that God values these places of worship and does not wish to see them replaced entirely by mosques on the model established by the Prophet Muhammad. It has much deeper implications, however. The message really seems to be that, without diversity, no one would acknowledge God—no one would recognize the divine, the miraculous, in the everyday. Thus, human diversity plays two key roles in the divine plan: ensuring a measure of recognition of the divine or Ultimate Being, and encouraging humility and the corresponding responsibility to be moral and act ethically.

Prophetic revelation is clearly insufficient for ultimate truth to play a universal, decisive role in human affairs because, if all we have are teachings supposedly revealed through human prophets, it remains logically conceivable for at least some people to deny the veracity of any claim to prophecy. What is needed is a primary revelation denial of which is logically inconceivable. Ramadan gives us an idea of such a primary revelation when he speaks of existence or creation itself as an undifferentiated revelation and God, not as an existent entity, but as the uncreated creative and sustaining force of and unifying principle in all reality. Yet prophetic revelation remains necessary because humans are fallible, and therefore forgetful, creatures. Furthermore, a multiplicity of human prophets and human interpretations is, paradoxically, necessary to ensure humility, lest all people unanimously accept a given prophetic revelation, thus destroying diversity and giving rise to hubris. This is simply because, a people who possess the truth in its entirety would no longer need to search for it and thus they would have no need of

God. Thus, we must deliberate among ourselves, we must respect each other and celebrate our differences to the extent, and possibly only to the extent, that it brings us closer to a recognition of the divine in us as well as others and so helps us order our lives in accordance with the nature of Ultimate Being, God, or, as Ibn Al-ᶜArabī has it, that which alone is Real. Nothing in modern liberalism is so coherent, hopeful, and ennobling.

CHAPTER EIGHT
Conclusion

> There are those who have been expelled from their homes in defiance of right—for no cause except that they say, "Our Lord is Allah." Did not Allah check one set of people by means of another there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, in which the name of Allah is commemorated.
>
> **— The Qur'ān (22:40)**

It is perhaps ironic that a tradition whose principal teaching is the absolute oneness of God, and whose sacred scripture presents itself in part as a corrective to previous oral and textual prophetic revelations said to have been corrupted or misunderstood, explicitly teaches that it is only through diversity that we can know God. Yet this is the conclusion Ramadan seems to reach about the revealed message of Islam. To say that this is revealed in the message of something called Islam, however, risks missing the point entirely. Before anything else, the pure *muslim*, submissive, or simply logically and actually dependent nature of all existence is manifest in the simple fact that existence itself cannot explain, justify, or understand its existence with reference to nothing but itself. The search for meaning itself, therefore—and not necessarily the full apprehension or comprehension of meaning, since the search would then no longer be necessary—is inscribed in the mysterious fabric of the universe, and in each one of us, and is thus by definition incumbent on all humans. This is the longing for God that Ramadan says all

humans naturally have and which is an essential part of *al-fiṭrah*. Existence itself is manifestly not self-sufficient and to claim otherwise—that existence, or any aspect of it, exists by virtue merely of the fact that it exists—is nothing but a tautology. This is the primary revelation of Islam, which is simply to say the primary, phenomenological, and therefore pre-theoretical and pre-conventional truth manifest in the fact of existence. This is the fact of necessary humility before ultimate self-insufficiency and the fact of diversity in the world we know as humans.

While this is a profoundly humbling experience, Ramadan is quick to remind us that it also calls and empowers us to take responsibility, to take ownership of our role in creation, by virtue of our capacity for reason and our theoretical ability to do otherwise. This is a role we did not—indeed, could not—create for ourselves. This is our role as what the Muslim tradition calls vice-regents of God. But if humans are vice-regents of God, which is to say Ultimate Being itself, this is not because they are necessarily or inherently superior to other creatures. In fact, as the Qur'ān suggests, it is because humans alone were foolish enough to accept this massive responsibility, such that it is part of true human nature—*al-fiṭrah*—to be responsible to God, and to struggle to honor this responsibility (see The Qur'ān 32:72, cited in Chapter Two above). This is the humbling aspect of the realization that humans alone, it seems, have the capacity for reason. Unlike other creatures, we must constantly struggle to remember the source that gives us life and that gives our lives meaning; we must continually strive not get distracted by transient things, while at the same time realizing that we ourselves are, as

Ibn Al-ᶜArabī, but "instances of time" (1980, 179). We are forgetful, not sinful, creatures by nature, and therefore called to be responsible.

This is what the Muslim tradition effectively proposes as the corrective to the doctrine of original sin, which seems to presuppose a different understanding of God. The responsibility we are called to is the responsibility to freely recognize our responsibility to the divine, both in ourselves and in all creation. This, as Ibn Al-ᶜArabī puts it, is our responsibility to be fully divine in essence and fully creature in form and so to learn and act with compassion. As Ramadan understands it, this is our responsibility to be just and to work for justice. It is a responsibility that we cannot know any other creature has, and that we can presume no other creature that lives by instinct alone has. It is a responsibility we can know we actually have because we can easily imagine acting otherwise, rejecting any such responsibility and thereby our need for God or any unifying idea of Ultimate Being and the divine in us. Since awareness of this responsibility can only come through the humbling experience of encountering diversity and thus questioning the meaning of things, however, humans are faced with a dual challenge: to know what their responsibilities are and to live up to them.

Mercifully, Ramadan says, God has provided for humans through a line of prophets stretching from Adam to Muhammad. Yet the traditions that subsequently emerged from the human understandings of the messages borne by these human prophets have resulted in even more diversity. The solution, however, is not to work for the domination of one of these traditions to the absolute exclusion of all others. This is

because any such attempt to destroy diversity would be an attempt to destroy a defining characteristic of existence, as we know it, and that diversity which keeps us humble and therefore human. To the extent that any such attempt appears successful, like the modern liberal ideal of the utter privatization of metaphysics or the force of the essence of technology in Heidegger's sense, it gives way to fundamentalism or totalitarianism. This is because, the claim to possess the complete truth such that one no longer needs to prove or justify the truth one claims to possess renders the idea of truth meaningless and justifies the most extreme, inhuman hubris. At any rate, any such attempt to destroy all human diversity is liable to fail miserably. More than that, however, is the idea, expressed in the Qur'ān, that diversity is necessary for human recognition and remembrance of God, for ultimate truth to play a meaningful role in human life, and therefore, politics. This, in turn, is necessary for justice and the human recognition of the responsibility to be just. As the Qur'ān puts it in the epigraph above, a passage briefly discussed near the end of the previous chapter: "did not Allāh check one set of people by means of another there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, in which the name of Allāh is commemorated" (22:40). Ramadan reminds his readers of this important passage in his biography of the Prophet. A balance of forces is necessary, he says.

> Absolute power for one individual, one nation, or one empire would result in the annihilation of diversity among people and the destruction of various places of worship (the list ending with mosques), which here symbolize the pluralism of religions determined and willed by God. Hence, the confrontation of forces and resistance to human beings'

> temptation to war are presented, in an apparent paradox, as the promise of peace among human beings. (2007, 98)

The solution, instead, Ramadan argues, is to learn to live with diversity—not out of prudence or out of respect for some transient, contingent and transient human understanding of human dignity, but because the nature of Ultimate Being demands it. The solution is not to simply tolerate diversity, but to accept it and learn from it. Accepting the fact of diversity, however, does not mean tolerating all diversity. Some moral or ethical positions are clearly wrong. The question is, if diversity of all kinds is necessary, how can we know which of so many diverse positions to accept and which to reject? Should we not all just become absolute relativists? The answer, Ramadan implies, is to accept all those positions that are consistent with the primary requirements of humility and responsibility, and to reject all those that are the product of hubris and a will to dominate. This requires that we strike a balance between humility and responsibility, which necessarily and paradoxically calls for both decisive and humble action.

The question then is how to make this determination, how to find this balance. This, Ramadan says, requires dialogue. Indeed, as we saw earlier, for Ramadan, we can only know justice through dialogue. But the model of dialogue this idea supports is quite different from any of the models of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue currently on offer from most modern liberal theorists. It is a model premised not on the search for common, however untrue, ground, but precisely on the quest for truth itself—albeit with the recognition that diversity is necessary for us to know anything as true and thus we may never possess the truth completely. It is a model of dialogue premised on a single,

ostensibly sure, ontologically grounded conception of the human being. Humans, so conceived, have real moral duties to each other. They must, of logical necessity and not just for some promised reward, treat others the way they would like to be treated, even at the expense of their worldly utility and power. This is because, to do otherwise, is to be less than human, and thus relinquish the anthropological basis for any moral claims they may imagine they have against others. This can be shown to be a true, pre-conventional and non-conventional duty that does not presuppose faith by the bare fact that to act otherwise would be to attempt, in however small a way, to claim what is logically impossible: that Being itself is the product of your wholly distinct, individual will and forethought. While the attempt may have its worldly benefits, it takes a person further away from his true self such that he is less free. As Dostoevsky's Father Zossima would see, such a person would simply be a slave to what, in the absence of Being, is utterly meaningless. While individual humans may be so many channels for Being, they cannot, in themselves, be Being as such or claim existence itself as theirs alone. To be human is to humbly recognize the need for meaning and the fact that no one can possess it or create it exclusively. As Nasr puts it, "I do believe that the goal of man on earth is to go beyond himself and seek the Transcendent and the Sacred and that without the Transcendent and the Sacred, man is only accidentally man and lives below the fullness of human potentiality" (Nasr 2001, 759). To be less than human is to presume that any single aspect of existence, by itself, is sufficient for meaning. To someone who disagrees, the question must be asked: if you yourself do not ultimately exist because of any act of your

individual will, can any meaning you find, even if you imagine it is entirely from within yourself, ultimately be isolated from the rest of existence? The answer, logically, is no.

Thus, I conclude, Ramadan articulates a radical and compelling alternative to all modern liberal theories of pluralism and arguments for toleration of human diversity. This alternative, I have attempted to show, simultaneously addresses the question of justice and moral duties and the question of how to understand and deal with moral and ethical diversity. In fact, it highlights the necessary relationship between diversity and justice, which are linked in Ramadan's thought through humility, which itself is both the product of and coextensive with revelation.

Ramadan's philosophy of pluralism is radical because, unlike modern liberal theories, it is premised on a truth claim about the nature of ultimate reality. This is the claim that we can only be fully human to the extent that we are humble and sincerely attempt to respond to the call to be responsible and just. This call, in turn, can only be discerned through the humility that comes through the recognition of human imperfection, self-insufficiency, and diversity, which leads a person beyond themselves and, indeed, beyond existence, to that unifying principle underlying Being itself. Thus, we must learn to live and deal with diversity and each other—to accept others and their differences—not because doing so is simply prudent or respectful of some transient, contingent human understanding of human dignity, but because the nature of Ultimate Being, or God, demands it.

Ramadan's philosophy of pluralism is compelling, meanwhile, because, as I have

attempted to do, the claim about ultimate reality that it rests on can be shown to be true. This is because Ramadan's understanding of the divine and the nature of the relationship between Ultimate Being and all aspects of existence, including humans, does not presuppose faith and thus does not seem to rely on any private experience of faith or any human convention or institution. Moreover, Ramadan's understanding of the divine is such that, contrary to what appears to be the dominant perception in the West, God is not a wholly and utterly distinct being as such, and therefore reason and revelation are naturally complementary and there is no necessary tension or incompatibility between the two. I have argued that this understanding of the nature of the divine, revelation, and ultimate reality, and the moral anthropology Ramadan derives from it, while not necessarily entirely novel, represent something concrete and politically significant that we can learn from the revealed message of Islam. Here, Ramadan would surely agree with Nasr, who writes,

> I have never sought to be "original" in the modem sense of the term, nor to be unique. I have only tried to be original in the sense of returning to the Origin and I prefer anonymity to uniqueness. Only the Ultimate Truth is unique. If what I have written were original in the modem sense of being completely other than what had been said before, and unique in the sense of differing from the wisdom of the ages, I would disown it completely. My task in life has been not to be original but to return to the Origin and then to express truths of a universal and perennial nature in a contemporary language and in answer to new challenges posed by the nature of the world in which we live. (Ibid., 276)

This still leaves us with plenty of specific ethical questions, but it suggests a sure ground upon which these may be decided and, therewith, the possibility of a return to serious

discussions about a meaningful role for truth, not merely opinion or instrumental rationality, in politics.

Islam, Ramadan argues, affirms that we have real moral duties to each other and all of creation by virtue of our true nature as humble, self-insufficient creatures. Diversity, however, is essential to our awareness of our self-insufficient nature, and thus we must respect it, not out of prudence, some transient and fallible human idea of human dignity, or the inability to suppress all difference, but because it is only through diversity that we can realize the full and ontologically true meaning of being human. In attempting to demonstrate the ontological truth of this proposition without recourse to the concept of religion, and instead focusing of what in Ramadan's thought and in his understanding of the message of Islam can be shown to be true without presupposing any particular kind of faith, this text provides an example of how it may be possible to access arguments about the true nature of ultimate reality, which is to say metaphysical arguments, such that it may be possible to determine whether or not they are ontologically true in a philosophically coherent manner and thus coherently uphold the pre-conventional or non-conventional moral principles they imply. This is a direct response to modern liberal claims that it is impossible to take metaphysical claims seriously on their own terms. This shows that it is worthwhile to not simply ask what different people believe about ultimate reality, which is usually couched in religious terms, but to ask whether or not what people believe can be shown to be true in any sense and, if not, what the legitimate boundaries of acceptance of human moral and ethical diversity are.

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