

REFORM THEOLOGIAN: ISLAM, OTHER U.S. FAITHS HAVE MUCH IN COMMON



Faith & Values
Aziz Junjo
Special to The Seattle Times

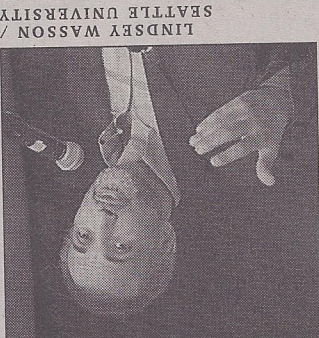
Two weeks ago, theologian, philosopher and renowned academic Tariq Ramadan visited Seattle, and I was honored to be granted a rare interview with him. Ramadan was here for a speaking engagement at Seattle University's School of Theology during its Spirituality Book Festival.

He encourages Muslims in the United States to identify themselves as Americans by nationality and as Muslims by religion. Muslims can be both fully Western and fully Muslim while sharing universal ethics and values, he says. The inclusiveness of all people in society is actually a hallmark of Islamic teaching; Muslims believe God has created us "as nations and tribes, that you may know each other" (Quran 49:13), not despise one another. Like all other citizens, Muslim Americans have chosen this home; a free, multicultural and multireligious society. We all have much to offer each other. By sharing of our common traditions, we benefit and contribute to our society.

Ramadan calls Islam an American religion, just as are Christianity and Judaism. Understanding Islam's values and ethics in the U.S. will invite genuine interest, respect and dialogue, he says. Further, Ramadan says, the portrayal of Islam in the media must not inhibit Muslims. He encourages Muslims to dispel irrational fears by being proactive within our society and a visible force for peace.

Muslims must act as "win-nesses" to their own messages and be open to self-examination and even criticism in order to improve conditions while displaying the courage to stand for what they believe. Muslims are not victims and must be courageous by practicing Islam in a thoroughly contemporary manner, he says. They need to be viewed as thoughtful contributors to society — as responsible citizens. Ramadan feels America represents a place where Muslims and all religions can flourish and live in harmony while raising their voices together for justice, dignity and mutual respect.

Islam's traditions of tolerance, dignity and respect are traits he feels we all share in the West. He says it is incumbent upon Muslims to impart these qualities to the societies in which they live. Ramadan believes misunderstanding of Islamic principles has nurtured suspicion in the West, both among Muslims and against Muslims, suspicion that causes divisive debates and even Islamophobia.



Tariq Ramadan, long denied entry to U.S., spoke Feb. 5 in Seattle.

Ramadan believes people in pluralistic societies such as ours must have knowledge of many faiths, appreciate individual differences and focus on our common, core values. He encourages Muslims to think critically, and he says they need to have a better understanding of their own religion, as well as a deeper understanding of the Western environment. As a creative intellectual, he has spent his life exploring Islamic teachings and principles to determine what's universal. Islam's traditions of tolerance, dignity and respect are traits he feels we all share in the West. He says it is incumbent upon Muslims to impart these qualities to the societies in which they live. Ramadan believes misunderstanding of Islamic principles has nurtured suspicion in the West, both among Muslims and against Muslims, suspicion that causes divisive debates and even Islamophobia.

However his fame as a Muslim academic has caused him some difficulties. In 2004, citing the "ideological exclusion provision" of the U.S. Patriot Act, the United States banned him from entering the country. His case was taken up by the American Civil Liberties Union, and after years of legal challenges, the ban was lifted by the Obama administration in January 2010 after the courts ruled the government had not made a convincing case for excluding him. Described as one of the foremost voices for reformation of Muslims' approach to their faith through place and standing-room-only, interfaith crowd at Seattle University's Campion Hall. Despite the recent protests in Egypt, he stayed focused on his topic, to encourage an integrative approach to citizenship in the West and promote interfaith dialogue that moves beyond tolerance

Most offices are closed Monday

Aziz Junjo is host of "Focus on Islam," a weekly cable-television show, and a frequent speaker on Islam. Readers may send feedback to faithcolumns@seattletimes.com