Synopsis: The popularity of Tariq Ramadan in Morocco

In the 1990s, Swiss activist and philosopher Tariq Ramadan started to attract the attention of a large, mainly Muslim audience, but also of non-Muslim politicians and journalists, through his ideas about Islam in Europe. He first participated in public debates in France, but later became known in the rest of Europe as well. His book *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* can be seen as a breakthrough. In this book, he argues that Islamic values and practices are not in any way contradictory to European laws and norms. Therefore, Muslims should claim their rights as citizens and should show how they can contribute to European societies. People should stop seeing European Muslims as either temporary inhabitants or as newcomers whose values are not compatible with democracy and human rights.

Lectures of Tariq Ramadan in Morocco attract large crowds. Why does an intellectual whose thinking is centered around the place of Islam in Europe is so popular in a majority Muslim country?

To find an answer to this question, I interviewed Moroccans, mainly students and young professionals, about how they practice their religion. As I supposed that the secularisation of the public space was leading to frictions between secular and religious practices, I used the themes Ramadan talks about in his lectures as an opening to talk about how my respondents fit their religious practices into their daily lives. I also attended several lectures by Ramadan in Morocco and read many discussions on social media, on pages where a video of Tariq Ramadan had been posted.

During my interviews, I discovered that tensions between secularity and religiosity were not the reason, or at least not the main reason, why members of the Moroccan middle class are interested in Ramadan. I realised that they had already learned how to deal with these issues. Although the distance between norm and practice has been growing due to the rapidly modernising and secularising public sphere, many Moroccans have learned from a young age how to live with seemingly contradictory sets of values (Bennani-Chraibi 1994; Ferrié 2004).

In Morocco, the dichotomy between the francophone elite and the arabophone popular classes does present a challenge to the new middle class, but it seems that this has more to do with politics than it has to do with religion. I argue that we are focusing too much on Islamic practices and texts when studying the popularity of Muslim leaders in different fields. This popularity should also be explained by their personal charisma and trajectory, as well as by the importance of politics and aesthetics. Instead of only looking at the discourses of these leaders, we should mainly be looking at the reasons why their followers are interested in them in the first place.

I begin this PhD by sketching the French and Moroccan religious and secular contexts, and how the position of Tariq Ramadan should be seen within these contexts. In chapter 1, I describe the rise to fame of Ramadan, firstly in France and then, through French media, in Morocco. In chapter 2, I reflect upon the discussion about possible tensions between tradition and modernity in Morocco, and I explain how a new middle class seems to be caught in between the working class and the French-speaking Moroccan elite. I then argue that part of the current generation of middle class Moroccan Muslims have more individualised Islamic practices, as they don’t recognise themselves in the national Islam used by the Moroccan monarchy to legitimise its power. In chapter 3, I borrow the concept ‘self-islam’ from Bidar (2008) to show how my respondents live a personalised, self-made religiosity, in which ethics and politics are more important than rituals. By displaying an Islamic
identity through their clothing or through the choice of specific themes on social media, they can easily connect to peers of the global Muslim community. As the dominant language on the worldwide web, English is the new lingua franca, and one of the reasons why Tariq Ramadan is highly appreciated in Morocco is that he masters both French and English - as well as Arabic, which gives him religious credibility. Social media are an important tool for spreading the buzz and it is essentially through YouTube and Facebook that Tariq Ramadan has become known in Morocco, which is why I talk at length about this phenomenon in chapter 4.

In chapter 5, I focus on charisma and celebrity cults, explaining how Tariq Ramadan uses his status as a controversial thinker to attract attention. He is clearly a part of what Boubakeur (2007) calls the ‘Islamic society of spectacle’ and what Haenni (2005) calls ‘market Islam’. I talk about this in chapter 6 and elaborate on the consequences for his position in Morocco and the acceptance or refusal of his opinions by his Moroccan audience and the Moroccan authorities.

The main issues which are coming back both in Tariq Ramadan’s discourse as well as in the comments of my respondents and in discussions on social media, are of a political kind. Both in France and in Morocco, many people don’t recognise themselves at all in the political elite. They are frustrated about corruption and about the lack of morality in politics. To give sense to their lives, Islam can be a useful ideology and a tool to create social cohesion.

In Morocco as well as in France, the colonial past continues to be a delicate issue which has not been sufficiently discussed since the independance of the former French colonies in North Africa. The political status quo which keeps many citizens blocked in a subordinate position is something that unites Moroccans in Morocco and in France, and it is the main reason why Tariq Ramadan is popular in both countries. While (French) Moroccans in France are seen as secondary citizens, the new middle class in Morocco feels that the upper class looks upon them with condescension. In the seventh and last chapter, I link the popularity of Ramadan in Morocco to these postcolonial issues.

Contrary to what I supposed when I started my research, Moroccans have no problem to integrate modern or Western practices in their daily lives. Even though they sometimes complain about the paradoxes that can be seen in the Moroccan public space, they have far more pressing issues to worry about, such as how they can have a successful career and how they can bring positive changes about within the Moroccan civil society.

Tariq Ramadan shows how you can put your Muslim belonging to the fore and put your principles into practice, while having a successful international career, and that is why he is liked. He is seen as a role model, who defends the honour of Muslims by explaining eloquently what Islam is about and by his exemplary behaviour. By choosing the best from different cultures and translating the Islamic texts and heritage into useful, practical life lessons, he embodies a successful, emancipated and decolonised cosmopolitan Muslim.