

## #LSEreligion Lecture: "Saying that we have to live together is not enough" – Tariq Ramadan

Earlier this month, **Professor Tariq Ramadan** gave a lecture at LSE entitled *Equal Rights and Equal Dignity of Human Beings* as part of LSE's Religion and the Public sphere *lecture series*. Here, ISoc President **Mahmoudat Sanni-Oba** reviews the lecture. A secular public sphere, Ramadan argues, must foster diversity and should be informed by – amongst other things – religion. Toleration isn't enough; to really live together we must be 'active' together.



Professor Tariq Ramadan's lecture on the equal rights and dignity of human beings is part of a series of lectures seeking to explore the role of religion in the public sphere. Ramadan provided both enlightening global perspectives and helpful applications for both British and international communities.

Ramadan's worldview that human beings have equal dignity and equal rights is informed both by the legal framework that we are all equal before the law and the Islamic belief that God has given dignity to all human beings. His lecture served as a discussion and exploration of the various implications of this belief.

Ramadan began by arguing that we have to give equal dignity and equal rights to people regardless of their religion and race. Just as a medical doctor does not ask for the religion or the race of his or her patient, he movingly states that "the poor has no religion, the oppressed has no religion, the refugee has no religion and the oppressor has no religion." Ramadan urges people to lend their support and stand in solidarity with every single human being regardless of their religion in the same way that we should be critical of oppressors regardless of their religion. His personal example here is particularly apt. In the advent of the Charlie Hebdo **terrorist attack** in Paris, Ramadan was asked by a journalist whether he was 'Je Suis Paris' to which he responded that if he were "Paris", he would have to be other countries including Beirut, Yemen, Iraq and Syria.

Ramadan continued on this track, contending that we should be careful not to nurture a sense of hierarchy in our emotional reactions and support for events around the world, especially in response to victims of violent extremism and terrorism. This argument is hard to ignore as journalists have argued that people have become **numb** to the suffering of those outside Western countries. In Syria, for example, the death toll has reached 470,000 according to a **report** on the

**New York Times** earlier in the year and it has been reported that **224 people** have been killed in the first week of Ramadan alone. The selective emotional outrage and the normalisation of the death of people in other countries glaringly contradict the concept that all human beings have equal dignity and equal rights. As Ramadan argues, this should extend to mean equal dignity of the dead and the oppressed.

Ramadan then went on to explore what implications the concept of equal dignity and equal rights has for our pluralistic society (in his opening remarks, Ramadan asserts that "pluralism is a fact"). Referring to the legal framework that all human beings are equal in the eyes of the law, Ramadan warns that we need to be careful that legal frameworks are not used to curtail the rights and the dignity of people that we perceive to be threats or the 'other'. In the UK, the government's counter-terrorism strategy, **Prevent**, has been criticised for enabling such curtailments. Last month the police chief leading Prevent said the programme risked creating "thought police", whilst an alliance of civil society actors warned Prevent would "**alienate communities and undermine free speech**". On university campuses, there is concern that for both religious and politically active students, university spaces will no longer be "free". This leads to a broader discussion about secularism and its role in eliminating religious thoughts and visibility in the public sphere.



Professor Ramadan was in dialogue with LSE Director Professor Craig Calhoun. Image: Maria Moore Photography

Here, Ramadan argues that secularism was created not with the intent to eliminate religion in the public sphere but rather as a way to enable diversity and facilitate the co-existence of different religions. He goes further by stating that the implementation of secularism in our society now seems to imply the invisibility of religion. Using the example of Muslims, he claimed that acceptable Muslims tend to be the invisible ones. Ramadan instead advocates for a secularism that fosters diversity as he claims religion can contribute meaningfully to civil discussions.

I agree that religion can inform public discourse on discussions that Ramadan describes as ones concerning "the meaning of life and quest for meaning". Religious views and thoughts can help to

shape and contribute to conversations about the ethics of money, the way we deal and interact with consumerist society, our relationship with nature and the environment, and deciphering the goals and objectives of life. By sidelining religion to the private sphere, we risk losing the value of the diversity of thoughts that religion can bring to these discussions.

Ramadan concluded by advocating for interfaith dialogue that addresses the centre of how we approach life and explores our respective philosophies, rather than existing on the periphery or at the practical level. He stresses that superficiality needs to be avoided in these dialogues and that it is necessary for the discussions to be inclusive not only of a diversity of religious people, but atheists and agnostics too. He places emphasis on the process of building universal values and the need to accept different paths to universal values that are shared, rationally derived and understood by rationalists, atheists, mystics and religious people alike. The objective is to enable people to work together on common values, projects and issues, from the environment to social justice.

Ramadan was critical of public discourse around the failure of multiculturalism, especially by politicians, that has led to the belief that rather than fostering a real engagement in civil society we only need to be able to live together. Here is where two notable moments of the lecture came. Firstly, when Ramadan argued that 'to tolerate each other is not enough' and secondly, when he passionately stated 'saying we have to live together is not enough for me. There's no way to live together if we don't do together, work together and be involved together. The real way of living is to be active together.'



In summary, Tariq Ramadan urges individuals and societies to come together on the common ground of the equal dignity and equal rights of human beings and presents a convincing argument of the need for more knowledge of religion and history, as well as the need for shared memories and creativity in the way we deal with each other. The inclusion of religion in our public sphere benefits us not only as individuals, but also collectively as a society, and can contribute meaningfully to the way we live our lives.

### About the author



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