Making Space for Islam and Muslims in Secular Land
Epistemological and Experiential Practices

Cheikh Anta Babou

Islam requires the believer to observe both orthodoxy and orthopraxis. It is a way of life that resists confinement to specific spaces and aims to govern the entirety of a Muslim's life, in both private and public spheres. The idea of consecrated sacred space is foreign to Islam; Allah has made the whole earth a mosque for Muslims to pray. Throughout history, most Muslims have been freely able to live and practice their religion in the public realm because they have lived in majority Muslim societies or in societies ruled by Muslims.

The idea of *dar al-islam* refers to those spaces where Muslims enjoy political and cultural hegemony, while *dar al-ḥarb* depicts spaces deemed hostile to Islam and Muslims. The dispersal of Muslims beyond *dar al-islam* and the formation of Muslim minority communities in non-Muslim contexts forced Muslim thinkers to address the relationships between space, faith, and identity in Islam. Some have discouraged Muslims from settling in non-Muslim lands, and others have affirmed the duty of Muslims to migrate from lands that have fallen into the hands of non-Muslims.

More pragmatic scholars have tried to bridge the rigid boundaries between *dar al-islam* and *dar al-harb* to pave paths of accommodation for Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim lands. The idea of *dar al-ahd* (land of truce) or *dar al-sulh* (land of contract, land of treaty) serves this purpose. While being outside the realm of Islam, these spaces are deemed appropriate for Muslims to live in because they provide peace and protection for their faith.

Cheikh Anta Babou is Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania, where, since 2002, he has been teaching the history of Muslim communities in West Africa. He is the author of Fighting the Greater Jihad *(Ohio University Press, 2007) and* The Muridiyya on the Move *(Ohio University Press, 2021).*

Note: This essay served as the keynote address for the Muslim Student Association alumni fundraising banquet in Philadelphia, February 4, 2023.

It is essential to note that the concepts of *dar al-islam, dar al-harb*, or *dar al-sulh* are not found in the Qur'an or the Sunnah; they emerged in the context of the expansion of the Islamic caliphate, which occurred over a century after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. They are, therefore, dated human constructs of Muslim scholars trying to make sense of the world as they envisioned it.

These efforts by Muslims to devise paths of accommodation of Islam in non-Muslim lands continue today and have gained a sense of urgency in the era of globalization, the rise of Islamophobia, and the formation of Muslim minority communities in the West. Muslim thinkers, particularly those living in Europe and in the United States, have taken up the challenge to develop new interpretations of Islam's sacred law in order to reconcile *sharia* law and Western secular law to make it possible for Muslim minorities in the West to fulfill their aspirations of being entirely Muslim while enjoying the rights and obligations of full citizenship.

These interpretations, which I refer to as epistemological practices, encompass *ibadaat* (worship) as well as *muhamallaat* (*sharia*-regulated social transactions), and primarily concern areas such as family law and the economy, as well as, to some extent, rituals. In addition to epistemological realignments, other Muslims have sought reconciliation through experiential practices that relate to the use of space and the promotion of ecumenism, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue.

Two key legal principles undergird Muslim scholars' efforts to adapt *sharia* to changing social conditions over time and space: These principles are (1) *maqasid al-deen*, also known as *maqasid al-shariah*, which refer to the "ultimate objectives of God's revelations," and (2) *maslaha,* or the common good. The concept of *maqasid*, first developed by Imam Al-Ghazzali, is rooted in the idea that *maslaha* was God's purpose in revealing the divine law, and its specific aim was the preservation of the five essentials of the human being: (1) religion, (2) life, (3) the intellect, (4) lineage, and (5) property.

Over time, Muslim jurists have developed differing views on the role that these two principles should play in the interpretations of Islam's sacred scriptures. In the past, some viewed them as secondary principles that should be constrained by scriptural sources, such as the Qur'an and the Sunna, while others regarded them as foundational, independent sources of law that could override specific references based on the literal meaning of the scripture. In our time, the latter view is championed in various forms by prominent scholars, particularly those residing in the West.

These scholars have expanded the scope of *maqasid* to address contemporary concerns, including women's rights, justice and freedom, human dignity, and human rights, as well as the religious lives of Muslim minorities in the West. They have coined the concept "*fiq* of the minority" to provide a framework for reconciling *sharia* law with the secular law that governs the lives of Muslim minorities living in Western countries. They urge Muslims to evaluate their normative

statements over and against the *maqasid al-sharia*. This will require the inflection of these norms across differing social settings to accommodate the differing aspirations of Muslims, especially those living outside of Muslim majority countries. The ultimate goal is to help Muslims organize their everyday lives in ways that align with their conception of piety while upholding the core principles of Western civil and constitutional orders.

Here, I will focus particularly on the work of Tariq Ramadan, perhaps one of the most prominent theoreticians of "*fiq* of the minority." A Swiss-born French national, Ramadan is also the grandson of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Ramadan's work focuses on two major issues: (1) the reform of Islam, based on the classical sources of the Qur'an and Sunna but whose principles are appropriately reinterpreted considering the modern world; and (2) the legitimate role that Muslims should play within contemporary Western societies.

Ramadan identifies two main challenges that confront Muslims living as minorities in Western countries who are caught between the twin dilemmas of religious accountability and secularist acceptability: Some of these Muslims may be tempted by secularism in their yearning for acceptance in Western society, and the result will be loss of their religious values and Muslim identity; and (2) others may yield to the pressure of a conservative Islam that rejects Western culture and promotes withdrawal from the public sphere. Ramadan's research is an effort to enable European Muslims to participate as full members in Western society, while simultaneously affirming their Muslim identity, since he sees no fundamental conflict between the values of Islam and those that shape Western civilization.[1]

Ramadan questions the validity and value of the classical concepts of *dar al-islam* and *dar al-harb*. He proposes the concept of *dar al-shahada*, or the abode of testimony, which he views as more reflective of the reality of Muslim life in the West. Ramadan elaborates this concept in six points:[2]

1. Reciting the *shahada* provides the basis for a Muslim's sense of identity as a Muslim—one who accepts and believes God's revelation and is a full member of the *umma*.
2. The *shahada* also provides the basis on which the other pillars of Islam can be performed with integrity.
3. The concept of *shahada* implies that Muslims should not be prevented from affirming their Muslim identity and should be allowed to perform all the regulations required by their faith.

---

1 Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 74–75.

2 Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 74–75.

4. This concept also stipulates that Muslims are people who respect all of God's creation and all other human beings, including "absolute faithfulness to agreements, contracts, and treaties that have been explicitly or silently entered into."[3]

5. Muslims are called upon to bear witness to their faith, presenting and explaining what Islam is all about. This incorporates the concept of *da'wa* (proselytizing).

6. Living out *shahada* includes both verbal witness and witness through good deeds. "To bear the *shahada* means to be engaged in society in every area where a need makes itself felt. . . . It also means being engaged in the process that might lead to positive reform, whether of institutions or of the law."[4]

Referring to the Prophetic saying that God has made the whole earth a mosque for Muslims, Ramadan suggests that "wherever a Muslim, saying [the *shahada*], is in security and is able to perform his/her fundamental religious duties, he/she is *at home*." Living in *dar al-shahada* also means being fully involved in one's non-Muslim community and contributing to it as a fellow citizen. Muslims should "establish places of real encounter, dialogue, and commitment 'together' in the name of values held in common by virtue of sharing a citizenship lived in an egalitarian fashion." For Ramadan, "it is impossible to live in autarchy, to make the testimony of faith, pray and fast, and go to pilgrimage only, far from men and worrying about no one except oneself. . . . To be with God is tantamount to being with men; to carry faith is tantamount to carrying the responsibility of a continuous social commitment."[5]

While Ramadan's ideas and practical suggestions have become central in our time, where the religious life of minority Muslims in the West faces increasing scrutiny, they are not new. They echo debates between so-called Muslim reformists and modernist Muslims in the wake of European imperial conquest of Muslim countries from the late nineteenth century. They are also reflected in the experience of Muslims in West Africa who lived in spaces ruled by followers of indigenous religions or by European colonizers. Here I would like to briefly refer to the Suwarian tradition and the teachings of Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba, which constitute good examples of experiential practices developed by Muslim minorities in sub-Saharan Africa to adapt to life in a non-Muslim land.

Elhaj Salim Suwari, the founder of the Suwarian tradition, spent the earlier part of his life in Macina, the current Republic of Mali, in the sixteenth

---

3   Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 74.

4   Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 74–75.

5   Tariq Ramadan, *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity* (The Islamic Foundation, 2008), 144.

century—a time that coincided with the collapse of the Muslim medieval empires of Mali and Songhay. None of Elhaj Salim's writings seem to have survived, but information gleaned from local hagiological texts in Arabic and local languages can help sketch his biography and teachings.

Elhaj Salim is described as a highly learned and pious Muslim. He performed the pilgrimage to Mecca numerous times. Sources refer to him as Imam and Wali Allah (friend and neighbor of God), as well as the leader of the Jakhanke/Jula community. Elhaj Salim's teachings were instrumental in shaping the identity of a diaspora of Jula Muslim traders and scholars that spanned West Africa, including lands governed by non-Muslims. Like most West Africans, he was a follower of the *Maliki Madhhab* for most legal opinions, but "in matters of Quranic exegesis, [he] followed al-Suyuti, who was a Shafi'i. He found the latter's relatively liberal attitudes toward non-Muslims congenial."[6]

Elhaj Salim's teachings represent the foundation of a pedagogical tradition that has stood the test of time; they continue to shape behavior to this day. These teachings concern primarily the issues of conversion, religion and the state, the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, and jihad. These same questions, as we have seen, are at the center of the preoccupations of contemporary Muslim scholars living in the West.

Elhaj Salim taught that unbelief was the result of ignorance rather than wickedness. He argued that it is God's will for some people to remain in a state of ignorance longer than others. True conversion, in his view, occurs only when God wills it. Therefore, coercing people to convert is tantamount to refusing to accept God's design for the world. Elhaj Salim condemned the *jihad* of the sword against unbelievers as an unacceptable method of conversion. For him, recourse to arms is permissible only in self-defense when the very existence of the Muslim community is threatened by unbelievers.

Regarding the relationship between religion and the state, Elhaj Salim taught that Muslims may accept the authority of non-Muslim rulers and even support it so long as this enables them to live their lives in accordance with their religion. For him, a non-Muslim government is preferable to non-government or chaos.

Elhaj Salim inspired a pedagogy of conversion based on patience and exemplary behavior. This pedagogy requires Muslims, wherever they reside, to embody the highest values and ideals, thereby representing attractive examples for people to emulate when, according to God's will, the time for conversion arrives. Finally, not unlike Ramadan, Elhaj Salim emphasizes the central role of education in ensuring that Muslims observe the law without error.

---

6   See Ivor Wilks, "The Juula and the Expansion of Islam in the Forest," in Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, eds., *The History of Islam in Africa* (Ohio University Press, 2000), 93–115, 97.

Elhaj Salim Suwari's teachings were preserved and disseminated through networks of scholars and teachers linked by *Isnads*, or a chain of authority. These scholars carried the legacy of the Suwari Islamic tradition for half a millennium and successfully aided the peaceful expansion of Islam, which transitioned from a minority to a majority religion in regions of West Africa where the religion had been resisted for centuries.

It is possible to discern an epistemological kinship between the idea of *fiq* of the minority, the Suwari tradition, and the thought and practice of Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba. Bamba was a Sufi. Sufi theology may offer the most compelling articulation of a theology of hospitality and tolerance toward non-Muslim cultures.

Perhaps one of the most salient features of Sufism is the distinction between the worlds of *batin* (the hidden, internal) and that of *zahir* (the manifest, external). The Sufi's emphasis on *batin* has important theological and organizational implications. Perhaps the most consequential of these implications is the suggestion that God can be known through means other than the divine revelations enshrined in the Qur'an. Because the world of *batin* does not lend itself to discursive scrutiny, Sufi theology tends to favor a universalist perception of religion that emphasizes sameness rather than the differences that an exoteric and legalist reading of Islam would encourage. I am arguing that the world of *batin* represents a universal spiritual canvas that provides space for the expression of diverse religious traditions.

In their quest for closeness to God, Sufis long for one of the greatest rewards—the acquisition of *ma'rifa*, or gnosis. *Ma'rifa* is knowledge beyond the book, which God gives to whom he wishes, but particularly to those who have succeeded in befriending him (Wali Allah). *Ma'rifah* is experiential knowledge acquired through *ilham* (inspiration) or *kashf* (unveiling). *Ma'rifa* is therefore unmediated knowledge that escapes the strictures of nature and human intellect. It is, in fact, always received in a state of altered consciousness.

For Sufis, the immediacy of this knowledge gives *ma'rifa* certain superiority over other forms of religious knowledge mediated by the senses or reason. *Ilham* and *kashf* are the tools through which the Sufi unveils the hidden meanings of the Qur'an and, in so doing, avails itself of religio-theological openness. *Ma'rifah* enables Sufis to transcend the bounds of scripture's knowledge, underscoring the view that fundamental truths can be expressed in multiple religions.

This pluralistic theological positioning explains why Sufis tend to stress the connection between Islam and other religions. This logic has led some Sufis, such as Jalāl al-dīn Rumi and the medieval Andalusian Sufi Ibn Sabin, to challenge the Islamic monopoly on knowledge of God and to consider the possibility that divine truth can also be found in other religions. Such theological innovations are only possible because of the unmooring of Islam from rigid legalistic

structures and the Sufis' emphasis on both God's immanence and the possibility of personal and individual relationship with Him.

Sufis are able to make the theological synthesis and cultural compromises that explain their spiritual agility because they have always strived to keep their autonomy from the state. Ghazzali's affirmation that the best *ulamas* are those who do not know and are not known by the Sultan offers the best illustration of the Sufis' suspicion of state power.

Most Sufis favored escapism, sometimes adopting a peripatetic lifestyle and taking their message to remote places, away from the center of power or to lands where the state's influence was weak. In doing so, they have enjoyed the freedom to model their religion in conformity to their idiosyncratic inspirations, defying the conformism of *ulamas* and their state sponsors.

Ahmadu Bamba was one of those charismatic Sufis who founded his own community in Senegal in the late nineteenth century. Like Sufis who preceded him, Bamba drew inspiration from Sufi theology and philosophy to model his own community. Two key concepts, among others, provide the philosophical underpinning of pluralism in the Muridiyya: *Maslaha* and ecumenism. Below, I will focus particularly on Bamba's ecumenism.

Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba's ecumenism reflects Sufi universalism as discussed above. It is rooted in his *Iman* (faith) and in the Sufi idea of the unity of creation, which implies that all human beings originated from one soul. And God has endowed humanity with reason so that human beings can distinguish between good and evil, and He has made it their duty everywhere to recommend what is good and to discourage what is forbidden. Because the human is, in God's eyes, the single being to deserve to be entrusted with reason and intelligence, he is *khalifat ul Lah fil ard*, or representative of God on earth. So, whether one is a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew, a Buddhist, or a pagan, they all belong to the same family—the human family—and they are all *khalifat ul Lah fil ard*.

The ecumenism of Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba is reflected in both his interactions with people of other faiths and his relationships with fellow Muslims. It was logical that Bamba's absolute trust in God should also translate into openness of mind and religious tolerance. He repudiated the wholesale condemnation of people because of their beliefs and instead used forgiveness as therapy against violence. Returning to Senegal after more than seven years of exile in Equatorial Africa, unjustly meted out to him by the French colonial rulers of Senegal, he proclaimed that he had forgiven all his enemies for the sake of God.

Conclusion

Islam is a missionary religion without missionaries. Ulamas and thinkers have historically shouldered the task of connecting Muslim communities across time

and space and building bridges with people of other faiths. They have achieved this by developing socially pragmatic forms of reasoning that enabled the creation of innovative Islamic institutions. I have tried to explain how, in the present context of growing Muslim minority communities in the West, scholars are revisiting old concepts and theorizing new ones to pave paths of accommodation for devoted Muslim citizens of the West who aspire to live according to the tenets of their faith.

This process of creative thinking is fraught with controversies. It is dismissed by both Islamophobists— who promote the idea of a clash of civilizations and the antinomy between Islam and Western culture—and conservative Muslims, who see any attempt to reconcile Islamic norms with Western values as surrender to secularism and a betrayal of Islam.

It is refreshing, however, to note the growing body of scholarship produced by Muslims on both sides of the debate, which makes their case. We seem to be witnessing a new revival of the culture of debate and disagreement that has historically stimulated the production of religious knowledge, which in turn has powered the development of Islam.