
The very first glimpse of *Islam and Other Faiths* by the late Ismail Raji al Faruqi filled me with excitement and curiosity. Here was an outstanding Muslim scholar venturing into a field that is at once virgin and full of intellectual promise. I had read only two books by him before: *Tawhid: Its Relevance for Thought and Life* and *The Islamization of Knowledge*. The contents of the former are in tune with the tenor of the papers which comprise the present book, being, *inter alia*, a philosophical statement of the unity of God and its implications. The Muslims in the western countries are truly in great need of studies such as the present one that would help them deconstruct and subsequently reconstruct the role they should play as minorities.

My study of the present collection of papers, which have been painstakingly selected and edited by Ataullah Siddiqui, reinforced the already positive impression that I had of the author. Al Faruqi stands out as one of the very few Muslim philosophers and scholars who earnestly attempted to interact with Islam’s two sister faiths, Judaism and Christianity, and articulated the theoretical foundations of such interaction.

Ismail al Faruqi obtained his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Indiana in USA. Likewise, he spent several years at al-Azhar University in Cairo, a foremost centre of traditional Islamic learning. He thus had the advantage of having deep knowledge of two different intellectual traditions, the Islamic and the Western. Enriched by these diverse scholastic backgrounds, al Faruqi attempted to articulate the Islamic worldview and to fortify it by presenting an array of rational and scientific arguments in support of it. In the West such an undertaking would be extremely difficult to accomplish because people have come to be concerned only with that which is empirically verifiable. At least this is what all those who are part of the Western intellectual tradition are taught to subscribe to. While reading al Faruqi, I was struck by the sharp difference between his philosophical arguments and approach and the approach of the contemporary Western intellectuals. As religion scarcely plays any role in contemporary Western social analysis, it was exciting to be exposed to a profoundly scholastic work written from the perspective of a knowledgeable scholar and thinker who strongly subscribed to a religious worldview.

Al Faruqi spent the last part of his life in North America where he taught at a number of Canadian and American universities. In his early career he seems to have been less concerned with the spiritual aspect of Islam than in the
later years of his life, the years during which he richly contributed to the academia. These were the years when al Faruqi zealously engaged in the Islamization of Knowledge project, the purpose being to arouse Muslims to become active participants in Man’s intellectual life and contribute to it from an Islamic perspective. Although The Islamization of Knowledge of al Faruqi might now appear to some as not all that mature, one has to remember what a sensation it created about two decades ago when it was first published and found its way to Muslim academics all over the world. I also recalled, while reading this book, the violent and merciless manner in which al Faruqi was murdered in 1986. I also thought how much more he could have contributed to Islamic thought had he lived longer, being a scholar and thinker of the calibre and commitment that he was.

While some of the papers in the collection are bound to be viewed in the context of the time to which al Faruqi belonged, there is no doubt that al Faruqi was far ahead of his contemporaries, particularly in the realm of inter-religious dialogue. Many of the ideas which he articulates in the book as regards how to deal with adherents of other faiths are certainly new and refreshing. They are also of vital relevance to the present-day Muslims some of who have lately begun to engage in inter-faith dialogue.

Having said this, I would also like to express some of my critical observations about the present work. I note, first of all, that al Faruqi’s papers reflect the growth and development of his ideas and attitudes over time, and at times the change that I noticed was, according to my judgement, not very wholesome. His papers of the 1960s seem to be less emotional and are more in accord with the Western scholastic tradition. But in the articles that he wrote later, especially those in the late 1970s and 1980s, we find al Faruqi emotionally involved to a much greater extent than before. This is borne out by his writings, including some of the papers which form part of this book. For instance, in one of the papers which he wrote in the sixties, he says that “exclusivism, so often a mark of religion, is as bad as proselytism. Both religions assert that they have the truth, which is logically impossible. Christianity and Islam must be interested in each other’s claims by means of dialogue, which is the altruistic extension of both religions. Only through dialogue will the two religions ever be united in the religion of God (may He be Glorified and Exalted) and truth” (p. 241). However, in the paper entitled “The Role of Islam in Global Inter-Religious Dependence” written in the 1980s, al Faruqi’s own attitude seems to have become somewhat exclusivist. Also, his attitude towards Judaism as a religion seems to lack the tolerance which he shows towards Christianity. I have a strong feeling that al Faruqi’s views regarding Zionism, a political ideology, had a negative influence on his attitude to the Judaic faith.
Another matter of interest in al Faruqi’s writings is his view of exegesis, or one might rather say, hermeneutics. In the article “Divine Transcendence and its Expressions” while discussing the question of God’s attributes al Faruqi says that “speaking, writing or interpreting allegorically is extremely dangerous because, by definition, it has no rules. Once the words of language are shaken loose from the meanings which lexicography has been attached to them, nothing can stop anybody from investing them with any other meaning” (p. 50). This statement seems to reflect the salaf point of view with an emphasis on bilā kayf (“without asking how”), requiring that one should not attempt to interpret God’s attributes. To take a concrete instance: God’s Hand has been mentioned in the Qur’an. Now, how do we interpret this? The right attitude, according to this line of thinking, is to affirm that God’s Hand is a reality though, as human beings, there is no way for them to have any clear idea as to what that Hand is like.

As al Faruqi develops his arguments concerning exegesis, he goes further in the same direction which makes his statements problematic. He says that “exegesis, or the reading of meanings into words not lexicographically associated with them, ruins any text it attacks. It transvaluates its values, transforms its categories, and transfigures its meanings” (p. 50). In this statement, al Faruqi comes forth as a “realist of concepts”. If he goes beyond talking about the attributes of God, as I believe he does, how can he explain the development of socio-religious concepts when meanings, as we know, are linked to attitudes prevalent in a society. An example of this is the concept qawāmah (see the Qur’an 4: 34) which has been understood in various ways, at different times and places, depending on the dispositions of the interpreters. From being a concept signifying male power and supremacy, it has lately come to be understood by a number of Muslims, both men and women, to mean that the distinct function of the males is to provide protection and service to the family.

In view of the above, how can we decide about the “original” meaning of the term qawāmah? In my opinion, it is hardly possible to find any such “original meaning”. It is true that we have fragments of Ibn ‘Abbās’ early commentary of the Qur’ānic verses. Do his comments provide the “original meanings” of the Qur’ānic terms and concepts? In my opinion, the answer is ‘no’, for Ibn Abbas’ commentary, notwithstanding our deep respect for Ibn ‘Abbās and his work, must be regarded as no more than a human attempt to understand the Word of God. In like manner, the interpretations of the Qur’ān by scholars in the subsequent centuries which were influenced by Ibn Abbās’ or other scholars’ understanding of the Qur’ān, represent, after all, human efforts to understand the Book.

My further question on the subject is: is it necessary that we should
always look for “original meanings” of the Qur’anic terms and concepts? Is it not true that it is precisely the flexibility of the Qur’an which makes it universal? Cultural differences have always existed and these differences will continue to exist. The breadth of opinion which characterizes Islamic philosophy and jurisprudence indicates the Muslim scholars’ tolerance of each other in the relatively early periods of our history. Al Faruqi’s categorical statements in this paper represent, in my opinion, a less tolerant attitude insofar as it assumes certain interpretations of the Qur’an to be definitive and valid for all times and places. I have unfortunately discovered that such an attitude is fairly common in the contemporary Islamic discourse. I believe it to be a characteristic of the contemporary times with its stress on “one truth”. It is because of this that Muslims have come to consider not only God as “the truth”, but also tend to regard the way or the method they follow in their intellectual efforts as “the truth”.

Notwithstanding these critical observations, my overall impression of al-Faruqi’s book is a positive one. His way of analysing other religions, particularly in his earlier writings, is enlightening. In this age Muslims have to learn how to deal with other religions with greater tolerance than they display at the present. This seems to be needed because there are certain elements in the Islamic da’wah (call to Islam) in our time which are liable to hurt the sensibilities of non-Muslims. It seems that, among other things, this has something to do with the change during the last two centuries or so in the power relations. When Muslims were in a position of power, they had self-confidence arising from the fact of their having an upper hand in the world. Hence, they felt no need to artificially bolster their self-confidence by adopting cheap methods of proselytization. In contemporary times, however, at times our low self-esteem seems to make us disregard our own tradition of tolerance towards others, including “the People of the Book”. By crudely and insensitively hammering that Islam is better than other faiths we are presumably trying to exalt own our seemingly declining self-esteem. But we must ask ourselves: is it justified, according to Islamic standards, to do so?

These questions came to my mind in the course of reading the book, and I believe it is of great value for Muslims to seriously engage such questions. They are today in the midst of a great change and in order to build up a strong Muslim ummah it is imperative to address such fundamental issues as to how we should deal with human beings of other faiths or people who have no faith at all.

To return to the book, I would like to compliment the editor for writing a very useful ‘introduction’ to al Faruqi’s life and thought. This considerably facilitates the reader in following the contents of the book. For let us not forget, al Faruqi’s language tends to be both abstract and highly intellectual.
This, of course, is in addition to some complex and subtle ideas and concepts which have been discussed in the book, and which might not be quite easy for an ordinary reader to understand.

*Islam and other Faiths* is a book which should find a place on every Muslim academic’s bookshelf. It would also be highly interesting for those non-Muslims who are concerned with the study of religion. For al Faruqi was one of the few Muslims who took pains to write extensively about religions in general, and his writings provide the reader with a Muslim perspective on the study of religion.

Anne Sofie Roald

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Almost a decade after the publication of *The Sufi Path of Knowledge,* William Chittick has fulfilled his promise made in that book about a volume on Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “Cosmology” in the form of a highly readable but synthetic account of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s teachings.

The publication of *The Self-Disclosure of God,* in “SUNY Series in Islam” under the editorship of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, not only brings to fruition a decade of work and reflections of its author but also marks an important event in the translation of the works of one of Islam’s most profound muḥaqiq, as Chittick likes to call Muḥyī’l-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn al-‘Arabī (560/1165—638/1240).

Though thematically related, one immediately notes a major difference in the two works. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* was Chittick’s labour of love in the making, *The Self-Disclosure of God* is his more confident walk in the delightful garden of al-Shaykh al-Akbar’s imaginal world. One also notes a certain clarity achieved through a consistent process of reflection in the period between the publication of the two works. Thus, one notes that certain key

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2. “Imaginal”, a word bequeathed to us by late Henry Corbin, is distinct from “imaginary”, which is no more than our individual fantasies. See “Introduction” in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, ix.