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Muslim-Christian Engagement in the Twentieth Century

The Principles of Interfaith Dialogue and the Work
of Isma'il al-Faruqi. London & New York: I.B. Tauris,
2015. 336 pages, £68.00, ISBN: 978-1848855090.

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Perhaps a handful of twentieth-century Muslims stand out as having made a significant contribution to formal interreligious dialogue. Among them one of the most intriguing and unlikely is the Palestinian scholar who is the subject of this excellent and informative book, Isma'il al-Faruqi. Part of what made him an improbable practitioner of dialogue was the coincidence in him of a somewhat rebarbative character and an admirable determination to attend to the on-going agony of his Palestinian compatriots and of oppressed Muslims everywhere from his exile in the United States. More problematic than these factors, however, was his seeming inability to approach Christians and Jews with an attitude of openness to learning from them. Instead, he constructed his own account of the essence of the two religions and then proceeded, in effect, to invite their adherents to Islam. His *da'wa*, it must be admitted, was of an unusual kind, drawing on his own idealised and, indeed, highly rationalistic understanding of Islam. All in all, whilst there can be no doubt as to the significance and thoughtfulness of his contribution, bringing, as it did, a strong and, to some, compelling ethical dimension to contemporary Muslim appraisals of Christianity and its alleged malaise, nevertheless, it is far from clear that it was either constructive or fruitful.

Al-Faruqi's intellectual endeavours were not limited to the interreligious area. He was also the creative mind behind an even more ambitious agenda which flourished in the late 1970s and 1980, the so-called "Islamization of Knowledge" project which he pursued through the International Institute of Islamic Thought, an organisation which he helped found. The guiding intuition was that Muslims needed to take back the epistemological initiative by reclaiming the sciences, both social and natural, purging occidental academic disciplines of their (Christian and/or secular) ideological axioms and replacing them with solid Islamic foundations. Al-Faruqi's was not the only methodology put forward to achieve this end but it was probably the least interested in the Islamic legacy, preferring to derive simple principles directly from the Qur'ān rather than rediscovering and appropriating neglected scholarly texts. The project as a whole was a failure and a large part of the blame for the doomed enterprise must surely lie with al-Faruqi's dogmatic triumphalism.

Was he, then, an unusually gifted fanatic or a true intellectual? My reading of him, it must by now be clear, favours the former view. His work on Christianity, embodied in his *Christian Ethics* (1968) is, to some extent, original but hardly conducive to mutual understanding. It is dependent on an earlier work, *Urubah and Religion* (1962) in which he set out his own novel, not to say eccentric thesis on Arabness and its close relationship to the essence of the three Abrahamic faiths. In both of these texts, one has the impression that the writer's mind was already firmly made up before he commenced his research; in that sense, it is hard to take him seriously as an intellectual. The principles which justify his dismissal of the validity of actually existing Judaism and Christianity may be unprecedentedly creative but they are also tailor-made, designed to end in dismissiveness. His objection to Christianity focuses on what he sees as a depressingly grim anthropology based on sinfulness and depravity and which gives

no motivation to the believer to improve herself morally. It contrasts, predictably, with an Islamic account of the human which is positive, dynamic and fosters lively moral consciousness and observance. In this foregrounding of a supposed polar opposition between the two religions' anthropologies, al-Faruqi has been singularly influential. Yet, quite aside from the blinkered idealism of his perception of Islam, it is easy to see that al-Faruqi's grasp of Christianity is regrettably partial, excessively Protestant and apparently oblivious to the doctrine of the Resurrection of Christ.

This book does a fine job of telling al-Faruqi's story and describing in great detail the components and evolution of his thought on matters religious, meta-religious and interreligious. It also explains how it came about that a Muslim who devoted himself assiduously to the task of promoting and participating in interreligious dialogue was himself so very undialogical in his approach. The first chapter deals with his life and formative experiences, incorporating telling anecdotes about his academic career in the United States and the reactions of some of his colleagues to his presence and ideas. The main body of the text, however, is a set of three chapters which systematically analyse the development and application of his unique methodology. It is a *tour de force* in that the author, Charles D. Fletcher, has meticulously examined and analysed each relevant text and noted every subtle development of al-Faruqi's thinking. It is also, for this very reason, heavy-going; setting out on the 120 odd pages of this analysis requires the reader to trust that the effort will yield dividends. In spite of the fine quality of Fletcher's scholarship, I am not entirely convinced that it does for the simple reason that the Palestinian's thinking is a dead-end, his vision of Islam far-removed from reality, his understanding of the two other monotheisms skewed and his disciples practically non-existent.

Fletcher's generosity of heart goes beyond painstaking analysis, though, extending to an expository style which, time and again, gives his subject the benefit of the doubt. But then the gloves come off in the penultimate chapter in which Fletcher deals a series of lethal blows to the intellectual edifice on which he has just lavished so much care. The charges are severe: circular reasoning, a confused methodology, forced textual readings, dogmatic assertions masquerading as rational principles *etc.* The criticisms are well-targeted and devastating, even as one notes in passing an occasional lack of conceptual clarity.

There is a sense in which the subject of this book does not require too penetrating a light to be shed upon his musings for them to reveal their shortcomings. This is particularly evident in the chapter I most enjoyed which deals with al-Faruqi's dialogue encounters during the years 1969-1986. It includes a long quotation from the notorious Chambésy consultation of 1976 during which a stubborn al-Faruqi clashed with a pushy Kenneth Cragg. This and other conversations put on display the uncompromising and, it must be said, one-dimensional stance of this feisty activist, a man for whom dialogue seems to have entailed the construction of walls rather than the building of bridges.

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