

Editorial

The Martin Luther of Islam?: Ismail al-Faruqi's Impact on Contemporary Islamic Intellectualism

Although I did not study under Isma'il al-Faruqi (d. 1986) directly as did scholars like John Esposito and many others, I have, nonetheless, had the pleasure of teaching and introducing my students to his person and ideas for the past decade. His former students have convened two conferences (London [2010] and Kuala Lumpur [2013]) to celebrate his intellectual contribution, from which came a book and a special issue of this journal. Could all of this be sentimental hero worship, or a life worthy of sincere celebration and emulation? Studying his intellectual publications and tracing his academic and social activities make it abundantly clear that he was unique and committed to improving the lot of Islam and Muslims.

John Esposito and John Voll narrate in their *Makers of Contemporary Islam* a brief story: "An old Christian acquaintance of al-Faruqi once commented that al-Faruqi believed that Islam was in need of reformation and, he believed, al-Faruqi aspired to be its Luther."¹ Even though this was a sincere assessment, Esposito and Voll speculate that al-Faruqi would have preferred the word *mujāhid*. Esposito prefers to use this term to describe al-Faruqi, as he did in his "Memoirs of a Scholar and a Mujahid."² Although al-Faruqi never referred to himself in this way, portraying him as Islam's Martin Luther does have some significance to contemporary Islam and Islamic thought.

Luther appeared on the Christian intellectual and religious scene during the 1500s, a time when Christian theology and thought were perceived as profoundly corrupt. There were indulgences, essentially "get out of purgatory free" cards, that only the rich and powerful could afford. Championed by popes and princes, this practice undermined the Christian's role of personal responsibility and Jesus' message (peace be upon him).

Church leaders sought to monopolize religious knowledge by prohibiting translations of the Bible and to stifle the pursuit of knowledge by publishing their *Index of Forbidden Books* (from 1559 to 1966, when Pope Paul VI abolished it). The church hierarchy also began teaching that following the Bible

and doing good deeds were unnecessary, for one only had to believe in Jesus. Luther was convinced that these and other positions were at loggerheads with the true content of Jesus' teachings, and thus were taking Christianity and Christians backward.

What happens to a society when intellectualism is stifled and the interpretation and practice of religion is dictated by an opportunistic religious elite? Eventually it will become backward and perhaps extinct. To challenge this status quo, Luther wrote *The Ninety-Five Theses* (1517) and translated the Bible into easily understandable German so that average Christians of his land could both read and understand it for themselves.

As regards Luther's challenge, one notes that he was more concerned with reforming the theoretical and practical dimensions of Christian thought, which eventually ushered in the Protestant Reformation. Whether he succeeded or not, one cannot deny that he left an indelible mark on its religious and intellectual history and set a new trajectory for its thought. Although some Christians may think he caused more schism, some researchers would argue that he may have saved Christianity – if not religiously, then at least intellectually. The Christian world now saw Lutherans arguing for the Bible and God's providence being equally available to all, regardless of their socioeconomic status; Calvinists articulating their belief in predestination and the work ethic; and most Protestants denouncing celibacy and extreme asceticism. Arguably, all of this is attributable to Luther's call for reform.

I cite these examples to show his role in shaping the future trajectory of Christian thought and to juxtapose it with al-Faruqi's role in contemporary Islamic thought. Given the different variables (e.g., religions, eras, the nature of the issues and circumstances that necessitated their agendas), some might argue that such a sharp comparison is unfair and perhaps irresponsible. However, I am neither praising Luther for his movement nor claiming that al-Faruqi led a similar project; rather, I am asserting their wholehearted conviction that reform was needed and that they did what they could. In fact, this may be where the assessment of al-Faruqi's Christian acquaintance gains its significance.

So what exactly did al-Faruqi do? Without analyzing Islamic civilization's history and decline, and starting from the premise that he believed "Islam needs a reformation," his reform agenda can be seen from at least two dimensions: (1) reforming Islamic thought's intellectual content and (2) reforming the religious and intellectual environments in which that thought can be shaped and molded (not excluding preparing future generations of intellectuals). Instead of recounting all of his ideas, I will focus briefly on several specific aspects and highlight the lessons that Muslims intellectuals could learn from them.

Reforming the Intellectual Content

Although al-Faruqi's early works on Arabism (*'urūbah*) recognized the Muslim world's diverse cultures and may represent his ideas on Islamic thought, it is fair to state that among his many works, those on *tawhīd* (God's unity) were his signature contribution.³ I therefore consider his *Al-Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (IIIT: 1992) to be his blueprint for achieving his envisioned reform agenda. In general, this is clear when one compares it to those of the authors he respected: the conservative Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) and the modernist Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905).

Not only did he use the concept of *tawhīd* to articulate the centrality of God's oneness (which others have done as well), but he also made it relevant to the broader interpretation and wider application of contemporary Muslim experience, be it the family institution, the political order, the economic order, ethics, and aesthetics. In support of my position, I offer his discussion of *īmān*, widely accepted as meaning "belief" or "faith." In *Al-Tawhid*, al-Faruqi opines that Muslims should reject such translations, for in contemporary English these terms carry a Christian and skeptic understanding that embody the "implication of untruth, of probability, of doubt and suspicion."⁴ Moreover, as they are valid only when considered in terms of a particular person or group, when that person or group takes a particular proposition to be true. Thus they do not mean that such a proposition is true, as is the case with *īmān*.

For theological considerations, he writes that *īmān* must be translated as "conviction" because it is "absolutely free of doubt, of probability, of guessing and uncertainty." Being derived from *amn* (security), it means that "the propositions it covers are in fact true" and that the mind has appropriated their truth. Al-Faruqi writes that in an Islamic sense, one may be a liar (*kādhīb*) or a hypocrite or a cheater (*munāfiq*) about *īmān*, but that *īmān* itself cannot be false, in the sense that "its object is non-existent or otherwise than it purports to say."⁵ Thus such a person only deceives oneself or someone else, for he/she never had any *īmān* in the first place.

Al-Faruqi regards *īmān* not as an act, a decision, or a resolution to accept or in which to put one's trust, or as that which is not known to be true. Rather, it is something that happens to a person when the truth, the factuality of an object, strikes one and convinces him/her beyond any doubt of its truth. Thus *īmān* and *yaqīn* (certainty) are synonyms, for before acquiring *yaqīn* one may deny and question the truth. But once one acquires it, truth is established and convincing.

He argues that *īmān* is truth given to the mind. Its truths or propositions are not mysteries, stumbling blocks, unknowable and unreasonable, but critical

and rational. *Īmān* is a cognitive category, for it has to do with knowledge, with the truthfulness of its propositions. And since the nature of its propositional content is that of the first principle of logic and knowledge, of metaphysics, of ethics and aesthetics, it follows that it acts in subjects as a light that illumines everything.⁶

He bases this claim on his effort to distinguish *īmān* from *belief* and *faith*, to prevent Muslims from falling into the trap of skepticism that eventually overtook and reformulated much of Christian thought. Skepticism states that all ways to the truth must be empirical, confirmed by controlled experiment, or else it is doubtful and thus necessarily false. Christian faith (dogma) is an act, a decision by which a person resolves to accept as truth that which cannot be proven (wager), that which is based on subjective experience, as opposed to fact or a critical observation of reality.

One does not have to accept this interpretation, and I am not calling for emulating al-Faruqi in this regard. Rather, I would like to point out that contemporary Muslim scholars need to be creative and innovative. While they should continue to consult and admire the original sources, they must move beyond reproducing ideas and venture into the uncharted territories of Islamic intellectualism, to carry out seriously interrogative research in the hope of improving, without necessarily lambasting, existing research. Appropriately, al-Faruqi appreciates al-Ghazali's (d. 1111) thought on *īmān* and then goes beyond it.

It is true that al-Faruqi was a uniquely gifted scholar. But he should not be the only one, nor can all Muslim scholars be like him. I think everybody should realistically aspire to emulate him both as regards his zeal to reform and his penchant to deliver the "goods."

Reforming the Intellectual Environment

The second dimension, that of reforming the intellectual environment, can be seen in the establishment of the international Islamic universities in Islamabad and Kuala Lumpur, the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT; Herdon, VA), and various Islamic think tanks around the world. The idea of establishing higher education institutions that would integrate traditional Islamic knowledge with the broader contemporary human and social sciences has arguably been part of al-Faruqi's contribution to Islamic intellectualism.

At the above-mentioned London conference, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman, the former rector of the International Islamic University, Malaysia, paid a glowing tribute to al-Faruqi for having the vision, along with others, to create IIIT and the Muslim Students Association (MSA) in the United States. Esposito

also mentioned al-Faruqi, AbuSulayman, Jamal Barzinji, and others as the brains behind IIIT's creation. The creation of more well-funded and well-equipped think tanks to research issues that affect Muslim societies, as well as to carve out new trajectories for Islam and Muslims, must continue. For example, al-Faruqi is also credited for creating the American Academy of Religion's (AAR) Islamic Studies Group, which he chaired for over a decade.

Another part of his agenda was to train young Muslims to implement the reformation of Islam's intellectual content. To that end, he helped scores of Muslim students attend universities. Yusuf's above-mentioned book has articles by several of al-Faruqi's former students who are now noted scholars. Some of them insist that without his active involvement, they would never have been able to pursue graduate studies in the United States, for he worked to get them accepted to prominent universities and find sponsors for them.

As I call upon scholars to emulate his intellectual creativity and activism, I also allude to his zeal and sense of commitment. For all of this, celebrating al-Faruqi's legacy (as his students do) is not a form of hero worship, but a well-deserved tribute to a hardworking intellectual and sincere reformer.

This Issue

We open this first issue of 2014 with Shaireen Rasheed's "Islam, Sexuality, and the 'War on Terror': Luce Irigaray's Post-Colonial Ethics of Difference." The author explores why the interests of Muslim women and Muslim gays have become the civilizing mission in the "war on terror." After explaining why the new politics of belonging is inseparable from the new politics of exclusion, she elucidates how Muslim gays are joining Muslim women, whose "liberation" has traditionally been used to justify imperialism. Rasheed concludes by relating to Irigaray's notion of an "ethics of sexual difference" in an attempt to provide the phenomenological conditions of an "alternative space" in which the Muslim, as "other," can be heard.

Hilman Latief's "Contesting Almsgiving in Post-New Order Indonesia" examines the origin and development of the ideas and practice of zakat on salary and analyzes how they affect the nature of zakat practice in contemporary Indonesia. Jakarta's attempt to mandate zakat payments via enacting zakat regulations at the provincial and district levels has stimulated new debates among indigenous Islamic scholars as to the legality, from a jurisprudential point of view, of whether this can be done to civil servants. Latief traces two discourses: (1) that zakat practice has been precisely prescribed in the Qur'an and Sunnah and thus such an "innovation" is unnecessary, and (2) that zakat belongs to that part of the Islamic ethical and economic system which is open

to reinterpretation and innovation. Such activities are indications of how almsgiving is contested in newly democratic Indonesia.

Mohd Altaf Hussain Ahangar, author of “Crime and Punishment in a Modern Muslim State: A Pragmatic Approach,” claims that some contemporary Muslims wish to live according to the laws promulgated in the Qur’an and Sunnah (the Shari‘ah) without any alteration and addition, even though this approach does not solve all existing and emerging offences. He argues, citing Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), that Muslims should reinterpret Islam’s foundational legal principles related to crime and punishment (viz., *ḥadd*, *qiṣāṣ*, *dīyah*, and *ta‘zīr*) in light of their own experiences and conditions.

We close with Amani Hamdan’s “Muslim Women Stereotyped: Deconstructing Common Myths,” which illustrates how global education theories and principles can be used to deconstruct and reframe these longstanding myths and misconceptions. Hamdan investigates the major themes of female circumcision, polygamy, and subordination in order to highlight the usefulness of applying global education principles.

I hope that our readers will find these papers not only thought-provoking and stimulating, but also sources of inspiration and motivation for their own research.

Endnotes

1. John L Esposito and John O Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 28.
2. Imtiyaz Yusuf, ed. *Islam and Knowledge: Al-Faruqi’s Concept of Religion in Islamic Thought* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012).
3. Among his many books are *Islam* (Beltsville, MD: amana publications, 1994); *Triologue of the Abrahamic Faiths* (Beltsville, MD: amana publications, 1982); *Islam and Other Faiths* (n.p.: Islamic Foundation, 2007); *Toward Islamic English* (Islamization of Knowledge, vol. 3) (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1988); and *Meta-Religion: A Framework for Islamic Moral Theology* (n.p: Islamic Institute for Strategic Studies, 2000).
4. Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, *Al-Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1982), 40.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 42.

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