

Atlas al Hadarah al Islamiyah

By Isma'il R. al Faruqi and Lois Lamya al Faruqi, trans. Abdul Wahid Lu'lu'a. Maktabat Al Obaykan (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia) and The International Institute of Islamic Thought (Herndon, Va., USA), 1998, 754 pages.

Atlas was first published in its original English edition in 1986. The collaboration of Temple University, the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), and the American Trust Publications with Macmillan made the publication possible. At the time, the book clearly marked a qualitative leap in terms of writings on Islamic culture and civilization. With its large format, over 500 pages, and hundreds of maps, tables, charts, chronologies, photographs, and illustrations, it sought to catch the eyes (and minds) of a wide range of readers, sacrificing little in the way of erudition or pertinent detail and shunning both geographical and chronological arrangements. These two approaches, the authors pointed out, would have been unsuitable for such a work, seeking to highlight the “essence” of the Muslim experience in the midst of and despite the bewildering diversity of that experience. Nor was the new venture merely a blend of the two methods with their perceived “shortcomings,” but one which followed the “phenomenological” method, where “the observer let[s] the phenomena speak for themselves rather than force them into any predetermined ideational framework.”

The Faruqis saw themselves as innovators in applying this method (traced to Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler) to the study of Islam. The method was advantageous as it allowed them to escape both the “epistemological ethnocentrism” of Western Islamicists and the “uncritical” assumptions of Muslim scholars. In the tradition of other Muslim harmonizers, and with a mix of genuine humility and some unconscious trepidation, they also stressed that their work was “a beginning.”

Surely *Atlas* was no starting point for the Faruqis. For many years they had worked together, or individually, on many a project, book, and seminar — papers on music, compendiums on world and Asian religions, books on Islam, symposiums on the dialogue of the Abrahamic faiths. Their numerous intellectual and academic achievements, including Isma'il al Faruqi's pivotal role in the founding and empowerment of the IIIT, deserve far more coverage than that provided by this cursory review. But the experiences and insights as well as the team spirit they developed over the years, and through a great deal of globe-trotting, were to stand them in good stead as they approached a task of encyclopedic proportions. Indeed, any glimpse into the features of *Atlas*, one

may venture to say, is bound to throw some light on the method and intentions of the Faruqis in their other works and activities.

At the heart of *Atlas* lies the concept of *tawhid*. It is the force that pumps life into almost every nook and cranny of the book and the loom which weaves it into a well-knit whole. Both a method and a personal conviction, it transforms the book into something of a devotional act and offering without compromising its framework.

Divided into four main parts — The Origin, The Essence, The Form, and The Manifestation — *Atlas* maps out the Islamic experience, both within history and despite it, arguing early on that “Islam is not its history.” The assertion that “Islam was born complete” and, hence as an “ideal,” cannot be identified with “any Muslims’ history” but must be regarded as “its essence, its criterion, and its measure,” has to coexist with the authors’ other assertion that the association of the faith with Muslim history is “crucial” since “Islamic culture and civilization were indeed its offspring, nourished and perpetually sustained by it in every realm of human endeavor.” In the authors’ minds there was of course no contradiction. But while some may agree with this view and see in it no disparity or failing (witness other world religions and cultures as well as Robert Browning’s “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp/Or what’s a heaven for?”), others will insist on seeing (and assessing) a system of beliefs mainly through its temporal manifestations, refusing to consider an ideal stasis but a continuum, rarely, if ever, perfect or complete.

Be that as it may, there is no lack of engagement with the nitty-gritty of Muslim facts and artifice on the ground. And in the wide range of subjects treated — from ancient Near Eastern religions and empires to the rise of Islam, and from the expansion of the faith and its guiding principles to its spiritual, intellectual, scientific, and artistic achievements as manifested throughout the Muslim world — there is reflected a great deal of erudition, which is invariably attended by great sensitivity and expressed in passionate terms.

The passion, one needs to say, sometimes gets in the way of the dispassionate and cool tone expected in an academic and encyclopedic work, and indeed at such times pulls it in the direction of propaganda or apology. Glossing over some problematic issues can be one downturn, as can be witnessed in, for example, the rather conventional view presented of the status of women before Islam and the not wholly convincing rationale for the mass conversions to Islam by the conquered nations. But even in such areas, the reader will frequently get an unexpected bonus of being presented with a string of insights that can serve as a very useful conceptual basis for a more comprehensive study. One example which readily comes to mind is the chapter “The Call of Islam,” which deals with the Islamic theory of mission but can inform and

greatly enrich any detailed study on the theme of Islamic diplomacy and international relations.

Such insights are amply provided in the treatment of many cultural manifestations ranging from communal prayer to architecture, calligraphy, and music. Interestingly, Sufism, much maligned in some quarters, is spoken about with great fervor and respect mixed with some reserve as the authors single out the negative results more excessive Sufi practices have had on diverting the Ummah from its balanced engagement with the “two readings” — the concept which Taha Jabir al-Alwani has been assiduously elaborating for the past few years.

In brief, this book reflects its authors’ deep commitment to and phenomenal understanding of Islam as a dynamic and universal force — a force that has been acting, in the authors’ view, as an agent for creativity and unity as well as tolerance, peace, and mutually beneficial exchange — which should continue to be so, despite occasional failings from within and pressures and distortions from without. Furthermore, the book acknowledges, indeed celebrates, the enormous variety of the Muslim experience, spanning some thirteen centuries and making its presence felt among numerous ethnic groups in various continents, entwining itself with major cultural and global issues, a variety that would have been very difficult to document, particularly by a small, albeit well-informed, team of two authors without a recourse to the principle of *tawhid*, which has acted as a unifying principle to that experience and to *Atlas* itself.

Nevertheless, one feels that this strength, this cementing agent, gets too set and stultifying at times, preventing the book from truly engaging and wholly applauding the dazzling, even at times maverick, manifestations of Islamic culture. Far more effort seems to have been spent on tracing the workings of *tawhid* on artisans and regions than on the contribution of such artisans and indigenous cultures to the interpretation of the abstract concept. Perhaps the notion that everything had been “born complete” came to be too dominant. That of course was a tidy idea, but the tidiness is not omnipresent. The book itself, particularly in the age of CD-Roms and highly finished and glossy publications, seems a bit faded and grey, with the impressive wealth of its data and insights somewhat cluttered and in need of a neater, up-to-date and more accessible format.

In his insightful “Introduction” to the Arabic edition, Hisham Altalib, a life-long colleague of the Faruqis, speaks about the book as an “orphan,” having seen the light after the tragic death of its two authors. Might this explain the shoddy layout of the book as a whole, with the maps, illustrations, tables,

and charts rarely keeping pace with the text, and with many photographs lacking in professional quality?

But for an "orphan," the book has really traveled widely. The Arabic translation is the fifth in a series which included Malay, Turkish, Indonesian, Spanish, and Portuguese. Hisham Altalib's Introduction is a real asset and an eye-opener as it illumines some little-known but fascinating aspects of Isma'il al Faruqi's life and puts the man's all-round character and qualifications in better relief. It was also fitting that the task of translating *Atlas* into Arabic was entrusted to Professor Abdul Wahid Lu'lu'a, one of the most erudite and sensitive translators (and academics) in the field. He has been able to bring to the formal and passionate tone of the original English the dignity but also the freshness and dynamism of modern Arabic expression. His own valuable "Translator's Note" and many annotations are an added testimony to his arduous but generally felicitous struggle to drive a wedge between "translators" and "traitors."

Sadly, however, the slovenly and haphazard layout of the illustrative material as found in the Macmillan original was faithfully duplicated in the Obaykan edition. Equally lamentable is the absence of any effort to update that material and other information to take stock of the momentous events since 1985-86 which led, among other things, to the emancipation of several Muslim nations from Communist and other rules — a fact that the Faruqis would have celebrated with a joy perhaps modified by the caveat that number is never the sole judge of strength or vitality.

Riad Nourallah
Senior Lecturer
The Diplomatic Academy of London
University of Westminster