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AL-FĀRUQI AND HIS PRINCIPLES OF META-RELIGION: THE ISLAMISATION OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

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Ismā'il Rāji Al-Fāruqi (1921-86) is a widely recognised Muslim intellectual who has contributed to the fields of Islamic thought, epistemology, philosophy, comparative religion and inter-religious discourse. He has authored, edited and translated 25 books, and published hundred of articles. He was visiting professor at a number of universities, and featured in the editorial board of several scholarly journals. One of his significant contributions, which is the focus of this article, was the development of a methodology in the study of comparative religion.

In 1967 al-Fāruqi published *Christian Ethics* in which he first introduced the principles of meta-religion in his research on Christianity. He was trying to propagate these principles as a prolegomenon to the comparative study of religion, by first adopting them in his investigation of Christianity. The rationale for the need of such principles is made clear in the introductory chapter of *Christian Ethics*.

Meta-religion means "beyond religion." Al-Fāruqi introduced this concept to express his dissatisfaction with the way religion was defined and studied in the Western secular setting. His criticisms were directed against three important methodologies adopted in the study of religion, namely, theological, philosophical and phenomenological.

The theological method, he suggested, was propagated by Christian theologians who had advocated exclusivity of the faith, resulting in the propagation of Christianity as the only true religion, the only criterion and the

norm of religious truth, and hence the benchmark for all other religions. Such an approach has made comparative religion a convenient tool for Christian missionaries who choose proclaiming the gospel as their vocation (Al-Fāruqi, *Christian Ethics* 35). In his article entitled "Meta-Religion: Towards a Critical World Theology," al-Fāruqi also condemned the theological method of polemics for its inherent prejudice against other religions. Such a methodology, in his view, left no room for the understanding of other religions, and thereby defeated the purpose of comparative religion.

The philosophical method, on the other hand, projected a sceptical outlook towards the religious truth, to the extent that it was critical of all the claims that religion made. This led to the violation of the central role of religion as every religion makes a special claim to Truth. In fact, the philosophical method, which is built on the Western secular epistemology, leaves no room for the authentication of religious truth and thereby denies the validity of religion. The question at hand is, why should philosophy undertake the study of religion if it is sceptical of the religious truth? If comparative religion were to pursue the philosophical method, it would jeopardise the very role of religion, which is unlikely to be its objective.

The phenomenological method has shown some concern on religious truth but limits it to only the external and observable part of religion. This method demonstrates little regard for the internal

and intrinsic truth of religion. Thus, to al-Fāruqī, it is a distorted form of rational inquiry which affects human understanding of Truth and certainty, particularly in the context of religion.¹

Al-Fāruqī's strong criticism against all the three methods was directed against the way they investigate religious truth, which is of vital importance in all religions. Despite their extensive and pervasive research on religion, al-Fāruqī was bold enough to challenge their objectivity and contribution to the body of human knowledge. For him, those methodologies needed to be revised in order to uphold the noble role of comparative religion in promoting Truth and inter-religious understanding. He, therefore, proposed for Islamisation of comparative religion via the meta-religious principles.

Among the three methods, however, al-Fāruqī placed maximum emphasis on the phenomenological method since it is the most recent and widely adopted method among theological scholars. The method also has a unique formulation that enhances its neutrality, known as *epoche* or "suspension of judgment." *Epoche* is to avoid prejudice and to study religion as it is. This has to some extent helped to maintain the impartiality of the phenomenological method towards religious study. Nonetheless, al-Fāruqī exposed the pitfall of such a formulation, particularly because *epoche* or neutrality of judgement has to be espoused permanently, which means one who studied religion would have to suspend his judgment on the religion under study to avoid biasness and prejudice. The aim is noble, yet such a permanent suspension of judgment would mean the researcher would have no obligation to evaluate the religious data. Thus comparative religion would be restricted to descriptive study, leaving no room for the verification of Truth that can add to human knowledge and understanding.

Following this, al-Fāruqī emphasised the need for revising the phenomenological method. *Epoche*, though may be useful to maintain the neutrality of study, cannot be permanently held. Al-Fāruqī thus insisted on the needs of judgment by means of application of principles of evaluation in the field of comparative religion.² Nonetheless, the challenge lies in ensuring that the principles are free from any kind of biasness that may hinder its neutrality. Meta-religious principles were then introduced by al-Fāruqī to shoulder the role of ascertaining religious truth. These principles were also to be used as a measuring standard for religion in the field of comparative religion. Such is the Islamisation effort embarked upon by al-Fāruqī in his quest to improve the methodologies to study comparative religion.

Meta-religion emphasises the following six universal principles of judgement as the basis for evaluating religion (*Christian Ethics* 21-32):

- i) Being is of two realms: Ideal and Actual
- ii) Ideal Being is relevant to actual being
- iii) Relevance of the Ideal to the actual is a command
- iv) Actual being is as such good
- v) Actual being is malleable
- vi) Perfection of the cosmos is only a human burden.

It is essential however to highlight the universality of the six principles; that they are not a culmination of any dogmatic form of any religion but rather the result of universal human logic and common sense. For example, the first principle attempts to define the entity of nature. Implicitly, the first principle indicates that human logic can accept the existence of a dual entity of beings in nature, in the categories of the Ideal and the Actual. Logic cannot accept that there would be more than one ideal, for it is impossible to have a plural of ideals. Human logic, on the other hand, can accept the existence of a plural of actuals but there would be no need to categorise them since they belong to the same category. Therefore, the first principle determines the very entity of nature and every religion that corresponds to the first principle meets the universal human logic. To elaborate, for example, the concept of nature in Christianity, following the logic of the first principle, is logical enough for the religion to establish the existence of an Ideal, which is God, the Creator, and the existence of the actual, the creation. Nonetheless, when the doctrine of Incarnation is examined under the first principle, it will encounter logical problems as the doctrine of Incarnation established the existence of more than one Ideal that is God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Would there be a logic for having three ideals? If there is, which one among the ideals is the only Ideal? If there is an Ideal, would the other two ideals continue to be the Ideal, or they would fall under the category of the actual? If they belong to the actual, they need not to be differentiated as they belong to the same category. The question at hand now is, can an Ideal be transformed into actual? Human logic cannot accept so, for Ideal and actual are two separate entities though relevant to a certain degree.

On the basis of the first principle, the Christian doctrine of Incarnation is questionable to the universal human logic. This is indeed the way the first principle works by virtue of universal logic and not from any religious dogma. The unique and dynamic aspect of this universal logic is that men themselves are free to either accept or reject the logical explanation but neither of the positions will allow to change the nature of the explanation. Using a simple mathematic calculation as an analogy, two plus two is logically and mathematically equal to four. Anybody may confront the logic with perhaps new mathematical formulation or a new logic. Nonetheless, the universal logic of two plus two will remain sound to the universal human understanding. Such is Truth, pervasive and absolute.

The interesting part of the principles of meta-religion is that it has no interest in advocating the superiority of any religion but only religious truth. On top of that, al-Fāruqī proves that religious truth can be made certain by universal human logic. Thus to adhere to any religion requires rationality and not a mere blind submission to the religious dogma. The principles of meta-religion are more interested in unveiling the Truth that lies within the heart of every religion. The Truth must be made comprehensible by human universal logic, otherwise religion may sound unreasonable and illogical. Nonetheless, if any of the adherents of religion would volunteer to abide by a hoard of religious absurdities, he or she would be free to do so.

LINGUISTIC SECURITY FOR ARABIC

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In the context of globalisation, security is required for the survival of a language and its culture, just as language itself has become an important means of providing security for its native and non-native speakers, and Arabic is a living case in this regard.

Linguistic Security

The concept of linguistic security relates to a wide range of theoretical and applied issues of language study. When one's speech is acceptable to its receivers in a process of communication, he is said to have attained *linguistic security* in the language he is using, considering his fluency, confidence and effectiveness in communication. Security in using a language is related to one's feeling of being secure, and one's perception of his own competence in expressing and sharing ideas effectively with others by using a particular language (see Koch).

A national or native language may also be promoted, learned and taught in order to protect it as a means of providing national security, and security for the language is thus achieved. Likewise, a language may be learned, taught and used for the purpose of collecting and interpreting

information related to the security of a country, and security with the language is thereby attained.

However, linguistic security covers the usage of slang and special codes by individuals and groups to exchange information in order to preserve their security. This is a linguistic strategy that has become a source of concern in the context of the war against terrorism. To decode this sort of information is an important area that requires the services of linguists.

Linguistic Insecurity

Many concerned Arab writers complain of the frequency of common errors in the usage of standard Arabic and the poor attention given by individuals to improve their language competence in its usage. Linguistic insecurity develops for standard Arabic from the usage of colloquial Arabic for various socio-cultural functions. Due to the scepticism against colloquial Arabic in Arab countries, academic studies of it have been sidelined and many writers judge it as ineffective in discharging intellectual functions. Its promotion is seen to be catastrophic, and a divisive factor among the Arabs (Nabhān).

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Following al-Fāruqī, the science of comparative religion should be able to enlighten mankind, especially the adherents of religion on religious truth. Religion is to be studied and ascertained of its Truth, for truth is its core business. However, the prevailing methodologies in the secular Western setting, namely, the three methodologies described earlier, jeopardise this role of religion to ascertain the Truth. Such should not be the case, as it may make the student of religion, whose goal is to discover religious truth, more irreligious through the negligence of Truth.

It is somehow strange to note that the principles of meta-religion were introduced in 1967 and have been used to examine Christianity, and yet, somehow, there is a dearth of study and research on the viability of the subject. In fact, it took al-Fāruqī almost two decades to revisit the principles in an article entitled "Meta-Religion: Towards a Critical World Theology," before his death in 1986, leaving behind a fertile area of study and research that could be applied to the pursuit and understanding of comparative religion.

Notes

1. Al-Fāruqī, therefore, criticised the religious scientists who limit religious truth to only the observable and external dimensions of religion (*Christian Ethics* 35-36).

2. In this line of argument, al-Fāruqī also criticised phenomenology of religion for treating religion as merely a scientific fact which can be coldly examined in the manner of a geological and biological sample (see *Christian Ethics*).

3. He argued that religious facts are not dead facts of natural science but living facts consisting of meanings and values, which require a more respectful approach, and that they must be "lived" in order to be appreciated. This particular critique is well elaborated in his article "Meta-Religion," in which al-Fāruqī argued that phenomenology suffers from limitations. The reason of such limitations is derived mainly from its very own methodology, which is the collection of data and the construction of meaning that fails to grasp the inner meaning and the spiritual and aesthetic realm of religion, but stresses only the external, observable part of religion. For an extensive account of his criticism on the limitation of both methodologies in treating religion as living facts, refer to Al-Fāruqī, "Meta-Religion: Towards a Critical World Theology" (20-26).

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