New Trends in Religious Study (*Religiouswissenchaft*):
As Developed and Proposed by Al-Faruqi

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Abstract: This paper will discuss the contributions of Prof. Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (1921-1986) in developing the discipline of Comparative Religion (*Religiouswissenchaft*) in Temple University, Philadelphia and its unprecedented impact and ramification in the Islamic world. The new framework and paradigm he introduced in religious and civilizational course had inspired International Islamic University of Malaysia to undertake this proposal and making it mandatory course in the Kulliyyah. The course was introduced to broaden the horizon and understanding of religious norms and traditions and designed as part of the discipline in comparative study. The discipline had brought tremendous impact in gearing and sustaining civilizational dialogue and inter-religious engagement in Malaysia and aroused the consciousness and appreciation of its universal and cultural root of a profound religious and spiritual tradition worldwide.

Keywords: Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi • *Religiouswissenchaft* • Civilizational Course • Religious Discipline • IIUM

Introduction

The study of religion and its significance for development and progress of modern civilization and universal progress of humanity was reflected by Akram [1] in his dissertation “The Other Within and the Self Without: Encounters of Muslim and Western Traditions in the Study of Religion” which analyzed the encounter of western and Islamic tradition in religious studies, “it is maintained that religious studies underscored an ambivalent relationship between scientific progress and the pervasiveness of religion, accepting the existential importance of religion but rejecting its claim to ultimate truth.” The principle work of al-Faruqihat established the groundwork for histhory of religions was articulated in his doctoral thesis “On Justifying the Good: Metaphysics and Epistemology of Value” at Indiana University, United States that constructed the epistemological values of religion and its world-perspective and attempted to answer his restlessness in identifying his true identity and reality of existence: “Who am I? What am I? And what should I do?” [2]


This paper will endeavor to bring to light this effort and contribution of al-Faruqi in formulating the principle method and major framework of religious study as reflected in his substantive works and his role in Muslim-Christian-Jewish relations.

**Al-Faruqi’s Scholarship in Religiouswissenschaft:**
Al-Faruqi’s important scholarship in religiouswissenschaft was acclaimed the world over as one of the foremost authorities on Islam and comparative religion” [3]. Leonard Swidler in his study of the history of Muslim and Christian dialogue “places the public entrance of Islam into dialogue with an article written by al-Faruqi” that inspired this highly influential tradition in the West. Voll [4] described him as the pioneer in Muslim-Christian Relations that “his writings, speeches and participation and leadership role in interreligious meetings and organizations sponsored by the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, the Vatican and the Inter-Religious Peace Colloquium (of which he was vice-president from 1977 to 1982) made him the most visible and prolific Muslim contributor to the dialogue of world religions. His writings and presentations set out the principles and bases for Muslim participation in interreligious dialogue and social action.” In his analysis of al-Faruqi’s pioneering works in comparative religion, S.H. Nasr described that Al-Faruqi [3] writings especially in the field of comparative religion, not only a polemic and challenge to the Western intellectual but has grounded on strong academic foundation.

Al-Faruqi’s works in comparative religion had inspired the development of the discipline of religious wissenschaft (the science of religion) in the West and Islamic world. His distinguished works such as Islamic and other Faith, Christian Ethics, and Trialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths has become the primary reference in the discipline and the precursor to civilization dialogue.

**The Method in the Study of Religion:** Al-Faruqi’s distinctive approach in the study of religion was inspired from the classical and medieval works of Islamic scholars such as al-Biruni and Ibn Taymiyah. It was based on meta-religious principles that objectively study the phenomenon of religion. In his investigation of al-Faruqi’s rational and contextual study of religion, Fletcher [5] expounded this highly scientific method: “He strongly advocated the need to evaluate and judge the data in order to determine the truth claims made by various religions. Here al-Faruqi departs somewhat from the general field of religionswissenschaft, which sought objectivity without imposing any kind of value judgement.”

This principle was essentially articulated in his Christian Ethics, that clearly manifested a coherent method of analyzing and understanding religion, as suggested by Shafiq [6] in his study of al-Faruqi’s works and its profound influence in the development of Islamic thought in North America: “Islamic meta-religion grants ready accreditation to all humans in their religious attempts to formulate and express religious truth. For it acknowledges all humans to have been born with all that is necessary to know God and His will, the moral law, so as to discriminate between good and evil.”

**The Abrahamic Faiths:** In 1981 the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) published a significant work Trialogue of Abrahamic Faiths that was painstakingly edited by al-Faruqi [7] from the collection of papers presented in the Inter-Religious Peace Colloquium: The Muslim-Jewish-Christian Conference of the “Trialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths” held at the American Academy of Religion in New York in 1979. It broke the ground for new analysis and understanding of the legacy and heritage of the three major monotheistic religion coming from the same semitic root of Ur religion and to celebrate the legacy of Abraham as Father of many Nation (in Jewish perspective), Father of Faiths (in Christian) and Friend of God (Islam).

In his editorial remark, Al-Faruqi [3] described the convention in 1979 of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in New York City as “a very unusual meeting”. It was proclaimed as “a novel undertaking, unprecedented in AAR history” that “bringing together members of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim academic communities in the United States to dialogue with one another on the subject of their own faiths”. They had contributed significantly to present and analyze “the other faiths”, their social and world order, their religious perspectives, principles and institutions and has

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rigorously “communicate with one another on matters of religion” that decisively brought the “rapprochement and mutual understanding between the three Abrahamic faiths.” [7].

On Christian Ethic: After spending four years (1954-1958) at al-Azhar University, al-Faruqi was offered to pursue his post-doctoral studies at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill. He was provided with fellowship by the Rockefeller Foundation and was “attached for two years to the Faculty of Divinity as a Research Associate, to have the experience of living in a Christian environment and of bringing a critical if friendly Muslim mind to bear upon current theological trends.” [8].

At McGill he studied Christianity and Judaism and participated in dialogue and seminars and produced a significant work, Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of its Dominant Ideas [8] that “displayed remarkable knowledge of Christian scriptures” and established definitive critics of Christian theology. In his preface to this work, Hendrik Kraemer lauded it as “a remarkable and note worthy book” and acclaimed it as “the first serious attempt by a scholarly, well-trained Muslim to study Christian dogma and ethics according to his understanding of them and is based on a wide and penetrating study of their historical development.”

The work presented a comprehensive analysis of the “religion of Jesus Christ”, that “encompasses the whole range of Christian history from the Fathers of the first centuries, through the Middle Ages and the Reformation, to the present time.” It systematically analyzed the Christian doctrine of Man and refuted the great Christian theologians such as Paul, Augustine, Luther and Calvin as “corruptor of the ethics and message of Jesus” and “promoted the absolute Truth of Islam.” [9].

The scientific method and analysis presented in this work was commended by Hendrik Kraemer, stating that “Dr Faruqi deserves appreciation and recognition for writing a documented book on Christian ethics according to modern scientific methods of analysis and critical appraisal of source material.” The Christian Ethics is his pioneering effort that “attempts to establish a dialogue between Islam and Christianity, based on modern methods of scientific research and criticism and representing a new phase in our understanding of the two religions.” [8].

The Study of Religion in IIUM: Al-Faruqi’s bold initiative and great effort to introduce religious discipline led to the establishment of the Department of Religion in Temple University in the United States. This momentous experience was unprecedented and “was a rare exception” [10] that gained popularity and increasing influence in the West, that was followed by a number of institutions in the United States. He had initially developed this idea since his time in Pakistan (Central Institute of Islamic Research), to introduce religious courses from comparative religious perspectives and standpoint, which unfortunately did not materialized.

He had also envisioned this project in Chicago Islamic College and in the postgraduate program of Islamic studies in the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in North America which has failed and then, “the only hope was embodied in this new institution of higher learning (IIUM) established in a country in which al-Faruqi had a great trust in its political leadership.” [10].

He continued this endeavor by formulating a concept paper that aimed for the establishment of Islamic University in Malaysia and outlined a structural planning of study based on an integrated philosophy of revealed and acquired knowledge. His proposal was realized with the establishment of IIUM in 1983 by the Malaysian government that aspired to implement his profound ideal and philosophy and “quite obviously, al Faruqi saw in the establishment of the IIUM a great opportunity for implementing his ideas on Islamic education.” [10]. He had dictated to making Islamic civilization a mandatory course, which “should seek to give the Muslim student knowledge of the first principles of Islam as essence of Islamic civilization in the first year; of the historical achievements of Islamic civilization in the second year; how Islamic civilization compares and contrasts with other civilizations in essence and manifestation, in the third year; and of how Islamic civilization is the only viable option in dealing with the fundamental problems of Muslims and non-Muslims in the contemporary world, in the fourth year. [11, 12]

Since the establishment of the Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (KIRKHS) in 1990, the teaching of Islam and other religion had been introduced and “has been largely influenced by the works of Ismail R. al-Faruqi-especially Christian Ethics, Islamization of Knowledge and Cultural Atlas of Islam.” [10]. In fact, “the establishment of IIUM and the religion study curriculum implemented at IIUM is a development of Faruqi’s earlier vision regarding the teaching of Islam as a civilization and worldview.” [10]. Using his theory and ideas of religion as a “life-fact” and his challenged to “the discipline of the history of religion from within” and his usage of the canons of universal rationality to argue for both Islamic and secular humanism, it has “encouraged Muslim scholars to engage others in a meaningful inter-religious dialogue and not to be inhibited by the secular humanist restrictive agenda.” [10].
CONCLUSION

From our brief discussion on the contributions of Prof. Ismail Raji al-Faruqi to introduce the new discipline of the science of religion (religionwissenschaft), it can be concluded that (1) al-Faruqihas demonstrated the objective and rational method in studying religion “as it is” (2) he has pioneered many scientific principles and dynamic approaches in the study of religion that “in the context of Muslim scholarship in Comparative Religion, past and present, no Muslim scholar stands anywhere near to his equal, be this in the mastery of the subject matter, the depth of analyses or in the methodology” [13] (3) By religionwissenschaft he envisaged to advocate a new era of dialogue and the meeting of two divided world and ideology (4) The analytical method of religious study as significantly advocated by al-Faruqi was significance that “he may be commended for his commitment to dialogue and his ultimate vision of inter-religious unity.” [14].

REFERENCES

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