Islam and Other Faiths

By Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, edited by Ataullah Siddiqui, Islamic Foundation and IIIT, 1998, 370 pp.

My first reaction to this eminent book of collected articles and lectures given by Professor Ismail Raji al-Faruqi is one of frustration that I was not able to meet the man. He died in 1986. I would have loved to have known him, for I found in reading this book that so many of his thoughts and ideas coincided with my own hopes concerning the future of Islam and its relationship with the other peoples of the Book, especially the Christians. I was a Christian theologian and teacher until my conversion to Islam in 1986.

Professor Ismail's book provides a good cross-section of his contribution to the study of comparative religion and covers a wide spectrum of interreligious issues, spanning more than two decades of his work. Essays which deal directly with other faiths, Christianity and Judaism in particular, were specifically selected but they should be seen against the background of his huge contribution to the study of religions through his many other eminent publications. Here, the volume concentrates on those aspects of Islam which the *Ahl al-Kitab* (the People of the Book) have in common rather than their differences.

I have long felt that this was the correct way forward. As a former Christian who initially came to Islam by studying the teachings of Jesus rather than the Qur'an, I was always aware of the commonality of the faith and its development through the prophets of Judaism to Christianity, to its deviation through Trinitarianism, and through the Prophet of Islam who was sent to bring new understanding of *Tawhīd* and the way to find the Straight Path to God.

Therefore, I was horrified and disturbed when I ran into the walls of hostility and misunderstanding from all sides—particularly the hostility of Muslims toward Christians and Jews, theological hostilities and racist ones, too. Much of this was and is caused by the complete ignorance of the practicing members of one faith for the others, a situation that will still take years to remedy. However, scholars such as Professor Ismail are trailblazers in this field, and I repeat my disappointment that I missed knowing him personally.

He was a Palestinian, born in 1921, and graduated from the American University of Beirut in 1941; he served as District Governor of Galilee in Palestine. He left Galilee as a refugee in 1948 when Palestine was partitioned;

he completed his graduate degrees in western philosophy in the USA and studied Islam at al-Azhar in Cairo from 1954 to 1958. From 1959 to 1961 he was visiting professor of Islamic Studies at McGill University, where he studied Christianity and Judaism. From 1961 to 1963 he was a professor of Islamic Studies at the Central Institute for Islamic Research in Karachi, and in 1964 he was a visiting Professor at the University of Chicago. His final post was as a professor of Islamic Studies and History of Religions at Temple University, Syracuse. He authored, edited, or translated 25 books and more than 100 articles, was on the editorial board of seven major journals, was visiting professor at more than 23 universities, and established and chaired the Islamic Studies Steering Committee of the American Academy of Religion. He was vice-president of the Inter-Religious Peace Colloquium from 1977 to 1982, becoming one of the most visible and prolific Muslim contributors to ecumenism. He was also one of the founders of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and its first president. He and his wife Lois Lamya were murdered in Chicago in 1986.

Part 1 consists of four chapters: "The Essence of Religious Experience in Islam," "Divine Transcendence and its Expression," "The Role of Islam in Global Inter-Religious Dependence," and "A Comparison of the Islamic and Christian Approaches to Hebrew Scripture." Professor Ismail examined religions prior to and after the Prophet Abraham and showed how the Islamic worldview related itself both to Jewish and Christian scriptures.

From the outset, I have to admit I had problems with his work—the language is exceedingly academic, and this considerably limits the ordinary reader's access to his thoughts and ideas. Professor Ismail's world was that of the high academic, and no doubt his audiences were better able than myself to cope with this. However, for what it is worth, this is my major criticism of his work. When the language level of a writer goes beyond that of his readers, it is human nature for them to lose interest. And that is a very great pity, for his ideas are extremely valuable and relevant.

The following sentence is a good example: "Besides being metaphysical, God's ultimacy is not for the Muslim isolable from, or emphasizeable at the cost of, the axiological . . . the value of the metaphysical is that it may exercise its imperativeness, its moving appeal or normativeness." Those who can read and understand such language with no problem should love this book. For lesser mortals, it may be noted that not all of the text is pitched at the same very high level, and the key ideas are so important that it is worth persevering.

The two key problems between Judaism with Islam were firmly addressed—that a scripture (specifically, the Torah) that was open to various sorts of formal criticism should be maintained as divine revelation, and that the Jewish

doctrine of election (being a "chosen race") is biological (thus being unethical and racist). The texts of the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets are human and historical and do not escape the relativities of history. There are enormous dangers in tying God to the fate and vicissitudes of a particular people—not least of which is the concept of God being in some way the "Father" of those people, and the expectation that He will maneuver historical happenings to reward or chastise those people. When things go wrong, God's transcendence goes out the window, and God is questioned, criticized, complained against—as if He had "let them down," or withdrawn Himself from them or abandoned them, or even that He had died. As Professor Ismail put it, ethnocentrism denies humanity the possibility of rising to the ethical consequences of transcendentalism (p. 29).

Jesus rejected not only the idea that Jews are the special children of God, but that the descendence bond counted at all. Whoever did the will of God was his brother, sister, and mother (Matthew 12:48–50). God is good to all indiscriminately. He saw ethnocentrism as "shutting up the Kingdom of Heaven against people," which together with the Jewish custom of calling themselves the children of God, he found odious and intolerable (John 8:44,47).

Professor Ismail then points out the influences of Hellenistic Gnosticism and the popular mystery religions of the Mediterranean world as influences that led Christians away from pure monotheism as revealed by Jesus. The crucified Jesus stepped into the place of the immolated savior-god, and severe asceticism and self-renunciation and mystical/emotional experiences took precedence over good ethics. A good discussion of the Islamic doctrine of transcendence follows, plus some very interesting side lights into the world of Islamic art and artistic expression.

Chapter 3 begins by raising some points that I found invaluable—that the respect with which Islam regards Judaism and Christianity, their founders and scriptures, is not just courtesy but an acknowledgement of their religious truth. In this, Islam is unique, for no other religion in the world has yet made belief in the truth of other religions a necessary condition of its own faith and witness. God is identified as the source of all three religions; Islam reaffirms the same truths as presented by all the preceding prophets—their revelations are one and the same as its own.

> Together with Hanifism, the monotheistic and ethical religion of pre-Islamic Arabia, Judaism, Christianity and Islam constitute crystallizations of one and the same religious consciousness whose essence and core is one and the same. (p. 75)

That this has not been properly realized by perhaps the majority of Muslims is one of the world's major tragedies and problems.

Islam granted the maximum respect and concession than can ever be given from one religion to another by recognizing the concept of *tawhīd*, and thereby the one God, of other religions. Muslims should be the assistants, friends, and supporters of the adherents of the other religions—differences should be considered domestic disputes within the same religious family and should be surmountable.

The phenomenon of prophecy is universal and has taken place throughout all space and time. Every human has the capacity to understand transcendence, and is responsible for his or her own deeds. How then do people's beliefs differ? Partly they differ because God Himself revealed Himself in different ways and different thought-forms to different peoples according to their circumstances. Partly, the differences come about by human weaknesses and errors and the less pleasant tendencies of humans in their selfishness and lusts for power.

Professor Ismail points to the responsibility of Muslims in their societies to see that all non-Muslims have their rights properly protected—they are never, ever, to be coerced into believing what they do not believe. So long as they remain loyal to the Islamic state, their right to believe what they like is actually part of Islamic faith and duty. For centuries, Jews and Christians (and other religious ummahs) lived and prospered in peace under Islam. He concludes that the *Pax Islamica* was universal and recognized the legitimacy of every religious community and granted each the right to order its life in accordance with its own religious genius, so long as that *Pax* was preserved.

Part 2 collects together his writings on the dialogue between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. He points out the responsibilities of Muslims toward non-Muslims living in a Muslim-majority environment.

There is a most interesting discussion on *din al-fitrah*, or natural religion—that which belongs to Man by virtue of his humanity. Man is not fallen, but created to be viceregent. Far from creating humans hopelessly unable to fulfill His will and thus to achieve salvation, God has created them in the best of forms and endowed them with all that they need. Humans are not born in sin or in any theological predicament, but God demands positive, affirmative action designed to remold individuals and their created environments. There is no predicament from which a person may not extricate himself or herself by his or her own effort, and all are capable of achieving the highest righteousness.

Professor Ismail suggests that the best way forward ecumenically is not to study how far "your" religion agrees with "mine," if at all; but to study how far all religious traditions agree with *din al-fitrah*, the original and first religion.

Then, instead of assuming that each of our religions is divine, as it stands today, let us all try to trace the historical development of our religions and determine precisely how and when and where each has followed and fulfilled, or transcended, or deviated from, *din al-fitrah*. Let us look at the various holy scriptures and try to discover what changes have befallen them or been reflected in them.

Islam thus calls all to critical analysis of religious texts and of the claims of such texts to revelation status. The biggest challenge in this respect is to Christians, who have the feeling of the superiority of their religion ingrained in them.

Part 3 focuses on *da'wah*. The first article presents the principles and theoretic aspects of possible dialogue between Christians and Muslims, and the second is a speech delivered to a Muslim audience. The most important aspect of *da'wah* work is the insistence that Muslims should not seek to enforce, trick, brainwash, or coerce others to accept Islam in any way. The truth stands out quite clear from error and does not need any of these tactics. Dr. Faruqi is particularly wary of Sufism, with its emphasis on altered states of consciousness in *dhikr*—something shared with the emotional soul-singing of various evangelical Christian groups. Conversions and religious convictions should always rest on reason and not on emotional "trips."

Professor Ismail declares that the majority, no matter how large or overwhelming, have no right to coerce even a single deviationist in religion. If that single non-Muslim adamantly refuses to accept the position of the majority, the latter is bound by Islamic law to honor his judgement and to enable him to exercise his convictions and to practice his faith in freedom and dignity—so long as he does not seek to physically obstruct Muslims and Islam from their own expression. This, he considers, is the only justification for jihad—if the sword is drawn in answer to a proposal to let the best argument win, then Muslims also have the right to take up the sword until that tyranny and aggression cease.

The aim of jihad is no more and no less than stopping the violent action taken by the non-Muslim and should stop immediately upon the cessation of their violence. No power should try to force another into accepting Islam, except Islam itself. Muslims should look to themselves, taking care to have studied the background reasoning for their own beliefs, and doing their best to present a noble and compassionate mode of life. This, in itself, is what has always attracted the non-Muslim to Islam, and continues to do so. The best possible *da'wah* is the quiet, logical reasoning behind the faith and the noble example of Muslims who take their way of life seriously.

The Muslim who assumes that Islam is best expressed in constant prayers, textual study, and rather superior preaching (usually to the already converted!) is missing the point. Islam is always best expressed in kind and compassionate, ethically pure living.

The noble Muslim attitude toward Jews and Christians and those of other faiths is not to accuse, criticize, attack, or denigrate—but to "live and let live." "To you be your religion, and to me be mine." The Prophet was only a warner, not an enforcer. If God had wished everyone in the world to become a Muslim, He could have done so very easily, without our help. But that is not His will—His will is our free choice, free understanding, and free love of Him.

Indeed, in Madinah, Jewish law, religion, and institutions became a sacrosanct trust whose protection, safe-keeping, and perpetuation became a Muslim responsibility imposed by the religion of Islam itself; likewise, the Christians (the example of the Arabs of Najran is highlighted—they did not accept Islam but were granted the same autonomous status as the Jews, loaded with gifts and sent home under the protection of a Muslim bodyguard with a Muslim statesman to organize their affairs); and as the Muslims fanned out of Arabia into Byzantium, Persia, and India, the large numbers of Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Buddhists that came under their dominion were granted the same recognition—on the one condition of keeping the peace.

There is a great deal more that can be said of the book, but these are the major themes. I cannot express strongly enough how much I was delighted to read it.

The text lifted my spirit and gave me fresh hope and a new exciting world-vision that suggested a wonderful way forward for Islam. It is my earnest prayer that Muslims everywhere will seek and find more education for themselves, in order to break away from what gives the impression of being highly un-Islamic behavior to those of us who share Professor Ismail's hopes.

Ruqaiyyah Waris Maqsood
Researcher and Author
U.K.