

Psychological Reflections on Ismail al-Faruqi's Life and Contributions

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Introduction

Perhaps I am one of the few persons who can contemplate deeply upon the psychosocial factors that shaped Ismail al-Faruqi's life and helped transform him into a great Muslim thinker. First, as a psychologist, I could clearly see from his career, as well as from his matchless linguistic ability and long personal discussions with him, that he was a highly intelligent and creative person with a rare gift for perceiving a holistic picture of seemingly unrelated aspects. Second, I am now an old man who lived in Lebanon and Jordan from the early 1950s until the late 1960s, interrupted only by the two years I spent in England pursuing my doctorate. I earned my BA and MA at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and then taught there after obtaining my doctorate. I am therefore well acquainted with the culture of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, as well as with AUB's academic and social life, during those years. Al-Faruqi joined AUB at an early age and was greatly influenced by what it had to offer.

Third, I was privileged to have long discussions and friendly talks with him during my visits to the United States and his visit to Saudi Arabia. I first met him in Indianapolis in 1976 at the international annual conference organized by the Muslim Students Association (MSA) and the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS). We had long academic discussions on Islamization and the future of Islamic psychology. It was his idea that Muslim psychologists in North America should form a psychology branch within the AMSS. I spent three months in Indianapolis, sharing the same house with the renowned scholar Taha Jabir al-Alwani. During these months I was asked to

give lectures to new Muslims and students in various cities and spent time with the Bilalians (previously known as the Black Muslims). I therefore had a good opportunity to appreciate the influence of MSA's devoted Muslim students on al-Faruqi, an influence that led him to abandon Arabism and embrace Islamism. Later on, he returned this favor through his wise guidance in leading these same students to a much wider horizon of Islam as a comprehensive worldview.

Our second long meeting occurred in 1978, when I presided over the first "Conference on Psychology and Islam" organized by the University of Riyadh's Department of Psychology. Held at a time when most Arab psychologists were either skeptical about any relationship between psychology as a "pure science" and Islam as a "religion," some were even hostile to the notion of Islamization. However, thanks to the influence of Abdullah al-Nafie, a professor of psychology who became the university's deputy rector, the organizers were able to invite great Muslim scholars from the Arab world and the West. Such scholars as Mohammad Qutb, Abul Azaim, Abu Hatab, Abdullah At-tayyib, and al-Faruqi conducted brainstorming sessions in which everyone participated.

As expected, al-Faruqi came up with the most practical recommendations for the Islamization of psychology. I still remember his words as he sat on the platform with the other scholars who had been chosen to lead the concluding session. I was sitting in the first row below the podium next to Qutb. His expressive face was aired in a 1970s small television monitor that made minor changes to his features. When the session ended, Muhammad Qutb lightheartedly said to Faruqi, "When I look up at you on the platform I see Faruqi, but when I look at the monitor I see Winston Churchill!" We laughed, as we really saw the resemblance between both men.

To date the International Association of Muslim Psychologists (IAMP) has, in its capacity as a worldwide professional group to which hundreds of Muslim psychologists belong, convened three international conferences. The last one, hosted by the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), attracted more than 300 participants. As its president, I look back on this event as an actualized vision of al-Faruqi.

My third and final long meeting with him took place at Philadelphia's Temple University during the early 1980s. Always a gracious host, he invited me to the university restaurant and booked me into a hotel that gave a special rate to university guests. While discussing the Islamization of psychology, he encouraged me to write a volume on it as a science before Islamizing it. He was under the impression that psychology was a real science and, as a philoso-

pher, wanted to follow this logical approach. I argued that it was not a pure science and that those elements of hard science contained within it were the no-man's areas that blend into pure sciences, such as psycho-pharmacy and genetic psychology. I also stated that we might finish the volume only to discover that a new perspective had made our publication obsolete. Before I had the chance to see him again, he and his wife were brutally murdered.

With these general reflections, I wish to turn to some of the psychosocial factors that can shed light on his life and contributions. I first wish to explain, in psychological terms, the riddle of his allegiance to Arabism.

Al-Faruqi and Arabism

At a very early age, al-Faruqi was appointed Registrar of Cooperative Societies. By 1945, apparently because of his good work, the British Mandate Government made him a district governor of Galilee. The Zionist occupation and Israel's subsequent independence in 1948 came as both a national catastrophe and an economic blow to him. His job disappeared, and he decided to immigrate to Lebanon. What psychological, cultural, and sociopolitical factors influenced him to adopt Arabism, which contradicted his early Islamic upbringing at the hands of a devoted Muslim father and his early education in the mosque's school? After all, his father Abd al-Huda al-Faruqi was a judge well-versed in Islam as both a religion and a way of life.

To answer this question, I have to retreat to the Middle East of the early 1950s. In 1954, I visited Jerusalem and prayed '*ishā*' in the al-Aqsa Mosque with about 15 to 20 other mainly very elderly men. At that time, Islam was anything but a revolutionary movement, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood had no or negligible influence in Palestine, and young Palestinians were influenced by charismatic Arab nationalists, Ba'athists, and Syrian nationalists. A number of them, such Michele Aflaq, the then-president of the Ba'ath Party, were Christian. These were the movements that expressed their anger against the Zionists and organized the young into revolutionary groups.

To the members of these movements, Islam was at best a religion that had come to glorify the Arabs. At worse, it was viewed as a religion that opposed Arab nationalism (*'urūbah*). As undergraduate students at the AUB, we used to hear extreme Ba'athists and nationalists declare that the accursed Abu Lahab was a hero of Arab nationalism because he refused the internationalism of Islam!

I speculate that during these years al-Faruqi found himself in a dilemma. His hostility toward Israel could not be quenched by his father's, as well as the

mosque's, passive form of Islam. But on the other hand, he could not become an extreme revolutionary Arabist who had no respect for Islam. So he made an ideological compromise by greatly stretching the concept of Arabism to include Islam as a deep-rooted cultural ideology that could embrace both non-Muslim Arabs and Muslim non-Arabs. With his unequalled linguistic ability, not to mention his rare skill in synthesis and his philosophical sophistication, he continued to highlight his belief in Arabism with persuasive talks and books. This can be seen in how he titled his four-volume series on Arabism: *'Urūbah and Religion*, *'Urūbah and Art*, *'Urūbah and Society*, and *'Urūbah and Man*.

Al-Faruqi and AUB

I believe that AUB's academic and social life at that time shaped his thought and formed the foundation of his post-Arabism worldview. During these years, AUB was still a Christian missionary institution greatly influenced by the crusading anti-Islamic spirit of its early founders. Although the great majority of students were Muslim, all students were compelled to attend talks mainly on Christian religious topics or faced concealed attempts to indoctrinate them into western-style modernity. These lectures were held three times a week in the university's chapel. After each lecture we would stand and, along with the American staff attending the lecture and the Christian students, chant a hymn from the Bible accompanied by loud organ music. As attending this assembly was obligatory, any student who refused to attend was forced to do laborious substitute written work. So for undergraduates loaded down with assignments, it was better to comply with the rules.

Another well-planned compulsory academic requirement meant to confuse young Muslim minds and prepare them to accept the supremacy of western civilization were the required first-year course on Islamic philosophy and the required second-year "General Education" course. The first course dealt with confusing issues raised by such Muslim philosophers as al-Farabi (d. 950), Ibn Sina (d. 1037), and the Ikhwan al-Safa', all of whom had been influenced by deviant and pagan Greek philosophers. We had to listen to discussions on whether God knows all particulars of human existence or not, whether an individual has free will or whether God predisposes everything, how can God's predisposition of everything be reconciled with divine justice, whether resurrection is for the body or the soul, and whether everyone will be resurrected. If any Islamic history were referred to, our lecturers would dwell on the fight between Ali and Mu'awyyah or the Battle of the Camel.

After being confused by this course, second-year students in the required “general education” twelve-credit course would study human cultures from the first hominids to the modern western man. Topics covered included history, archeology, sociology, evolution, art and architecture, and politics. After finishing the course, students would readily consider western civilization the apex of human cultural progress and human excellence.

Campus life was equally challenging to young Muslim students coming from traditional societies. In 1953, I and several other Muslim students living in the same dormitory refused to acclimatize to the American way of life. For example, the large communal shower room had no separate stalls for privacy. We solved that particular problem by showering very late at night while wearing our bathing suits. Majoring in science, I also had to contend with chemistry lab experiments that would go on for more than five hours and cause us to miss the afternoon prayers. So we used to sneak out and pray on our white gowns under the building’s stairs.

However, looking at these formative years more objectively, one must be grateful to Allah for the positive aspects in the American liberal education that we received at the time. We were encouraged to be creative and critical as well as to write term papers for the compulsory social science courses. Higher grades were offered to students who came up with new aspects and readings that were not discussed in class. Had we graduated from the Arab universities of the 1950s, we would have only been good memorizers of the notes and books written by our lecturers. Now back to al-Faruqi.

Al-Faruqi came to Lebanon as a vulnerable uprooted immigrant who had lost his job and was displaced from his beloved home and relatives. He could have faced the same challenges if he were a devoted movement-oriented practicing Muslim. However, opting to adopt an Arabist ideology must have provided him with some support from the majority of Arab nationalists and Ba‘thists. Furthermore, for obvious reasons, AUB’s American administrators were sympathetic toward the secular Arab nationalistic groups. In fact a number of its leading faculty members, among them Constantine Zurayk, Nabeeh Amin Faris, and Nicolas Abdu Ziadeh, were prominent Christian Arab nationalists who wrote and spoke in support of this ideology.

Although Zurayk was a profound thinker, particularly in his fields of philosophy and the interpretation of history, he was a humble soft-speaking scholar whose intellectual influence on his students and colleagues is recorded in the biographies of most of his contemporaries. A 1928 AUB graduate, he secured his doctorate degree (Princeton, 1930) and eventually became a prominent intellectual who spoke prolifically on rationalism and secular Arab

nationalism. Among his influential intellectual works is *Ma'nā al-Nakbah* (*The Meaning of the Disaster*), one of the earliest critiques of Arab society after the establishment of Israel. Published in 1948, the year in which al-Faruqi immigrated to Lebanon, it was followed eleven years later by his *Nahnū wa al-Ta'rīkh* (*Facing History*), which advocated the same ideology. I believe that it would not be farfetched for us to presume that Zurayk's personality and works, along with his emphasis on an Arab awakening based on rationalism and objectivity, must have influenced al-Faruqi greatly. Even though he was a Christian, Zurayk believed that Islam was a worldview that could play a major role in supporting his concept of Arab nationalism.

Al-Faruqi's Indo-Psychic Spiritual Conflict

I believe that, despite his ideological support for Arabism that remained strong even during his visiting professorship to Pakistan, he could not free himself from his love for Islam. This is evidenced in his stretching of his concept of Arabism so much that it combined under its umbrella all Muslim Arabs, non-Muslim Arabs, and Muslim non-Arabs in an ideological culture in which Islam is a major component. I dare to speculate that al-Faruqi's enthusiastic academic campaign in support of this type of Arabism was probably a form of internal psychic defense against its indefensible paradigm. I dare to speculate that he was probably haunted by the nostalgia for his childhood Islamic spiritual memories: his father's blessed spiritual face, his shaykh's teachings in the mosque's school, and the simplicity of life during those days.

I believe that the upsurge of these dormant spiritual feelings finally moved him, after obtaining his doctorate in 1954, to seek his Islamic roots. He left the United States and went to Egypt in order to immerse himself in Islam's spirituality and to study at al-Azhar, the Islamic world's earliest and most respected university. He patiently pursued his studies from 1954 to 1958.

From Arabism to Islamism

When I first met Indianapolis' devoted MSA members in 1976, I began to appreciate how young students could sway a renowned professor to revolutionize his longstanding ideological perspective. Members of this group came from different countries and divergent cultures, and had dissimilar physical features and skin colors: AbdulHamid AbuSulayman from Makkah, Ahmad Totonji and Hisham Attalib from Iraq, Eltigani Abugideiri and his wife Hagga from Sudan, Mahmoud Rashdan from Jordan, a white American named John Sullivan, and a few Afro-Americans. The only aspect that united them into a strong spiritual unit was their submission to Allah and devotion to serving

Islam. They were able to benefit from the freedom and respect for human dignity enjoyed by Americans at that time and from the advanced skills of running their association.

For the first time in his life, al-Faruqi met a group of young students who shattered his conceptualization of Arabism. He had to submit to Islam as the ummah's real binding force – especially since Arabs are only a small minority within it. Several sources mention that al-Faruqi was a patient in Johns Hopkins Hospital when he declared to Ilyas Ba-Yunus: “Until a few months ago, I was a Palestinian, an Arab, and a Muslim. Now I am a Muslim who happens to be an Arab from Palestine.”¹

I believe that this dramatic change could take place because these young Muslims presented themselves to al-Faruqi at the right time and when he was in the most suitable psychological state. As I mentioned earlier, al-Faruqi must have been spiritually softened by his study and spiritual retreat in Egypt. Also, he was getting older and his interest in Islamic spirituality must have been enhanced. Moreover, any Muslim admitted to a hospital feels the need to request Allah's mercy and to submit totally to His might. As a result, all the “gods” of nationalism and worldly achievement vanish into thin air. While in this psychological state, he realized his true relationship with his Creator: a submissive Muslim whom Allah, in His wisdom, had chosen to create as an Arab from Palestine.

From Islamism to the Islamic Palestinian Struggle

As I said earlier, al-Faruqi was very generous to me when I visited him in Temple University in the early 1980s. One morning he took me to visit Joseph Wolpe, the famous Temple University psychiatrist who inaugurated behavior therapy. His new perspective actually changed the whole face of psychotherapy. In the evening he invited me to attend a large meeting of distinguished Palestinians, some of whom later became leading figures in Hamas. There were passionate talks and moving Arabic poetry. It was obvious that the organizers wanted to transform him into an Islamic spokesman for the Palestinian cause in the United States. They were happy with his new Islamic stance and wanted him to use his rare talents and academic position to fight for their just cause. They realized that he could become a very influential scholar in the service of their cause and in the anti-Zionist struggle. Unfortunately the Zionists were aware of the potential danger he represented to their continued occupation of Palestine and ongoing atrocities. Three years after this meeting, al-Faruqi and his wife Lois Lamya were brutally murdered. This tragedy was

not due to his work as an Islamizer, but because of his future anti-Zionist writings and words.

In the concluding session of the conference on al-Faruqi held at the IIUM in Kuala Lumpur in which this paper was read, Anis Ahmad declared to the audience that al-Faruqi had confided to him that his father had made two special supplications for him: to become a great scholar and to die as a *shahīd* (martyr). As quoted by Ahmad, al-Faruqi wondered: “Now I am a scholar, but how can I die a *shahīd* in the US?” Allah Ta‘ālā accepted both supplications.

In conclusion, al-Faruqi underwent three major ideological changes during his life: from an average Palestinian to a devoted Arab nationalist, from an Arabist to an Islamist, and from an Islamist to an intellectual jihadist against Zionism. May Allah bless his soul.

Endnotes

1. Ilyas Ba-Yunus, “Al-Faruqi and Beyond: Future Directions in Islamization of Knowledge,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (1988):14.

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