

Submission date: 05/09/2020

Accepted date: 10/03/2022

DOI: 10.33102/abqari.vol26no1.333

UNDERSTANDING AL-FĀRŪQĪ'S METHODOLOGY OF STUDYING RELIGION

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Abstract

Ismā'īl Rājī al-Fārūqī (1921-1986) was one of the foremost Muslim scholars to engage in academic study of religion in the modern age. One of his tremendous contributions to this field was his methodology of studying religion which he believed was a theology-free approach based on universal rational thought acceptable and applicable to all religions. Al-Fārūqī disagreed with Western approaches in studying religion because he believed they were either too subjective or too reductionist. This article aims to reveal Al-Fārūqī's views on Western approaches to studying religion, and at the same, it discusses his own methodology of studying religion. The researcher uses an analytical approach to analyze Al-Fārūqī's methodology or principles of understanding religion and examine their general applicability. Al-Fārūqī's approach is presented as suitable to study all religions since it does not rely on religious assumptions from the outset, but on purely rational arguments. Al-Fārūqī challenges the prevailing Western approaches in studying religion and presents an alternative approach which is well-developed, rational, scientific and systematic that is intended to be applied to study all religions.

Keywords: Western approaches, Al-Fārūqī, study of religion, methodology, theoretical principles, meta-religion.

INTRODUCTION

Interest in the study of religion can be traced as far back as the Middle Ages with Muslim scholars such as al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048), Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) and al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153) who are considered as some of the first scholars to systematically study religions other than their own. They studied Judaism and Christianity and religions of the people they encountered in new Muslim territories as far as Indian and China. However, academic study of religion as it is understood today is said to have begun in the

nineteenth century with the emergence of Western studies of the Bible and of non-Western cultures. During this early period, religion was studied as part of Christian theology. Christianity was taken as the paradigmatic religion against which all other religions were studied and compared. The main aim of studying religion here was to prove how false other religions were in as far as Christian theology was concerned. Following the European Enlightenment, the study of religion developed into a modern academic and scientific process where religions were studied through the eyes of science. This development can be seen in the introduction of the science of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) by Friedrich Müller (1823-1900) where the study of religion was separated from Christian theology. *Religionswissenschaft* gave birth to many different approaches in the field of studying religion such as historical and social sciences as well as phenomenological approaches (Eliade & Kitagawa, 1959).

In the modern Muslim world, there has not been much engagement from Muslim scholars in the modern academic study of religion. In cases where they have engaged in studying religion, they oftentimes adopted approaches that were developed in Western scholarship. Others saw such approaches as unfitting to their Muslim faith and thus adopted theological approaches which oftentimes were apologetic in nature. These methods were limited and did not provide sufficient analyses of many different religions of the world.

This, however, does not mean that there have not been any effective Muslim contributions to the modern academic and scientific study of religion. Ismail Raji al-Fārūqī stands at the forefront as one of Muslim academics in the twentieth century who attempted to develop a systematic theoretical model for an Islam based approach to studying religion which challenged prevailing Western approaches. Al-Fārūqī envisaged the importance of Muslim engagement in the modern study of religion and in promoting understanding between world religions. He disagreed with the approaches widely used in Western scholarship because they were either too subjective and functionalist or too reductionist. He was the first Muslim scholar to engage in the phenomenological approach to study religion. For a scientific and objective study of religion, he took phenomenology as his primary model and went ahead to introduce certain principles which he believed were universally applicable to study all religions objectively and sufficiently. These principles would guide in understanding and evaluating religions. Al-Fārūqī’s approach was based on rational thought and emphasized the use of value judgments to understand and evaluate religions. This approach, he believed, was accepted by everyone and applicable to all religions since it was not based upon a particular religion. It was a dogma-free approach based on rational thought.

This paper is an attempt to present the contributions of Al-Fārūqī to the academic study of religion by studying his methodology which can generally be divided into two set of principles: (a) theoretical principles which govern the understanding and comparative study of religious phenomena, and (b) meta-religion principles which provide the basis for objectively evaluating the content of a religious system.

AL-FĀRŪQĪ'S VIEW OF WESTERN APPROACHES TO STUDYING RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT OF HIS OWN.

Ismail Raji al-Fārūqī was a scholar of Palestinian origin born into a well-known and influential family in Jaffa in 1921. He received a good education since his childhood. He attended his undergraduate studies at the American University in Beirut where he graduated with a major in philosophy in 1941. In 1945 he was appointed governor of Galilee. His life in government service, however, did not last long because he and many other Palestinians were forced to leave their home country because of the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1948. In the course of time, al-Fārūqī turned to academia, and it was in pursuit of his academic career that he would later move to the United States to further his studies. In 1952, he earned his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Indiana. During the period from 1954 to 1968, he moved to different places in pursuit of knowledge and building his academic career. He finally went to Temple University where he settled as a professor of Islamic studies and history of religions. His life ended abruptly when he was assassinated along with his wife in 1986 (Eposito, 2001; Fletcher, 2008; Yusuf, 2012).

Al-Fārūqī was not only a dedicated scholar and author but also an activist who was directly engaged in the progression of the study of religion as well as in the field of interreligious dialogue. His contribution to the modern academic study of religion in the Muslim world and in the field of interfaith dialogue was that of a pioneer. He was one of the first Muslim scholars in the modern age to engage in the comparative study of religions from an Islamic perspective. He was also one of the major forces in the development of Islamic studies in the United States. Al-Fārūqī advocated for studying Islam along with modern approaches in the study of religion. His major academic contributions can be seen in four areas: in the study of Islam, in the field of phenomenology and history of religions, in interreligious dialogue, and in the Islamic educational movement in the modern period (Yusuf, 2014).

Al-Fārūqī's view of studying religion was that, in order to gain a comprehensive and accurate understanding of a religion, the process had to be carried out in a systematic, scientific and objective way. The study of religion in the West went through five phases with each phase adopting certain types of approaches which according to al-Fārūqī were all limited.

The first phase, “Classical Antiquity”, was marred by hostility towards religions of the other. There was no general interest from adherents of a particular faith in studying a foreign religion or faith. It was when Greek thinkers in the sixth century B.C had lost faith in their gods that they started to develop some curiosity towards other faiths. Even still, the general attitude was to prove the superiority of one’s faith or unfaith towards the faith under study (al-Fārūqī, 1986:14-15). The second phase was the “Judeo-Christianity”. This phase according to al-Fārūqī was characterized by hatred, fear, condemnation, and a sense of superiority from both Judaism and Christianity towards each other as well as towards other religions (al-Fārūqī, 1986:15-17). The third phase, “Modernity since the Enlightenment”, was characterized by the diminishing role of religion. Reason replaced religion as a base of identity. Creed and piety were also replaced by ethics and utility as the criteria for human worth. This was to have a destructive impact on the role of religion since it became acceptable only if it was in line with reason. As a result, religion was driven away from human affairs and all the influence it had went crushing down. It was because of this negative impact the Enlightenment period had on religion that the West witnessed robust developments in various fields of industry and trade which resulted into the West’s explorations in Africa and Asia. This led to the fourth phase where Western thinkers, because of their colonial agendas, decided to study the cultures and religions of the people they encountered in their colonial expeditions. This phase of studying religion was driven by evolutionary theories which considered religion to have gone through a series of developments i.e., from the simplest and primordial to the complex and complete form. Christianity was considered the complete form and the pinnacle of all religious developments. They therefore set out to seek for the primordial forms in the religions of the peoples they encountered in their colonial explorations because they considered them to be rudimental and primitive.

Many approaches such as anthropological, sociological, psychological, philosophical, historical, theological, and phenomenological were developed in this period with each approaching religion from a different perspective (al-Fārūqī, 1986:19-20). These approaches were limited and did not provide a comprehensive, accurate and objective essence of religion. In order to avoid these limitations, the phenomenological approach was developed which was the fifth phase in Western academic study of religion. The West’s quest for objectivity gave rise to the science of religion or *Religionswissenschaft* introduced by Max Müller (1823-1900) in 1867 which separated theology from the study of religion (Müller, 1893). The main objective was to study religion through employing scientific methods as used in the natural sciences. This would help to do away with the previous reductionist, functionalist and subjective approaches and allow for a high level of objectivity. Continuing with the West’s obsession with objectivity, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) introduced the phenomenological approach which sought to further minimize any chances of subjectivity by allowing the phenomena under study

to speak for themselves and curtailing any preconceived ideas and judgments that the researcher might have. This approach has been the most influential in the twentieth century and it is, as al-Fārūqī notes, “the highest point the academic study of religion has reached in the West” (al-Fārūqī, 1986: 20).

However, for al-Fārūqī, all these phases failed to provide a purely scientific and objective approach to study religion in a holistic and comprehensive way. The diminished role of religion caused by European Enlightenment, and the nineteenth century obsession with theories of evolution, as well as the emphasis and over reliance on feelings and experiences as the primary data for studying religion made it difficult for Western scholars to objectively study religions. Al-Fārūqī rejected these approaches because they were either too subjective, reductionist or functionalist and developed an approach based on rational evaluation of values. For him, values and ethics formed the data for which religions should be studied. The coherence of such values in a religious system and their centrality to that system formed the basis upon which that religion should be evaluated. Al-Fārūqī also proposed that the approach to ethics and values should be based on logical and rational grounds since mankind relate to one another as rational beings. For al-Fārūqī, it is the rational and institutional coherence, as opposed to feelings and experiences, that should be given the primacy in the study of religion.

Al-Fārūqī regarded the phenomenological approach as the most suitable method for an objective and scientific study of religion although it was not without shortcomings. Phenomenology involves three stages: first is reportage or collection of data where information on all aspects of human life and religion under study is gathered by the researcher, second is construction of meanings from the data gathered which involves organizing and classifying data and analyzing it within its historical context and extracting and distilling meanings from that data. Although these two stages are necessary to discern meanings and help in understanding the nature and essence of religion, al-Fārūqī stresses that the researcher must go beyond that to evaluate the meanings discerned. For this, al-Fārūqī proposed a third stage which involves judgment or evaluation of meaning-wholes. For al-Fārūqī, evaluation was not only necessary but also desirable and possible. He introduced meta-religion principles with which he sought to guide this evaluation, basing it on rational thought.

Al-Fārūqī adopted from phenomenology the principle of disengagement or applying *epoché* which means that to guarantee a high level of objectivity, the researcher must step out of his own religious belief and suspends and disconnects himself from any preconceived judgments or feelings and enter into the religion under study. This way, the researcher becomes part of the religion and perceives and experiences it the same way its adherents do. This is a very important step because it allows the researcher to understand the religion the way its practitioners perceive it and on its own terms thereby avoiding any biases that may influence his evaluation and judgment. It is only by

applying *epoché* that the researcher “can be said to have apprehended the meaning presented, to have not only surveyed [the content of the religion] as it were from the outside but to have ‘been’ it” (al-Fārūqī, 1967:4).

Al-Fārūqī however, regarded suspension of judgement alone as insufficient. It was only a necessary first step and a tool to understand the content of religion. The aim of the researcher should not stop at only understanding the contents of a religious system because doing so would amount to relativism where truth claims of each religious system are merely understood without any judgment or evaluation. Al-Fārūqī argued that the researcher needs to go beyond *epoché* to evaluate and judge in order to compare and validate the various truth claims (al-Fārūqī, 1967:8-10). To guide this process of evaluation, he developed meta-religion principles.

It can be understood from the above discussion that al-Fārūqī developed his approach basing it on rational evaluation of ethics and values. Taking phenomenology as his primary model, he emphasized suspension of judgement for an objective understanding of the meanings in a religious system. He parted from phenomenology by introducing meta-religion principles which would help in evaluating the meaning-wholes and truth claims of different religions. Al-Fārūqī’s approach can therefore be divided into two set of general principles: (a) principles which govern the understanding of religion called theoretical principles; and (b) principles which guide the evaluation of religion called meta-religion principles.

AL-FĀRŪQĪ’S PRINCIPLES OF UNDERSTANDING (THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES)

As mentioned earlier, the main aim of these principles was to understand the content and meanings derived from the collected data and to recognize the differences and similarities between different religions. Al-Fārūqī stressed that for an objective scientific study of religion, the process had to be “governed by standards of reasoning and ‘higher principles’ which have authority independent both of the religion and culture we are studying and of our own” (al-Fārūqī, 1967:4-5). He, therefore, developed these principles independent of religious assumptions and based them on reason and rational arguments, a faculty shared by all mankind, and therefore feasible for a rational, scientific, and objective study and understanding of all religions of man. Al-Fārūqī also argues that these principles will lead the conversation in *Triologue* of the Abrahamic Faiths (Smith, 2004:188). They are five principles.

The first principle is internal coherence which means that there should be internal consistency and rationale in the teachings of a religious tradition. There should not be any self-contradictions or irrationalities. Denying the principle of internal coherence is “to deny that human thought and human discourse are possible as there is no point for

a statement which is as true as its own opposite" (Rashid & Alwi, 2020:110). Paradox as a final position should also not be accepted. Here, al-Fārūqī does not imply that everything needed to be completely apprehended and rationalized in a religion. He admits that there are in every religion certain elements which appear contradictory but these are only tolerable only if they appear on a lower or superficial level. They should fit under the general premise of internal coherence and not constitute the final position of the religion because such contradiction would mean contradiction in revelation. He says: "Internal coherence is therefore a law governing the validity of revelation. This is not to assert a law for, and hence a limitation upon God, but man" (al-Fārūqī, 1967:11). What matters here is the way God communicates His commands because His communication is assumed to be consistent, intelligible, and accessible to all mankind (Fletcher, 2011). What is implied by al-Fārūqī here is that if a religious tradition claims to have received its commands from God, then such divine revelation must not contradict itself because God cannot ask man to do something and at the same time ask him to do the opposite. Such contradiction would render the teachings of a belief system illogical. Therefore, since, theoretically speaking, all religions receive divine revelation, it is on this premise of internal coherence that they should be compared and understood.

The general applicability of this principle, however, poses some challenges. The presence of inconsistencies does not mean that there is no internal coherence in a belief system as Fletcher argues that internal coherence might appear on different levels based on the believer or inquirers level of understanding (Fletcher, 2008). Reason alone, as advocated by al-Fārūqī, is not the only way through which internal consistency of a religious system could be perceived. There is the mystical and esoteric level of understanding of certain beliefs which is only available to those who are further along the spiritual mystical path (Fletcher, 2011). Understanding a religion also requires understanding its level of perceived coherence (Fletcher, 2008, 2011). Moreover, there are for example, certain aspects of God which cannot be conceived and understood by man's limited capacity to understand. These aspects are part of revelation and are accepted by believers because of faith and trust. This, Fletcher argues, "is true for the majority of religious believers. Certain doctrines and teachings are accepted based upon trust in the prophets who were given such teachings by God" (Fletcher, 2008: 256-257).

The second principle is coherence with cumulative human knowledge which means that the teachings of a religious tradition must correspond with what is already known to man. God, "does not operate in a vacuum" (al-Fārūqī, 1967:14). He communicates in a fully intelligible manner and His revelation "is always relational to the human situation" (al-Fārūqī, 1967:14). Such revelation therefore needs to be consistent with the accumulated human knowledge, with reason, and with any development in human understanding.

The third principle states that all revealed truths must cohere with the religious experience of mankind. This is closely related to the previous principle. If revelation, indeed, comes from God, then it must correspond with the religious experience of man. A religion which commands its followers to adhere to certain values today and commands them to do the opposite tomorrow cannot be regarded a true religion. This is because if such values come from God, they cannot contradict each other. al-Fārūqī notes that there may appear certain modifications or adjustments between one revelation and another, such developments however, should not be “outright contradictions or change of purpose” (al-Fārūqī, 1967:14). There must be complete unity of revelation hence unity of truth.

Similarly, the general applicability of this principle can be questioned, more so in Islam. The story of Abraham who was asked to sacrifice his son Ishmael, according to Fletcher, contradicts this principle of coherence with mankind’s religious experience (Fletcher, 2008). This is because the Godly command for Abraham to sacrifice his innocent son appears to be in total contradiction of His command not to kill an innocent soul. Also, should Abraham have used pure reason, as emphasized by al-Fārūqī, he would have ignored such a command since it contradicted the other command not to kill, which in turn would have led to an act of disobedience (Fletcher, 2008). This challenges the general applicability of the above principle and al-Fārūqī did not try to address it or provide criteria by which such seemingly contradictory commands could have been resolved (Fletcher, 2008). It could, however, be argued here that although God in the beginning had commanded Abraham to sacrifice an innocent soul, this was not the intent from the command because He replaced the innocent soul with a sheep. The aim from the command was a test of belief for Abraham and his son. What al-Fārūqī argued for was that such a command or paradox must not be the final stance of the religion. The story therefore does not seem to contradict this principle.

The fourth principle states that truth claims of a religious tradition must correspond with reality which means that truth claims of a religious tradition must corroborate with the reality we all know and experience. Contradicting reality “is *ipso facto* invalidation of the system. No theory or view can afford to oppose reality without separating itself, sooner or later, from the life or thought of man. To ignore reality is to be ignored by reality” (al-Fārūqī, 1967:14). This is a necessary principle in understanding the truth claim of a religion because reality cannot be denied and therefore contradicting it puts such truth claims into question. Such a religion must revise its claims and reinterpret them in accordance with reality.

The fifth principle states that religion must have a purpose, and this should be bringing man towards ethicality and realizing the higher values. Religion should define the destiny of man and give him the opportunity to realize that destiny. Since it is God who

defines the ideal, the main purpose of revelation should be to show man how to realize that ideal. In other words, the main objective of any religious tradition should be guiding man towards realizing his destiny, which is through the actualization of the ideal, the higher ethical values. Any religion “which deems this destiny of man already realized, impossible of realization or unworthy of human striving and endeavor, in fact denies the *raison d'être* of morality and religion” (al-Fārūqī, 1967:14). This is a necessary principle to understand a religious system, for it defines the primary function and purpose of religion because if its purpose was not to guide mankind towards realizing ideal values, then, why should there be religion at all? Religion should serve the purpose of guiding humankind towards doing good and being good and improving its ethical and moral situation. This is achieved through obedience to God's commands who defines what is good and what is not.

Thus, according to al-Fārūqī, observing the above principles was the first step that the researcher needed to follow when he/she wanted to study and understand the nature of a belief system. Al-Fārūqī, however, suggested that the researcher needed to verify with the adherents of the religion under study whether his findings were representative of what they believe or know of their religion. The researcher then needed to verify his/her findings with the texts and traditions of that religion and the authoritative writings of its scholars since there is a possibility that the adherents' understanding of their religion is not necessarily correct or perfect. This process however faces the challenge of determining whose writings are authentic representations of the religion and who determines what is authentic and what is not (al-Fārūqī, 1967). Nonetheless, the researcher must cross-reference his findings with the available data before offering any evaluation. This is in the case of a continuing living religion. In the case of an extinct religion, al-Fārūqī suggests the researcher verifies his findings with their archeological remains in addition to putting emphasis on the internal coherence of that religion (al-Fārūqī, 1967). As stressed earlier, al-Fārūqī's aim, here, was not to determine whether a religious tradition was true or false, because any religion could fulfill all these principles but still be untrue. His aim at this stage was to understand the nature of a religious tradition.

AL-FĀRŪQĪ'S PRINCIPLES OF EVALUATION (META-RELIGION).

When the researcher, while applying *epoché*, concludes the task of collecting data and deriving meanings, they must go a step further to evaluate the contents and the meanings derived. Al-Fārūqī stressed three criteria that needed to be fulfilled before moving on to evaluation: without prejudice, the researcher has to be able to understand and pass on his understanding to other people; in cases where his personal involvement is inevitable, he has to declare it openly and keep it in check by his academic desire to know the truth; and finally he has to seek to make a set of universal principles, rather than personal religious stand, as a presupposition for the study (Al-Fārūqī, 1967). At this stage, al-Fārūqī calls the researcher to move beyond describing and understanding to evaluation.

Failing to evaluate the religious content and just describing it without offering any assessment, according to al-Fārūqī, amounts to relativism where different truth claims are merely understood and apprehended without verifying whether they hold truth or not (Al-Fārūqī, 1967). It is understood here, then, that there must be a universal truth against which all religions must be evaluated. Al-Fārūqī notes that “[a] religion that is valid only for its adherents is no religion at all. Even at best, such a religion is but a tribalist ethic; just as a truth which is truth only for those who accept it and has no claim to the acceptance of all men, is not truth at all, but a mere prejudice.” (Al-Fārūqī, 1967:10). This process of evaluation required some external evaluative criteria which was not based on religion but applicable to all religions. Al-Fārūqī therefore, presented theology-free criteria which would evaluate religion based on reason and rational thought since it is a faculty shared by all humans. He began, for the sake of argument, with the assumption that God does not exist (Al-Fārūqī, 1967) and put forward a set of principles which address the basic questions which man has been curious about regardless of whether he is a believer or not. They address issues such as life and existence, its nature and constituents, and its purpose and destiny (Ibrahim, 2017). It is argued by Ford (1993) that the principles proposed by Al-Fārūqī are rooted in Islamic theology. Al-Fārūqī developed these principles based on rational arguments as opposed to religious arguments because even without religion, man was capable of verifying the issues they address using his reason and rational faculty. According to Tayob (2013:235), “this set of principles or meta-religion allowed Al-Fārūqī to promote a particular Islamic construction”. They are six principles combined into two sets of metaphysical and ethical principles.

The first principle states that “Being is of Two Realms: Ideal and Actual” (al-Fārūqī, 1967:22). This principle explains the nature of existence and its components. According to al-Fārūqī, existence comprises of two realms: the ideal which is transcendent and beyond space and matter; and the actual which is the physical existence, a realm of space and matter and everything that is within it including mankind, sensory perceptions, and all acts of consciousness (Al-Fārūqī, 1962; Fletcher, 2008). These two realms are entirely different and distinct from each other. Denial of this fact leads to self-contradiction and confusion. Al-Fārūqī justifies this duality by arguing that there must exist the transcendent ideal being from which the actual determines its knowledge and values (al-Fārūqī, 1967). The actual is determined by, and the valuability of everything within it is in accordance with the standard set by the ideal. To give an example, the value of a metal such as gold does not come from it being a metal, there must be people who define and give it value. In the same way, justice for example, does not define its own value. It must be defined by a realm different from that in which it exists. If this duality did not exist, it would have been impossible to determine the value of justice because there would be no ground on which to base that value since all that exist within one being are alike. And the fact that justice does exist in the actual, and

the actual by nature is incapable of determining its value, it necessitates the existence of another being which is different from the actual, and from which the value of justice can be determined. This is the ideal being. Thus al-Fārūqī argues that this duality is necessary to provide the standard and to determine the valuableness of the actual. Denying this duality leads to self-contradiction and confusion or even the impossibility of values (al-Fārūqī, 1967; Tayob, 2013).

The second principle states that “Ideal Being is Relevant to Actual Being” (al-Fārūqī, 1967:23). Corollary of the first principle, al-Fārūqī explains the connection between the components of the two realms as the second principle. He says that “[s]ince the ideal realm acts as principle of classification, of the order and structure of actual being, it follows that it provides the pattern by which the actual is or is not what it is, the standard by which the actual is or is not valuable” (al-Fārūqī, 1967:23). The relationship between the ideal and the actual realms is that of dependence. The ideal provides the standard and the basis upon which the actual judges the valuableness or the goodness or the evilness of an object; it provides the laws that structure the actual and put it into order, laws without which the actual would not exist or would be in complete chaos. For example, an object such as a plant appears in the actual based upon the way its essence appears in the ideal. Al-Fārūqī says that: “[b]etween essences and real existents, there is an ontological relationship. The structure of the former reappears in the latter” (al-Fārūqī, 1962:258; Fletcher, 2008: 157). It is the ideal which sets the standard by which all that exists in the actual is valued or dis-valued. Therefore, the value or dis-value of an object in the actual is judged according to the ideal value that exists in the ideal. In this sense, the actual is shaped by, and its value is determined and defined by the ideal. This indicates that the ideal and the actual do not merely coexist, but their relationship is that of great importance in the sense that the Ideal determines and makes the actual what it is.

In the third principle, al-Fārūqī states that the “Relevance of the Ideal to the Actual is a Command” (al-Fārūqī, 1967: 24). This principle suggests that the ideal realm has the capacity to command the actual realm and this command is one-directional. The actual cannot become the ideal and the ideal could not manifest itself in the actual realm. This is because if that was the case, it would lead to “determinism” and value would lose its valuableness and the door for striving for value would be closed (al-Fārūqī, 1967). Man needs to have the freedom to obey or disobey the Ideal command. His obedience or disobedience, however, does not affect the Ideal in itself. To give an example, generosity as a value belongs to the ideal realm but there are unlimited forms of actualizing this value in the actual. Whether one donates one cent or a million, it means a realization of the ideal value of generosity. It should, therefore, be remembered that the realization of the value is not the value in itself and will not exhaust all the ideal valuableness of generosity. The Ideal also keeps persisting and commanding as an ideal value that ought to be realized. For instance, one would realize that he/she is egotistical

and self-centered after being ungenerous to someone or when acts contrary to the ideal value of generosity, thus, the ideal commanding that it should be followed. The same applies to all values in the ideal which ought to be realized in the actual. Whether or not these values are realized in the actual does not affect the ideal in itself. However, given the fact that having these values become realized in the actual realm is needed and necessary for actualization of the ought-to-be, their realization, therefore, becomes a command or necessity (al-Fārūqī, 1967). Al-Fārūqī also states that unlike man who has the choice whether to obey the ideal command or not, there is also the world of nature which has no freedom but to obey the ideal command (al-Fārūqī, 1967; Fletcher, 2008).

Moving on to the fourth principle, al-Fārūqī states that: “Actual Being is as Such Good.” (Al-Fārūqī, 1967: 27). Actual being, though not perfect, has the potential to be perfect. This is because man has the ability to realize the ideal values, which are good in themselves, in the actual realm, and since ideal values cannot be realized without existence, it follows then that existence itself is good. If actual being was not good from the outset, realizing the ideal good would have been impossible because the actual realm, where the ideal is supposed to be realized, is fundamentally not good. Also, on the other hand, the very fact that man exists at all makes him naturally, if not potentially, good. This is because he exists to realize and actualize the ideal good into the physical world. Had he been essentially evil, actualizing the ideal good would have been impossible (al-Fārūqī, 1967). It should be noted, however, that the actual realm being good does not mean that it cannot contain evil or is perfect and cannot become better; it simply means that although it can contain evil, it is fundamentally not evil and has the potential to improve and become perfect. Therefore, the actual realm and all that resides in it, though not perfect, has the ability to be improved and bettered. Any religion, philosophy or worldview which regards it as fundamentally evil, disvaluable or not-worthwhile “sets off with a false start and denies itself the right to contend in what is valuable and not valuable for man” (al-Fārūqī, 1967: 27).

The fifth principle states that “Actual Being is Malleable” (al-Fārūqī, 1967: 28). If understood correctly, this principle means that the ideal realm dictating something does not automatically mean that that thing will be realized in the actual realm. Its realization or non-realization remains a possibility and can be caused by determinants outside the ideal realm. For example, the ideal dictates through natural law that everything on earth that goes up must come down due to effects of earth’s gravity. However, because of other determinants, this law is altered and birds, planes and other flying objects manage to fly, although they still remain subjected to gravity (Fletcher, 2008). This is the same with the actual being. Although the ideal commands it to be in a certain way, it is capable of not realizing the ideal due to outside determinants and thus capable of turning out different from what it would have, had it followed the ideal. This simply means that although the actual realm is designed in a way that the determinants of its ontological

efficiency are complete, it remains open to new determinants which, if effected, change the courses of its causal threads (al-Fārūqī,1967). This is what is meant by the actual realm being malleable. Therefore, although the ideal commands to be realized by the actual, the possibility of that happening or not happening still remains.

The sixth and final principle states that “Perfection of the Cosmos is only a Human Burden” (al-Fārūqī, 1967:30). Man is the only member responsible for actualizing the ideal in the actual realm. He is the only member of the actual realm who has the choice to effect the ideal into the actual. All other agents in the actual realm are under the dominion of the theoretical ideal being and are mercilessly subject to the inevitable laws of the ideal which constrains them into strict obedience (al-Fārūqī, 1967). They do not have a choice but to submit to the ideal. Man on the other hand, though subject to the same natural laws as other members, he alone has the ability to change the courses of the causal threads of destiny and produce results different from what had been destined had he not changed the courses of necessity (al-Fārūqī, 1967). Al-Fārūqī argued further that man is the only agent through which ideal value can be actualized. Man alone “holds the key to the entrance of the valuational ideal into the actual” (al-Fārūqī, 1967:30-31). “He stands at the crossroads of the two realms of being, participating in both, susceptible to both” (al-Fārūqī, 1967:30-31). Whether the rest of creation, without man, would have value or not, was something that al-Fārūqī questioned. For him, man was the only agent capable of bringing value from the ideal into the actual realm. This is what made him significant and the only agent responsible for perfecting the cosmos (al-Fārūqī,1967); perfecting it in the sense that he brings it into the likeness of the Ideal by deflecting its causal potency to ends which embody values (al-Fārūqī,1967).

Because al-Fārūqī intended these six principles to be based on rational rather than religious arguments, he began by assuming that God did not exist. After giving a rational exposition, he introduced God in the picture as the Creator and this cosmos as His creation. With God in the picture, the first principle means that since God is the sole Creator and Sustainer of everything, He belongs to a realm unique only to Him and this is the Transcendent Ideal realm. Everything else belongs to an entirely different realm, which is the actual, the realm of the created. Existence therefore is made up of two realms: the Transcendent Ideal realm of the Creator; and the realm of the created. The second principle means that the relationship between God and His creation is not mere co-existence. God’s creation is dependent upon Him to provide the standard by which it is judged and valued. This is regarded as God’s concern for this world. The third principle means that God’s concern for His creation is a command which has to be obeyed in order to be realized. Although God’s actions in the realm of nature (natural laws) are necessary and unavoidable – without them the world would not exist, they are, for man’s destiny, commands for which he has the choice to obey or not. The fourth principle means that because God created the world, it is intrinsically or has the potential to be good, for if that was not the case, His purpose for creation which is

perfecting the world through realization of ethical and moral values would not have been possible. The fifth principle then means that for that perfection to be able to happen, the world has to be in a way that it is possible to be changed and bettered. It has to be possible for man to follow God’s command in order to perfect the world and bring about ethical felicity. The final principle means that since man, among all God’s creation, is the only agent capable of realizing the higher part of God’s will with the freedom to choose whether to obey or not, it follows then that perfection of the world is solely his responsibility. His mission is a cosmic one, “a genuine *khilāfat*, or viceregence of the divine order” (al-Fārūqī, 1973:197).

CONCLUSION

Although al-Fārūqī’s methodology challenged Western approaches in studying religion and presented a well-developed, rational, scientific and systematic approach that could be applied to study all religions, its general applicability was not without problems. As seen above, although al-Fārūqī gave prominence to value and ethics and insisted on using reason and rational arguments to understand religious traditions, which is highly commendable, he excluded other ways of apprehending religious beliefs such as the mystical and esoteric perspectives. Al-Fārūqī was aware of the contributions of these approaches but it was his insistence on developing a theology-free approach based on rational arguments that he excluded other methods. This, in a way, limited the general applicability of his approach. Also, although al-Fārūqī rejected paradox as the final position, his view may not be generally shared because almost all religions have some paradoxes especially in matters relating to God who is considered to be beyond human reason.

Another critical remark concerns his meta-religion theory which was the most critical and revolutionary part of his methodology. Al-Fārūqī did not fully articulate the theory because it was drafted as part of a project that was meant to be completed at a later period. For that, it was open for addition, criticism, and evaluation. Al-Fārūqī considered meta-religion principles self-evident. He, however, did not get a chance to complete the project because of his untimely death.

On a general level, meta-religion theory appears to be more suitable for monotheistic religions, more so Islam. Al-Fārūqī developed the principles basing on rational arguments and a theoretical set of assumptions which he considered self-evident. The practical application of the theory, however, does not go without problems as seen, for example, in the two realms of existence which may not be accepted by all religions as it is the case with Hinduism and Buddhism who view the actual realm as an illusion. He also disregarded any position that blurred the distinction between the Ideal and the actual thus disregarding, for example, philosophical Sufism that might accept monistic approach to metaphysics.

Another general remark labeled against al-Fārūqī's theory was that although he presented it as applicable to all religions, it was rooted in Islam and promoted a particular Islamic theology (Ford Jr, 1993; Tayob, 2013). The principles he proposed appear to be speaking a language that is entirely Islamic. They seem to have been developed from Islamic arguments of the nature of existence, God, and man, and present Islam as the rational measure for all religions. This renders their general applicability and acceptance by other religions difficult.

These remarks notwithstanding, al-Fārūqī's methodology provides a good starting point for an objective study of religions. His appeal to the use of logical arguments free from religious assumptions, and to evaluate religions based on the closer or further they were from realizing value and the corresponding morality is laudable. By this approach, he moved beyond such approaches which sought to evaluate religions based on their truth or falsity, and by offering to evaluate, he moved passed those approaches which only studied religion without evaluating its content, thus he avoided falling into relativistic pluralism where each religion claims to hold the final truth. Al-Fārūqī's appeal to the use of reason and to "transcend dogmatic theologies and get back to a "theology-free meta-religion" by basing the analysis of religions on a set of self-evident principles" (Esposito, 2001:33), which he believed was through mankind's experience, is what makes his approach distinct. It is here that the importance and relevance of his approach lies.

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