

CHRISTIAN ETHICS: A REVIEW FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AL-FARUQI

Fathiyyatunnur Idris¹

¹(Corresponding author). Centre for Foundation Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia,
Gambang Gampus, Kuantan Malaysia.
Email: fathiyyaidris@iium.edu.my

Abstract

This article reviews the writing of Ismail Al-Faruqi entitled "Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas." It thoroughly evaluates the origins of Judeo-Christian's relationship and its relation with Islam. The method used is library-based research and deductive method of analyzing. This evaluation is crucial because there were distorted historical facts and certain misunderstandings in the idea of ethics and self-transformation and to the extent, Al-Faruqi introduced a new name to the Christians today which is Christianity and he also introduced a new approach to the study of religions i.e., Epochè. The distortions should be analyzed to avoid any confusion of the real and not real teachings of Jesus. Hence, this paper will identify the existing distortions and examine it with the original concept derived from the Islamic perspective which eventually harmonizes the ultimate reason of God sending down all His messengers to the earth.

Keyword: Ethics, self-transformation, Judeo-Christian's, Islam, Al-Faruqi

INTRODUCTION

Professor Dr. Isma'il Ragi A. Al-Faruqi was a professor of Religion and Art at Philadelphia's Temple University. He has made a lot of contribution to the world of comparative religion where he studied and understood the other faiths from their perspectives i.e., objective method. He expanded the concept of Islam in his analyses with excellent research of the record from the tradition itself as he was familiar with the Old Testament and New Testament. In this book entitled "Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas.", he expounded the idea into three major sections: Introduction, Part One: What is the Ethics of Jesus? and Part Two: The Christianist Transvaluation.

In the introduction part, Al-Faruqi elaborated on the method that he used which is Epochè or religio-cultural disengagement, overarching principles or higher principles that consist of Meta religion, the Muslim-Christian Dialogue, and the shortcomings of the Christian Comparative Discipline. In the section two of the book which is the Part one: What is the ethic of Jesus? Discussed about the Jewish background i.e., Jewish ethics such

as the nature of Hebrew Racialism, the source of Hebrew Racialism i.e., Hebrew Scripture. After discussing the Jewish, he continued the topic of The Ethical Breakthrough of Jesus. Here, he elaborated on the teachings of Jesus. For example, the interiorization of ethics and the self-transformation. And the last subtopic for this section is the Sufi Parallelism by which he made a thorough comparison between Islam and Christianity's source of Sufism.

The third section is the topic on The Christianist Transvaluation or the Ethics in Christianity. This topic elaborated on the teachings of those Christianist that invented numerous teachings that did not originate from Jesus himself such as the origin of man, sin, salvation and saviorism that was against the societism and personalism taught by Jesus. And in the last section of the book, Al-Faruqi concluded that the religion of Christianity exists nowadays is 'heresy'. He created a few terms to differentiate between the real and fake teachings of Jesus for instance the concept of Christianity and Christianists (Al-Faruqi, 1999).

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Firstly, Al-Faruqi started off his book by addressing the Religio-Cultural-World Community. He asserted that there are a lot of books discussed about Christian ethics but not so many works were critical enough. Most of the books were biased as they were written by Christian authors which only extended their understandings of faith and to find solutions for their problems but not under the guidance of the tradition itself. Even though there are other critical works on Christian ethics, they are presenting it from a perspective that lies outside the faith altogether and make criticism under principles of which the faith challenges.

Al-Faruqi listed out his five objectives of writing the book. One, to present the new oneness of humanity. At his time, people were divided because of tribes, provinces, nationality, and sects. And from that, humanity was divided into four religio-cultural groupings, the Christian World or the West, the Muslim World, the Hindu-Buddhist World, and the Materialist World. Thus, there is a need to make people united because the division was creating a lot of tension as they were excluding others to be in their groups. Or in other words, global citizenship i.e., humanity as one family. There is an attempt to solve it and Al-Faruqi came up with a very interesting concept i.e., humanism which brings mankind into one brotherhood. So, this is the first objective of the author's book; to make people become brothers and help each other without any ulterior motives even though they have different faiths, also to create Islamic identity.

The second objective is to uncover the deeper ground between the religio-cultural worlds of Islam and Christianity, in the hope that an awareness of these grounds will aid as a foundation for reconciliation between the two

religions. The third objective is to analyse the main ideas of Christian ethics as to reconcile both religions and to have a good dialogue with the Christians. The fourth objective is to suspend all dogmatic theology. For example, the pillars of faith in Islam etc., must be theology-free. And the last objective is to change focus from the questions of nature of God to questions of man i.e., his duties and responsibilities. The nature of God will not be the same for all the religions in the world. So, it is meaningless to have a debate on it as it will not have an end and further creating a lot of problems between different religious adherents. Thus, the focus should be on the questions of man and the most essential part of man is his duties and responsibilities.

The author then introduced his methodological approach of the book, which is called, Epochè or Religio-Cultural Disengagement. It will be sufficient here to define the term by quoting the sayings of the author in the book,

“That is to say, to take off one’s shoes at their doorstep, to strip oneself bare of presuppositions, of one’s varying spiritual cognitions and contending valuations. In order to understand them truly, one has to exercise what phenomenologists call an epochè, i.e., to get out of oneself and, putting oneself as it were entirely in parenthesis, to exercise by means of the imagination a leap into the religious factum in question.”

Apart from this religio-cultural disengagement or detaching oneself from any beliefs that one has, he also came up with the new method of validating truth in religions. The method is Meta-religion that consists of six principles. First, being is of two realms: ideal and actual. Second, ideal being is relevant to actual being. Third, relevance of the ideal to the actual is a command. Fourth, actual being is as such good. Fifth, actual being is malleable and the last is perfection of the cosmos is only a human burden. From this Meta-religion, only Islam fulfils the six principles.

In the last part of the introduction section, Al-Faruqi clarified the shortcomings of the Christian Comparative Discipline. Some have written their works as engagè Christians and have included many anti-Islamic polemics. Most of the works on Islam were prejudiced by the West, if not strictly speaking Christians. Even though there were scholars who are aware of Christian religious commitment and conviction, very little can stand the test of academic scholarship and objectivity. Some works that were addressed to Muslims by convinced and committed Christians were hardly more than proselytizing essays. It is unfortunate that so far, the Christian comparatists have been either the paradox-ridden missionary who conceives his vocation as one of the proclaiming the Gospel p̄reat mundus, or the a-religious scientist for whom religious truth has but the observable, external dimensions (Al-Faruqi, 1999).

SECTION TWO: PART ONE: WHAT IS THE ETHIC OF JESUS?

According to Al-Faruqi, the ethic of Jesus is based on the Jewish background. Before he discussed on the Jesus's ethics, he explained the nature of the Hebrew racialism. Hebrew racialism or in other term, "racial apartness" is a concept that makes them to be the first racist in human history. The concept is basically referring to the chosen people of God. They regarded their ethnical identity and political identity as indissoluble values. Their scripture is only theirs; written in their language by their ancestors for their benefits alone. God is in favor of one man, one family or one party and the favor of God towards them are irrational and groundless. They are just being chosen by God without any reason. Thus, their people are standing above the rest of humanity and the Hebrew is better than non-Hebrew simply because he is Hebrew, and he is not Hebrew i.e., goyim.

Besides, whatever actions they do must be based on the law instructed in the Hebrew scripture to the point that they were worshipping their scripture rather than God himself. They also have a double standard of the law which is double justice. Justice can only exist among the fellow Jews but not with the non-Jews. For example, usury. Usury is forbidden in Hebrew scripture thus they are not allowed to involve in it when dealing with the Jewish community, but they can practice the usury when dealing with the non-Jews.

Jesus was born in this kind of circumstance of moral degradation. His mission was to revive or reform the worst condition of the Jews at the time. The most essential teachings of Jesus were the Kingdom of God, the interiorization of ethics and the self-transformation. Jesus teaches the people to seek the Kingdom of God rather than the Kingdom of Israel. Kingdom of God is the spiritual kingdom and consists of souls whose will fall under the determination of God. The Kingdom of God exists in this world and after death. The interiorization of morality is itself the universalization of Israel. Its purpose is universal humanity as well as higher value, and these are the opposites from the ideal of Jewish Law. Jesus emphasized on the intent of the moral agent. The intent of a doer is the fulcrum of ethics, the effects he produces may be good or bad according to the law of utility. But intention is that which gives to the act its moral character. Thus, the radical transformation of self is about repentance and conversion. It is related to the reorientation of one's soul to God, a transformation of his attitude to God. Above all, it is so to transform man's inner self as to achieve its total reorientation of God. Self-transformation produces the character from which moral deeds necessarily flow, thus producing in man not a good deed here and another there but a wholly new 'style' of life. The self-transformation Jesus has taught was therefore both religious and ethical at once (Al-Faruqi, 1999).

Furthermore, the author elaborated on the Sufi Parallelism between Christianity and Islam. Sufism in the perspective of Christianity is a completion

of the breakthrough of Jesus. It meets and satisfies the requirement laid down by Jesus for radical self-transformation. Jesus demanded of the Jews the rejection of the tribalist Jahweh whom they identified with Israel, the race, the community, the political state, as object of worship and desire or in other words, their preoccupation with the tribe as God. Meanwhile from the perspective of Islam, it is an outcome of the breakthrough of Islam. It is a process of self-purification, the end being always the determination of the soul by God alone. The teaching Of Muhammad was to combat against the polytheism in Mecca. Both Christian and Islam's interpretation of Sufism is similar as it aims to cleanse the soul from anything besides God (Al-Faruqi, 1999).

SECTION THREE: PART TWO: THE CHRISTIANIST TRANSVALUATION

The Christianist Transvaluation was focusing on the teaching of Christianity that does not originate from Jesus. There are a lot of teachings that were claimed to be from Jesus, but it was not actually. For instance, the origin of man, sin, salvation and saviorism. With regards to the topic of man, Al-Faruqi used a new terminology which is Peccatism i.e., man is a fallen creature. According to him:

“Christianity is a perfectly prepared to accept the empirical reality, which is always contingent, of goodness. As regards evil, however, Christianity is adamantly dogmatic and assertive. Sin or evil, is necessary, universal, and inextricably involved in human nature. This aspect of Christianity, for the lack of better name, I propose to call “peccatism.”

Man is naturally biased to be evil. Sin is universal and necessary, that all men have sinned and will sin. Why does man by nature commit evil or sin?

The author further expounded the answer for the question by expanding the previous record of Jewish background in the book of Psalms. Not only some human beings are evil, but all men are evil. Sin also begins with the story of the Fallen Angels. Fallen Angels or descendants of giants is viewed as how evil, and wickedness came into the world. By the time of the Ezra apocalypse (the Book of Esdras), the Adam-Eve story had definitely replaced the angels story. It was this story or myth that Christianity adopted largely under the influence of Paul.

Next, Al-Faruqi moved the Christianist Transvaluation of the Jewish Idea of the Fall in the book of Genesis. Originally, Adam and Eve disobeyed a divine command of not eating from the 'tree of life' or the tree of 'knowledge of good and evil'. Thus, Adam was the father of sin and all the children of Adam were physiologically inherited the sin. By committing sin, he must be

punished and the punishment of one man must be applied to all men. In contrast, the Quran regards Adam as the father of the prophets. Adam directly learned everything from God, and this is the reason he was superior to the celestial beings. God commanded him to enjoin the good and reject evil. Satan enticed Adam to commit evil by eating the forbidden fruit. He fell to the trap of Satan and ate the fruit thus committed a transgression and an evil deed. However, God corrected him, and he atoned and was rightly guided.

In the Gospels, Jesus never entertained the peccatist thesis. Therefore, in the four Gospels of Mark, Mathew, Luke and John, there are no records of sin or fall of man or the author coined it as peccatism. Otherwise in the teaching of Paul, what Jesus did not furnish, Paul was ready to offer to Christianity. According to Paul, Jesus Christ is God, incarnate, crucified, and resurrected that man may be saved from the predicament of sin. As stated by Paul in Roman 5: 12-19:

“wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and do death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned... Through the offence of one many be dead...By one man’s offence death reigned by one... By the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation. By one man’s disobedience many were made sinners.”

With this quotation, the peccatist thesis can be attributed to the work of Paul and Jesus never spoke about the sin of Adam to be inherited by all men.

Another new term that the author gave to the Christianity is saviorism. In this concept, Christianity is considered to be the religion of redemption. Jesus is perceived to be the savior or redeemer of the sin committed by Adam. Without Jesus, the sin that by nature is inherited from Adam will not be redeemed. Thus, humans can never attain salvation or be saved from the sin of Adam. As stated in the book:

“Christianity is unique in that it has made redemption its be-all and end-all; in that it has woven a divine scheme of redemption into the very nature of the Godhead; and thirdly, in bringing the whole of cosmic history and destiny into sharp in what it claims to be the single, unique, and final redemptive event. In order better to appreciate this aspect of Christianity, let us compare it, in this matter, with Islam.” p. 224.

The author compares the concept of saviorism in Christianity with the Islamic teaching. From the viewpoint of Christianity, the Christ-revelation sweeps away all the pre-Christ religious experience of mankind. However, in Islam, the revelation of Muhammad, was not the first, recovers at one the pre-Muhammad religious experience of mankind. The Christ-revelation redeemed

man from bondage to sin. But the revelation of Muhammad redeemed man from bondage to shirk (associationism) or kufr (ungodliness or unfaithfulness). Moreover, for Christianity, redemption is the nature of God. Jesus is the God who sacrificed himself on the cross to redeem the sin made by Adam. Whereas in Islam, Muhammad was the prophet of God not the God himself, determined for Islam the nature of the will of God (Al-Faruqi, 1999).

SECTION FOUR: CONCLUSION

Al-Faruqi stated that the Christian doctrine fell under the dogmatism of Tertullian before, and of Athanasius after, the Council of Nicea. Later, it was wedded to the 'anti-life' irrationalism of St. Augustine at the Council of Chalcedon. Thus, he regards the Christianists teachings as heretics. And the proper term that is suitable to the Christianists' teaching is Christianity.

CONCLUSION: BRIEF ANALYSIS

The book can be considered to cover almost every aspect of Christianity even though the title of the book focuses on ethics. The ethics here cover the personality of the Jews and Jesus himself. Al-Faruqi was a distinguished scholar as he was knowledgeable in the Abrahamic Traditions namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He referred to the original sources and contemporary sources available at that time.

The approaches that he used in the book of *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas* are two i.e., descriptive, and analytical. He describes the information by explaining it through the method of historical and comparative. He describes the historical chronology of the Jewish community before Jesus's life and continues to develop the chronology after the death of Jesus until his present time. The comparative approach can be evidential when he frequently makes comparison between the teachings of the three religions which are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And by the analytical approach, he offers deep analysis of Christianity from the very original source to the new source of the religions. In the book, there are no refutations and debates, but he makes a very serious and objective studies on Christianity.

The debates of Al-Faruqi can be taken from his book entitled, "*Al-Tawhid Its Implications for Thought and Life (Issues in Islamic Thought)*". He stated that Judaism and Christianity had misunderstood the transcendence of God. Judaism used plural form for their God, Elohim throughout the Torah; with claiming that the Elohim married the daughters of men, that God was the father of Jewish kings, that God was father of their nation in a real sense. Judaism also claimed to bind God to "His People" constrained Him into granting them favors despite their immorality, their hardship and stiff-neckedness (Al-Faruqi, 1992). Hence, the transcendence of God is not real as

the God's attribute is associated with human attributes and God is compelled to only serve them regardless of their behaviours.

For Christianity, it was extending the nontranscendent concept to God's "fatherhood of the Jewish kings" to Jesus. Most of them believe that God was a real man who walked on earth and did all things men do, including the suffering of the agonies of death. Jesus was both man and God. They never took a consistent position on Jesus' humanity or divinity with accusation of apostasy and heresy. That is why their language is always confusing, at best. When pinned down, every Christian will have to admit that his God is both transcendent and immanent. But his claim of transcendence is therefore devoid of grounds (Al-Faruqi, 1992). Therefore, the transcendence of God is complicated and hard to understand using logical thinking.

In addition, Al-Faruqi introduced a new method of studying religions which is Epochè or religio-cultural disengagement. This method can be related to the attitude of any researchers in any fields which is to be objective. In terms of studying religions, one must suspend himself from pre-judgments and values to understand those religion that one wishes to study. The longer one can be objective, the deeper will be his experience of other religion. The researcher could understand religion as there is understood by its adherents and let religion speak to itself (Zuriati & Ahmad, 2010). But this disengagement should not overshadow the original beliefs of a reasearcher because in Islam, no religion is comparable to it eventhough Islam is a universal religion, it does not mean it is equal to any religions. Equality of religions is also known as religious pluralism and this philosophy has been gazetted to be deviated from the true teachings of Islam by Department of Islamic Development Malaysia or JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2015) and the Government of Selangor gazette on 31st July 2014 (Government of Selangor Gazette, 2014).

In terms of the ethic of Jesus, the crux reason of his prophethood is to revive the false teachings of Judaism which were dominated and contaminated by the Rabbis. The two core teachings of Jesus were the coming of the Kingdom of God and interiorization of morality of one's soul to God (Al-Faruqi, 1999). And this is parallel to the teachings of prophets before and after Jesus. Islamic ethics begin with the identification of the divine purpose in man. Islam holds that man was created to serve God. God said in the Quran, "I have not created men and jinn except to serve Me." In philosophical terms, this is tantamount to saying that the purpose of man's existence is the realization of the highest good i.e., the fulfilment of the divine will. Whereas this fulfilment takes place involuntarily as in the physiological and psychic function; and freely, as in the ethical. The ethical functions realize the moral values, and these are the higher occupants of that realm, the higher imperatives of divine will (Al-Faruqi, 1992). In other words, there are two basic purposes of human creation. First and foremost, to be His slaves and second, to be the God's vicegerent on earth.

Furthermore, the two distortions of Christian teachings which was not coming from Jesus are peccatism and saviorism. Peccatism is about man is a fallen creature and saviorism is about Jesus as the savior or redeemer of the sin committed by Adam. In Islam, humans are meant to be living on the earth to fulfil their responsibilities and the sin of Adam had been forgiven as Adam realized he committed the sin and he straightaway ask forgiveness from Allah and He accepted it. This is evidence in *Sūrah al-Baqarah* (2:37) and *Sūrah al-A'raf* (7:23):

فَتَلَقَّى آدَمُ مِنْ رَبِّهِ كَلِمَاتٍ فَتَابَ عَلَيْهِ إِنَّهُ هُوَ التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيمُ

Then Adam received from his Lord [some] words, and He accepted his repentance. Indeed, it is He who is the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful.

قَالَا رَبَّنَا ظَلَمْنَا أَنفُسَنَا وَإِن لَّمْ تَغْفِرْ لَنَا وَتَرْحَمْنَا لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ

They said, "Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers."

Thus, the only authentic religion in the sight of Allah is Islam because of the last messenger of God was teaching the same thing to the entire humanity in the sense of Tawhid but the different teachings throughout the long line of prophets is in the sense of laws and regulations. As the followers of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), Muslims should abide by the laws in Quran and Hadith.

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Penafian

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