Ismail al Faruqi's Interfaith Dialogue and Asian Religions with Special Reference to Buddhism

by

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Abstract

This study looks at the suitability and relevance of al Faruqi's dialogical ideas in relation to Asian religions, with special reference to Buddhism. The primary weakness in Faruqi's dialogical and meta-religious principles in relation to Asian religions lies in his methodological exclusion of mystical and esoteric contributions, insights, and perspectives. Thus, a rational approach to dialogue needs to be combined with other approaches. There is a leeway for al Faruqi's principles to be shaped and deepened further, and this continues to remain one aspect of his legacy.

Ismail al Faruqi's methodological constructs for interfaith dialogue, developed during the 1960s and 1970s, continues to remain the most systematic theoretical attempt to place dialogue on common ground accessible to all religions.[1] While fashioned through philosophy and rational thought, rather than on religious dogma, his work nevertheless reflects a worldview that is monotheistic in nature, if not Islamic in perspective. Whether implicitly or explicitly stated, his system appears best suited to interfaith dialogue among monotheistic faiths – in particular, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The majority of his dialogical encounters centered around Christianity, and to a lesser degree, Judaism. What is less certain is the applicability of his dialogical principles when encountering Asian religions, most notably Hinduism and Buddhism.

In this paper, I will be exploring the suitability and relevance of al Faruqi's dialogical ideas to non-monotheistic faiths with a special focus on Buddhism. Al Faruqi advanced the idea that his methodology was suitable

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as a means for a dialogue across all faiths precisely because he appealed to supra- or meta-religious principles, which are not based upon any religion.[2] After summarizing his methods – including his objectives, presuppositions and concepts – I will be measuring his ideas within the context of dialogue with Buddhism as representative of Muslim encounters with Asian religions. This is of particular relevance due to the significant presence of Buddhists and Muslims in Southeast Asia and the inevitable religious encounters between these various faith communities.

Background

Muslim encounters with both Buddhism and Hinduism are interwoven into the history of the spread of Islam in the South Asian subcontinent, and beyond into Southeast Asia, where Hindu and Buddhist communities flourish. As noted by the Buddhist scholar Alexander Berzin, in the early history of interaction between Buddhists and Muslims, it was Muslim scholars who expended more effort in acquiring knowledge about Buddhism than Buddhists about Islam.[3] Nonetheless, both communities coexisted. In the Qur'an, there is an awareness of Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, but nothing of the religious traditions of the Far East.[4] So, there was little guidance as to how Muslims were to relate to Buddhism and Hinduism, although the conclusion reached was to treat Buddhists as *dhimmīs*.[5] The Qur'anic commentator al-Shahrastānī (c. 1076–1153) was the first to provide accurate descriptions about Indian traditions concerning the Buddha (*al-Buda*) and noted similarities with Sufi thought.[6] The general historic pattern of engagement was that Buddhist and Muslim scholars would take interest in other religious traditions when their own religion was spreading into areas dominated by established religious systems, such as Islam into Buddhist and Hindu regions. However, the dominate religion in the region would expend less effort to understand the newly arrived religion.[7]

The interest in dialogical relationships is a more recent phenomenon motivated by various factors. These include responses to economic rivalries following the financial crisis in Southeast Asia in 1997 and 1998 and the later (post-2001) global economic situation, along with the pressures of globalization.[8] In addition, the Taliban destruction of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan in 2001 and terror attacks by militant Islamic extremists in Mumba, India have led to strong reactions. To allay confusion and to seek understanding, the Buddhist-Muslim dialogue became more urgent as demonstrated by conferences, commissions, and joint declara-

tions in the late 1990s in Thailand.[9] One of the main objectives has been to find common ground through shared ethics in order to address communal violence and economic and social injustice.[10] However, the pragmatic nature of these dialogues betrays an absence of doctrinal discussions, which would inevitably probe deeper into each religious tradition. Due to the initial requirements to find ways to coexist, this is not unexpected. However, this is only a first step in the process of building dialogue, where dialogue is defined as understanding another and allowing such understanding to influence one's own religious views.

Islamic methodologies designed to address Buddhism are also a relatively recent occurrence. Previous efforts, as exemplified by al Faruqi, have focussed on relations with Christianity, and to a far-less extent, Judaism. These three monotheistic faiths hold much in common – from history, to prophets, and to elements of doctrine and worldview. Asian religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, present different challenges and, in many ways, require greater creativity and generosity in creating common links. I will address some of these issues shortly as I examine al Faruqi's system of dialogue.

Signs of increased awareness and academic interest in Muslim-Buddhist dialogue are found in the April/July 2010 issue of *Muslim World*, which for the first time dedicated an entire issue to Muslim-Buddhist dialogue and relations.[11] In May 2010, the Dalai Lama, joined by a panel of select scholars, officially launched the Common Ground project, which he and HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan had planned over the course of several years of personal conversations.[12] The project is based in part on Reza Shah Kazemi's commissioned work, entitled *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism*.[13] Such interest and activity holds promise for better mutual understanding between the various Muslim and Buddhist religious communities. It is in the spirit of these newfound efforts that I look back to the work of al Faruqi to examine his contribution to interfaith dialogue and to determine its relevance for Muslim-Buddhist interactions.

Al Faruqi's Dialogical Concepts

As with any methodology of interfaith dialogue, certain presuppositions and objectives exist, and such is the case for al Faruqi. In particular, as a philosopher, al Faruqi assumed that rational thought was the best means through which to build principles of dialogue.[14] For him, mystical ap-

proaches were too subjective and, thus, an insufficient means from which one can construct a dialogical system. His objective was to develop a means of dialogue that any religious tradition could use. In this way, each faith could come to the table of discourse with a common system to guide the interactions. The assumption that he made was that since rational thought was accepted by all humanity, therefore, all interreligious discourse should be based on the results of applying a set of criteria derived from this rational thought. It is not that rationalism does or does not work. It does. The question becomes: is it the only or even the best avenue from which to conduct dialogue that is suitable for all religions? For example, as noted by Shah Kazemi, *ma'rifah* (mystical knowledge) can offer another access point in conversations with Buddhists.[15] After all, Islam was introduced to the region through Sufism, where Muslim mystical thought related to Buddhist notions of enlightenment and spirituality rather than *'aqida* (creed/doctrine), in which there was less affinity.[16]

A second presupposition was the need to develop a means for dialogue that was free from theology. This is a corollary of rational thought. If the objective is to create a system that any religious tradition can use for dialogue, then that system cannot be based upon the doctrine of any one religion. According to al Faruqi, the best way to distil and tease out such a methodology was to use rational thought to derive dialogical principles. While it may be possible, in theory, to create an overarching set of dialogical principles, the inevitable result is that practitioners will tend to interpret these principles through their own sets of beliefs. People cannot help but see the world and others through their experiences, contexts, and beliefs. Even when applying al Faruqi's third presupposition of the practice of epoché – or bracketing one's beliefs in order to understand another's faith from their perspective – this in itself is subjective, based on the personal skill and empathy of the interlocutor. The closer in resemblance another religious tradition is, theoretically the easier it is to understand the other through keeping in check one's personal beliefs. For example, Islam and Christianity share a great deal of common doctrine, such as a belief in a theistic God, but Islam and Buddhism are further apart. Intuitively Christians and Muslims are in a better position to appreciate each other's beliefs. Muslims hold that *tawhīd* (God's oneness) is the central and most important belief, where as in Buddhism, the Ultimate Reality is not seen in this way, and in fact, *tawhīd* is considered irrelevant. While, epoché is a necessary practice, it is increasingly difficult to achieve given the apparent distance between Islam and Buddhism or Islam and Hinduism, mainly

because there are substantial differences in worldviews, as evidenced in doctrine. However, this can become more accessible when spiritual and ethical similarities are considered, since Islamic mystical thought is closer to Buddhist spiritual ideas.

Ultimately for al Faruqi, his interest and aim was to find truth. Truth was not seen to be exclusively possessed by any one religion, although the intended outcome of the application of his dialogical principles would lead to truth and to the religion that was nearest. So, instead of starting from one religion, such as Islam as the true religion, al Faruqi intended to start from the assumption that all are theoretically true or at least maintain elements of truth.

Along with the above presuppositions, al Faruqi maintained a number of key concepts or ideas that shaped his dialogical perspective. The first, *'urubah* or Arabism, was the notion that within humanity there exists an eternal spirit manifested through different cultures, religions, and peoples as a belief in the oneness of God and the ethicality of behavior.[17] The term *Arabism* was the attempt to redefine Arab from an ethnic category to one that encompasses anyone who displays the qualities of the Arab spirit.[18] Thus, according to al Faruqi, when the Qur'an speaks of Arab, it is referring to this wider inclusive definition. One could then logically extrapolate to say that some Buddhists could be called Arabs if they demonstrate elements of Arabism. However, this is problematic for a number of reasons. Aside from the difficulty of identifying the historic reality of this idea, Buddhists generally do not speak of the one God, although they can exhibit the requisite ethical and moral behaviors. It is difficult to place Buddhists and even the Buddha within al Faruqi's concept of Arab. However, as described by the Dalai Lama, in Buddhism there is a belief that all sentient beings possess a fundamentally pure nature:

> The Buddha taught that every sentient being has a mind or consciousness whose fundamental nature is essentially pure, unpolluted by mental distortions. We refer to that nature as Buddha nature or the seed of enlightenment. From that point of view every being can eventually achieve perfection. And also, because the nature of mind is pure, we believe that all negative aspects can ultimately be removed from it. When our mental attitude is positive, the negative actions of body and speech automatically cease. Because we believe every sentient being has such potential, all are equal; everyone has the right to be happy and to overcome suffering. The whole Buddhist way of life is based upon principles of deep respect for the welfare of our fellow beings. It is a system based on the practice of compassion.[19]

This is not the same as al Faruqi's concept of Arabism, but with some effort the two perspectives could be reconciled based upon the common expectation of ethical behavior, and if one equates the concept of the Arab spirit with the Buddha nature.

Alongside Arabism, al Faruqi championed the concept of *dīn al-fitrah* or *religio naturalis* as the true and original representative of religion.[20] Whenever *dīn al-fitrah* appeared, so did the Arab spirit. The two were intertwined. With the idea of *religio naturalis* comes the potential to measure each religious tradition – not to each other, but to this original religion. Al Faruqi's contention is that subsequent religions have more or less moved away from the ideals present in *dīn al-fitrah*. If such could be identified and quantified, it could revolutionize not only comparative religious studies, but also dialogue.[21] Alas, despite al Faruqi's vigorous efforts, such a project cannot be demonstrated, at least not to the satisfaction of all participants in interfaith dialogue.

A third concept, which is ever present in the Muslim-Buddhist dialogue, is the nature of prophethood. While Buddhism does not speak of its spiritual leaders in such a manner, Muslim scholars have attempted to determine if the Buddha was a prophet. This is an important question because if it can be established that the Buddha bore God's given message, then the current differences between Buddhism and Islam can be explained as distortions of the original message. In an exchange between al Faruqi and Kenneth Cragg at the Chambésy 1976 consultation, in which Muslim and Christian scholars met to discuss the idea of mission, the topic of Buddhism emerged in the context of a discussion about the prophets:

> Kenneth Cragg: What you are saying, then, is that God has sent prophets everywhere, but *ex hypothesi* these prophets must be consistent with Islam.
>
> Al-Faruqi: Yes, Islam as *religio naturalis, din al-fitrah.*
>
> Cragg: But that which in Buddhism is antithetical to Islam and to rationalism is not simply chaff mixed with wheat, if I may put it that way; it is the very wheat of Buddhism. By your analysis here it must then have been a false prophecy which brought the Buddhist to that belief.
>
> Al-Faruqi: I won't say a false prophecy. I would say that a true revelation through an authentic prophet has been thoroughly falsified.
>
> Michael Fitzgerald: But by what historical criteria is the "true" prophet to be identified? And where is the "true" prophecy of which you speak within Buddhism?

> Al-Faruqi: I don't know, but it can be researched; the fact that I assume it to be there at the origin is at least a good step in the direction of ecumenical tolerance.
>
> Khurshid Ahmad: It is very possible that rudiments of the true prophecy are to be found even in some pagan religions.
>
> Cragg: It seems rather an escape hatch of a theory, because if a prophet is really a prophet then his message becomes known, it is *balāgh*, communication; and if has not survived historically it must be mythical.
>
> Al-Faruqi: No. At one time it was known. But then later on it became falsified as the Hebrew message became falsified, and the Christian message was falsified.
>
> Cragg: But from an historical point of view that would be entirely conjectural.[22]

At least three observations can be made from the above exchange. First, al Faruqi accepted as a starting point that Buddhism originally presented a "true" message or prophecy, which was consistent with *dīn al-fitrah*. Second, this message was also consistent with the original message as found in historic Islam (equated with *dīn al-fitrah*), although there is a sense that al Faruqi is also speaking of current day Islam. Third, the message of the Buddha has over the centuries, as with Judaism and Christianity, become distorted, or more strongly, falsified.

The question of the prophethood of the Buddha was not addressed in any more detail by al Faruqi. However, other Muslim scholars have tackled this question: al-Nadīm (d. 995) interpreted the Buddha as a prophet and an apostle to the Indians, and al-Shahrastānī compared the Buddha to the Qur'anic figure known as al-Khadir.[23] In recent discussions, scholars such as Imtiyaz Yusuf,[24] Keiko Obuse,[25] Perry Schmidt-Leukel,[26] and Shaykh Hamza Yusuf[27] have offered the idea that the Buddha brought a message to his people for his time, as generally indicated by the Qur'anic verse: "And for every nation there is a messenger" (10:47). Further, Qur'an (16:36) reads: "And truly We have raised in every nation a messenger (proclaiming): Serve Allah and shun false gods." Therefore, it is in the realm of possibility that these verses include the Buddha as one who was given a message for his people.

This leads to al Faruqi's final concept, and indeed one that Muslims hold, that of *tawhīd* (God's oneness). On the surface, this is the greatest doctrinal obstacle to Muslim-Buddhist dialogue since practitioners of Buddhism do not describe or interpret ultimate reality in this way. As David

Scott noted, the main Muslim view is that Buddhism suffers "from the twin evils of idolatry, through its use of richly decorated visual statues and paintings; and of atheism, through not having a theistic God at the centre of their religious system."[28] Recent Muslim scholars have sought to dig deeper into the Islamic doctrine of Oneness and the Buddhist concept of Ultimate Reality in order to find points of contact, even levels of agreement. While such a discussion is both fascinating and necessary, my primary purpose is to examine al Faruqi's approach.

On this topic, al Faruqi offered some insight. Although not directly addressing Buddhism, his concept of God is helpful for he argued that humanity sees God *in percipi* and not *in esse*.[29] According to al Faruqi, we cannot grasp the nature or essence (*in esse*) of God because He is beyond human understanding and knowledge. However, we have access to his will and attributes, from which we can perceive (*in percipi*) God. Thus, no one can ever know God in His essence, but only in terms of his attributes that are seen through human perceptions. This allows some room for different perceptions about God or the Ultimate Reality. So, some religious traditions simply have a more accurate perception of God. Certainly for al Faruqi, as it is for other Muslims, the highest perception of God is His Oneness. Since Buddhism does not adhere to such perceptions, Muslims have viewed it as atheistic. However, as has been explored by Shah Kazemi, Imtiyaz Yusuf, and other contemporary Muslims who are in dialogue with Buddhists – with some careful thought, al Faruqi's general premise of God *in percipi* can be applied to Buddhism. Imtiyaz Yusuf argues that Buddhism is not polytheistic or atheistic, but rather non-theistic.[30] There is no conception of a personal deity, but rather an Ultimate Reality or Absolute, which is unfathomable and unknowable because it is beyond human comprehension. The Buddhist conception of sunyata (nothingness/non substantiality) parallels the Abrahamic religious notion of transcendental monotheism or non-anthropomorphism.[31] Even more striking in its comparison to al Faruqi's conception, is Shah Kazemi's argument that the Ultimate Reality of Buddhism is what monotheists call God or the Essence (*al-dhāt*) of God.[32] The focus of the Buddha was on the need to escape to the Absolute, rather than to describe theologically the various attributes of the Absolute.[33] So, the focal point is on the essence not the perceptions of the Ultimate Reality, whether labelled as the God or the Absolute. My point here is not to explore in any depth Buddhist or Muslim conceptions of Ultimate Reality, for this the reader is directed to Imtiyaz Yusuf and

Shah Kazemi's work, but rather to demonstrate that al Faruqi's concept of God *in esse* and *in percipi* is applicable to Muslim-Buddhist dialogue.

Having discussed some of al Faruqi's presuppositions and central concepts, we can now turn our attention to his methodology of dialogue. His dialogical principles are based on his principles of meta-religion and comparative religious study. The latter guides understanding and the former theevaluation of a religion based on rational nonreligious criteria, with each religion measured against a universal standard known as *dīn al-fitrah*. It was with meta-religious principles that al Faruqi sought to free dialogue from religious dogma and create common ground from which all could participate. His belief was that rational thought could create this common ground from which dialogue unfolds. Dialogue then rests upon this preliminary work of understanding and evaluating. The objective for al Faruqi was to develop a system of principles for dialogue between faiths in relation to *dīn al-fitrah*, resulting in a search for value and truth. In his words:

> We must say it boldly, that the end of dialogue is conversion; not conversion to my, your, or anyone else's religion, culture or political regime, but to the truth.
>
> Conversion, as a conviction of the truth, is not only legitimate, but obligatory—indeed, the only alternative consistent with sanity, seriousness and dignity.[34]

When comparing his three sets of methodological principles – comparative religious study, meta-religion and dialogue – it becomes apparent that his principles of comparative-religious study reappear in his dialogical principles.[35] Thus, we will focus only on his meta-religious and dialogical principles.

Al Faruqi's Principles of Dialogue Applied to Buddhism

In meta-religion, as mentioned above, the objective was to rationally derive principles to evaluate religious belief, teachings, and actions based upon a comparison with a universal norm known as *dīn al-fitrah*, which, according to al Faruqi, represented and embodied the highest call to ethics,values, and commitment to the Oneness of God.[36] Previously it was mentioned that there are difficulties in historically verifying the existence and subsequent teachings and premises of any original religion. Al Faruqi appears to have based his commitment to this concept, in part, on the Muslim belief that every prophet was sent with the same basic message of *tawhīd*, culminating with the Prophet Muhammad.[37] He is not alone in this presupposition;

current Muslim writers, such as Shah Kazemi, work to uncover *tawhīd* in Buddhism, although "Buddhist" *tawhīd* is not present in the form of a personal God or as monotheism. Nonetheless, it does demonstrate that Muslim dialogical attempts, as with every religion, must remain true to its own doctrine even as it reaches out for contact with other faiths.

Meta-religion itself is presented in philosophical rather than religious terms. For this reason, it can be complicated to understand, let alone apply. The main objective here is to determine if al Faruqi's premises are compatible with Buddhism. The principles are:

1. Being is of two realms—that is, the ideal and the actual realm of existence.
2. Ideal being is relevant to actual being.
3. Relevance of the ideal being to the actual being is a command.
4. Actual being as such is good.
5. Actual being is malleable.
6. Perfection of the cosmos is the burden of humans alone.

At first glance, the above principles do not appear to have much to do with religious dialogue. In fact, that was not the primary intention – rather, meta-religion set the parameters for determining how close a religion came to the presupposed ideal in terms of value and ethics. Thus, dialogue would be centered on how to reach this ideal. Each faith contributes to this task, but some are better able than others to approximate this objective and, thereby, are closer to the truth. By value, al Faruqi meant the ultimate definition of concepts, such as good and love, demonstrated through moral and ethical behavior. So, there is a logical flow to these premises culminating with human beings who strive to achieve the highest ethical values, which inevitably are values based upon a perfect ideal. In monotheism, the source of these ideals is God, who is manifested to humanity through values that are perceived (*in percipi*) and from which we can surmise that the essence of God (*in esse*) is perfect. For Muslims, this is known as God's will, which is revealed as His law.

In the context of Buddhism, the first premise – that being exists in two realms of existence, the ideal and actual – requires some explanation. The ideal in Buddhism appears to be sunyata (nothingness) and nirvana (extinction/enlightenment), which is the Ultimate Reality or the Absolute, and the actual realm of existence is considered conceptually illusory. The

objective is to apply dharma (the righteous path/teachings) by living out moral actions – thereby negating suffering in order to seek liberation from samsara (reincarnation/cycle of rebirth) and karma – until one enters enlightenment, reaching nirvana or extinction of the self's desires into the Absolute.[38] This does not mean that the actual does not exist: rather, the actual is a mixture of elements with no innate abiding essence. This masks the true goal of human existence from which one must become detached in order to reach the Absolute or Ultimate Reality. The actual is not the objective, but, rather, must be overcome to reach the objective. As John Makransky writes:

> The fullest realization of ultimate reality (active nirvāna, dharmakāya) *is* fullest, non-dual insight into the *emptiness of all conceptual appearances* and active compassion for all who have not realized the freedom of such insight.[39]

This is not what al Faruqi had in mind when he developed the first principle. In his explanation of the principle, he considered this to be a self-evident truth, that is, that being exists in two realms.[40] However, this is not so straightforward in Buddhist thought. The Buddhist interpretation of the first principle is fundamentally different because while al Faruqi used rational philosophy to derive the premise, Buddhist thought uses an esoteric approach and a different worldview. This does not mean that the two positions are irreconcilable. Both would agree that that the Ideal is the source and essence that must be sought, and careful consideration could produce additional common links between the concepts of ideal and actual.

In terms of the relevance of the actual to the ideal (principle 2), the nature of the Ideal's connection with the Actual is one of necessity (principle 3) – that is, the Actual exists and receives its value from the Ideal – and as such is good (principle 4). These principles face some challenges from Buddhist thought. The concept of the Actual as "good" is on one level irrelevant because the objective is to become detached from desire and the self in the attainment of nirvana. Desire and dependence can arise just as easily from good as it can from bad. On another level, ethical behavior, which is pursued in order to become liberated from the perpetual cycle of conditional existence and suffering, requires some way to distinguish between good and bad behavior. Al Faruqi's effort to determine value without relying on religious doctrine by appealing to the Ideal realm is useful in terms of identifying what is the good and from where it receives value. This would allow Buddhist interlocutors to situate moral behavior and ethics on a common plane theoretically acceptable to others. Buddhism is largely in agreement

with the remaining principles – that is, actual being is malleable (principle 5) and the perfection of the cosmos is up to humans alone (principle six). However, whereas al Faruqi meant manipulating the actual in such a way as to realize the ideal, and this is in the context of value and ethics, Buddhism manipulates the actual by becoming detached and liberated. Again, Makransky notes:

> Any religious practices that encourage reifying, absolutizing and clinging to conceptualizations of God, scripture, religious identity, ritual, or ethical prescription would obstruct realization of the emptiness of all such forms.[41]

One can hopefully see the difficulty in the interpretation and application of al Faruqi's meta-religious principles. On the widest plane of application, both Buddhists and Muslims can agree that ethical values are worth pursuing, but are they in themselves a measure of the truthfulness of a religious tradition? They certainly can and do remain a basis for dialogue. If the goal of dialogue is to determine which faith is closest to the realization of higher ethicality, as al Faruqi believed, then his meta-religious principles become less useful. Indeed, in this regard he writes:

> While the redeemed life in Indian religion is not a life in space-time but in *Nirvāna*, life under the grace of Christ is either an *imitatio Christi*, i.e., a seeking of death at the hand of one's enemies; or monotonous proclamation of the news of the *fait accompli* redemption by Christ while awaiting the eschatological end of this-world as if it were a temporary, intermediate interlude, insignificant in itself, but important only on account of that to which it leads. In neither case is the only and final criterion of truthfulness to this- [sic] world realized, namely, whether or not man's vocation consists of diverting the causal threads of the cosmos towards a historical space-time reality in which all values are realized.[42]

However, if we borrow his ideas without his objective of the evaluation of religions, the striving for values, such as good, is a noble goal to be shared by Buddhism and Islam. Whether one or the other is better or more consistent at achieving a higher level of moral behavior does not necessarily imply one religion is truer than the other. So, in summation, al Faruqi's meta-religious principles do not necessarily further the cause of Muslim-Buddhist encounter. Buddhism interprets these principles differently, and the objective to evaluate which religion is closest to *dīn al-fitrah* is more an Islamic than a Buddhist concern. One could perhaps rework al Faruqi's principles by widening the definitions of the *ideal* and the *actual*, but there are other more fruitful avenues to pursue, such as his dialogical principles.

While assuming that the objective is to discover and apply truth, Al Faruqi's dialogical principles are more directly applicable to Muslim-Buddhist dialogue than his meta-religious ideas. The principles are:

1. No religious pronouncement is beyond critique.
2. Internal coherence must exist.
3. Proper historical perspective must be maintained.
4. Correspondence with reality must exist.
5. There is freedom from absolutized scriptural figurization.
6. Dialogue should be conducted on areas where there is a greater possibility of success, such as ethical values.

As with meta-religion, there are some differences in how these principles can be interpreted. The first principle that "no religious pronouncement is beyond critique" is a necessary first principle allowing participants the freedom to ask and be asked questions. Combined with respect, both Buddhist and Muslim interlocutors are free to explore the meanings of both faith traditions and, in so doing, obtain a greater depth of understanding of each other and of themselves. The second principle of internal coherence for al Faruqi meant internal consistency and logic. There must be no paradox as a final position.[43] If a religious system was irrational and inconsistent in its teachings, then dialogue would fall into utter subjectivism, changing every moment at the whim of a believer and achieving little. This is not to imply that al Faruqi held that there could be no mystery or that everything in a religion needed to be understood completely. For him, it was a matter of how God communicates, and this was assumed to be intelligible, consistent, and accessible to all humanity. However, is internal consistency only measured by logic and rational thought? The mystical and esoteric may maintain a level of coherence that is only understood by those further along the spiritual path. To the uninitiated, Buddhist thought may seem unintelligible, but that does not necessarily mean it is inconsistent or lacks internal coherence. Indeed, part of dialogue is to understand another religion, including its level of perceived coherence. This is not to say that al Faruqi indicated in any way that Buddhism lacks internal coherence. If anything, he writes that Buddhism like Christianity is a universalist religion, as opposed to an ethnic-based faith such as Hinduism.[44] So, one can offer the suggestion that there are different levels of internal coherence based upon the level of understanding possessed by a believer or inquirer. This is demonstrated with children who are taught a faith tradition tailored

to their intellectual capacity. As they grow older so does their understanding. This is as true with the rational approach as it is with the mystical.

External coherence, or as al Faruqi described it as "proper historical perspective must be maintained" means that coherence must correspond with the history of humanity, especially religious history. This is applied in relation to the growth of human knowledge. Since a religious system contains revealed truth, then this truth must be relational to the human situation and remain as truth across time and within all historical contexts. In the same manner, if God is the source of revelation, then His commands will not contradict one another. Therefore, external coherence means in part empirically verifiable and rationally understandable religious histories.[45] In the words of al Faruqi:

> Coherence with the larger body of human knowledge is a must for all disciplines, for all genuine discoveries of truth. In the case of religion, no revelation can be an absolute law unto itself but must cohere with human knowledge as a whole, above all with the history of that revelation, the established factor of the accompanying human situation.[46]

Principle number four then becomes almost a corollary, in that dialogue must correspond with reality either as corroboration or refutation. However, al Faruqi does not elaborate on what he means by reality, just that the data of religious revelation must find corroboration in reality:

> Contradiction of 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. The data of religious revelation must find corroboration in reality.[47]

Of course, for Buddhists, the "reality" of this world is temporal and illusory, giving way to an Ultimate Reality with the realization of the emptiness of perception. The disconnect with al Faruqi's idea is in the definitions of reality, and the connection is that even in Buddhism, people live and act in this world – and the practice of dharma as the noble path is completed in this world. Of course, the goal is to become free of suffering, but suffering occurs in this level of reality. It is on this stage that Muslims and Buddhists can relate.

Now, the fifth rule of dialogue, that it must be free from the "canonical figurizations" of each religion, also requires some additional explanation.[48] By "figurizations," al Faruqi means perceptions and interpretations, and by "canonical," dominant or dogmatic. Thus, in religious history, revelation was separated into concepts in order for the faith community to understand;

it was interpreted and then arranged into structures by rational thought and shaped into legal ideas and provisions to guide the community. Once these concepts, structures, and legal notions became normative they are said to have been figurized. However, in the history of faith, different figurizations emerged from different thinkers and communities creating a variety of representations. Over the course of time, disputation and discussion arose over these various figurizations. and some became more accepted than others. Some became known as heretical and others as accepted representations of truth and, therefore, were employed as a means to define truth for that faith. In this way, they became canonized as dogma or orthodoxy. In the realm of dialogue, al Faruqi does not call for a rejection of, but freedom from figurization. Buddhism like other religions has its forms of figurizations, such as presented by Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism.

In the last principle for dialogue, al Faruqi calls for discourse on ethical rather than theological or ideological questions.[49] He maintains that, due to the great number of doctrinal disparities between religions, in this case Islam and Buddhism, little progress can be made in dialogue. In addition, questions of doctrine become questions of faith. The lines are drawn and hard to cross without cries of heresy or betrayal. Questions of ethics, however, are less threatening because they become differences in perceptions as opposed to categories of right/wrong or true/false and are rationally approachable by everyone. He writes:

> Difference in ethical perception, on the other hand, can mean that one does not see as much, as far, or as deep as the other. This situation calls for nothing but the involved midwifery of value perception.[50]

This last principle of dialogue reminds us of the ideal concept that people, like religion, are at different levels of realizing or bringing ideal being into the actual realm, which according to al Faruqi is moral and ethical behavior lived out before the One God. In Buddhism, ethical and moral action is not in response to God's commands, but is in response to the law of karma. Purity of action and thought is a necessary component in improving and ultimately escaping from the cycle of rebirth. While the motivations differ, the results are a means of connection and, therefore, a source of dialogue between Buddhist and Muslim communities. This final principle is applicable for everyone.

Challenges

From the above discussion, there are many challenges in dialogue between Muslims and Buddhists. It is not surprising then that the contributions made by al Faruqi are only partially applicable in part due to his dependence on rational philosophy. One can only speculate how his ideas would have been shaped had he engaged Buddhists and Hindus in dialogue. Much of his work was within the borders of Judeo-Christian-Muslim thought, and his concepts and principles were developed in light of the commonalities between the faiths and the subsequent avenues available for the application of dialogue.

The primary weakness of his dialogical and meta-religious principles in relation to Buddhism (and one can add Hinduism) was his methodological exclusion of mystical and esoteric contributions, insights, and perspectives. While it is possible to create a system of dialogue based entirely on rational philosophy, it is not the only approach available. Certainly, contemporary Muslim thinkers are finding that in order to engage Buddhism, they need to engage the mystical and spiritual aspect of Islam. This is something absent from al Faruqi's work and, thus, his contributions are limited. It was not that he was unaware of Islamic mysticism – rather, he attempted to move past the dogma of religion to create a theology or doctrinal free method of engagement, and this included mysticism. By applying rational thought, he derived and settled on value and ethics as the best means to evaluate religious traditions and, at the same time, as the main subject of dialogue and engagement.

The prominence of ethics and moral behavior is the greatest strength of al Faruqi's dialogical work. Not only did he underpin this avenue ontologically and philosophically as the most common and highest of human ideals and achievement – rationally rather than religiously justifiable – but he also championed the concept as the best way of communication between faiths. Certainly, this emphasis, however derived, is an essential point of contact between Islam and Buddhism.

This theme of ethics reappears in contemporary Muslim-Buddhist discussions. This is affirmed by Buddhist and Muslim scholars. Kristin Beise Kiblinger points to the Buddha's teaching that:

> We should see which teachings and practices are conducive to lessening suffering. The various means can be affirmed as long as one is moving with those means in the direction of that objective, and in fact clinging to any particular set of means hinders one's progress. Hence

> the way opens for accepting non-Buddhist teachings and practices as means.[51]

The above comment is related to the understanding that religions are simply the means to the goal and the goal is more important than the means. Thus, for example, as long as Islamic ethical teachings are deemed to lessen suffering, then Buddhists can accept them, without needing to accept Islam's doctrinal teachings. A similar sentiment is offered by the Dalai Lama:

> My Muslim friends have explained to me that since God is characterized as compassionate and merciful, faithful Muslims are actually offering complete submission to the ideal of universal compassion. By this means God's compassion can flow through the actions of the faithful. Such a practice is clearly a way of purifying the mind and seems to parallel what the Buddha himself said about the importance of actually living your life in a compassionate way. Thus, from a Buddhist point of view, the practice of Islam is evidently a spiritual path of salvation.[52]

On the broadest level, Muslim intellectuals, such as al Faruqi, could agree with the Dalai Lama's comments. Certainly the affirmation of compassionate and ethical behavior is a shared goal, and truth is truth where ever it may be found. That faith is a means to the objective is acknowledged by al Faruqi:

> The act of faith neither justifies nor makes just. It is only the entrance ticket into the higher realms of ethical striving and doing. It does no more than let us into the realm of the moral life where to realize the divine imperative in the value-short world, to transform and fill it with value, is man's prerogative as well as duty.[53]

Throughout the discussion of al Faruqi's dialogical principles, I have made an attempt to find some areas through which his ideas could be reconciled with the larger issues of Muslim-Buddhist dialogue, but this is not a complete picture. Al Faruqi was a committed Muslim, who firmly believed that Islam could be equated with *dīn al-fitrah*. One can speculate, that while he undoubtedly would have welcomed the opportunity of Muslim-Buddhist dialogue and supported the thematic focus on ethics, he would have argued strenuously that Buddhism is a falsified message in need of correction. In a conversion with Cragg, al Faruqi commented:

> However, if I discover that another man's religion had been corrupted and falsified beyond recognition, then I have a duty to tell him about the Qur'ân, God's final revelation, to present it to him as rational truth, and invite his consideration. If he says, "I don't want to listen," then either he is malevolent or a fool.[54]

The dialogical contributions offered by al Faruqi are still relevant and, with serious consideration, can assist in further developing the intellectual dimension of Muslim-Buddhist dialogue. Nevertheless, these were principles that reflected a passionate if not provocative Muslim intellectual whose goal was truth and whose belief was that this truth was completely found in Islam. Dialogue, its methodology and practice, cannot be separated from the interlocutor. Thus, al Faruqi's principles are available to be shaped, deepened, and employed, and this continues to remain one aspect of his legacy.

Endnotes

1. Ismail al Faruqi, *'Urubah and Religion*, vol. 1 of *On Arabism* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Djambatan, 1967; Isma'il al Faruqi, *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas* (Montreal, Canada: McGill University Press, 1967).
2. Al Faruqi, *Christian Ethics*, 32–34.
3. Alexander Berzin, "Historical Survey of Buddhist and Muslim Worlds' Knowledge of Each Other's Customs and Teachings," *Muslim World* 100 (April/July 2010): 187, 199.
4. David Scott, "Buddhism and Islam: Past to present encounters and interfaith lessons," *Numen* 42, no. 2 (May 1995): 142.
5. 'Alī ibn Hāmid Kūfī, , *The Chachnamah: an ancient history of Sind, giving the Hindu period down to the Arab conquest*, trans. Mirza Kalichbeg Fredunbeg (Delhi, India: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1979), 168ff. *Dhimmīs* refer to non-Muslims who are protected by a treaty of surrender
6. Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa-al-nihal* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 710–712.
7. Alexander Berzin, "Buddhist-Muslim doctrinal relations: Past, present, and future," in *Buddhist Attitudes of Other Religions*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel (St. Ottiken: EOS, 2008), 219.
8. Ibid., 222.
9. Ibid., 224.
10. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue: Observations and Suggestions from a Christian Perspective," *Muslim World* 100 (April/July 2010), 351–52.
11. Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Islam and Buddhism Relations from Balkh to Bangkok and Tokyo," *Muslim World* 100 (April/July 2010): 177.

12. Islam and Buddhism, www.islambuddhism.com, accessed January 29, 2011.
13. Reza Shah Kazemi, *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010). The work was commissioned by HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan.
14. Al Faruqi, *Christian Ethics*, 33.
15. Shah Kazemi, *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism*, 4ff.
16. Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Dialogue between Islam and Buddhism through the Concept of *Ummatan Wasatan* (the Middle Way) and *Majjhima-Patipda* (the Middle Way)," *Islamic Studies* 48, no. 2 (2009): 371.
17. Al Faruqi, *'Urubah and Religion*, 211ff.
18. Ibid., ix.
19. The Dalai Lama, "Foreword," in Shah Kazemi, *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism,* vii.
20. Ismail al Faruqi, "Islam and other faiths," in *Middle East 1* ed. Graciela de la Lama (presented at the Thirtieth International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa, 1976), (Mexico City, Mexico: Colegio de México, 1982), 163.
21. Ibid., 142.
22. Ismail al Faruqi, "On the nature of Islamic da'wah," *International Review of Missions* 65, no. 260 (1976): 402ff.
23. Ibn al-Nadīm, , *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, ed. and trans. Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 824, 831–32; Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions* (The Hague, The Netherlands: Mouton, 1976), 113–14.
24. Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Islam and Buddhism Relations from Balkh to Bangkok and Tokyo," 181. See also Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Dialogue between Islam and Buddhism," 375.
25. Kieko Obuse, "The Muslim Doctrine of Prophethood in the Context of Buddhist-Muslim Relations in Japan: Is the Buddha a Prophet?" *Muslim World* 100 (April/July 2010): 215–32.
26. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue: Observations and Suggestions from a Christian Perspective," *Muslim World* 100 (April/July 2010): 354.
27. Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, "Buddha in the Qur'ān?," in Reza Shah Kazemi, *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), 113–36.
28. Scott, "Buddhism and Islam," 143.

29. Al Faruqi, *'Urubah and Religion*, 219.
30. Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Islam and Buddhism Relations from Balkh to Bangkok and Tokyo," 180.
31. Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Dialogue between Islam and Buddhism through the Concept of *Ummatan Wasatan* (the Middle Way) and *Majjhima-Patipda* (the Middle Way)," 372.
32. Shah Kazemi, *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism,* 5.
33. Ibid., 32.
34. Isma'il al Faruqi, "Islam and Christianity: Prospects for dialogue," *The Sacred Heart Messenger* (September 1967): 30. Reprinted in al Faruqi, "Islam and Christianity: Problems and perspectives," in, *The Word in the Third World*, ed. James P. Cotter (Washington, DC: Corpus Books, 1968), 168.
35. Al Faruqi's principles of comparative-religious study are: 1) internal coherence; 2) external coherence, that is, in relation to cumulative human knowledge; 3) all revealed truths must cohere with the religious experience of mankind; 4) the truth of religion must correspond to reality if it intends to establish its claim to be a system; and, 5) religion must serve the upward progress of man toward ethically higher value and the Godhead.

    Compare to his dialogical principles: 1) No religious pronouncement is beyond critique; 2) internal coherence must exist; 3) proper historical perspective must be maintained; 4) correspondence with reality must exist; 5) freedom from absolutized scriptural figurization; and, 6) dialogue should be conducted on areas where there is a greater possibility of success, such as ethical values.
36. Al Faruqi, "Islam and other faiths," 139.
37. Isma'il al Faruqi, "The role of Islam in global inter-religious dependence," in *Towards a Global Congress of the World's Religions*, ed. Warren Lewis (Barrytown, NY: Unification Theological Seminary, 1980), 26ff.
38. Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Islam and Buddhism Relations from Balkh to Bangkok and Tokyo," 180.
39. John Makransky, "Buddhist Inclusivism: Reflections toward a contemporary Buddhist theology of religions," in *Buddhist Attitudes of Other Religions*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel (St. Ottiken: EOS, 2008), 61.
40. Al Faruqi, *Christian Ethics*, 22.
41. Makransky, "Buddhist Inclusivism," 61ff.
42. Isma'il al Faruqi, "On the raison d'être of the Ummah," *Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (1963): 164.

43. Al Faruqi, *Christian Ethics*, 11f.
44. Ismail al-Faruqi, "Rights of non-Muslims under Islam: social and cultural aspects," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 1 (1979): 91.
45. Al Faruqi, "Islam and Christianity: Prospects for dialogue," 31.
46. Al Faruqi, *Christian Ethics*, 13.
47. Ibid., 14.
48. Al Faruqi, "Islam and Christianity: Prospects for dialogue," 31.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 32.
51. Kristin Beise Kiblinger, "Buddhist stances towards others: Types, examples, considerations," in *Buddhist Attitudes of Other Religions*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel (St. Ottiken: EOS, 2008), 31.
52. The Dalai Lama, "Foreword," in Shah Kazemi, *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism,* vii.
53. Al Faruqi, "Islam and Christianity: Problems and perspectives," 172.
54. Al Faruqi, "On the nature of Islamic da'wah," 402ff.