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Muslim-Christian Polemics across the Mediterranean. The Splendid Replies of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285)

Leiden: Brill, 2015. 368 pages, €135,00/\$175.00, ISBN (hardback) 9789004285514

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Muslim-Christian Polemics across the Mediterranean

The Splendid Replies of Shihāb al-Dīn
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The book is a valuable contribution to the history of Muslim-Christian polemics with perceptive observations on modern problems, and insights regarding the perspectives of future interreligious conversation. The author focuses, with diligent scrutiny, on a polemical work written by the Egyptian Mālikī jurist Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 1285). The work titled *al-Ajwiba al-fākhira ‘an al-as’ila al-fājira* (“Splendid Replies to Insolent Questions”) is, as the author argues, not an isolated attempt at responding to a letter in Arabic written by the Melkite bishop of Sidon, Paul of Antioch, in about 1200, but rather a part of an intellectual and ideological struggle for religious hegemony. The examination of al-Qarāfī’s work is informed by a wider interest of reconciling these two faiths to a degree and of proposing

ways of softening some of the sharpest edges of Christian-Muslim oppositional discourses while developing an outlook that sees the others not as enemies to be neutralized (theologically speaking), but as believers deserving respect (p. 12).

The book is written in a clear language and is well structured into six chapters. The first chapter explores the intellectual impulses for the composition of *Ajwiba* and locates it within the local and regional context conditioned by religious-political competition between Mamlūks, Frankish Crusaders, and Mongols, and by renewed Christian strength on behalf of the Coptic community in Egypt. Thus, not only al-Qarāfī's polemical work, but rather his entire intellectual endeavor, is understood best in the framework of attempts at restoring Sunni Orthodoxy in Egypt.

The second chapter focuses on the date and circumstances of the composition of *al-Ajwiba*, and on its five written sources including Paul of Antioch's *Letter to a Muslim Friend*. It is argued here that Muslim-Christian polemics was a collegial intellectual activity in a variety of places and at different times.

The next four chapters of the book explore the content and main arguments in those four chapters of *al-Ajwiba*, in which al-Qarāfī displays systematic refutation of the *Letter to a Muslim Friend*. The first two parts are highly apologetic in nature. Al-Qarāfī brings in common motifs against Christianity such as the invalidity of the Gospels and Christian doctrines and beliefs, and continues responding against series of arguments raised by Christians.

The final two chapters of *al-Ajwiba*, covered in the fifth and sixth chapters of Sarrió Cucarella's book, take an offensive tone. Al-Qarāfī's point of reference is the Islamic category of innovation. From this perspective, Christian practices and behavior, established by the rules of apostolicity, fail to be authentic and verifiable. In the last chapter, al-Qarāfī locates Islam in the history of prophetic heritage, constructing the Biblical mention of the prophet Muḥammad which was supposedly deliberately obscured by Jews and Christians. An important conclusion derived from these chapters might perhaps be the realization that both Christian and Muslim polemicists

assess the other's religion according to their own religious understandings which are seen as axiomatic and universal. The book provides helpful appendices on al-Qarāfī's literary production, fifteen points of arguments which al-Qarāfī derived from Paul of Antioch's letter, al-Qarāfī's piece on the corruption of early Christianity, and Biblical predictions of the coming of Muḥammad.

Perhaps one of the greatest merits of the book is the author's openness to expressing his own concerns about the historical and current state of Muslim-Christian polemics and his ability to develop suggestions in the introduction and the conclusion of the book. Although the focus of the book is mainly a single source, it certainly serves to reveal a wider picture of and scholars' interest in the conversation between the two religions. Sarrió Cucarella's book thereby also underscores the importance of studying texts like *al-Ajwiba*.

Most of the suggestions in the book derive from some relevant concepts which the discipline of comparative theology offers. Referring to Hugh Nicholson's study on comparative theology and especially of the notion of the 'inescapability of the political' in the making of religious identity, the author argues that changing one's attitude toward each other (ignoring historical hardship and emphasizing commonalities) or relying on new theological perspective (inclusivism or pluralism), is not at all sufficient for improvement of the dialogue between Muslims and Christians. The political dichotomy between 'us' and 'them'—an enduring standpoint in the historical course of Muslim-Christian relations—has to be given due consideration. In the construction of religious identity, the political is followed by the ideological moment of naturalization in which the views held by 'them' are declared devoid of all truth and thus unworthy of any respect. The two religions have always understood themselves through application of conflicting theological terms to one another, leading

to inherent 'othering'—of which the encounter in dialogue between Paul of Antioch and al-Qarāfī is a resonating example. It is crucial to keep in mind that theological differences cannot be taken for granted, but that they rather are contingent, politically conditioned, and consequences of selective processes—that is to say the existing knowledge about each other's religion is selected and emphasized according to historical-political predicaments. Another significant proposition derives from Francis Cloony's thesis about the 'purification' and 'intensification' of faith. The first concept relates to the correction of misconceptions about the other religion, and the second one is about reaching a point at which one's tradition is not taken as the only true one.

Along these lines, examining Muslim-Christian polemical literature might serve a corrective role and result in seeing some relevance in the religious tradition of the 'other', too. Historical polemical texts will help us, as the author suggests, to perceive religiously and theologically charged terms and categories as historical products of complex processes of identity construction "through which Muslims and Christians situate themselves politically in relation to each other" (p. 268).

One big problem that remains is the issue of supersessionism, the notion that a religion is final and complete. The related problematic issue of continuity has to be addressed in Christian-Muslim encounters in ways which allow both parties to acknowledge the other's arguments. The Christian revision of this self-perception in relation to Jewish people after the Holocaust is, the author emphasizes, a major shift for it allows holding the central Christian theological tenets without abrogating God's covenant with the Jewish people. However, in Christian-Muslim relations there is much to be revised and reconciled, the author suggests. On the Christian side it is the need to see Islam as a separate religion rather than a heresy, and on the Muslim side, it is the imperative of revising the old polemical

claim that Muslim scriptures have been deliberately falsified by Christians including the predictions in the Bible about the coming of Muḥammad.

What is not sufficiently addressed in Cucarella's book is the applicability of the considerations and suggestions he makes to wider societal platforms. The question is whether reading and revising polemical literature could function on a horizontal level and offer new paradigms to ordinary believers who are far from engaging with sophisticated argumentative discourses. It is worth examining how the polemical literature, elitist in its own ways, and its revisionist readings might disseminate knowledge and improve attitudes towards each other among 'the common'. Otherwise, the whole enterprise continues to emphasize the disparity between those who establish high-level intellectual landscapes in the field of inter-religious communication and those who, as ordinary believers, encounter unease on a daily basis. The language and rhetoric of polemics are also not treated in the book. The author states that greater emphasis needs to be placed on the theological content than on rhetoric. However, the polemical genre is much sustained and reinforced by its use of language and rhetoric—from ridicule to sober argumentation. Examining this aspect of al-Qarāfī's work becomes even more desirable with the author's claim that unlike the previous polemical works, *al-Ajwiba* was not written to instruct Muslims against decadent teachings and practices (as is the case with Ibn Taymiyya's polemical work directed largely towards Muslims themselves) but "to buttress the self-assurance of Muslims in the face of both military threat and cultural-theological challenge." (p. 68) The language of a polemical work which avoids addressing any error or deviant behavior of Muslims certainly differs from one which is directed at teaching, exhorting, and warning against mistakes. For our understanding of the intentions and strategies of polemics, it is worth examining the poetics of polemical writings.

Finally, it is understandable that due to limitations and the author's main focus of interest, the book treats mainly the Catholic and Sunni religious perceptions. However, it is worth taking some of the suggestions and conclusions stated in Sarrió Cucarella's book as points of reference for the future examination of broader, more diverse and more complex denominational relations.

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