

Book Review

Diego R. Sarrío Cucarella, *Muslim-Christian Polemics across the Mediterranean: The Splendid Replies of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285)*. The History of Christian-Muslim Relations, Vol. 23 (Leiden: Brill, 2014). ISBN: 978-90-04-28560-6. Price: €141.00/\$191.00.

Uri Shachar

Ben Gurion University of the Negev

(urisha@bgu.ac.il)

This book sets out to explore a question that is deliberately more ambitious than it could possibly exhaust, namely: how could the history of polemical literature, which is ostensibly quite confrontational, set Christian-Muslim relations on a less confrontational course than their shared history? More ambitious, because the answer depends on whether the interpretation that this book models will influence future studies or not, and on what the effect of such influence would be. But the question itself is both important and well positioned.

Since its inception, the study of Muslim polemics against other religions was to a large extent shaped in the shadow of the study of Christian anti-Jewish polemic. Over the course of the nineteenth century, German scholars, many of whom were Lutherans who taught or were trained at Tübingen, applied the new methods of source criticism and systematic philology to articulate a new paradigm for the rise of Christianity and the role of Jesus Christ.

According to this school of New Testament studies, Second Temple Judaism had become a sanctimonious, excessively legalistic religion, in which God was remote and inaccessible. In their penchant for dry codification the Pharisees had been responsible for the long and inevitable drift away from the spiritual creativity that characterizes parts of the Pentateuch. What is more, while Jesus and his teaching grew directly from this same tradition, his intellectual and spiritual program were the exact antithesis of Judaism. Influential theologians such as Julius Wellhausen and Ferdinand Wilhelm Weber took the polemics against Judaism that are found in the New Testament—e.g., Phil. 3:2; Matt. 23; Gal. 3:1–5—at face value. For them, the tension that is felt most strongly in Paul's epistles speaks to the fact that the Jews living during the time of Christ and the Apostles were in fact hypocrites, but adhered at the same time to the same corpus that the Christians inherited *en masse*. In other words, Paul's (perceived)

polemical attitude toward the Mosaic Law and toward observing it seemed not only warranted (because it was true, that is), but also necessary.

This was equally true for Church Fathers and early Christian theoreticians who composed tracts that polemicized against the Jews. For Weber and his students, if indeed Pharisees were dangerous “Judaizers,” then early Christians, who belonged to a split and persecuted sect, had to explain why some of their fundamental ideas were rooted in the same tradition. From Barnabas to Augustine, the polemic was not with “real” Jews, but with an abstraction that stood for the scripture that Christianity inherited. Its crucially important objective was to articulate a hermeneutics with which to read the Hebrew Bible that was the consequence of the Christology that is embedded in the Gospels. For proponents of the Tübingen school and its offshoots, Christian polemic is fundamentally benign, free of any political hostility; it is a hermeneutical endeavor, in which theoretical Jews are staged as an interpretive foil, born out of fear of assimilation and oppression.

Not so, however, in Islam. Nineteenth-century orientalists did not view polemics as a necessary component in the Muslim theological tradition. The Qur’ān points out the shortcomings of Judaism and Christianity, but on the whole is appreciative of the previous revelations. At the same time, Islam did not adopt the Old and New Testaments as scripture. The need to articulate a hermeneutical position vis-à-vis previous revelations, in other words, did not exist in the same way as it did for Christianity. As a religion that very soon after its founding achieved political hegemony, its attitude toward neighboring

faiths could not have been driven by the threat of persecution or silencing. For such critics as Steinschneider, Goldziher, and Becker, therefore, the polemical impulse that started to become manifest fully in the ninth century was a sign of the virulent hostility that characterized Islam’s attitude toward other faiths. It is no wonder, furthermore, that scholars viewed polemical exchanges from the crusader period—a time when the religions were indeed engaged in an ongoing political and spiritual battle—as particularly emblematic of this inherent enmity.

The past two decades, however, have seen a shift in our understanding of the complex inter-religious conversations that unfolded in the Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Frankish Near East. While scholars recognize the complicated political circumstances in which authors made attempts to engage with (putatively) rival traditions, there is also a growing understanding that the longstanding intellectual exchange that emerged during this period speaks to the rise of what could be called a polemical dialogue. The pioneering work of David Thomas, Paul Khoury, and Thomas Michel has identified Paul of Antioch as a key figure in the history of this discourse, facilitating through his treatises a constructive inter-religious conversation that spanned religions and regions. It is to this recent impulse that Diego Cucarella’s masterful and provocative study of al-Qarāfī’s treatise *al-Ajwiba al-fākhirā* belongs.

Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285) was an Egyptian Mālikī jurist who rose to prominence as a teacher of *fiqh* in various institutions of learning during the second half of the thirteenth century. A true intellectual, al-Qarāfī commanded

knowledge in a wide range of fields that stretched well beyond the classical Islamic sciences, including astronomy, optics, mathematics, and logic. It was at some time between 1250 and 1278—relatively late in his life—that he turned to the systematic and argumentative defense of Islam. Indeed, in both title and structure, *al-Ajwiba* is positioned as a response to an attack that was set forth by an unnamed Christian critic. In fact, the first chapter consists of replies to every single claim that is found in Paul of Antioch's *Letter to a Muslim Friend* (although it is important to note that al-Qarāfi probably responded to some later rendition of the original letter). But *al-Ajwiba* is far more ambitious a project than an attempt narrowly to defend Islam from the claims of the Melkite theologian. The composition, for example, begins with a series of anthropological observations concerning secular institutions in Christian communities around the Mediterranean. For al-Qarāfi, the fact that Franks in the Levant resort to the Ordeal (trial by combat), a foolish practice that is incapable of achieving justice he says, or the annual persecution of Jews in Castile and Provence on the basis of the ludicrous accusation that they “stole the [Christian] religion” (which is subsequently restored after three days), all prove that Christianity has become an ignorant sect overcome by servile conformism (p. 100). The centrality of bishops in Christian society, al-Qarāfi explains, is to be blamed, for without the firm voice of prophetic guidance the corrupt clerical elite introduces blameworthy innovations and error into society. Indeed, in all its sections *al-Ajwiba* draws heavily on a wide range of sources, both geographically and thematically,

which creates the impression that its opinion on Christianity and defense of Islam is not only exceptionally erudite but also intentionally broad. In the first two chapters of the book Cucarella meticulously lays out this thematic and intellectual breadth. He furthermore points out that al-Qarāfi set out not only to launch a narrow philosophical attack on the theological tenets of Christianity (and, to a lesser extent, Judaism); rather, by addressing questions of prophetology and revelation, he also sought to establish the supremacy of Islamic culture, as a doctrinal system but also as a civilizational project. This ties in to Cucarella's larger argument in the book, to which I shall return momentarily.

Chapters 3–6 provide a thorough and insightful survey of *al-Ajwiba* in its entirety. Chapter 3 treats the first chapter of *al-Ajwiba*, which is also the most polemical one in tone and content, where al-Qarāfi responds to the claims brought forth in the Melkite tradition that stand at the bottom of this correspondence. Cucarella shows that while Paul of Antioch's critiques of Islam are numerous and diverse in theological nature, al-Qarāfi's response hinges on one main point on which the two traditions disagree; namely, the doctrine of prophetic infallibility that had become the consensus in Muslim theology by al-Qarāfi's time. If Muḥammad was an infallible envoy of divine revelation, then by definition his message is to be accepted as universally true. The same, however, is not true for the apostles, who may have distorted Jesus' message, or even for the Hebrew Bible that may have become corrupt through faulty transmission. In this way al-Qarāfi both disproves Paul's Christological interpretation of several

Qur'ānic passages, and undermines his claim regarding the restricted quality of Muḥammad's teachings. What is more, this disagreement on the issue of prophetology, which results in conflicting views of scriptural truth, leads al-Qarāfī to draw far-reaching conclusions not only on the veracity of Christianity as a creed, but on the very ability of contemporary Christians to lead a healthy communal life.

Despite the harsh critique of Christian error, on the whole the first chapter is apologetic, with the objective of escaping the uncomfortable consequences that result from Paul's reading of the Qur'ān. In the next two chapters, however, al-Qarāfī shifts to the offensive. Cucarella points out that in Chapter Two al-Qarāfī is still responding to various attacks on Islam, but the stakes are clearly higher, and the tone more acerbic. Al-Qarāfī, for example, defends the Muslim rejection of Christ's crucifixion. He scrutinizes the narrative in the Gospels to show that even on the basis of a plain literary analysis, it is an unreliable report of the event. The story as it unfolds in the Gospels, in other words, shows that between the arrest and the crucifixion there were several moments in which the identity of the person being crucified was not sufficiently clear. But fundamentally, for al-Qarāfī here, too, what lies at the bottom of the matter is a question of epistemology. Arguably the most important moment in Christian soteriology is an event about which we know via the report of a few people who were present and four scribes, none of whom was a prophet.

Later in the chapter al-Qarāfī responds to one of the earliest and most widespread arguments against Islam; namely, that it had spread through the use of

brute force, showing that its claim for theological supremacy is in fact weak and unconvincing. This argument, of course, invokes not only the history of the early conquests, but also verses in the Qur'ān that are seen to preach violence against unbelievers. Here again al-Qarāfī returns to his basic critique of Christianity as a religion that has strayed from the truth revealed to its prophet due to the unchecked influence of "innovative" bishops. If Christians engage in warfare, which they clearly did in al-Qarāfī's time, despite the pacifist command to "turn the other cheek" in the Gospel, then this must be because power-hungry princes have lured bishops to abrogate Christ's teaching in a way that has left this community, unlike the Muslim one, hopelessly misguided. This dismissive tone characterizes the subsequent chapter, which as Cucarella states, is the most combative and the least original in *al-Ajwiba*. Al-Qarāfī collected 107 arguments against Christianity from a variety of sources, most dominantly al-Ja'farī's *Takhjīl man ḥarrafa al-tawrāh wa-al-Injīl*, which was extremely popular at the time. Al-Qarāfī questions and directly refutes many of the basic practices and doctrines that his Christian counterparts endorse. Because they did not take the teaching of Jesus as the one and only authority (which, as a result, has become inaccessible), Christians have on the one hand introduced into their faith blameworthy innovations – such as the Eucharist and celibacy – and on the other hand have irresponsibly abandoned practices that Christ is reported to have observed – such as ritual purity, circumcision, and the prohibition of eating pork. But in this chapter al-Qarāfī directs his arrows mainly at the person he thinks

is responsible for the most destructive corruption of Christ's teaching: St. Paul. The chapter dwells at length on several narratives of Paul's conversion and his subsequent deceitful ploys that drove the followers of Christ away from their original monotheistic faith. Cucarella traces masterfully the complicated history of these narratives in their various manifestations in the anti-Christian polemical tradition.

The final chapter of *al-Ajwiba* (and the penultimate chapter in Cucarella's book) deals with proofs of Muḥammad's prophecy that al-Qarāfī attempts to find in the Old and New Testament. As Cucarella points out, this contradicts al-Qarāfī's previous attack on the integrity of these scriptural traditions, but the use of these prooftexts here is strictly polemical. Al-Qarāfī turns to these texts, in other words, not as religiously authoritative, but simply to substantiate the prophethood of Muḥammad on the basis of traditions that Jews and Christians accept as revealed truth. Cucarella does not quite spell this out, but as a consequence of this attitude al-Qarāfī's treatment of the biblical text does not amount to scriptural polemic in the hermeneutical sense. All of his arguments are historical in nature: passages in the Torah or Psalms or the Gospels, he says, should be seen as referring to Islam simply because the descriptions correspond most accurately to Muḥammad or the Umma. For example, those of whom it is said that "praise of God [is] in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands" in Ps. 149:6 must be Muslims because they are the only ones who praise God with loud voices in the call to prayer and are allegedly the

only ones who use two-edged swords (p. 248). Al-Qarāfī, in other words, does not accuse Jewish or Christian exegetes of misinterpreting the Bible because they lack the tools or cognitive ability to understand its true meaning; rather, because of their political entanglements that are the result of the lack of proper religious leadership, they deliberately refuse to acknowledge the plain (i.e., historical) meaning of their own texts.

That Cucarella chose not to draw out this point further is rather surprising, as one of his main arguments in the book is that *al-Ajwiba* should be seen fundamentally as a political text. He reiterates the notion that al-Qarāfī was driven by a sense of threat to Muslim hegemony, which led him to compose a defense not only of the Qur'ān and Muḥammad, but of Islamic civilization. In the context of the recurring conflicts with Latin Christians and the rising threat of the Mongols, as well as the so-called Coptic renaissance, Cucarella states aptly, polemics seemed like an appropriate vehicle to trumpet the truth not only of Islam but of the Muslim community as the "best nation ever brought forth to men" (Q 3:15). This is most visible where al-Qarāfī's critique strays from the nuts and bolts of philosophical polemic and turns to issues that concern the ordinary practices of neighboring communities.

But this point is more subtle (and urgent) than simply a reminder to consider the context in which this treatise was composed and that shaped the experience of its author, for what underlies Cucarella's treatment of *al-Ajwiba* is the claim that inter-religious discourse is in fact about the basis of human civilization precisely because, through the debate about various

doctrinal differences, authors really attempted the construction of separate identities, which are always profoundly entangled. Yet especially after Vatican II, says Cucarella, those who have engaged in efforts to resolve long-lasting religious conflicts have tended to assume that the various doctrines are incommensurably different, and that the source of all conflict is the struggle for power. If only we could “depoliticize” theology and refrain from comparison, some say, we might achieve harmony. This fantasy, however, has been rejected even by some of the most vocal supporters of the message brought forth by Vatican II. In contrast, Cucarella claims, citing Hugh Nicholson, we should recognize that some of the most profound doctrinal differences “are the contingent product of the complex processes of selection, emphasis, and recognition through which religious communities situate themselves politically in relation to proximate rivals” (p. 11). In other words, religious discourse—even the most refined and seemingly insular theological treatment—is part of the identity construction through which Muslims and Christians situate themselves ‘politically’ in relation to each other (p. 268).

This provocative insight is the engine behind Cucarella’s approach, which is stated in the question with which this review began: could polemical literature help us foster a better understanding between Muslims and Christians? It is crucially important to recognize, says Cucarella, that the seeming polarity between the traditions is not essential but rather results from a dialectic of mutual

perceptions that was fashioned over centuries of heated and engaged discussion. Moreover, polemic plays a decisive role in building this very discourse, the purpose of which was in part to intensify the political sense of ‘us’ against ‘them.’ A sympathetic reading of the polemical tradition, therefore, could teach us that the othering, which now seems so deep and inextricable, owes to various social and political exigencies as much as it does to theological precepts. But how do we both do justice to medieval authors who clearly treated the precepts of their own tradition as axiomatic, and at the same time hold that the very same precepts are the mutable product of political identity construction? This juggling act seems to put the modern commentator in charge of cleaning up what Cucarella calls “the rhetorical excesses” of medieval polemics. Indeed, it seems that even Cucarella wishes that al-Qarāfī had had the courtesy to evaluate Christianity according to its own standards, and that he had talked with and not “past” his Christian interlocutor. One has to be careful that this approach does not end in the same kind of reduction that is created by the comparative theologian who cedes to the other religion only the thinnest common denominator that would anticipate a comfortable, yet useless, bridge. Needless to say, however, this is an impressive book and a laudable program, not only for its potential impact on the efforts for a better understanding between religious communities, but also for how we read the pre-modern ancestors of debates that continue to rage.