



Muslim-Christian Polemics across the Mediterranean: The Splendid Replies of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī

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BOOK REVIEW

Muslim-Christian Polemics across the Mediterranean: The *Splendid Replies* of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī, by Diego R. Sarrió Cucarella, Leiden, Brill, 2015, 366 pp., €135.00/\$175.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-28551-4

This book is an analysis of the *al-Ajwiba al-fākhira ‘an al-as’ila al-fājira* (Splendid replies to insolent questions) by the seventh/thirteenth-century Egyptian Mālikī jurist Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī. It appears as the twenty-third volume in Brill’s “History of Christian–Muslim Relations” series. A small handful of editions of the *Ajwiba* currently exist, but no English translations, and Sarrió Cucarella does not provide one here. Instead, he attempts to situate al-Qarāfī and the *Ajwiba* in its literary milieu and considers how its major themes are perpetuated in modern Muslim–Christian relations.

In the first chapter, Sarrió Cucarella places al-Qarāfī in his cultural and historical context. Here, we catch a glimpse of a multi-talented jurist applying his intellectual prowess to works of great variety. He eventually sets himself the task of defending the Muslim community as the best nation brought forth for humankind. This claim was challenged, in particular by Paul of Antioch, seventh/thirteenth-century Melkite bishop of Sidon, in his *Letter to a Muslim Friend*. Al-Qarāfī writes his *Ajwiba* as a response to this letter, producing a rebuttal of the bishop’s claims and a defence of the superiority of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (though the Christian and his letter are not named in al-Qarāfī’s text). The *Ajwiba*, then, is part of a significant theological exchange, for not only did al-Qarāfī read the *Letter to a Muslim Friend*, but a fourteenth-century anonymous Christian in Cyprus also edited and expanded the letter, sending it to the notable Muslim scholars Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī, both of whom wrote lengthy responses. Sarrió Cucarella discusses many of these historical details in this first chapter and he demonstrates the political and cultural complexities evident in literary exchanges and religious polemic.

Sarrió Cucarella’s second chapter focuses on the *Ajwiba*, paying special attention to al-Qarāfī’s written sources. These include Paul of Antioch’s letter, as well as important Muslim treatises by scholars such as al-Ja’farī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Khazrajī, and al-Maghribī from the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries. This chapter is important because it shows the reader what al-Qarāfī was looking at as he wrote the *Ajwiba* and some of the main sources for his knowledge of Christianity. This not only illuminates the text and al-Qarāfī as a scholar, but also allows Sarrió Cucarella to draw some helpful conclusions with respect to the wider field of Muslim–Christian polemic and dialogue. For example, Sarrió Cucarella shows that intellectuals like al-Qarāfī were able to form “scholarly networks” (98) across time and geographical space. Even so, as Sarrió Cucarella concludes, these relationships usually did not indicate that authors hoped to change the minds of the opponents they wrote against. Instead, the polemic they wrote was meant for internal consumption as an effort to reassure one’s community of its religious superiority in the face of religious challenge (98).

In his next four chapters, Sarrió Cucarella treats each of the *Ajwiba*’s four sections. In these chapters, he analyses al-Qarāfī’s text in great detail and the reader who is unfamiliar with the *Ajwiba* will quickly discover that the text covers most of the *topoi* of medieval Muslim–Christian apologetic and polemic literature. Most significant in this regard are

al-Qarāfi's discussions of, and Sarrió Cucarella's commentary on, *tahrīf*, or scriptural falsification (see, for example, 161–169), and the Bible's alleged prophecies of the Prophet Muhammad. The latter topic is the focus of Chapter 6 and an entire appendix is devoted to enumerating the biblical passages used by al-Qarāfi (291–302).

Sarrió Cucarella is consistent in his treatment of important apologetic themes and is careful to examine the ways in which al-Qarāfi uses his sources. But this is only one of the book's foci. The author also attempts to marry deep analysis of the *Ajwiba* with reflections upon present-day Muslim–Christian dialogue. Such efforts are always delicate ones as they can often yield rather thin analysis of either the historical context under examination or the contemporary situation. There is also the danger of ascribing modern sentiments to medieval circumstances. Quoting Sidney Griffith, Sarrió Cucarella helpfully observes that it is “unrealistically anachronistic to expect to find writers of almost a millennium ago following the usages and etiquettes of interreligious dialogue adopted by twenty-first century academicians” (260), and he therefore chooses to focus on the “enduring theological constructs of the other that this tradition has bequeathed to present-day Christians and Muslims” (260). This is a noble endeavour, for, while the standards for interreligious dialogue may have changed, many of the potential pitfalls remain. Similarly, even though the al-Qarāfi existed in unique historical, cultural, and political contexts and wrote his text for unique purposes, the topics he chose to address still arise in many present-day Muslim–Christian exchanges.

Sarrió Cucarella successfully avoids dangerous anachronisms in his study, a triumph no doubt owed to the robust methodology set out in the book's Introduction, where he includes insightful treatment of comparative theology methodologies and skilfully applies these to the common concerns of Muslim–Christian relations. These strong applications reappear in Sarrió Cucarella's Conclusion. Perhaps most significantly, they allow the author to determine that studies like his show “the breakdown in communication that results from taking one's theological categories as axiomatic and universally applicable” (268), a feature evident in the *Ajwiba* and other texts like it. Indeed, Muslims and Christians often spoke past one another in their efforts to defend and prop-up their respective faiths, a characteristic that endures in our time. One only wishes that the insights that appear in the Conclusion would have appeared more consistently in the main chapters of the book, especially since consideration for the connections between al-Qarāfi's work and present-day Muslim–Christian relations was the underlying concern of Sarrió Cucarella's book. Indeed, the author is unfailingly rigorous in his analysis of al-Qarāfi and the *Ajwiba*, but commentary on what his observations might have to say about present-day concerns are more dense in some chapters than they are in others. Nevertheless, Sarrió Cucarella's overall approach is a success and readers are treated to a thorough analysis of the *Ajwiba* and guided in their reflection on how works like it continue to touch upon the variety of issues present in Muslim–Christian dialogue. Those interested in medieval religious polemic and students and scholars of Muslim–Christian relations will surely benefit from Sarrió Cucarella's work.

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