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Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

Volume 18. The Ottoman Empire (1800-1914)

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Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq 060057

Fares Chidiac, Faris Al Chidiac

DATE OF BIRTH 1805
 PLACE OF BIRTH Ashqūt, Mount Lebanon
 DATE OF DEATH 20 September 1887
 PLACE OF DEATH Unknown; buried in Hazmieh, Mount Lebanon
 by-Rana Issa

BIOGRAPHY

Fāris al-Shidyāq was born into a Maronite family in Ashqūt in Kisriwan, the son of Yūsuf, a scribe employed by the Maronite Church. He was the younger brother of Tannūs, the historian of Mount Lebanon, and As'ad, the first Arab convert from the Maronite Church to Protestantism and martyr for the Protestant faith. Al-Shidyāq grew up on the outskirts of Beirut in the village of al-Ḥadath. He was expected to become a scribe, following in the footsteps of his father and older brothers, who were his first teachers before he joined the famous school of 'Ayn Waraqa. He was introduced to American missionaries through his brother As'ad, and began to work for them as scribe and instructor in Arabic. When As'ad met his death in 1825 while he was imprisoned by the Maronite Patriarchate in the monastery of Qannūbin, Fāris fled to Egypt with the help of American missionaries. He spent two years there, continuing his studies in Arabic and the Islamic sciences alongside his work as an Arabic teacher, translator and copy editor for the missionaries. He moved to Malta with his new wife in 1825, and worked there for ten years with British missionaries.

In Malta, Fāris expanded the scope of his work and wrote one of the first books on teaching Arabic as a second language, as well as translating the Book of Common Prayer with George Badger. On account of his drinking and animated lifestyle, his relationship with the missionaries was rocky, but that did not deter them from moving him to Cambridge to work with Professor Samuel Lee on a new translation of the Arabic Bible.

In Cambridge, Fāris also wrote *Al-sāq 'alā l-sāq* ('Leg over leg'), the book for which he is most famous. It was the first direct attack that he published against Christian clergy, and against the continuing relevance of the Bible to ethics in the modern world. He left England for Paris in 1855 and lived there for two years, publishing *Al-sāq* with help from his fellow Levantine, Raphael Kahla. In 1860, he sought new employment in Tunis.

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