Islamic Reformism and Christinaity. A Critical Reading of the Works of Muhammad Rashid Rida and his Associates (1898-1935)

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Chapter Seven
Recapitulation of Ideas: Christianity as Reflected in Riḍā's *Fatwās*

We have already discussed the polemics of *al-Manār* on Christianity on different levels. In chapter three we have seen that Riḍā had opened the pages of his journal to some of his readers by publishing their reactions to missionary activities. As early as 1903, *al-Manār* published a poem by an anonymous reader under the title of *Su'ālun fī al-Tathlīth* (A Question on the Trinity). Signing his poem *sīn nūn*, the poet challenged the Christians to prove that this doctrine was *qadīm* (primordial). The fact that it had never been explicitly mentioned in the teachings of previous prophets (especially Moses) proved that it was *hādith* (newly innovated).[1] We have also pointed out that missionary activities in Egypt reached its peak in the beginning of the 1930s. In June 1933, another reader under the name Hasan al-Dars, a police officer and a journalist in Cairo, wrote a poem which he titled as *Muhārabat al-Mubashshirīn lil-'Islām fī Miṣr* (Missionaries fighting Islam in Egypt), which Riḍā never published in his journal. In his long poem, al-Dars accused missionaries to be 'charlatans', who used all means, such as hypnosis, to convert people. He was grieved by the 'laxity' of the government in combating their work.[2]

Riḍā's interaction with his readers is best exemplified in his *fatwā* section.[3] In this section, he illustrated many of his reflections on many a great deal of theological, scholarly, religious, and social issues. Beginning in 1903, firstly under the title 'Questions and Answers' (*Su'āl wā Jawāb*), and later '*Fatāwā al-Manār*', he responded to a wide variety of queries from all over the world. This collection indicates that *al-Manār* was a remarkable record of interests and preoccupations of the Muslim world.[4]

It should be stressed that most of these petitions were submitted by Muslim readers; but there were also questions raised by Christians and missionaries. As we shall discuss, Riḍā's answers to the Danish missionary Alfred Nielsen represented his only reaction to queries directly sent by an active missionary in the Middle East. We also encounter the name of the above-mentioned Coptic lawyer Akhnūkh Fanūs (see, chapter 2), who sent Riḍā a long message in which he discussed the differences between some Qur'ānic

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[1] *Al-Manār*, vol. 6/6, pp. 225-226.

[2] Letter to Riḍā, Hasan al-Dars, 15 June 1933, Cairo, Riḍā's private archive.

[3] The whole collection of his *fatwā*s has been collected in six volumes in 1970-1971 by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid and Yūsuf al-Khūrī, 6 vols., Beirut, 1976-77.

[4] Dudoignon, 'Echoes', pp. 85-116. More studies about Riḍā's *fatwās*, see, Jajat Burhanudin, 'Aspiring for Islamic Reform: Southeast Asian Requests for Fatwas in *al-Manār*', *Islamic Law and Society*, Leiden: Brill, vol. 12/1 (2005), pp. 9-26. Cf. Charles Adams, 'Muḥammad ʿAbduh and the Transvaal fatwa', in *The Macdonald presentation Volume*, Princeton University Press, 1933, pp. 13-29; John O. Voll, 'ʿAbduh and the Transvaal Fatwa: The Neglected Question', in T. Sonn (ed.), *Islam and the Question of Minorities*, Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1996, pp. 27-40.

narratives and their equivalents in the Old Testament. We should remember that Fānūs was one of the pivotal figures behind the Coptic Congress, which Riḍā had strongly resisted in 1911. Riḍā published his brief reaction to his message as a *fatwā* in 1913.[5] He sharply reacted that the Qur'ān is the Word of God and more trustworthy than the Biblical narratives authored by Jewish historians. He divided Jewish narratives into two types: 1) divine as they contained the history of Prophets, and 2) non-divine, such as the historical account of the Jewish historiographer Josephus. Riḍā stated that the Christian views of the narratives of the Old Testament were not always coherent, especially those on the stories of prophets. Muslims were therefore required not to trust their Scriptures, neither in the 'literal', nor in the 'figurative' sense. They should be merely seen as historical records.[6]

7.1. Early Encounters

The first pertinent question was raised as early as 1902. In the minds of one of Riḍā's readers there were some theological problems as to the narratives on the *nuzūl* (descending) of Jesus before the end of the world. And would his return as a prophet contradict the concept of the Prophet Muḥammad as the seal of prophecy?[7]

Riḍā confirmed that Muslims were not required to believe in the return of Jesus because there was no related *qaṭ'ī* (definite) Qur'ānic text. All ḥadīth*s* related to this issue, mostly from Abū Hurairah, were *aḥād* (narrated by a small number people) or *gharīb* (odd). In matters of *ʿAqīda* (doctrine), one should depend on definite and *mutawātir* traditions. Riḍā furthermore disagreed with those who quote the Qur'ān in order to support this element of doctrine. He gave different interpretations to the two verses related to this issue. The verse: 'And there is none of the People of the Book but must believe in him before his death' (al-Nisāʾ, 4:159) was actually mentioned in the context of the claims of Christians about Jesus as the Son of God. In the *fatwā*, Riḍā employed the same arguments he used in the *Tafsīr* as we have already discussed in the previous chapter. The verse refers to a group of the People of the Book who will revert to the true belief in Jesus as God's prophet immediately before their death. To take the verse as proving the descending of Jesus, and that people will believe in him before his natural death before the Day of Resurrection, in his view, inaccurate. The narratives concerning the coming of Jesus became

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[5] *Al-Manār*, vol. 16/7, (Rajab 1331/July 1913), p. 520. In 1904, Riḍā published a poem by Fanūs on the Russo-Japanese War, and the reason behind Japan's progress in many fields. *Al-Manār*, vol. 7/19 (Shawwāl, 1322/December 1904), p. 752. See also Riḍā's criticism to Fanūs and his role in the Coptic Congress in 1911; *al-Manār*, vol. 14/3, pp. 216-17.

[6] *Al-Manār*, vol. 16/7, (Rajab 1331/July 1913), p. 520.

[7] Aḥmad effendi ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm from Shibīn al-Kūm (Egypt), 'Nuzūl al-Masīḥ', vol. 5/4 (Ṣafar 1320/May 1902), pp. 135-138. Riḍā gave a similar answer on the ascension of Jesus to Heaven to a question raised by a certain Aḥmad Ismāʿīl al-Quṭb, a subscriber to *al-Manār* from Lebanon, see, 'Ṣuʿūd al-Sayyid al-Masīḥ ʾilā al-Samā'', vol. 14/7 (Rajab 1329/July 1911), p. 507.

only known after the circulation of the manuals of the two *Shaykhs* (Al-Bukhari and Muslim).[8]

Despite his refusal to accept the return of Jesus on the basis of the Qur'ān, Riḍā insisted on making his own comparison between the concept of the Messiah in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Jews, in his view, expect their messiah who would renew the kingdom of Israel. Riḍā alluded that as they are desirous for wealth, the Jews predict somebody who would consolidate their 'materialistic' aspirations on earth. The Christians expect the return of theirs in order to re-establish his Kingdom and the Cross. But Muslims believe that Jesus will return and 'break the cross, kill the swine, put an end to the payment of the *jizyah* (the poll tax on the People of the Book), establish the Islamic *Sharīʿa*, and observe the Muslim prayer in order to make it clear that Islam is the true religion.'[9] Riḍā however argued that some Christians believed in the return of Jesus not in the physical sense. They interpreted his 'return' as referring to his 'good attributes and sermons of love, peace and brotherhood'. In the same sense, Riḍā metaphorically elucidated the word *Nuzūl* in the ḥadīth as that the descending of Jesus will be exemplified in the propagation and loftiness of Islam as the true religion of God. The Christians would also comprehend the nature of Jesus to be a man, the same as the Muslims believe in Muḥammad.[10] Concerning the second point of the question, Riḍā confirmed that the notion of the Prophet Muḥammad as the seal of prophecy was confirmed by means of *mutawātir* and definite traditions; and there was no need to interpret it in the light of other *aḥād* narratives such as that about the return of Jesus.[11]

In 1903, a habitual *mustaftī* (petitioner) of *al-Manār* under the name Aḥmad Muḥammad al-ʾAlfī, a regional scholar in the town of Tūkh nearby Cairo, wondered why many Christians, despite being highly qualified and having significantly contributed to the Arabic language, would still insist on disbelieving in the Qur'ān as the final and true revelation. Some of them, he went on, already admitted its miraculous nature, but rejected its divine nature out of 'stubbornness': Why did eloquent Christian men of letters adhere to Christianity, and ignore the 'contradictions, the broken chain of transmission, and the opposition to logic in the Christian Scriptures? Why did they leave the Qur'ān with its 'wise' message and 'beautiful' style aside?[12]

Riḍā answered that those Christians insisted on adopting their religion only as a matter of 'nationality' and socio-political bond. They preserved its religious symbols of doctrines, traditions in order to keep their national and religious unity intact. In Riḍā's thinking, they did not fairly study Islam in order to

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[8] Ibid., 137.
[9] Ibid, pp. 137-38.
[10] Ibid., p. 138-139.
[11] Ibid.
[12] 'Bayān al-Qurʾān wā Balāghatuh wā mā yuhimu dhālik', *al-Manār*, vol. 6/12, pp. 461-466. About questions by the same person see, vol. 4/6 (Ṣafar 1319/May 1901), pp. 221-22; vol. 4/7, pp.256-57; vol. 4/8 (Rabīʿ al-ʾAwwal 1319/June 1901), p. 303; vol. 6/10, pp. 373-74; vol. 6/12, pp. 461-62; vol. 14/2, pp. 99-100.

understand its origins. However, the 'vices' widespread among Muslims made the 'merits' of Islam invisible to the fair-minded among them. Riḍā moreover spelled out that most of the well-versed Christian Arab linguists hardly looked at the Qur'ān in an objective way. Their 'ethnical enmity' against Islam, he further argued, frequently prevented them from saying the truth about the Qur'ān's miraculous (*muʿjiz*) nature. However, he excluded the group of those who reached another conclusion, viz. that the language of the Qur'ān is miraculous, such as the above-mentioned Christian Lebanese linguist Jabr effendi Ḍumiṭ in his book *al-Khawātir al-Ḥisān*.[13] Riḍā assured his petitioner that most of the educated and rational Christians did not believe in the Trinity, and a group of them had frequently informed him that they were entirely sceptical about their religion.

In 1904, an unnamed Tunisian questioner asked Riḍā whether a Muslim was allowed to read non-Muslim scriptures, such as the Torah, only for the sake of acquiring knowledge about their contents. Suppose that Muslims were to be prohibited to read other scriptures, non-Muslims would be more knowledgeable and stronger than Muslims, since they were not discouraged by their religion to study the Qur'ān.[14] For Riḍā, reading other scriptures for the purpose of supporting the truth of Islam and refuting the allegations of others was highly recommended. He even considered this act as a matter of *ʿIbādah* (worship); and in many cases this should become a duty. As early Muslim scholars had been reading other scriptures in order to deduce proofs from them, Riḍā deemed it an obligation upon himself and other contemporary scholars to combat missionary writings on Islam by reading Christian scriptures and disproving them. In order to avoid disturbance in their beliefs, Riḍā discouraged common Muslims and young students to read the books of other religions. He compared the state of those Muslims with a 'crow' who tried to learn the way of walking of a 'peacock'. As soon as the crow acquired the peacock's way of walking, it would totally forget its former nature.[15]

7.2. Are Christians Unbelievers?

Muḥammad Effendi Ḥilmī, a secretary at the Prisons of Ḥalfa (Sudan), put a question to Riḍā concerning the eternal abide of unbelievers and Christians in the Fire.[16] Riḍā expounded that the Qur'ān is clear-cut in stating that the *Kāfirūn* (unbelievers) and *Munāfiqūn* (hypocrites) are eternally abiding in the Fire, except whom the Lord wills to be saved. The scholars interpreted the concept of *Khulūd* (eternity) in this case as *Mukth* (eternal residence) in a similar way as in the other verse: 'If a man kills a Believer intentionally, his recompense is Hell, to abide therein for ever' (al-Nisāʾ 4:93). Muslim

[13] Jabr Dumit, *al-Khawātir al-Ḥisān fī al-Maʿānī wā al-Bayān*, Cairo, 1896.
[14] 'Mutālaʿat Kutub al-Milal Ghayr al-ʾIslāmiyya', vol. 7/7, pp. 262-263.
[15] Ibid., p. 263.
[16] 'Khulūd al-Kāfir fī al-Nār', vol. 7/7, pp. 258-259; questions by the same person, see, vol. 6/13 (Rajab 1321/September 1903), p. 510; vol. 6/17, p. 672, vol. 7/4, p. 141

theologians were also of the opinion that anyone who knew about Islam on a sound basis that would stimulate his contemplation, while he did not believe out of stubbornness and rigidity, was eternally destined to the Fire. However, they excluded those who had not received the message properly or those who studiously and seriously investigated Islam, but did not manage to discover the truth before their death.

Another petitioner had some doubts about the authenticity of the ḥadīth of the *Fiṭra* (God's way of creating or His plan): 'Every infant is born according to the *Fiṭra*, then his parents make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian'.[17] Riḍā explained that every infant is born ready to 'promote' himself by accepting Islam as agreeable with God's original nature of creation. The infant later will be taught other psychological and physical behaviors which might influence his nature. When parents (or anybody playing their role) bring up their child according to beliefs other than Islam, they will be creating in the character of their children other traditions opposing the *Fiṭra*. Riḍā concluded that Christian parents, for example, raise their children to believe that all human beings had been created by nature with 'evil' and 'sin'. They also learn them that salvation and happiness could be reached if they believe in the crucifixion, which Riḍā defined as a change in their *Fiṭra*.[18]

In another *fatwā* on the belief of the People of the Book, Riḍā made his points clearer. He gave the example that their belief was like a group of slaves whose master left them his farm in order to reconstruct it and avail themselves from its crops. Later he sent them a more educated and well-informed slave with a manual of other instructions and duties. They followed that manual, but soon abandoned it after the death of the slave. They were 'tempted' to discard their work according to his manual, replacing it by extravagant veneration of the slave instead of exerting efforts to keep the farm cultivated. Riḍā followed the line of ʾAbū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) who maintained that those who died after having conducted deep investigation, but did not reach the truth of Islam before their death, would be forgiven in the Hereafter. Such people are excused until they have a real opportunity to learn about the 'truth' of Islam.[19]

7.3. A Kuwaiti Petitioner on Slavery in the Bible

In the Gulf region, there were slave-holding areas even until the 1950s, despite official out-lawing of the slave trade. In their writings, missionaries in Kuwait and Bahrain were critical of the institution of slavery.[20] In response to many

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[17] *Al-Manār*, vol. 8/1 (Muaḥarram 1323/March 1905), pp.18-20; a certain ʿAbdullāh Sulaymān sent the question from Suez. In his comment, based on the question, Riḍā found him a 'strange man'.

[18] Ibid.

[19] *Al-Manār*, vol. 13/8 (Shaʿbān 1328/September 1910), pp. 572-574. See, Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Faysal al-Tafriqah Bayna al-ʾIslām wā al-Zandaqah*, edited by Sulaymān Dunyā, Cairo, 1961, pp. 206-208.

[20] Eleanor Abdella Doumato, 'An 'Extra Legible Illustration of the Christian Faith': Medicine, Medical Ethics, and Missionaries in the Arabian Gulf', in Eleanor H. Tejirian & Reeva Spector

questions, Riḍā published opinions on slavery. Sulaymān al-ʿAdasānī (d. 1957), *al-Manār*'s agent and Riḍā's informant in Kuwait, requested Riḍā to dwell upon the concept of captivity and slavery in the Bible. The reason for the query was to respond to the objections against Islam as an 'anti-humane' and 'barbaric' religion.[21] Al-ʿAdasānī had several debates with Christian missions in his homeland. In a letter to Riḍā, he mentioned a well-circulated missionary pamphlet in Kuwait entitled: *Ḥusn al-Ijāz fī Ibtāl al-ʾIʿjāz* (The Best Refutation of the Unapproachable Eloquence) by a certain Nusair al-Dīn al-Zāfirī, whose aim was to disapprove the Qur'ān's claim of eloquence.[22]

In his answer, Riḍā did not cite any specific sources. His reply was based on lengthy quotations from the Bible which he saw as encouraging slavery. He continued to elucidate that there were ample evidences that captivity and slavery were permitted in ancient legislations. He pointed for instance to the Biblical narrative that Abraham's brother had been taken captive (Genesis 14:14). Mosaic Law had also allowed the Israelites to take 'the children of the strangers' as their 'bondmen forever' (Leviticus 25:46). Riḍā argued that these Biblical passages stated that it had not been permitted to free any foreign slave. The Israelites, on the other hand, were requested to free their Hebrew slaves during the year of Jubilee, except those who showed as their desire to remain in eternal slavery. Riḍā went further and applied his analysis of these biblical passages to the Zionist movement. He expected that once they completely seized Palestine and established their laws, they would 'root out' all native inhabitants and put them under slavery forever. In his view, the Israelites were likewise asked not to set a king over themselves who was 'a stranger' and not a 'brother' (Deuteronomy 17:15). Riḍā referred to another passage as responsible for the subjugation of female captives. According to Deuteronomy, when an Israelite saw among the captives a beautiful woman, and had a desire unto her as his wife, he should bring her home. She had to shave her head, and pare her nails (21:11-14). As for the Gospel, Riḍā pointed out that it endorsed slavery in the same manner as the Romans. It neither demanded masters to free their slaves nor to be lenient with them. In many places it was stressed that servants should be submissive to their masters 'with all fear' and 'according to the flesh, with fear and trembling' (Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-25; I Peter 2:18-20).

Simon, *Altruism and Imperialism: The Western Religious and Cultural Missionary Enterprise in the Middle East*, Middle East Institute, Colombia University, 2002, pp.167-182; G.E. Dejong, 'Slavery in Arabia,' *The Muslim World*, vol. 24 (1934), pp. 127-31. More about slavery in Kuwait, see, Suzanne Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, Rowman Altamira, 2003, pp. 164-172.

[21] 'Al-Saby wā al-Riqq fī al-Tawrāh wa al-ʾInjīl', vol. 17/9 (Ramaḍān 1332/August 1914), pp. 658-661.

[22] Al-ʿAdasānī was the founder of the first public library in Kuwait. He later became a member of the Kuwaiti Legislative Council. See, http://www.moe.edu.kw/schools-2/mobarak_alkabeer/moqararatschools/boys/Wchool/nbza.asp; accessed on 25 January 2008.
In Riḍā's archive, I found about 30 letters sent by the petitioner to Riḍā. The treatise was published by the American Press in Cairo (Bulaq, 1912, 24pp). The title is to be listed in the *Summer 1914 Edition, op. cit.,* p. 13.

In this *fatwā*, Riḍā did not exemplify the Islamic rules of slavery in details, but he referred the questioner to other articles in *al-Manār* on the subject.[23] Suffice to him to rebuke those who criticised Islam as an unjust religion towards slaves. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, he argued, Islam never made slavery an obligation, but allowed it for specific reasons. Riḍā looked at the role of slaves in that sense in a positive way. In the case of war and the murder of most of the male members of the clan, slaves had always been of great benefit in taking care of children and women. Islam always demanded masters to treat their slaves on an equal footing, even in giving them the same food and clothes; and never to humiliate or afflict them with heavy work.[24]

7.4. An Aḥmadī Petitioner

In 1915, Shir ʿAlī, the director of the *Aḥmadī* quarterly *Review of Religions* (firstly published in 1902) in Punjab, made a statement that *al-Manār*'s interpretation of the phrase *muṣaddiqan lima bayna yadayhi* (lit. confirming which is between his hands) was an eye-opener for him. This phrase is often mentioned in the Qur'ān as a testimony to other holy books. *Al-Manār* made a distinction between '*saddaqa lahū*' (a non-transitional verb with the preposition *lām*) and '*ṣaddaqa bihī*'(a non-transitional verb with the preposition *bā*). The former refers to 'verification and confirmation', whereas the latter means 'completion, or implementation of the purport of something'. The usage of the concept by the Qur'ān referred to the former meaning of verification, only. According to Shir Ali, this interpretation would remove the misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians concerning the testimony of the Qur'ān to their scriptures. Shir Ali had heard about this interpretation, but did not read *al-Manār* himself. The significance of it lay in the fact that he, as a Muslim missionary in India, was indebted to Riḍā whose arguments regularly endorsed his debates with Christian missionaries.[25]

Riḍā explained to Shir Ali that the interpretation was not his own, but had been formulated earlier by Tawfīq Ṣidqī in one of his polemical treatises. Riḍā added to the interpretation more linguistic analyses of some theological connotations. The verb *ṣaddaqa* could be used in the Qur'ān as *mutaʿaddī bī nafsihī* (transitional form in itself) and has two meanings: 1) the Prophet verbally conveyed the truth of the Jewish and Christian messages, or 2) his mission, supported by his 'merits and deeds', confirmed his prophecy on the

[23] Riḍā dealt with the issue of slavery in *al-Manār* in many other places. In 1910, for example, he received a group of questions on the issue from a certain Muḥammad Mukhtār from Paris, see vol. 13/10 (Shawwāl 1328/November 1910), pp. 741-744.

[24] *Al-Manār*, vol. 17/9. Later in 1922, Riḍā clung to the notion that Muslims were obliged to retain slavery if their enemies did so, to improve their bargaining position. Towards the end of his life, he even opined that servitude could be a refuge for the poor and weak, notably, women, and could give all women a chance to bear children. See, William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery*, Hurst (London), Oxford University Press (New York), 2006, pp. 205-206.

[25] *Al-Manār*, vol. 18/3 (Jumāda al-ʾŪlā 1333/14 April 1915), pp. 178-180.

coming of other scriptures. Riḍā agreed that the non-transitional verb *muṣaddiqan limā* was only used for confirmation, but the other way around, viz. the other scriptures contained clear prophecies, which confirmed the coming of the prophet Muḥammad and the message of Islam.

7.5. A Lutheran Danish Missionary in Riḍā's *Fatwās*

Riḍā was never reluctant to publish his own debates with missionaries in his *Manār*, and opened its pages for their questions. He thought that this was the best way to raise the Muslims' awareness of the missionary movements of his time. He published three *fatwās* on Christian missions, whose questions had been raised by the Danish missionary Pastor Alfred Julius Nielsen (1884-1963), a Lutheran missionary in Syria and Palestine.[26]

It is worthy noting that Nielsen had worked for some time in Riḍā's village, and was a subscriber to *al-Manār*.[27] He was also keen on having correspondences with other Muslim scholars in Palestine, in which he discussed many theological aspects of the Bible and the Qur'ān. He was much interested in promoting tolerance and the free exchange of opinions relative to Christianity and Islam.[28] As a liberal theologian, Nielsen argued that 'the Christians of the Near East were to lose nothing, if they would abandon Christianity and become Muslims'.[29] It was not important for him that Christians and Muslims might reach an ultimate conclusion with each other as regard to the concept of Salvation; but they should live as 'brothers'.[30] In its review of one of his Arabic treatises, the Jesuit magazine *al-Machreq* severely criticised Nielsen for his overzealous goals by 'treading a wicked road'. It also considered his views 'a slap in the face of Christians'.[31]

Riḍā's three *fatwā*s for Nielsen contained interesting arguments, which can be scarcely found in the Muslim-Christian controversy of that time. They were

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[26] For more details, see, Ryad, 'Nielsen'. See also, Nielsen's articles and the reviews on his Danish works, 'Koranen og Biblen (Book Review, by S. Zwemer)', *The Moslim World*, vol. XII (1922), p. 210; 'Skildringer af Syriske Medarbejdere (Book Review, by S. Zwemer), *The Moslim World*, vol. XXI (1922), p. 21; 'Bag Libanons Bjerge (Book Review)', *The Moslim World*, vol. XII (1922), p. 211; 'Damascus as a Mission Center', *The Moslim World*, vol. XIII, no. 2 (1923), pp. 160-166; 'Difficulties in Presenting the Gospel to Moslems', *The Moslim World*, vol. XIX, no. 1 (1929), p. 41-46; 'Moslem Mentality in the Syrian Press', *The Moslim World*, vol. XX, no. 2 (1930), pp. 143-163; *Muhammedansk Tankegang i vore Dage*, (Copenhagen, 1st ed., 1930); 'Muhammedask Tankegang I vore Dage (Book Review, by Zwemer)', *The Moslim World*, vol. XX (1930), p. 426; 'The Islamic Conference at Jerusalem', *The Moslim World*, vol. XXII, no. 4 (1932), pp. 339-354; 'Colloquial Arabic', *The Moslem World*, vol XXXIV, no. 3 (1944), pp. 218-219; 'Comparison', *The Moslem World*, vol. XXXIX, no. 1 (1949), pp. 1-5.

[27] Letter, anonymous to ʿAbd al-Rāziq Ḥamzah, Damascus, 15 Rabīʿ al-Thānī 1343, Riḍā's archive in Cairo.

[28] *The Muslim World* , 25 (4), 1935, pp. 411–422. He also co-published a treatise entitled as, *Afkār Muʾminīn fi Ḥaqāʾiq al-Dīn: li-mādhā Atbaʿu Dinī dūna Ghayrih*, with a certain Abdallah al-Qayshāwī of Palestine. See, W. Bjorkman, *Die Welt des Islams*, vol. 20 (1938), p. 139.

[29] As quoted in, *al-Machreq*, vol. 33 (1935), p. 470.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., pp. 470-471.

unique in the sense of being a face-to-face debate between a Muslim theologian and a Christian missionary. Riḍā's answers did not only deal with his conception of the missionary work, but contained some reflections on a few theological issues as well.

The first *fatwā* (1924) dealt with Nielsen's questions on several points, such as the Muslim perception of decent missionary work without attacking Islam, and learning the Bible as it is the basis of Western civilization. In his answer, Riḍā amply vindicated that the Muslim, with the knowledge and reason given to him, can distinguish between good missions whose work was fair and included no defamation or obscenity of other religions. The Muslim, according to him, could differentiate between zealous Christians and most missionaries who exploited it in politics and retained religious fanaticism. Riḍā evaluated all missions working among Muslims as corrupting and indecent due to their 'bad' behaviour, which had been attested. A decent missionary approach, however, was acceptable. His own experience convinced him that there were some individuals who preached their religion on the basis of manifesting its values, standing up for their convictions on the basis of solid knowledge, and keeping abreast of honesty and blamelessness. He lived among such Christians in his hometown. He had many debates with them, and they used to respect each other.[32]

As for the point of learning the Bible, Riḍā stated it was not true that it is the duty of every enlightened person to know the Bible. It was only the duty of the scholars specialised in religious sciences. He also rejected Nielsen's statement that Western civilisation is based on the Holy Book. This allegation, according to him, was absurdly formulated by the missionaries in order to win over those who were dazzled by the European civilisation. The association between Western civilization and the Bible was not plausible. In his mind, Western laws had no connection whatsoever with the legislation of the Torah. Nor did the morals of Western people have any relation whatsoever with the body of ethics included in the Gospel. The civilisation of the West, he believed, was lusty and materialistic, and mainly based on arrogance, conceit and the adoration of money, covetousness, and extravagance in embellishment and lusts. On the contrary, the principles of the Gospel were founded on modesty, altruism, asceticism, truthfulness, the renunciation of embellishment, and the renouncement of lusts. The dissemination of sciences and arts in the West was not due to the spread of missionary groups there. Riḍā stressed that the impact of religion on nations was at its strongest and most complete in the early stages of guidance. Once a nation reaches its full blossoming, religion gradually becomes weaker. For many centuries, even after the spread of Christianity, the West remained without the application of any principle of the sciences and arts. All these concepts were originally transferred from the Arabs and Muslims to Europe. 'It should be borne in mind that', he wrote, 'the propagators of these concepts in Europe were tyrannised and ill-treated by 'the Holy Group' and its

[32] Ryad, 'Nielsen', pp. 96-99.

defenders in the courts of Inquisition. Had the West acquired the religion of the Arabs from the East, just as it had acquired their knowledge and wisdom, it would have been perfect in both religious and worldly matters, and it would not have been entirely materialistic as it is today.'[33]

Riḍā was persuaded that the Bible was not a 'virtue' which everybody should appreciate. Appreciation should be only given to things of real benefit. Missionary activities have been proved to be tragic and catastrophic wherever they worked. He challenged Nielsen to bring him any justification necessitating the gratitude of Muslims to Christian missions. The high esteem Riḍā gave to the Qur'ān stimulated him to maintain that 'if any Muslim, who is aware of the true nature of Islam, studies the Bible, he will be more convinced that the Qur'ān is given priority over all books, superior to them, and has the soundest judgement among them all'.[34] Furthermore, Riḍā predicted a total fiasco for missionary work among Muslims. The real Muslim believing in his religion on the basis of true knowledge and firm belief should not fear any 'call' for any other religion. Riḍā quoted al-Afghānī who said that the Muslim could never become a Christian because Islam is Christianity with additions. Having decided on something perfect, Riḍā added, one would never accept a subordinate alternative.[35]

He attempted, for instance, to hit straight at the doctrine of Trinity: one of the most vulnerable spots, which Muslims always took into account in the opposition with Christian dogma. His very premise started from the argument that Muslim theologians are of the agreement that there is no logical impossibility in Islam (*muḥāl ʿaqlan*), what means: a Muslim is never required to believe in anything that is logically impossible. If he once encounters anything which seems to be in rational or practical conflict with a definitive proof, it should be interpreted as an attempt of reconciliation between the rationale and the text on the basis of the Qur'ānic passage: 'On no soul doth Allah place a burden greater that it can bear. It gets every good that it earns, and suffers every ill that it earns' (al-Baqara, 2: 286). Riḍā argued that other religions rather than Islam required people to believe in what is rationally impossible, i.e., the reconciliation between the two antitheses or opposites, such as the real Unity and the real Trinity. In other terms, that God is truly one, and truly more than one at the same time.[36] Putting in mind that he was in debate with a Christian missionary, Riḍā argued that unlike the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, there was little historical information about previous Prophets, including the record of the life of Jesus in the four Gospels.[37]

Riḍā's due respect for Nielsen was explicitly noted in the *fatwās*. One rarely met in missionary circles, he commented, someone who would write in such a confident way like this Danish missionary. Riḍā had no respect for

[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

Christians with extravagant evangelistic ideas. Those who preached their religion with firm conviction and submission, such as Nielsen, were to be respected by any sensible person.[38]

Only one year later (1925), Riḍā published an answer to another question sent by Nielsen, who bluntly challenged Riḍā by asking why he repudiated the 'call of Christianity', despite being quite aware of Christian sources. In his reply, Riḍā gave a brief outline of the reasons why he firmly upheld Islam as the true religion. He maintained that it had been proved to him that the Prophet Muḥammad was *ummī* (illiterate). He was never a disciple of any scholar of theology, history, law, philosophy, or literature. Neither was he an orator, nor a poet. Thereupon Riḍā proceeded to speak about the qualities of the Prophet Muḥammad:

> Unlike the people of his age at Mecca, the prophet Muḥammad was not keen on leadership, fame, pride or eloquence. He was very renowned for his good disposition, truthfulness, honesty, decency, austerity, and all other kinds of good morals to the degree that they used to call him *al-ʾAmīn* [the honest]. At his maturity of age he maintained to be a prophet sent by Allah for all people. His message was to preach the same message of other prophets before him.[39]

In view of these reasons, Riḍā underlined that he was firmly convinced of the message of Islam. The Qur'ān foretold many things, which had been unknown among the people of Mecca during that time. The most important among these things, he argued, was the corruption and alterations made by the Christians and the Jews in their Books. It had been revealed in the Qur'ān that the Jews and the Christians had twisted the truth by corrupting their Scriptures, a fact which was verified by modern Western scholars.

The controversy around the book of the Egyptian Ṭaha Ḥusayn on *Pre-Islamic Poetry* (1926)[40] and his understanding of the place of the prophet Abraham in Islamic history was a turning point in the Riḍā-Nielsen discussion. Nielsen's inquiries centred upon the Muslim-Christian critique of each other's scriptures as understood in the term *Ṭaʿn* (defamation). Nielsen pungently blamed Riḍā for his rooted hostile attitudes to missionaries when he stated that it was always their duty to defame Islam. He raised the important question whether it was possible to declare the Muslim, who would still be committed to Islam in both religious and moral aspects, as unbeliever, if he (such as in the case of Ḥusayn) reached a conclusion that might contradict the Qur'ān and the Islamic creed through his scientific methods and research.

Nielsen raised his questions to Riḍā because he did not want to put any other argument against Islam than what Muslims themselves would agree upon. At the same time, he believed that enlightened Muslims were expected very

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., pp. 99-100.

[40] Ṭāha Ḥusayn, *Fī al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī,* Cairo: Matbaʿat Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1st ed., 1926.

soon to change their attitudes towards the Qur'ān by distinguishing between religious and moral matters, on the one hand, and scientific and historical ones on the other. Imbued by his Lutheran background, Nielsen insinuated that this would lead to the same conclusions reached by the Christians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The belief of those scholars of the infallibility in the Bible was different from those of the eighteenth century, despite the fact that both Christian generations shared the same belief in Jesus as the only Saviour mediator between God and mankind. In addition, Nielsen predicted some changes in the Muslim world. He saw, for instance, the coming of modernist movements and magazines in Turkey and elsewhere in the Muslim world as a signal for a new and similar trend within Islam in the near future.[41]

Riḍā clearly pointed out that the Christian scriptures were not binding for Muslims. He lexically defined the word *Ṭaʿn* as originally used to mean, 'to thrust or stab a spear or a lance', which was also designated to mean 'to rebuke, insult, deny, and orally disregard'. The parallel between both definitions was that the latter spiritually hurt the person, just like the former did in a material sense. What Tāha Ḥusayn (a Muslim himself) wrote in his book 'painfully hurt' Muslims, so it was valid to say that he rebuked Islam. But Riḍā made it clear that it would be no *Ṭaʿn* if any Muslim, Christian, or Jew attempted to deal with the Book(s) of the others. The same would hold true, according to him, for the things in which they did not believe and what they might see as contradictory to their own religion, so long as they did not go beyond 'moral obligations' in their critique. For example, he deemed neither what Nielsen wrote about Islam in formulating his questions, nor his reply to them as *Ṭaʿn*.[42]

Recurring to Nielsen's comparison between the changing attitudes of enlightened Christians and Muslims, Riḍā did not accept the very concept that enlightened Muslims, like the Christians in the passage of time, might change their belief in the Qur'ān. He strongly disagreed that they would ever make distinction between the religious and moral matters as infallible on the one hand, and the historical ones as vulnerable to criticism, on the other. Such a comparison sprang to Nielsen's mind, Riḍā believed, because of his interest of drawing an analogy between Islam and Christianity, and the Qur'ān and the Bible.

Regarding the denial of the historical existence of Adam, Ibrāhīm and Ismāʿīl, Riḍā consistently maintained that the existence or the non-existence of anybody, who was said to have lived in long past eras, was not to be proved by scientific methods, in so far as this was not logically impossible. Nobody could deny the existence of someone called Ibrāhīm, as far as it was not logically impossible. At any rate, the very premise of the possibility of his existence, Riḍā contended, was supported by the Revelation according to both the Children of Israel and the Arabs. In support of his argument, Riḍā discussed at considerable length the denial of the existence of some generally recognised men in history. He, furthermore, lamented that suspicions that had been expressed against the

[41] Ryad, 'Nielsen', p. 101.
[42] Ibid., p. 102

existence of famous persons, for instance by those who denied the existence of Jesus on the ground of the historical account of the Jewish historiographer Josephus, who was contemporary to Jesus. He did not allude to him in his writings on Jewish history, though he paid much attention to less important events. Riḍā refuted this suspicion by pointing out that Josephus must have concealed this fact in his writings fearing that he would have been considered as a preacher of the Christian message. He deliberately did not want to give his readers any suggestion that he was a believer in the message of Jesus. The other two examples were Homer, the Greek poet, and Qays, the Arab poet. Homer was asserted to have been an imaginary mythical character, to whom the Greeks attributed many eloquent poems. As for the second example, it was said that the poetry of Qays was composed during the Umayyad Empire, but that somebody had attributed it to him. Apparently Riḍā intentionally referred to the example of the pre-Islamic poetry of Qays, as it was the core of Ḥusayn's book.[43]

In Riḍā's vocabulary, Muslim scholars were unanimous, the same as the 'People of the Book', on the point that there must be a distinction in religion between the principal theological matters, the rituals and legislations on the one hand, and what was mentioned in the Scripture about the secrets of the Creation on the other. The former were intended to reform and cultivate human beings, and prepare them for the best of their life. In contrast, the latter were mentioned as a manifestation of the Divine signs of the Creation, which indicate the Divine oneness, mercy and power. The latter category, Riḍā argued, is not used by scientists and historians in their methods of scientific research. Allah, on the contrary, let human beings use their own capabilities to reach specific scientific conclusions through research without depending on the Divine Revelation. And yet if there were any accurate scholarly conclusion, which might not be agreeable with the literal meaning of the Qur'ān, the subjects in question should be interpreted in the light of the concept of *Taʾwīl*.

In his concluding remarks, Riḍā stressed that one of the characteristics of the Qur'ān was that there is no *qaṭʿī* (definite) passage which can be violated by definite logical and scientific proofs. The People of the Book, on the contrary, never hold such a claim with regard to their Scripture. Indignantly criticising Muslim doubters, Riḍā expounded that ignorance of the Qur'ān in both spiritual and social matters had dominated some Muslim minds, though the Qur'ān in fact is agreeable to logic and science: 'Unlike many Westerners who were ready to raise funds for the spread of their religion, despite the contradictions their Scriptures contain', Riḍā said.[44]

7.6. An Egyptian Debater in Gairdner's Magazine

Due to his polemical contributions against missionary writings, a certain ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Nuṣḥī ʿAbd al-Majīd was known to the readers of *al-Manār* in the late

[43] Ibid., pp. 105-106.
[44] Ibid., p. 106.

1920s. Very little is known about him, but he always signed his contributions to Riḍā's journal as 'a warden of the storeroom of the Royal Agricultural Cooperative Society in the city of Ashmūn' (Northern Egypt). In *al-Manār* we read that he wrote a treatise entitled: *al-Qawl al-Ṣaḥīḥ fī Tarjamat Muḥammad wā al-Masīḥ* (The True Statement concerning the Biographies of Muḥammad and Jesus), which was also available for two Egyptian piasters in al-Manār Bookshop in Cairo. The treatise was a brief summary of the histories of both prophets. Riḍā showed his appreciation to Nuṣḥī's small work, describing it as: 'nicely written and well-styled in its discussion on the authors of the Gospels'.[45]

During further research, it appeared that Nuṣḥī had a correspondence with the above-mentioned missionary periodical *al-Sharq wā al-Gharb* of Temple Gairdner. In June 1923, for instance, he asked the editorial board of the magazine to explain the genealogy of Moses and that of Jesus from the side of their mothers.[46] Nuṣḥī's tone reflected the challenge of a Muslim reader who tried to cast doubts on Biblical narratives.[47] Later in March 1924, he raised two more questions in relation to the concept of polygamy in the Bible; and whether there was any obvious statement in the Bible prohibiting slavery.[48] It was apparent that Nuṣḥī's aim was to oblige the missionary magazine to give an implicit refutation of its own allegations on Islam regarding these points, which they also used in their critique of Islam.

Nuṣḥī also turned to Riḍā with a query (1928) on the concept of Original Sin in Christianity. He mentioned that he had had regular gatherings with Christian missionaries in his hometown. Once he had discussed the matters of the Original Sin and the crucifixion with a missionary, who adamantly challenged him that those who did not believe in Jesus as the saviour would continue to carry this sin. 'Without shedding blood', the missionary went on, 'one's sins would never be forgiven. Muslims themselves sacrifice [animals] on behalf of themselves, including the Prophet who himself offered sacrifice.' Nuṣḥī asked Riḍā how true the missionary claim was about Adam's Sin as attached to his offspring.[49]

In his answer, Riḍā articulated many elements of his anti-missionary polemics mentioned above. He repeated that the 'missionary enterprise is a part of the Western penetration in Eastern lands'.[50] He quoted again Lord Salisbury's statement that 'missionary schools are the first step towards

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45 *Al-Manār*, vol. 29/5, p. 400.

46 See, *al-Sharq wā al-Gharb*, vol. 19/7 (July 1923), pp. 212-214.

47 Ibid., pp. 212-214 In their answer, the editors of the magazine referred Nuṣḥī to the Biblical passages on the genealogy of Moses in Exodus (6:16-20), and to that of Jesus in Mathew (1:1) and Luke (3:23). The magazine added that, as he was concerned with availing the Jews with his writings, Mathew intended to prove that Jesus had the full right to be called 'the offspring of David'. And as he wrote his Gospel for the 'nations', Luke's intention was to prove the progeny of Jesus from David from the side of his mother.

48 *Al-Sharq wā al-Gharb*, vol. 20/3 (March 1924), p. 86.

49 'Naẓariyyat al-Naṣārā fī Khatī'at ʾĀdam (The View of Christians concerning the Sin of Adam)', *al-Manār*, vol. 29/2, pp. 100-104.

50 *Al-Manār*, vol. 29/2, *op. cit.*, p. 102

colonialism […] that they cast strife and animosity among the inhabitants of the one country'.[51] Riḍā warned people like Nuṣḥī neither to read missionary literature, nor to waste their time in debating with them. He stated that those missionaries - except a few – were 'soldiers hired to carry out mischief on earth'.[52] He harshly attacked the Christian concepts of salvation and Trinity as 'ancient pagan creeds', referring to the work of Tannīr. Again, he praised the 'independent' Western Christian intellectuals in the West, who rejected these doctrines.[53] In conclusion, Riḍā totally rejected that offering animals as sacrifice was prescribed in Islam as a 'pagan practice', like in other religions. It was only stipulated in order that a Muslim would show his gratitude to God in his sharing with other poor fellow-Muslims in the society.[54]

7.7. A Muslim Facing Missionaries in Tunisia

On a similar level, a certain ʿUmar Khūja from Tunisia became confused about some theological issues due to his debates with Protestant missionaries in his region.[55] One of the issues they dealt with was the creation of the universe and the explanation of the cosmic structure in light of the Qur'ān, such as in the verse: 'Allah is He Who created seven Firmaments, and of the Earth similar ones' (Al-Talāq, 65:12). It was difficult for Khūja to understand that the heavens are spanned out as seven layers in the context of modern scientific discoveries. The second problem in the Tunisian petitioner's mind was the status and place of Jesus after death. If it were really true that he is still living on 'earth', how could he get food or drink? But if he survived in the heaven, where would he descend at the end of time? What about the Muslim who does not believe in his present survival in Heaven?

Riḍā mentioned that there are tens of Qur'ānic verses speaking about the creation of heavens and earth. The word *arḍ* (earth) is always found in the singular form, except in the verse quoted by the petitioner. Riḍā described it as *mutashābih* (ambiguous). He considered all interpretations of the verse describing the length or breadth of heavens as unreliable because they were based on the lore of *ʾIsrāʾīliyyāt*. Riḍā referred to the ḥadīths related by Ibn ʿAbbās, ʿĀʾisha and ʾAbū Hurairah in this regard as indefinite and not *marfūʿ*, which means a ḥadīth effectively elevated to the Prophet (As for the second point, Riḍā contended that there was no *qaṭʿī* (definitive) tradition which indicated that Jesus had been lifted to Heaven and was still alive with his soul and body.[56] As for the verse: 'O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to Myself (Al-Imrān: 3:55), Riḍā was more inclined to accept the interpretation of Ibn ʿAbbās that God made him really die. He rejected the commentary of Wahb

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] *Al-Manār*, vol. 29/2, *op. cit.*, p, 103
[54] Ibid., p. 104.
[55] *Al-Manār*, vol. 28/10 (Rajab 1346/January 1928), pp. 747-757.
[56] Ibid., pp.753-54.

Ibn Munabbih (b. 34 AH/654-5 AD) that 'God had made him die three hours at the beginning of the day after which he was lifted to Heaven'. The reason for his rejection was that such interpretations contradicted the apparent meaning (*dhāhir*) of the verse, let alone the role of Ibn Munabbih in disseminating Israelite tales, which Riḍā totally denounced.[57]

The same held true for the return of Jesus before the Day of Resurrection, which we have already discussed in the first of the *fatwās* selected in the chapter. This notion was, in Riḍā's evaluation, the basis on which the Christian belief lies, but it has no foundation in Islam. Riḍā also doubted the traditions indicating that Jesus will descend before the end of the world being on to the white arcade of the Eastern gate at Damascus, or being on to a hill in the Holy Land with a spear in his hand to kill the *Dajjāl* (Antichrist). He highlighted that most of the traditions on the second return of Jesus were narrated in the context of the *'aḥād* traditions on *'Alamāt al-Sā'ah* (Signs of the Hour), on which one should not depend in matters of belief.[58] The belief of Jesus' being alive in Heaven, Riḍā added, was no part of the fundamentals of the Islamic creed. Therefore, if a Muslim rejected it, he would be no apostate. But he was hesitant to leave his statement open, and stipulated that if a Muslim reached the conclusion after his investigation that the prophetic traditions in this respect were to be regarded as sound, he must believe in the return of Jesus on the basis of them. His doubt of the Prophet's sayings in that case, Riḍā asserted, might lead to apostasy. In other terms, it was no harm to refuse or to accept his return on the basis of what he believed to be *zannī* (subjective) traditions, but this became prohibited when he would discredit what he had concluded to be definite traditions. The Muslim should rather maintain the Prophet's sayings as trustworthy, and leave all other details to God. At the end, Riḍā summarized:

> A Muslim should not cling to such traditions, since they were no article of the Islamic faith. It is also no harm for one's doctrine to suspect their authenticity […]. What could really harm him is his scepticism or rejection of these traditions after having recognised their authenticity […]. In this case he is discrediting the Prophet [… by thinking of] his erroneousness in delivering God's revelation.[59]

7.8. Fatherless Birth of Jesus: non-Qur'ānic?

In the early 1930s, a student in Indonesia wrote a long article in which he denied the virgin birth of Jesus. He argued that the matter was totally in contradiction with the Qur'ānic verses which stressed that there would never be *tabdīl* (change) or *taḥwīl* (turning off) in God's order or system of the universal laws (al-Aḥzāb, 62 & Fātir 43). The editors of the magazine contended those who believed in the fatherless miraculous birth of Jesus to bring Qur'ānic

[57] Ibid, p. 754.
[58] Ibid, p.756.
[59] Ibid., p. 757.

verses or authentic prophetic traditions which would prove the contrary. The above-mentioned Basyūnī ʿImrān of Java (see, chapter 1) brought the issue to *al-Manār* to say its word, since he was persuaded that its commentary on the relevant verses could put an end to this controversy. Riḍā briefly elaborated on the issue by saying that Muslim scholars on the basis of many Qur'ānic verses have unanimously agreed on the fatherless birth of Jesus. If anyone denied its truth, he harshly concluded, he should be deemed to be an unbeliever.[60]

7.9. Missionary Doubts on Qur'ānic Narratives

A certain ʿAlī al-Jundī, a teacher at al-Nāṣiryya School in Cairo, had religious debates with Christian missionaries, who had raised doubts on some Qur'ānic narratives. He eagerly requested Riḍā for his clarifications on such 'allegations' in order that he could sustain his arguments with solid arguments.[61] The first point focused on the *ḥawāriyyūn* (disciples) of Jesus, who were constantly praised in various places in the Qur'ān, but were also mentioned in the Christian scriptures as believing in the Trinity and crucifixion. Al-Jundī was also confused that some Christians portrayed some figures in the Qur'ānic tales as being Christians. The Qur'ān, for instance, described *Ahl Al-Kahf* (the People of the Cave) as monotheists, but they had existed 250 years after Jesus. This might suggest that they had believed in a 'corrupted' Christianity. Al-Jundī once read that the Jesuit scholar L. Cheikho had argued that the People of the Cave were believers in 'the Cross'. The commentators of the Qur'ān explained the story of *Ahl al-Qaryah* (the People of the Village)[62] as a tale about the disciples of Jesus, including Paul. Forthly, the questioner had many 'moderate' Christian friends who believed in Jesus as a prophet and saw Islam as a 'true' religion, but still believed in the crucifixion. They argued that the story had been mentioned by the Jews and witnessed contemporary people and scribes. What were the differences between the Jewish and Christian Scriptures? Were the Jews closer to Muslims in monotheism than the Christians? If so, what was the reason for their 'inherited' hostility to Muslims as related in the Qur'ān? Were there any Christian religious men other than Barnabas who had propagated pure monotheism and rejected the crucifixion? Did such people also exist after the message of the prophet Muḥammad? Could Muslims rest assured that Islam would win over Christianity, even though Christian missionaries were more vigorous in propagating their religion?

In the beginning, Riḍā explained that there was no mention of the names or genealogy of Jesus' disciples in the Qur'ān. But the Christian Scriptures narrated that they were twelve. He argued that it was only John who decribed them as believing in the Trinity. He saw that there were discrepancies among the four Gospels concerning the story of the crucifixion. Riḍā demanded his questioner not to believe entirely in the narratives mentioned in the works of

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[60] *Al-Manār*, vol. 32/9 (Jumāda al-'Ākhira 1351/October 1932), pp. 671-672.
[61] Vol. 33/7 (Shaʿbān 1352/November 1933), p. 507-512.
[62] Yasīn, 36: 13-32.

Tafsīr regarding the People of the Cave. He also accused Cheikho that as a Jesuit he had either based his story on such 'invented' Israelite tales, or had made it up himself. He confirmed that Jesus had been dispatched to preach montheism. All Muslim commentators maintained that the People of the Cave were not Christians, except ʾIbn Kathīr (d. 1373) who attributed them to the religion of Jesus. However, Riḍā believed that they had existed a long time before Christianity. He rejected that they had been Christians, who believed in the Cross. Riḍā's only proof was that such a claim should have contradicted the Qur'ān, which he deemed impossible.[63]

The same held true for the Prophetic traditions on the story of the People of the Village. They were related by the converted Jews Kaʿb al-Aḥbār and Wahb ibn Munabbih, who dissiminated most of these 'mythical' tales on the authority of Ibn Abbās. Riḍā depended on ʾIbn Kathīr's view, who had interpreted that the People of the Village were messengers sent by God and not by Jesus.[64]

Regarding the Christians who firmly believed in the crucifixion and accepted Islam as true, Riḍā explicated that the Qur'ānic verse negating Jesus as having been slain (al-Nisā, 3:157) did not indicate the rejection of the story completely, but rebuffed his death in the way explained by Christian Scriptures. Riḍā was less clear in judging those Christians than his above-mentioned *fatwās* on those who search for the truth. One would also expect Riḍā to repeat his interpretations of the crucifixion as 'illusive', which he had uttered earlier in his aforementioned treatise in 1913 (see, chapter 6). After twenty years, he now put emphasis in this *fatwā* on his conviction that the story of the crucifixion was not reliable, and there was no consensus among the early Christians about it.[65]

Riḍā admitted that the concept of the Messiah according to the Torah was a complex issue. He only repeated his point mentioned in the first *fatwā* that the Jews believed in the Messiah as a coming king who would revive the kingdom of Solomon, but not as a prophet. For him, the Christians considered his coming kingdom as a spiritual one, while the Jews would expect it as a political and financial one. Riḍā explained the verse regarding the animosity of the Jews and the friendship of the Christians as revealed in the case of the Jews of Ḥijāz and the Christians of Abessynia in particular. It should not be understood as part of the realm of the Islamic belief. He also rejected the view that the animosity between Jews and Muslims was intrinsic. He insisted that it was the Jews who had first shown animosity against Muslims, especially in Palestine. In the same sense, Christians had also founded their hostility with Islam in the form of the crusades in the past and the continuation of European colonialism and Christian missions in the present. Without colonialism and missionary activities, he went on, Christians would have been much closer to Muslims than the Jews. However, he explained that the conflict between

[63] Ibid., pp. 508-09.
[64] Ibid., pp. 510-11.
[65] Ibid., p. 511.

Muslims and Western Christians would result in many advantages for Muslims, viz. that all Western nations would one day convert to Islam.[66]

7.10. Miḥrāb and Altar

In 1932, Riḍā received a question concerning the *miḥrāb* (niche) in the mosque and its similarity with the altar in the church.[67] The questioner cited the ḥadīth where the Prophet was reported to have said: 'My nation remains in a good status as far as they do not turn their mosques into altars like the Christians.'

Riḍā maintained that the *miḥrāb* was embedded in the *qibla* (direction of prayer) wall for the practical reason that the imam would not occupy a whole row in the mosque. The niche of the Christians and Jews known as altar was a shrine and place for worship. The altar was known in ancient religions as the place where men used to give their offers to God. He cited the Old Testament 'And Noah built an altar unto the Lord; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar' (Genesis, 8:20). Stories about the altar of burnt offering and that of incense are also mentioned in details in the chapter of Exodus. Riḍā issued the *fatwā* in the period when he had intense conflict with *Nūr al-Islām*, the mouthpiece of Al-Azhar at that time (see, chapter 3). He suspected the authenticity of the ḥadīth quoted by the questioner, accusing Al-Azhar scholars of propagating such doubtful narratives in their magazine.[68]

7.11. Don't Recite the Qur'ānic Verses on Christians in Public!

In chapter three, we have seen that Riḍā's views on allowing Muslim children to attend Christian schools had led to a rigorous dispute with Al-Azhar scholars in the early 1930s. In 1934, he had another dispute with a regional scholar under the name of Sheikh Maḥmūd Maḥmūd, the deputy of *Jam'iyyat Makārim al-'Akhlāq* (Society of Best Moralities) and a high school teacher in Cairo. The society was situated in Shubrā, in the outskirts of Cairo. Upon his arrival in Egypt, Riḍā became an active member of the society, where he used to deliver many lectures. One of the main objectives of this society was to combat missionary organizations in the neighbourhood. It had its own primary school and printing house. Besides it published two magazines, one was named after the society, and the other bore the name *al-Muṣliḥ* (The Reformer).[69]

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[66] Ibid., pp. 512-13.

[67] *Al-Manār*, vol. 32/4 (Dhū al-Ḥijja 1350/April 1932), p. 268.

[68] In 1935, a certain Umar al-Jundī, teacher at Alexandria Religious Institute, sent *al-Manār* an article on the history of the *miḥrāb* in Islam. He traced the Prophetic Traditions on it and the difference with altars. See, Umar al-Jundī, 'Maḥārīb al-Masjid wā Madhābih al-Kanā'is', *al-Manār,* vol. 34/9 (Dhū al-Ḥijja 1353/April 1935), p. 708-710.

[69] The society was founded by Sheikh Zakī al-Dīn Sanad during the late nineteenth century in Cairo. See, *al-Manār*, vol. 2/27 (Jumāda al-'Ūlā 1317/16 September 1899), p. 430; vol. 2/45, (Ramaḍān 1317/January 1900), p. 537. The activities of the society waned after the death of

According to the Cairine newspaper *al-Waṭaniyya*, Sheikh Maḥmūd maintained that broadcasting Qur'ānic recitation on radio should be stopped. He argued that the Qur'ān contains certain verses opposing the People of the Book. The reasons for their revelation were not existent anymore. 'Since the People of the Book have become under our protection (*Dhawī Dhimmatina*)', Maḥmūd argued, 'their feelings should not be hurt any longer by letting them listen to such verses.'[70] He further explained that he himself hated *Surat Yūsuf* being recited inside Muslim houses because he worried that women would suspect Yūsuf's chastity, when they regularly listen to the story. Also people, according to Maḥmūd, should not recite the Qur'ān in public as far as they did not grasp its inner meanings.

Ayyūb Sabrī, the editor of *al-Waṭaniyya*, referred the question to Riḍā, requesting him to deal with the issue as soon as possible.[71] Riḍā did not hesitate to express his total rejection of Maḥmūd's *fatwā*. In his primary answer, Riḍā preferred not to mention the name of the mufti, hoping that he would recant his opinion or would send a clarification to *al-Manār*. He strongly declared that the Qur'ān as 'the true word of God' must be propagated and any concealment of its verses was sin; any acceptance of this sin as lawful would lead to infidelity.[72]

Two years earlier, we read in *al-Manār* that Riḍā highly commended Maḥmūd because of 'his religious knowledge and enthusiasm'.[73] But his religious views in this regard turned this enthusiasm into total frustration. Riḍā attempted to convince his readers that there was no difference between 'knowledgeable' or 'ignorant' reciters of the Qur'ān in public occasions. All Qur'ānic verses speaking about the People of the Book negatively or positively were suitable to each age and place. Riḍā plainly asserted there were many among the People of the Book in his time, who were more hostile to Islam than those contemporary of the time of revelation. He saw that Maḥmūd's attempt of 'abrogating' these verses was only to satisfy the Christians and Jews, giving them priority above the Qur'ān.

Five months later, Riḍā mentioned the name of the person, who issued the *fatwa*. Having read *al-Manār*, Sheikh Maḥmūd started to defend his point of view. The discussion quickly turned into a hot polemical attack on Riḍā's character as a scholar. In his commentary on the Qur'ānic verse: 'Revile not ye those whom they call upon beside Allah, lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance' (Al-Anʿām, 6:108), Maḥmūd concluded that Muslims were prohibited to insult the 'gods of the Christians'.[74] He intensified his assault upon Riḍā by saying that the Qur'ān was dearer and more beloved to him than

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Sanad, but it revived again in 1920s-1930s. See Riḍā's article on the society, vol. 32/8 (Jumada al-ʾŪlā 1351/September 1932, p. 634.

[70] *Al-Manār*, vol. 34/1, p. 33.

[71] Ibid., pp. 33- 38.

[72] Ibid.

[73] *Al-Manār*, vol. 32/8 (Jumādā al-ʾŪlā 1351/September 1932), p. 634.

[74]. As quoted in, *al-Manār*, vol. 34/5, p. 383.

the founder of *al-Manār*. He depicted Riḍā of having grown old and his memory weakened. He had also started to forget what he himself said in his *Tafsīr* regarding the same verse.[75] He reminded Riḍā of what he had already stated years ago in his commentary on the verse that it was prohibited to call the *dimmīs* 'unbelievers' if it would lead to hurting them.[76] He also concluded that any abuse of the gods or saints of the Christians on radio should be forbidden, especially when Muslims were divided, humiliated and weakened while the unbelievers were more strong and unified. Muslims should especially avoid this when it would also lead to the disintegration and ruin of the umma.[77]

Riḍā contested the *fatwā* by cynically maintaining that he held higher esteem for the Qur'ān than the mufti of *Makārim al-Akhlāq*. He was deeply disappointed by Maḥmūd's remarks on his 'weak memory' and 'old age'. He counterattacked by saying that due to his 'young age' Maḥmūd was not able to understand *al-Manār*'s views. He moreover argued that the Qur'ānic verses on Christians contained no offending passages for their gods, cross or saints. The Qur'ān on the contrary recommended cooperation and concord with them. At the end, Riḍā promised to put an end to the conflict if Maḥmūd would discontinue to publish his 'absurdity' on the Qur'ān.[78]

7.12. A Muslim Copyist of Missionary Books and Crafting the Cross for Christians

In 1930, Riḍā issued an interesting *fatwā* concerning a Muslim calligrapher, who was hired by Christian missionaries in Algeria to copy their books.[79] Riḍā considered that any assistance to missionaries by reproducing such 'repulsive' books would lead to participating in spreading 'infidelity'. Those 'geographical Muslims' should be called back to repent from earning money through ways of infidelity and enmity of God and the Prophet. To continue working with missionary institutions would lead to apostasy. His Muslim fellows should not give their daughters to him in marriage, nor should they bury him according to Muslim rites. Riḍā urged that if there were a *Shar'ī* court in the province, a case of apostasy must be suited against him in order to separate him from his Muslim wife.

Riḍā's last *fatwā* (July 1935), a few months before his death, came as an answer to a similar petition by a certain Muḥammad Manṣūr Najātī from Damascus, whose craft was probably printing, on the religious ruling concerning printing books of other religions and engraving the cross on copper, zinc and on covers of those books.[80] In the same line of his previous

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[75] Ibid.
[76] *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 7, p. 550. Riḍā published this view for the first time in the first issue of *al-Manār* in February 1898. See, vol. 1/1 (Shawwāl 1315/February 1898), p. 17.
[77] *Al-Manār*, vol. 34/5, p. 383.
[78] Ibid.
[79] *Al-Manār*, vol. 31/4, p. 276.
[80] *Al-Manār*, vol. 35/2 (Rabī' al-Akhar 1354/July 1935), pp. 134-35.

fatwā, Riḍā deemed printing or giving any assistance to print or propagate 'false' books as totally forbidden. This work might lead to infidelity in case he admitted its contents as accurate. In Riḍā's view, the cross was a symbol of a non-Muslim religion; and Muslims should not help its followers to spread it. However, nobody should protest against the will of the Christians to display it in the Territory of Islam. To engrave it on metals for commercial reasons was not considered sinful as far as there existed no verification for their beliefs in the heart of the Muslim doing that.

7.13. Conclusion

The chapter has proved that Riḍā's *fatwās* are a mine in tracing his theological and polemical views on Christianity. The questions raised in these *fatwās* were diverse. This medley of *fatwās* echoed synopses of some of the major elements of Riḍā's analysis of Christological doctrines, such as the Trinity and the Original Sin, from an Islamic point of view. The questions show a significant dimension of the Muslim encounter with missionary attacks on Islam in various regions at the micro-level. Raising these questions was not only related to the theological challenges to Islam put forward in missionary writings, but was also connected to social problems, such as the question of slavery in Kuwait and to the petitions of Muslim copyists and printers of missionary works in Algeria.

Riḍā's *fatwā*s for Alfred Nielsen were unique. It has been noted that both sides were ready to come close to each other, each trying their best to show the merits of their own belief. As religious men, both Riḍā and Nielsen were keen on giving their views on several subjects. The discussions do not only reflect an Islamic view on missions, but clearly represent Nielsen's understanding of Islam as a missionary as well. Nielsen's questions took the form of a missionary challenge to Islam. He attempted to probe the Muslim perception of missions through Riḍā's views. Nielsen's questions also reflected a strand of self-critical liberal Christian thought which many conservative Christian thinkers, at that time and still today, would have found objectionable: the idea that doubt-grappling with one's faith rather than accepting it without thought- is necessary for faith, for a Christian's faith as well as for a Muslim's.