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

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Conclusion

The study has offered an important example of Muslim-Christian contact in the modern age as highlighted in 1) *al-Manār*'s views of Christianity, 2) its founder's relations with his fellow Arab Christians and most significantly 3) his responses to Christian missionary writings on Islam. In his responses, Ridā clearly proclaimed his religious and political doctrines with all the fervour of a Muslim scholar and activist. He was 'an indefatigable writer […], whose views carried weight with friend and foe alike'.[1] However, his views were sometimes ambivalent. His early writings on Christianity seem to be rational and calm. But this position underwent a marked change with the passage of time. Ridā was immensely provoked by what he deemed as the social and political decadency of Muslims of his time. Intertwined with this spirit of despair and his pan-Islamic outlook, his pen (especially in his later years) started to produce harsher apologetic literature, which expressed his frustration with all forms of the Western penetration in Muslim societies.

Besides these distinct reversals in his thought, there was one area in which he remained unchanged, viz. that he did not reject Christianity as such, but attempted to interpret the Holy Scriptures in the light of the Qurʾān by rejecting all passages which would indicate any contrary notion to the Islamic principles of belief. In consolidation of his interpretations, and in an attempt to demonstrate the 'irrationality' of the faith of his Christian adversaries, he eagerly utilized the works of historical criticism, first developed by Christian theologians, philosophers and writers. Riḍā's very motivation of using such Western studies in his polemics was to vindicate the authenticity of Muslim scriptures vis-à-vis the Bible and to fulfill his aim of *daʿwa.*

The *first* chapter has argued that Riḍā's polemical tone against Christianity should be studied against the background of his general understanding of the West. In many places of his journal, he praised the progress of the West, which he ascribed to 1) its independence of thought, 2) the eradication of political oppression, and 3) the foundation of social, political and scientific associations.[2] But his writings exposed also his feelings of parallel vexation, which focused more on those Western Christians, who tried to ridicule Islam and relate the socio-political failure among Muslims to the tenets of Islam.

Throughout the chapter we have seen how complex and diverse Riḍā's network of associates was. Riḍā's ignorance of Western languages did not hinder him to follow the path of proving the authenticity of Islam by exclusively quoting positive findings or remarks made by European writers,

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[1] See, A.L. Tibawi, 'From Rashīd Riḍā to Lloyd George', in Khurshid Aḥmad and Zafar Ishaq Ansari (eds.), *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in Honour of Sayyid Abū al-Aʿlā al-Mawdūdī*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1980, pp. 335-342.

[2] 'Manāfiʿ al-ʾUrubiyyīn wā Maḍāruhum fī al-Sharq (The Benefits and Harms of the Europeans in the East)', *al-Manār*, vol. 10/3, pp. 192-199; Shahin, *Eyes*, p. 46.

which he always described as 'fair-minded'. In that way, the translation movement and Riḍā's circle of associates always proved to be rich sources for his journal in accumulating knowledge from and on the West. Studying such sources has helped us to understand the value of these contributions in buttressing the shape of his journal especially regarding his anti-Christian polemics, studied in details in the ensuing chapters. The contributors to *al-Manār* were selective in their approach. Nevertheless, an intact and identifying characteristic of their writings was that they did not see a problem in accepting modern thinking when they found it compatible with Islam, and that, consequently, should not pose a problem to the Islamic identity.[3]

Arslān's contributions in Riḍā's journal on the Christian theological developments in Europe represented an integral part of their common belief in pan-Islamism and their broad efforts of anti-imperialism. Those articles indirectly attempted to argue that European politicians were ready to collaborate with religious clergymen and invoke religious fanaticism against non-Christians. One should also not underestimate the importance of hitherto unknown figures, such as Kirām. From Berlin, he was a useful informant for Riḍā, although he was on the periphery of the 'first class' group of Muslim luminaries in *al-Manār*'s circle. On writing his book *al-Waḥy*, Riḍā was interested in reading some Western biographies on the prophet Muḥammad. As an example, he requested Kirām to make an Arabic summary of Tor Andrae's work, as mentioned above.

It was characteristic for Riḍā to lend himself Western positive views in his defence of Islam. But he also tried to use a combination of his religious knowledge and these Western scholarly critiques of the Bible as an instrument to prove his conviction of the conformity of their findings on the Bible with the Qurʾānic reports, especially the 'corruption' of Jewish and Christian scriptures. But he was much upset about the critique voiced by Western scholars about the established Muslim theories on Biblical figures in the Qurʾān, such as the case of his response in 1933 to Wensinck's article on Abraham in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Although he was not directly involved in the affair, Riḍā was provoked by Wensinck's article to the degree that he discredited the Dutchman's meticulous investigation in indexing the ḥadīth. The observation of Elissa-Mondeguer was right that Riḍā's understanding of the West (especially in the 1930s) should be seen as part of his program of reform in which he tried to envisage that Western civilization was in need of the guidance of Islam, which he presented as the religion of 'brotherhood, mercy, and peace'.[4]

The *second* chapter examined Riḍā's multi-dimensional relation with his contemporary Arab Christians. Due to his political bent, which was coupled

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[3] Haddad, 'Manrists', p. 60.

[4] Shahin (1989), p. 115 ; Nadia Elissa-Mondeguer, '*Al-Manār* de 1925 a 1935: la Dernière Décennie d'un Engagement Intellectuel', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, n°95-96-97-98 - *Débats intellectuels au Moyen-Orient dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, April 2002, pp. 205-226.

with his uncompromising religious convictions, his relations with many of them were fluctuated. In his discussions, he outlined specific attitudes that varied according to the intellectual, political or religious background of his counterpart in question. In the course of our discussion it has been observed that the editor of *al-Manār,* in its process of evolution over more than three decades, tried to integrate many political ideas to his religious aspirations. His Christian fellow-citizens, mostly educated in their homeland at missionary schools, provided a whole generation with many journals. With a heart turned to Syria, Riḍā directed his political activism towards those compatriots, and very rarely had the chance to develop any political ambition in Egypt. While Riḍā, as a reformer, had a role in Syrian nationalism, his main role was neither in Syria nor in Egypt but within the world of *al-Manār* and the ideas it propagated in the Muslim world.[5]

These diverse relations with Syrian Christians did not go all along the line smoothly. His frictions with them should be understood within the context of the great controversy on science, politics and religion in the Arab world. As far as his Arab Christian counterparts would carry forward his investigations either on religion (Islam in particular) or politics in a way that was in conformity with *al-Manār*'s worldviews, Riḍā had no tendency whatsoever to draw negative conclusions. But their criticisms of Islam aroused a wide range of replies of an intense nature in his journal. The political and socio-cultural upheaval in the Muslim World also directly affected his discourse with them to the extent that he became sometimes unpredictable in his responses, especially in his debate with some of the Arab Christians. A typical confrontation was his dispute with Faraḥ Anṭūn. His critics see him as the 'assassin' of Anṭūn's journal *al-Jāmiʿa*, but it has also been noted that he was a key figure in organizing the ceremony of Anṭūn's tribute after the latter's death. Riḍā's reaction to the type of secularism the Syrian Christians were propagating was temperate as compared with his treatment of the views of Muslim secularists, as we have seen in the case of the Iraqi poet al-Zahāwī. He was vexed by the abolishment of the Caliphate and its repercussions on the Islamic identity, and that might explain his later impassioned rejection of secularism, which he perceived as insidiously creeping into the Arab World.

Chapter *three* sketched *al-Manār*'s evaluation of Christian missions. Its polemics contain indirect responses to the belittling remarks of Europeans about Eastern civilization and Islam. Just as many previous Muslim thinkers, Riḍā's vehement refutation of the Christian belief and scriptures was to affirm his conviction of the inherent superiority of Islam to other religions. Characteristic of his style was his bemoaning of the sad state of Muslims which made it possible for the opponents of Islam to depreciate it in its own home. Muslims had become powerless, so that Europeans lorded over them everywhere.[6] Riḍā's anti-Christian polemics involved his critique of their attempts to win over Muslim 'souls' as well. He was sometimes emotional and

[5] Adal, *op. cit.*, p. 202.
[6] Ayoub, 'Views', p. 54.

showed bitterness and stern tones towards the missionary work in the Muslim world. However, he was initially positive about the efforts of missionary schools, and admitted their role in achieving some social and technical developments in the Muslim world, especially the American College in Beirut. But this positive tone was soon muted. When he became embroiled in intensive polemics with his Azhari opponents, and the 'saddened' news he received from his Muslim readers, Riḍā started to recognize the other side of the coin; namely, that these schools were established to achieve the 'colonial covetousness'.

As part of his anti-missionary campaign, Riḍā tried to develop some ideas on the nature of religious propaganda. Cole described Riḍā's approach as pragmatic and secular.[7] In his early years, he was of the view that successful religious propaganda grew out of his struggle against Christian missionary activity among Muslims. He began by rejecting an explanation of success in mission through governmental support. He went on that success in mission could be enhanced by practical techniques adopted by the missionaries, and that these techniques could be used to promulgate any religion, true or false.[8] But looking at the development of his thoughts one finds that he was always convinced of the propaganda of Islam as the only true mission. Giving the Qur'ān a higher esteem than the Bible, he was convinced that Islam would expand on its own with no need of any missionary effort. A proof of that was, according to him, the higher social status of Muslim converts (such as Headley) than those Muslims who changed their faith. However, Riḍā was aware of the fact that he was lacking official religious institutions to support him in his religious aspirations, like the Church in the Christian case, which was ready to spend a huge amount of money in spreading its religion. Riḍā tried to put his ambitions into practice by words and actions. His words had great impact on the Muslim thought, but his religious missionary project of *da'wa* was short-lived.

Against this background of Riḍā's network and activities, chapter *four* carried the discussion forth by specifically examining *al-Manār*'s early mode of polemical thoughts as expressed in his series of articles on the '*shubuhāt* (or allegations)' of Christians on Islam, which he later compiled in one small volume. Riḍā's book was of an unsystematic character, due to the fact that it was a compilation of sporadic issues that he raised from time to time in his disputes with certain Christian writings on Islam. Writing these articles in 1903-1904, Riḍā imposed a condition upon himself to defend Islam without attacking Christianity and going no further than addressing Muslim readers' questions.[9] Later, in 1931, and amidst his polemics with al-Azhar scholars (mentioned above), he clarified that after an experience of three decennia, it was sometimes unavoidable for him to counterattack missions by using harsh words; and his 'journal, despite its cautiousness in decency and politeness,

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[7] Cole, *op. cit.*, 291.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

could not defend Islam only by responding to missionaries with statements they did not hate.'[10]

The core of these articles was to discuss the textual authenticity of both the Torah and the Gospel from an Islamic point of view. He directed his most detailed discussions in that regard against the claims of the Egyptian missionary writer Ghabriyāl (whose book is still widely used on Christian websites nowadays) on the Qur'ānic testimony for Jewish and Christian scriptures. It has been properly remarked that Riḍā did not discuss the doctrine of Trinity in details.[11] Neither did he discuss other key concepts in Christianity, such as the birth, crucifixion and salvation of Jesus. This was not because he had nothing to say about them. In the *shubuhāt*, Riḍā rejected these doctrines as 'irrational', but the ideas of *al-Manār* on them were more clearly put forward later, especially after the appearance of Tawfīq Ṣidqī on *al-Manār*'s stage.

In his *Shubuhāt*, Riḍā was convinced that it is no harm for a Muslim to believe in a Chinese religion or in Hinduism as part of God's revelation. More than twenty years later, he further developed the idea by making it clear that 'all people of ancient religions, such as Buddhism and Zoroastrianism belonged also to the People of the Book and were followers of prophets, but paganism and polytheism crept on them to the extent that we do not know [the reality] of their scriptures.'[12]

In the *fifth* chapter, we have seen that Riḍā, in order to put his pursuit of a 'wishful' Gospel supporting the Islamic message into practice, first published fragments of the work of Tolstoy on the four Gospels, and in the end published a full Arabic translation of the Gospel of Barnabas. It has been observed that despite his faith in its authenticity, Riḍā in his introduction was somehow cautious in declaring this in an explicit manner. It was only in 1929 that he overtly voiced that the Gospel of Barnabas was more authentic than the four canonical Gospels. Bājūrī's anti-*Manār* piece of work is a remarkable example of the Coptic reaction to this Gospel. As a Muslim convert to Christianity, considering himself a 'soldier of Jesus', he was not only sarcastic about *al-Manār*'s printing of the Gospel of Barnabas, but also critical of Riḍā's views on Islam. He must have felt compelled to express his disdain for this Gospel with vehemence, proving beyond doubt his devotion to his new faith. Bājūrī did not see Riḍā's publication as part of an Islamic, anti-colonial discourse, but a part of the Muslim polemics against Christian minorities in the Muslim world, especially the Copts.[13] Strangely enough Riḍā neither reacted to Bajūrī's treatise, or to any other polemical work against the Gospel of Barnabas. The treatise should be read as an illustration of the reaction of other Christians of his age; and these reactions deserve to be carefully studied in further research.

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[10] *Al-Manār*, vol. 31/6, p. 479.
[11] Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
[12] *Al-Manār*, vol. 25/3, p. 227.
[13] See, Leirvik, *Images*, p. 139.

The *sixth* chapter examined *al-Manār*'s change of strategy by giving Ṣidqī a principal position in its polemics. Why Ṣidqī? As part of Riḍā's network of associates, we have studied Ṣidqī's place in the world of *al-Manār*. The very reason why he came into contact with Riḍā was his intense discussions with his classmate and Christian convert to Islam ʿAbduh ʾIbrāhīm. More importantly, Riḍā was also impressed with his knowledge of natural sciences and medicine, as well as his ability to apply this kind of knowledge to Islamic sources. Infuriated by what they saw as 'unsympathetic' critique of the West and Westerners on the basis of Biblical passages, some missionaries approached Lord Kitchener, who attempted to convince the Egyptian authorities to ban Riḍā's journal. Riḍā did not give many details about the affair, but his diaries help us know more about its background. Although the Egyptian authorities did not attempt to ban *al-Manār*, it seemed that this protest had its effect. It is observable that Riḍā directly stopped publishing Ṣidqī's anti-Christian articles. But his tone of grief about this incident reflected the 'underneath' feeling of an 'oppressed' colonized person in face of his 'colonizing oppressors.'

Our analysis of Ṣidqī's works included a survey of the sources accessible to him. Besides a limited knowledge of some Western rationalistic books on Christianity and Jesus, Ṣidqī's medical knowledge was more overriding than his knowledge of Islamic sources. However, we indicated that his medical interpretation of the fatherless birth of Jesus that Mary was probably a 'masculine hermaphrodite' came close to the portrayal of Mary by the thirteenth-century Muslim exegete of the Qurʾān al-Qurṭubī. Ṣidqī and Riḍā shared many ideas, and the most noteworthy of these was their common belief in 'illusive' happenings around the event of the crucifixion. Although their interpretation agreed with the classical Muslim exegesis that Judas (or another person) was killed instead of Jesus, it diverged in its rationalistic argument that the crucified man really looked like Jesus, and that the Roman soldiers arrested him by the way of mistake. It was interesting to read that Riḍā depended in his analysis of the theory of 'Crowd Psychology' according to the medical popularizer Le Bon who believed that crowds generate specific emotions. According to this theory, the anonymity of facts and the creation of clichés in the minds of the people is a natural result. Riḍā drew a parallel and argued that those who witnessed the event of the crucifixion became emotional, and therefore did not recognize any difference between the real Jesus and the one resembling him.

In the *seventh* chapter, the discussion came to an end by a recapitulation of *al-Manār*'s ideas on Christianity through Riḍā's lively contact with his readers. The presence of the missionary work in the Muslim world was a breeding ground for many Muslim readers to ask questions, which Riḍā included under the section of *fatwā*s. Some of these questions focused on christological issues, with which Riḍā had already dealt in many other places in his journal, such as the fatherless birth of Jesus, his natural and physical death, as well as his return before the Last Day. Besides, Riḍā's Muslim readers were curious to know his perceptions on other issues which resulted from their daily

contact with missionaries. The most visible among those was the Egyptian Muslim ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Nuṣḥī, who was boldly challenging missionaries by sending inquiries to their journals. His participation in *al-Manār* and the subjects of his inquiries to *al-Sharq wā al-Gharb* of Gairnder pointed to his critique of the missionary work and the views of missionaries on Islam. An obvious rupture is noted in Riḍā's answer to the Danish missionary Nielsen. He did not consider Nielsen's discussions on the case of Tāha Husayn as 'defamation' of Islam. Riḍā's general views on this case were harsh. But addressing Nielsen, as an 'outsider', he dared to accept discussing such issues with non-Muslims. It can be also concluded that Riḍā's anti-Christian polemic was 'an apologetic directed towards Muslim doubters.'[14]

Riḍā's *fatwā* that Jesus died a natural death after having been saved from the Cross, and then was taken up to the Heaven, deserves a special concluding observation. Even though he was in line with ʿAbduh in this regard, the view comes close to the interpretations of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement, who denied the belief that Jesus is alive and awaiting in the Heaven for an eschatological return to earth. In his view, the idea that Jesus is alive was nothing but a Christian invention, designed to demonstrate that the living Jesus is superior to the deceased Muhammad.[15] In his *fatwā* to the Tunisian Umar Khūja on the rejection of Jesus as having been taken alive in the Heaven, Riḍā was more cautious in leaving it open. He boldly stated that a Muslim, who would reject the relevant traditions after having reached the conclusion of their soundness, was an apostate.

It is nowhere mentioned in *al-Manār* that the views of ʿAbduh and Riḍā in this respect caused any Muslim repercussions in their time. But in 1942 the then member of the High Corps of Al-Azhar ʿUlamāʾ and later Sheikh of Al-Azhar Maḥmūd Shaltūt (1893-1963), who was influenced by the spirit of *al-Manār*, issued a similar *fatwā* in which he maintained that Jesus died and was taken in soul and body to God.[16] In support for his arguments, Shaltūt quoted the views of ʿAbduh, Riḍā and al-Marāghī after his analysis of classical interpretations of the relevant Qurʾānic verses. It is interesting to know that Shaltūt specifically cited Riḍā's *fatwā* for Khūjā. It was ironical that the questioner of Shaltūt was an Indian officer of Aḥmadī background, and the *fatwā* remains one of the sublime specimens which the Ahmadiyya publications still use as a sign of

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[14] H.A.R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*, Chicago, 1947, p. 53.

[15] Much has been written in this regard. See, for instance, Y Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background*, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 114-115; N. Klatt, 'Jesus in Indien', *Zeitschrift für Religions-und Geistesgeschichte*, 1987, 267-272.

[16] Shaltūt's *fatwā* was firstly published in the Egyptian weekly *al-Risālah*, vol. 10/462 (11 May 1942), pp. 515-517. The fatwā and Shaltūt's later reactions were also published in his collection, M. Shaltūt, *al-Fatāwā*, Cairo: Dār al-Qalam, second edition, n.d., pp. 59-83. See, the translation of the fatwa by C. C. Adams, 'A fatwa on the ascension of Jesus', *The Muslim World*, vol. 34/3 (1944), pp. 214–217.

triumph for their founder's pioneering analysis of the subject.[17] However, Shaltūt's opponents were among his colleagues within Al-Azhar, who accused him of issuing the *fatwā* in a 'Qadiyānī spirit'.[18] Shaltūt was very upset about the critique, which he considered as an implicit 'accusation' of 'Abduh, Riḍā and al-Marāghī.[19] O. Leirvik correctly observed that the christological discussions of the school of *al-Manār* remained mostly within the tradition of apologetics and polemics towards Christianity, but the discussions of the forties around Shaltūt's *fatwā* were an internal Muslim affair.[20]

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[17] See, for instance, '*The Ulama of Egypt on the Death of Jesus Christ -- A Fatwa:* Exaltation of Jesus by Prof. Mahmud Shaltut', http://www.ahmadiyya.ws/text/books/others/misc/ulamaegyptdeathjesuschristfatwa.shtml, accessed on 7 January, 2008.
[18] See, Shaltūt's reply, *al-Risālah*, vol. 11, no. 513, pp. 363-363.
[19] Ibid., p. 364.
[20] Leirvik, *op. cit.*, p. 143.