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**RASHÎD RIDÂ AND A DANISH MISSIONARY:  
Alfred Nielsen (d. 1963) and Three *Fatwâs* from *Al-Manâr***

By  
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**Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ (1865-1935)**

Sheikh Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ, whose full name is Muhammad Rashîd b. Muhammad b. Alî Ridâ b. Muhammad Shams al-Dîn b. Munla 'Alî Khalîfâ<sup>1</sup> was born on Jumadâ al-Akhira 27, 1282 AH/ September 23, 1865 in al-Qalamûn, a village three miles away from Tripoli-Syria on the Mediterranean coast; and died in Egypt on Jumâdâ Al-Ûlâ 23, 1353/August 22, 1935.

Ridâ was one of the most influential religious figures in the Muslim world during the first half of the twentieth century. After he migrated to Cairo in 1315/1887-1888, Ridâ became a close disciple and friend of Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), the modernist and reformist Muslim scholar. Later on, Ridâ established himself in Cairo and devoted his career to the publication of a journal dealing with Islamic reform, *al-Manâr* (The Lighthouse). His fame was connected with the name of the journal; and his career was almost entirely devoted to its publication. The first issue of *al-Manâr* appeared on Shawwâl 22, 1315/ mid March, 1898, and continued to appear until a few years after Ridâ's death. *al-Manâr* had for many years represented the mouthpiece of the *salafî* heritage in the Muslim world of that time. After 'Abduh's death, Ridâ established himself as a leading heir to the modernist movement in the Muslim world by publishing a voluminous biography of the former. He also started to complete the commentary on the Qur'ân which 'Abduh had already begun.

**Ridâ and Christian Missions**

During the colonial period, the Muslim world witnessed the coming of many western missionary organisations. There were a large number of missionaries who travelled to the Muslim lands, and began to write and spread printed materials. Printed materials were

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<sup>1</sup> W. Ende, "Rashîd Ridâ", in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975, vol. 7, p. 44. More about his biography, see for example: Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1789-1939*, London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962. Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, London: Oxford University Press, 1933. Shakîb Arsalân, *Al-Sayyid Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ aw Ikhâ' Arba'in Sanah*, 1st ed., Damascus, 1937.

promoted by modern missionaries as one of the effective means in their struggle against Islam in an attempt to convert as many Muslims as they could to Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

*Al-Manâr* placed particular emphasis upon the necessity of counteracting the activities of Christian missions in the Muslim lands through schools that could provide instruction in the duties and doctrines of Islam. To this goal, Rashîd Ridâ formed the ‘*Jam’iyyat al-Da’wa wa al-Irshâd*’ (Society of *Da’wa* and Guidance), as soon as he moved to Cairo.<sup>3</sup> The idea of such a society first occurred to him when he was a student in Tripoli-Syria, where he used to frequent and read the literature provided by the American missionaries in that city, and he wished that the Muslims had had similar societies and schools.<sup>4</sup>

Rashîd Ridâ’s criticism of the widespread increase of the Western incursion in the Muslim world (including Christian missions) was like that of many other Muslim scholars squarely presented in his writings.<sup>5</sup> He bemoaned “the sad state of Muslims which made it possible for the opponents of Islam to deprecate it in its own home. Muslims have become powerless because they have weakened Islam, so that Europeans lorded over them everywhere. Christian missionaries have, moreover, established themselves throughout the Muslim lands, denigrating the Qur’ân and the Prophet”.<sup>6</sup> In many succinct accounts in *al-Manâr*, Ridâ dispensed his antithetical stances, explicitly attempting to refute many of what the missionary groups used to write on Islam. He also viewed it as “his duty as a religious thinker and teacher to answer the doubts and queries raised in the minds of Muslim readers by Christian missionary writings. He felt an obligation to counter the hostilities and distrust fostered by such missionary activities”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On the history of mission to the Muslim world, see also: Erich W. Bethmann, *Bridge to Islam*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1953. W.H.T. Gairdner, *D. M. Thornton: A Study in Missionary Ideals and Methods*, London: Hodder and Stoughton Publishers, 1908; *Edinburgh 1910*, Oliphant, Edinburgh and London: Anderson & Furrier, 1910. Julius Richter, *A History of Protestant Missions in the Near East*, 1st ed., New York: AMS Press, 1970 (reprinted from the edition of 1910). Lyle L. Vander Werff, *Christian Mission to Muslims: the Record*, Calif: the William Carey Library, South Pasadena, 1977. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity (vol. VI): The Great Century A.D. 1800- A.D. 1914 in Northern Africa and Asia*, London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1945. Padwick, Constance E., *Temple Gairdner of Cairo*, London, 1929. Samuel M. Zwemer, *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam*, London: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1900; *Islam: A Challenge to Faith*, New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1907; *The Disintegration of Islam*, New York, Chicago, Toronto, London, and Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1916; et al (ed.), *The Mohammadan World of Today*, with a foreword by H.H. Jessup, New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1906.

<sup>3</sup> The Society of *Da’wâ* and Guidance was inaugurated on Rabî al-Awwal 12, 1330/March 3, 1912. The study started immediately on the second day of inauguration. See: Hasîb al-Samarrâ’î, *Rashîd Ridâ al-Mufasssir*, Baghdad: Dâr al-Risâla lil-Tibâ’a, 1397/1977, p. 304.

<sup>4</sup> Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, London: Oxford University Press, 1933, p. 196. For more on Ridâ’s views on Christianity and missions, see for example: Rashîd Ridâ , ‘*Aqîdat al-Salb wa al-Fidâ*’, 2nd ed., Cairo: Matba’at al-Manâr, 1353 AH; “al-Sunna wa Sihhatuhâ wa al-Sharî’a wa Matânatuhâ: Radd ‘alâ Du’ât al-Nasrâniyya bimisr” (two articles), *al-Manâr*, vol. 19 (Sha’bân 29 & Ramadân 15, 1334/June 30 & July 15, 1916), pp. 24-50 & pp. 97-109. M. Ayoub, ‘Muslim Views of Christianity: Some Modern Examples’, *Islamochristiana*, 10 (1984), pp. 49-70 (Quoted below, “Views”). Cf. Eliezer Tauber, “Rashid Ridâ as Pan-Arabist Before World War I”, *The Muslim World*, vol. LXXIX (1989), p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> For details, see: Emad Eldin Shahin, “Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ’s Perspectives on the West as Reflected in *al-Manâr*”, *The Muslim World*, vol. LXXIX (1989), pp. 113-132.

<sup>6</sup> Ayoub, “Views”, p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54-55.

In the same vein, Ridâ was never reluctant to publish his own debates with missionaries in his *Manâr*, and opened its pages for their questions, as he thought this was the best way to raise the Muslims' awareness of the missionary movements of his time. According to Ayoub, Ridâ, however, did not wish to engage in anti-Christian polemics; rather he felt compelled to answer the charges which missionaries advanced against Islam in their various writings. He realised the futility of such polemical endeavours and, instead, repeatedly called for mutual respect and co-operation between both communities. Both Ridâ and his opponents judged the faith and the scriptures of the other by the standard of their own tradition. Nonetheless, Ayoub goes on, it must be said that Ridâ was more convincing, calm and rational.<sup>8</sup>

### **Focus of the Study**

The subject of the present article is an analysis of hitherto three unstudied *fatwâs* by Rashîd Ridâ on Christian missions. These relevant *fatwâs* were published in *al-Manâr* in 1924, 1925 and 1927. The three *fatwâs* are particularly interesting as they were issued in reply to some questions sent to Ridâ by a Danish missionary in the Middle East at that time. The three *fatwâs* have, to the researcher's best knowledge, not been studied before.

The most daunting part of the study at hand has been that there is hardly any information about the questioner, who is merely indicated in each *fatwâ* by Ridâ as (the Arabic text): *Min al-Qiss al-Dânîmârkî Alfred Nielsen fî Dimashq* (From the Danish Priest Alfred Nielsen in Damascus). An investigation in the history of the Christian missions in the Muslim world of that time has enabled the researcher to identify the questioner, whose full name is Pastor Alfred Julius Nielsen (1884-1963), a man who was working as a Protestant missionary in Syria and Palestine during the second and third decades of the twentieth century.

The three *fatwâs* contain intriguing arguments between Ridâ and Nielsen, which can be scarcely found in any other controversy between Muslim scholars and Christian missionaries of that time. Their discussions are unique in the sense of being a face-to-face debate between a Muslim theologian and a Christian missionary. It will be noted that although both sides were ready to come close to each other's thoughts, each party was trying his best to show the merits of his own belief. As religious men, both Ridâ and Nielsen were keen on giving their views on several subjects. In his answers, Ridâ tried to outline *al-Manâr*'s perspective of the issue. The three *fatwâs*, as we shall see, focus in the first place on variant theological matters between Islam and Christianity. They contain a number of intellectual, educational, social, and religious topics, which preoccupied the Muslim world of that time.

### ***Alfred Nielsen (1884-1963):***

#### ***Short Biography***

Alfred Nielsen was born in Odense (Funen), Denmark (April 11, 1884), and died in Jutland (January 11, 1963), where he was also buried. He was one of the members of the *Oesterlandmissionen*.<sup>9</sup> He obtained his master's degree in Danish, English and German at

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> The *Oesterlandmissionen* was founded in Svendborg of Denmark (March 10, 1898). The first person sent out was Einar Prip, who had been in Jerusalem since 1896 to learn Arabic, while

the University of Copenhagen in 1908. During his years of study, Nielsen joined a Danish Christian student movement which had been influenced by such people as the English missionary John Mott, the American missionary Robert Wilder, and the Danish missionary Lars Peter Larsen.<sup>10</sup>

Alfred Nielsen first thought of joining the Santal Mission in India, but eventually chose the *Oesterlandmissionen*. In 1911 he was ordained as a pastor in the National Lutheran Church of Denmark and went to Syria together with his wife Christine to study Arabic in Homs.<sup>11</sup> In 1912 Alfred Nielsen and Christine settled in Nebk, where he started his work as a missionary with the *Oesterlandmissionen*. Nielsen was critical of the missionary methods followed in dealing with Muslims, especially at hospitals and schools. For example, he did not approve of the idea that people could be brought and forced to listen to the 'Christian message'.<sup>12</sup> He was also disappointed to find that the number of converts among Muslims there was less than he had expected.<sup>13</sup>

In reaction to World War I he and some other missionaries left Syria in January 1915 and did not return until June 1919. Nielsen then took part in The Syrian & Palestine Relief Fund's Work until 1920. In October 1921, Nielsen took up his work in Damascus. Later on, he became a teacher at the Newman School of Missions in Jerusalem, which was run by the Anglican Church. At this school he taught future missionaries Arabic and Islamic culture. In 1954 he returned to Denmark and lived his last years in Askov, a village in Jutland.

Nielsen contributed to the missionary field with works in Danish, English, and even in Arabic. Some of his English articles were published in *The Moslim World*. He also wrote a book in Danish titled: *Muhammedansk Tankegang i Vore Dage*<sup>14</sup> (Muhammadan Thinking in Our Days), in which he speaks about his own missionary experience in Damascus. This is mainly based on Nielsen's reading of about seventy articles from the Arabic and Muslim press. It opens with severe criticism of the status of women in the

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working in a German missionary institution for Armenian and Syrian orphans there. Together with his friend Dr. Rudolf Fox Maule, Prip started a Danish mission in al-Qalamûn of Syria (Ridâ's birthplace) in 1905.

<sup>10</sup> My thanks go to Alfred Nielsen's son, Mr. Svend-Holm Nielsen, a retired professor of the Old Testament at the University of Copenhagen, for providing me with a Danish leaflet on his father's biography by Dan Petersen: *Missionær blandt muslimer Alfred Nielsen I Syrien 1911 til 1928*, Selskabet til støtte for Pakistans kirke, 2000. Some of the information cited in the biographical sketch on A. Nielsen also depends on my own correspondence with staff members of the Copenhagen Faculty of Theology, to whom I am very indebted, especially Anne Noegaard-Pedersen, who sent me an email containing the English translation of the section concerned with Nielsen's life from the *Dansk biografisk leksikon*, 3rd ed., Gyldenal, 1982, vol. 10, pp. 386-387. I also received relevant information from Bruno Boedker Hansen of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (November 11, 2000). Nielsen's personal papers are included in the archives of the *Oesterlandmissionen* in the *Rigsarkivet* (Public Record Office) in Copenhagen.

<sup>11</sup> After Christine's death and burial in Jerusalem in 1943, Nielsen was married (1947) to Erna E. Georgi.

<sup>12</sup> Dan Petersen, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6. According to Dan Petersen, Alfred Nielsen baptized a Muslim carpenter, whose name is Abû Ibrâhîm, and his family on Ramadan 26/ April 1925. But in the summer of 1928, Abû Ibrâhîm returned back to his belief in Islam, *q. v.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Nielsen, *Muhammedansk Tankegang i vore Dage*, Copenhagen, 1930. The book is in Danish, but there is also an English summary published by Nielsen titled: "Moslim Mentality in the Syrian Press", *The Moslim World*, vol. XX, April 1930, no. 2, pp. 143-163 (Quoted below, "Mentality").

Muslim world. The veil, according to him, is a 'mark of the inferior position of women in Islam'.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, he attacks the Muslim lunar calendar, asserting that to fix religious feasts according to the moon is somewhat peculiar. He wonders whether Muslims will ever give up this lunar system, and accept the solar one like the West instead.<sup>16</sup>

In some of his works, Nielsen's attitudes towards Ridâ are explicit. In his comment on the International Islamic Conference in Jerusalem (1928), Nielsen stated that the full of the meetings of the conference were chiefly caused by Ridâ. Nielsen, nevertheless, deemed Ridâ as a well-known Muslim thinker who was, in his view, hostile to Christian mission and other foreign influences. He was also aware of Ridâ's reformist ideas, and his work for puritanical reforms inside Islam in order to get back to the Qur'ân and the *Sunna*.<sup>17</sup>

### **Works and Publications**

- "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 Bjerger (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.

### **1) First Fatwâ:**

#### ***An Islamic View on Mission***

In 1924 Ridâ published his answers to questions sent to *al-Manâr* by Alfred Nielsen in which he inquired about the Muslim opinion on missionary activities.<sup>18</sup> The questions are focused on the following specific points:

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<sup>15</sup> Nielsen, "Mentality", p. 143.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>17</sup> Alfred Nielsen, "The Islamic Conference at Jerusalem", *The Moslim World*, vol. XXII, no. 4, (October 1932), p. 346.

<sup>18</sup> The *fatwâ* is published in *al-Manâr*, vol. XXV, no. 3 (Sha'bân 29, 1342/March 4, 1924), pp. 188-194. It is also reprinted in S. al-Munajjid, and Y. Khûrî (ed.), *Fatâwâ al-Imâm Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ*, Beirut: Dâr al-Kitâb al-Jadîd, 1970-1971, vol. 5, pp. 1761-1769. See also my paper: Umar Ryad, "Islam and Mission: a Research Paper on a *fatwâ* by Rashîd Ridâ on

- 1) Do Muslims consider Christian missions in the Muslim land as corrupting and indecent, even if they are fair and without any *ta'n* (defamation)?
- 2) Do Muslims consider the enthusiastic Christian, who is keen on propagating his religion, and the one who neither practices religion in his life, nor works to propagate it among others as being on an equal footing?
- 3) Is it not the duty of every enlightened person to know about the Bible, on which the Western civilisation is based in accordance with the *Hadîth*: (“Seek knowledge even in China”)?
- 4) Does preaching through the Bible not deserve the appreciation of everybody, as it either acquaints oneself with benefits that he had not acquired before, or makes him, after deep contemplation, prefer his own book?
- 5) Is the present age not the age of *ijtihâd* (independent investigation) of all religions so that the followers of any religion are demanded to adhere to theirs, not because they tag along with their ancestors, but because they have deeply reflected upon religion and found it beneficial for themselves and to the social body rather anything else in the world?
- 6) Who is better, the one who adheres to a religion after conviction and practices it in his life, or he who remains in the religion of his ancestors without the inner belief, nor adopting his life according to the highly-ranked and celebrated values of religion?

#### ***Christian Missions Corrupting?***

At the very beginning of his discussion, Ridâ started his answers saying that the grammatical structure of Nielsen’s Arabic is weak. In his answers, however, Sheikh Rashîd Ridâ amply vindicates that the Muslim, with the knowledge and reason he has been given, can distinguish between good missions whose work is without defamation [to others] and that of obscenity. In his own words, Rida states:

The Muslim can also differentiate between the enthusiastic Christian who practices his religion, and the one who trades in it and exploits it in politics, like most missionaries of whom we know, and those who exploit [their religion] in politics, like those who were raised by missionaries to [retaining] fanaticism and being in enmity with anyone at variance with their religion among their compatriots. For them religion has become a merely political value. Neither do they fulfil the virtues it commands, nor abandon the evils it condemns. They use it only to oppose those who disagree with them. As is articulated by Islam, the Muslim never scorns anything more than hypocrisy and the people involved in it.<sup>19</sup>

Ridâ, nevertheless, sees all missions dispatched by the Christians to Muslims as corrupting and indecent, since it has been proved through the experiment with the public conduct of many missionary communities – even though he says this is not a logical necessity in itself. Decent missionary approach, in his view, can be acceptable. In this respect, he writes:

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Missionary Activities”, unpublished paper, Seminar “Problems and Methods of Islamic Studies”, Leiden University, April 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Munajjid, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 1762.

However, there are some individuals who preach their religion on the basis of manifesting the values incorporated in it, standing up for their doctrines and fundamentals against any counterarguments through their knowledge, keeping abreast of honesty and blamelessness; and avoiding anything that might antagonise the other party in debate with them. I lived with some of them during my stay in Tripoli-Syria for many years. I had many debates with them; but none of us tried to cast any doubts on the others. However, we used to respect them, for they were of good morals and never traded upon their religion, even though they were given salaries by missionary organisations.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Missionary Schools***

In the *fatwa* under study, Ridâ gives his opinion on missionary schools and hospitals, a hotly-debated issue then. He believes that the most obnoxious thing done by missionary schools, even the American ones (which he considers as the most honest), is that they make the students doubt their religion, without even convincing them of Christianity. Thus many of the students will become hypocrites and atheists. The same holds true for Christian students and others. However, such institutions brought benefits regarding disseminating pure and applied sciences in the Muslim countries, particularly agriculture, commerce and medicine. Ridâ comments that such advantages are worthy of thanks, but they are not due to missions in any way. The specialists in these fields at such schools are farther from the instructions and rulings of the Bible.<sup>21</sup>

Apart from the services of these schools and hospitals, Ridâ goes on, they were mainly established to help the 'colonial covetousness', as it was clearly expressed by Lord Salisbury (1830-1902), the well-known English minister, who said: 'Missionary schools are the first step of colonialism'. Ridâ thus insisted that there was an espousal between colonialism and mission:

Missionary schools, first of all, cause division among the populations of the one land where they are established. The people, as a result, would fall into intellectual disagreement and dogmatic doubts. The 'foreigners', in that way, would succeed in striking the people of the country by one another. This will in the end give the colonial powers the opportunity to get them completely under control, humiliate and deprive them of their independence and wealth.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Knowledge of the Holy Book: Is it obligatory?***

Concerning the point of the knowledge of the Bible, Ridâ stated that the *fatwâ* section of his journal is too short to contain a detailed answer for the point. However, he briefly declared that it is not true that it is the duty of every enlightened person to know about the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 1762.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. A detailed discussion on the secular benefits of missionary schools in Ridâ's reply to a letter by some Muslim students at the American College in Beirut (1909) in which they complained of many problems they encountered there. The students, for example, asked to establish their Muslim Students' Union on their own without any political orientation, but their request was refused. They were also prohibited to celebrate Muslim occasions. *Al-Manâr*, vol. XII, February 21 and September 14, 1909, pp. 16-26 & 637-640. There is another *fatwâ* on missionary schools, also published in *al-Manâr*, vol. XXXII, no. 3 (Dhû al-Qi'dah 1350/March 1932), pp. 178-181. See also, Khâlidî, Mustafâ and 'Umar Farrûkh, *al-Isti'mâr wa al-Tabshîr fî al-Bilâd al-'Arabiyya*, Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya, 1969, *passim*, 90-112.

<sup>22</sup> Munajjid, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 1762-63

Bible. But it can be only the duty of the scholars, who are specialised in the science of religions and sects, to study the Holy Bible which he calls 'the collection of the historical and religious scriptures'.<sup>23</sup>

At another level, Ridâ rejects the very argument that Western civilisation is based on the Holy Book.<sup>24</sup> This allegation, according to him, is absurdly stated by the missionaries of his time in order to win over as many people as possible among those who are dazzled by the European civilisation, to Christianity. The association between Western Civilization and the Bible is not plausible. In his mind, Western laws have no connection whatsoever with the legislation of the Torah, save to treat the weak and defenceless with cruelty. Nor do the morals of the [Western] people have any relation whatsoever with the body of ethics included in the Gospel. The civilisation of the West, he believes, is 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 are founded on modesty, altruism, asceticism, truthfulness, the renunciation of embellishment, and the renouncement of lusts.

In his concluding remarks on the issue, Ridâ states that the dissemination of sciences and arts in the West is not due to the spread of missionary groups there. He stresses that the impact of religion on nations is at its strongest and completest form in the early stages of guidance. After a nation has reached its full blossoming, religion gradually becomes weaker. For many centuries, even after the spread of Christianity, the West has remained without the application of any principle of these sciences, arts and 'mental independence'. All these concepts were originally transferred from the Arabs and Muslims to Europe through Al-Andalus; and also by what had been brought by the Crusaders from the Arab Muslim countries:

It should be borne in mind that the propagators of these concepts in Europe were tyrannised and ill-treated by 'the Holy Group' and its 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 to-day.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Mission Work through the Holy Book***

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<sup>23</sup> Munajjid, *op. cit.*, p. 1764.

<sup>24</sup> The question of Western civilization as based on the Holy Scriptures was hotly-discussed among Muslim and Western intellectuals of that time. See, for example: the Afghâni-Renan discussion, Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1789:1939*, London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 120-123. Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Jamâl al-Dîn al-Afghânî*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968, pp. 84-97 & 181-187. M. 'Uthmân al-Khasht, *al-Islâm wa al-'Ilm bayna al-Afghânî wa Renan*, Cairo: Dâr Qibâ', 1998. About the 'Abduh-Hanotaux discussion, see: Muhammad 'Abduh, *al-Islâm wa al-Radd 'alâ Muntaqidîh*, Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Rahmâniyya, 1928. Cf. the Antûn-'Abduh discussion, Muhammad 'Abduh, *Al-Islâm wa al-Nasrâniyya ma'a al-'Ilm wa al-Madaniyya*, with a foreword by Rashîd Ridâ, Cairo: Matb'at al-Manâr, 1341. Mahmûd Ayyûb, "Islam and Christianity: A Study of Muhammd Abduh's view of the two religions", *Humaniora Islamica*, vol. II (1947), pp. 121-137.

<sup>25</sup> Munajjid, *op. cit.*, p. 1764.



In an answer to the fourth point regarding conducting missionary work through the Bible, Ridâ claims that to preach through the Holy Book is not a virtue which everybody should appreciate. In his view, appreciation should be only given to things of real benefit. Missionary activities have been proved to be tragic and catastrophic for the countries which was acquainted with, since they have caused hostility and division among their people.

To support his argument, Ridâ states that most knowledgeable people of Syria at that time admit that their dissidence and the disintegration of their sects – which had deprived them of national unity in which Western countries take pride– is mostly caused by the activities of missionary schools in the country, and what their [different] inclinations were doing in the country. According to Ridâ, this is also stated by many other writers, orators, and versed people (either Muslims or Christians). Also according to the people acquainted with religious and social affairs, Christianity had been so firmly and faithfully adopted by its believers; that ‘deplorable’ fanaticism among them had been weaker than it was after the coming of those missions, albeit the knowledge of religion had been less. And there is not any [good] effect known over the people Christianised by missionaries. They have not become better than the people of their [former] religion with regard to virtues, morals or the worship of God, Ridâ argued.<sup>26</sup>

By the end of his argument on this point, Ridâ challenges Nielsen to bring him the justifications which necessitate the gratitude of Muslims to Christian missions. The question, in Ridâ’s mind, is controversial, since it is not a perquisite to missions *per se*. Everyone can avail oneself of anything he has never known before through learning. However, he stated that there are a few people who study the Bible owing to mission or under the guidance of missionaries in order to give their own Book precedence. The high esteem Ridâ gives to the Qur’ân 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’ân is given priority over all books, superior to them, and has the soundest judgement among them all’.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Independent Investigation in Religions***

Firmly holding his reformist ideas about independent judgement in the matter of religions, Ridâ believes that the Qur’ân necessitates *Ijtihâd* (independent investigation) with regard to the comprehension of religion and the inference that brings about certitude everywhere and at every age. He stresses that such guidance is needed much more nowadays, for independent education and the freedom of thought have been gaining currency.

Thus Ridâ was brought to attack the *taqlîd* (the acceptance of belief on the authority of others) and to demand the restoration of *ijtihâd*. *Taqlîd*, according to him, had become more harmful in the existing age than it had been in the past.<sup>28</sup> The Qur’anic verses which censure imitation and the mere following of the ancestors’ footsteps are explicit and need no *ta’wîl* [interpretation].

However, these Qur’anic verses do not prevent some scholars, whom Ridâ calls ‘charlatans’ to allege to be knowledgeable about Islam to forbid *ijtihâd*, and degrade the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 1765.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 1766.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 1766. Cf. Adams, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-192.

independence of thought. Unless the call of such 'charlatans' had not had popularity among Muslims, Ridâ goes on, nor had many 'common' Muslims been dazzled by it, the state of Islam would have been the best. Such 'charlatans' keep Muslims clear of *ijtihâd* through their ignorance.

### ***Adherence to Religion***

The sixth question is given more detailed attention in Ridâ's statement. In his prefatory remarks, he elucidates that the adherent of any religion can never be a staunch follower, unless he is convinced of the true nature of his religion, submitting psychologically and practically to it by performing worship, steering well clear of all prohibitory acts, and committing to all its rulings and ethics, save the slight infringements for which he shows remorse and seeks Divine forgiveness. The conclusive belief, in his view, is to be crystallised into *imân* [or faith], and the practical and psychological submissiveness [to Allah] is to be patterned upon Islam. The Muslim and the *mu'min* [believer] are, however, one thing.

In another vein, Ridâ attempts to hit straight at one of the most vulnerable spots, which Muslims always take into account in the opposition with Christian dogma. His very premise starts from his argument that Muslim theologians are of the agreement that there is no logical impossibility in Islam (*muhâl 'aqlan*), what means: the Muslim is not required to believe in anything that is logically impossible.<sup>29</sup> If he once encounters anything in the *Shari'â*, 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'anic passage: 'On no soul doth Allah place a burden greater than it can bear. It gets every good that it earns, and suffers every ill that it earns'.<sup>30</sup> Other religions rather than Islam require 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.

Furthermore, Ridâ predicts a total fiasco for missionary work among Muslims which is according to him, it would be fruitless. In his thoughts, the real Muslim who follows what is prescribed by his religion on the basis of true knowledge and firm belief has no fear of being affected by the 'call' of any other religion. The Muslim, as Ridâ quotes from Jamâl al-Dîn al-Afghânî, can never become a Christian because Islam is Christianity with additions.<sup>31</sup> Having decided on something perfect, Ridâ adds, one never accepts a subordinate alternative.

Besides, Ridâ goes on to raise some other critical and controversial points about other religions. Unlike the Prophet Muhammad, he says, information about foregoing Prophets, whether it be dates, books nor traditions, is not well-preserved. In the four Gospels, which were selected and approved by the Church from amongst many others, we

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<sup>29</sup> Ridâ here adopts the same attitude held by Muhammad 'Abduh. In 'Abduh's conviction, knowledge and religion properly understood, could not come into conflict at all, so the reason need not recognise a logical impossibility as a religious truth: religion was given to man as a thread to guide him against the aberration of reason. See: J. Schacht, "Muhammad 'Abduh", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, Leiden and New York, 1993, vol. VII, 419-420.

<sup>30</sup> The Holy Qur'ân: Sûrat al-Baqara [2: 286].

<sup>31</sup> Munajjid, *op. cit.*, p. 1767.

find very little record of the life of Jesus, and this record was not transmitted through the *isnâd* (uninterrupted chain of authorities).<sup>32</sup>

In addition, Ridâ is not inhibited to state that his reason for having digressed his answers to the above-mentioned questions is that the Muslim never frets about mission: the more missionaries intensify their work, the more the Muslim becomes convinced about Islam. Missionaries, Ridâ accuses, disseminate their ideas only among Muslims who are lacking of the Islamic knowledge, except of some 'traditional values', and the young pupils. In the passage of time, none of these would convert to Christianity, but most of them will become atheists, sceptics, agnostics, and *mu'attilah*.<sup>33</sup> At that point, Ridâ confirms Nielsen's idea that such people are virtually bad, unlike the one believing in a particular religion, which forbids evil and recommends good.

Ridâ later turns to sound his views on the fundamentals of the message of Islam, giving them great sublimity, and quoting from the Qur'ân. In his own words, he says:

The respected Reverend [Nielsen] has to know acutely well that one of the fundamentals of our religion is to believe in Allah, His angels, Books and Messengers: 'We make no distinction between one another.'<sup>34</sup> All messengers were sent by Allah to all nations to guide and lead them to worship Him [as one God], and to do good and abstain from evil. Due to the differences of human readiness, the guidance had been accomplished according to His [Divine] laws of evolution [...]. When such readiness for acceptance became complete, Allah sealed the Prophecy with Muhammad [...]. So what was sent down to him is actually the complementary part to all former revelations. One of his marvellous qualities is that he was sent with the most upright essence the same as [the message of] the most celebrated Prophets, who shortly came before him, and whose instructions were preserved, particularly Moses and Jesus. But he was illiterate and never looked through any book at all.<sup>35</sup>

As is clear from his comments, Ridâ concludes that no reasonable person, who knows his religion perfectly well, believes in other Prophets without believing in the Prophet Muhammad. Missionaries, according to him, study Islam, neither to grasp its true nature, nor to compare it fairly with other religions, but to find anything that may help them to accuse it, even under any pretext.

At the end of his reply, Ridâ's due respect for Nielsen can be explicitly noted. It is not frequently standardised in missionary circles, he thinks, to find someone who would have written in such a confident way like Nielsen. Ridâ, on the contrary, signifies that the writings of those who are of extravagant evangelistic ideas among missionaries, and who prefer what they have to what others have, reveal that they write what is contradictory to

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<sup>32</sup> The point of the reliability of the transmission of the Holy Book was one of the significant themes that Ridâ always used in his writings on Christianity. See: his introduction to the Arabic text of the Gospel of Barnabas (translated by Khalîl Sa'âda). R. Ridâ (ed.), *Injil Barnaba*, Cairo: Matba'at al-Manâr, 1325/1907.

<sup>33</sup> The word '*mu'attilah*' has various sorts of connotations: one of them is to disacknowledge the Creator, and the raising and restoring of life, and to assert that nature brings to life and time is that which brings to naught: another sort is to acknowledge the Creator and the beginning of the Creation, but disacknowledge the raising and restoring of life: further another one is to acknowledge the Creator and the beginning of the creation, and a mode of restoration to life, but disacknowledge the apostles. See: Lane, *op. cit.*, pt. 5, p. 2083.

<sup>34</sup> The Holy Qur'ân, Sûrat al-Baqara [2:285].

<sup>35</sup> Munajjid, *op. cit.*, pp. 1768-1769.

what they believe. However, those who preach their religion with firm conviction and submission are to be respected by any sensible person, but they are few, Ridâ says.<sup>36</sup>

## 2) *Second Fatwâ: Islam or Christianity?*

Only one year later (1925), Ridâ published an answer to another question sent by Alfred Nielsen. In frank terms, Nielsen challenged Ridâ about his own belief, and his adherence to Islam as the only true religion; and why he repudiated the ‘call of Christianity’, despite being quite aware of evangelism and Christian books!<sup>37</sup>

In his reply to the question, Ridâ gives a brief outline on the reasons why he firmly upholds Islam as the true religion. He maintains that it has been proved to him that the Prophet Muhammad was *ummî* [or 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 Ridâ proceeds to speak about the qualities of the Prophet Muhammad:

Unlike the people of his age at Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad was not keen on leadership, fame, pride or eloquence. But compared with them, 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-Amîn* [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, with which other previous Prophets before him had come.’ In brief, Ridâ went on to describe the contents of Islam, as a religion and message, and the privileges of the Qur’ân.

In view of these reasons, Ridâ underlined that he is firmly convinced of the message of Islam, for the Qur’ân has signified many things, which were not known among the people of Mecca during that time. The most important among these things, he argues, is the corruption and alterations made by the Christians and the Jews in their Books. It has been revealed in the Qur’ân that the Jews and the Christians “have been given a portion of the Book”.<sup>38</sup> However, “they changed the words from their right places and forgot a good part of the Message that was sent to them”.<sup>39</sup>

Surprisingly enough, Ridâ adds, Muslims have become more acquainted with such facts in details only after having scrutinising the authenticity of the history and the books of both the Christians and Jews. Referring to the Biblical historical criticism, which appeared in Europe during the nineteenth century, Ridâ maintains that all these facts have also been confirmed by the criticism of many liberal scholars in Europe. So how could this

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<sup>36</sup> Munajjid, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 1769. In his later polemical discussions with other Muslim scholars, Nielsen quoted this statement by Ridâ by having said: “there is no objection to a Muslim and Christian trying to convert each other if they do it in the right manner”. See: his discussion with Sheikh Abdullâh al-Qishâwî of Jerusalem in 1938. Harry Gaylord Dorman, *Towards Understanding Islam: Contemporary Apologetic of Islam and Missionary Policy*, New York: Columbia University, Teachers College, Bureau of Publications, 1948, p. 100.

<sup>37</sup> The *fatwâ* was published in *al-Manâr*, vol. XXVI (1925), pp. 98-99; reprinted in Munajjid, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, pp. 1820-1823.

<sup>38</sup> The Holy Qur’ân: Sûrat Âl-’Imrân [3:23].

<sup>39</sup> The Holy Qur’ân: Sûrat al-Mâ’idah [5:13].

illiterate man, who has grown up among the illiterate, have known all these facts unless Allah had revealed them to him?!

Concerning the reason why he keeps away from the 'call' of Christian missionaries, Ridâ apparently believes in the falsity of their mission. The principle for their belief, he argues, is based on the allegation that Adam disobeyed his God, so he and all of his descendants deserve eternal torture by the Divine justice. But this is quite contradictory to the Divine mercy. God, nevertheless, had not found any way to combine His mercy with His justice, except through the Incarnation into a human being [Jesus], who would bear pain, torture and curse in order to salvage humanity from punishment. In addition, He requires them to believe in this as a condition for Salvation.<sup>40</sup>

In no less striking comments, Ridâ concludes that most of the missions had effects only on the people who are ignorant of Islamic values. Missionaries make these people doubt the fundamentals of Islam, causing strife and division among them. Ridâ, in this effect, regards most of them as despicable, for it has been proved to him that they trade upon their religion to the extent that they, most of the time, lie and twist the truth. Also there are some atheists among them; and many of them are fanatics who were raised to thoroughly dislike Islam. Finally, Ridâ reiterated the same conclusion he added in the above-mentioned passage that he could not deny that there are still some faithful among them, but they are few.

### 3) Third *Fatwâ*:

#### *Tâha Husayn and Mission*<sup>41</sup>

#### Introduction

Another occasion for Nielsen and Ridâ to return to in their polemics was about the famous case of Tâha Husayn (1927): when he was convicted for his *The Pre-Islamic Poetry*, which was first published in 1926.<sup>42</sup> The appearance of the work provoked a storm of hostile criticism. The book was accused of undermining the foundation of the Islamic faith. Demands were made that Husayn should be dismissed from his post as a teacher at the Egyptian University. The issue was also introduced into the Parliament. However, the final result was that the offending book was suppressed and Husayn presented his resignation to the university administration, which refused to accept it.<sup>43</sup>

The focus of the book was the authenticity of the pre-Islamic poetry. In the book Husayn claims that the pre-Islamic poetry is an apparently inexhaustible source from which proof and illustration have been drawn in support of doctrines of Islam or to demonstrate the grammatical correctness and rhetorical elegance of the language of the

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<sup>40</sup> Munajjid, *op. cit.*, p. 1822.

<sup>41</sup> The *fatwâ* was published in *al-Manâr*, vol. XXVIII, no. 8, Rabî' al-Âkhara, 1346 A.H/October 26, 1927, pp. 578-583; reprinted in Munajjid, *op. cit.*, pp. 1978-1985. The same as what he mentions in the first passage, Ridâ stated in the very beginning of this *fatwâ* that he had published Nielsen's questions with his grammatical mistakes as they were.

<sup>42</sup> Tâha Husayn, *Fî al-Shi'r al-Jâhili*, Cairo: Matba'at Dâr al-Kutub al-Misriyya, 1st ed., 1926. Cf. Muhammad al-Khidr Husayn, *Naqd Kitâb fî al-Shi'r al-Jâhili*, A. al-Tunusî (ed.), 2nd ed., Cairo, 1977.

<sup>43</sup> Adams, *op. cit.*, 255.

Qur'ân. All of this poetry, which is so abundant, says Husayn, that we might imagine that all ancients were poets, has been fabricated to meet the exigencies in view.<sup>44</sup>

What should concern us here with regard to the following examination is that the author expresses in the course of the work ideas which have been taken against him, and because of which he was accused of unbelief. He denies the story of the founding of the Ka'ba by the Prophet Ibrâhîm and his son Ismâ'îl and questions the historical existence of these two individuals, denies the seven variant readings of the Qur'ân, as having come from the Prophet Muhammad, and denies that the religion of Islam was primarily the religion of Ibrâhîm and existed in Arabia before the time of Muhammad.<sup>45</sup>

According to P.S. van Koningsveld, Tâhâ Husayn adopted the views of C. Snouck Hurgronje, the Dutch orientalist, in relation to the historical origin of Islam.<sup>46</sup> However, Husayn must have been aware of earlier works, such as A. Sprenger, in his *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad* (Berlin, 1869), who was the first to point out that the figure of Ibrâhîm in the Qur'ân had a history before he finally develops into the founder of the Ka'ba. His thesis was further expounded by Snouck Hurgronje.<sup>47</sup>

In his dissertation *Het Mekkaansche Feest* (Leiden, 1880), Snouck Hurgronje brought together and interpreted the information, which is documented in the Qur'ân about the Prophet Ibrâhîm, in a synthesis which traces its development. In conclusion, he asserts that it was not until after the *Hijra* that the Prophet Muhammad, being forced to find other support on the occasion of his controversy with the Jews, pronounced the Old Testament patriarch a *Hanîf* and the first Muslim, and maintained that Ibrâhîm, together with Ishmael, the ancestor of the Arabs, built the Ka'ba and introduced the ceremonies of the pilgrimage. Ibrâhîm, according to Snouck, became only at this juncture the most important forerunner of the Arabian Prophet: Islam was able to claim, as being the religion of pure monotheism already propagated by Ibrâhîm, priority over both Judaism and Christianity.<sup>48</sup>

In his *Manâr*, Rashîd Ridâ published an account of the legal findings of the court, articulating his spectrum of opinions on the case. By the end of his statements, Ridâ argues Tâhâ Husayn jeopardises Islam, even more than Christian missionaries used to do. His *ta'n* (defamation) of the Qur'ân, as Ridâ expresses it, was more dangerous than the doubts missionaries cast on Islam. To Ridâ, Tâhâ Husayn, and those of like faith with him represent an aggressive atheism that is usurping the institutions of the country and the very profession of teaching, in order to poison the minds of the young men of the country with their unbelief. He deems the statements of Husayn in this book to be theories only and the deductions of the writer, to be without genuine proof, by means of which 'he has

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>45</sup> Husayn, *op. cit.*, p. 26-27.

<sup>46</sup> P.S. van Koningsveld, *Snouck Hurgronje en de Islam: acht artikelen over leven en werk van een orientalist uit het koloniale tijdperk*, Leiden, 1987, p. 22.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. the supplement by A. J. Wensinck to: J. Eisenberg, "Ibrâhîm", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1st ed., Leyden and London, 1927, vol. II, p. 430. See, Johannes Pedersen, *The Scientific work of Snouck Hurgronje*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957, p. 10; G. Bousquet and J. Schacht, *Selected Works of C. Snouck Hurgronje*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957, p. 66.

<sup>48</sup> R. Paret, "Ibrâhîm", in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition, Leiden and London, 1971, vol. III, p. 980. Paret maintained that the thesis of Snouck Hurgronje became more widely known through the supplement which A.J. Wensinck added to the article Ibrâhîm in *EI* (1st ed.) and provoked contradiction and denials, especially from the Muslims.

established his apostasy from Islam, and proves that he was estimating the results of his actions and their evil effects upon Muslims without concern'.<sup>49</sup>

A few months later, Alfred Nielsen sent Ridâ his comments on the matter, including some questions. The object of the questions goes further than the issues discussed between Ridâ and Nielsen earlier in their former discussions. As is clear from his statements, Nielsen desired to have had a polemical dialogue with Ridâ on the effect of the liberal trends in the Muslim lands during that time. In addition, he was eager to acknowledge Ridâ with his views, as a missionary, that missions still have their merits. In his premise, Nielsen pungently blames Ridâ for his rooted hostile attitudes to missionaries when he states that it is always their duty to defame Islam. Nielsen further confirmed that the Christian missionary never preaches the Gospel among Muslims for nothing, but because of his belief in the 'glad tidings' which are found neither in Islam nor the Qur'ân, even though the Qur'ân contains useful 'prohibitions' and 'proscriptions'. Nevertheless, the missionary's criterion of discrediting the Qur'ân, Nielsen went on, is because It rejects the notion of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus, the doctrine on which the Christian faith is established and clearly taken from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter and John. Based as they were on Ridâ's comments on Husayn's work, Nielsen formulated the following questions:

### **Nielsen's Questions**

In the start, Nielsen says that he has not managed to read Husayn's book, as the government had banned it. However, he was only able to read *al-Manâr*'s comment on the case, and some parts of it as published in the newspaper: *al-Mîzân* ('The Scale').

The main issue of the discussion was the word *ta'n* (or defamation) of religion. The first point he raised for discussion was the word *ta'n*: what does it mean? And how can we label Tâha Husayn as such, despite the scientific deductions he reached without any other objective? He also wondered whether the word *ta'n* means to 'scorn or contempt', or something else. If everything said about any religion, which might be thought as contradictory to its beliefs, were to be always thought as *ta'n*, Nielsen continues, how could we avoid it in the lands where Muslims, Christians and Jews live side by side, even though they disbelieve, and even rather reject, each other's doctrines? However, if *ta'n* means to 'scorn and disdain', we must then avoid it.

The other point in Nielsen's thoughts was his questioning that if any Muslim once reached a conclusion that might contradict the Qur'ân and the Islamic creed through his scientific methods and research, could he be considered as a *kâfir* (unbeliever) or *tâ'in* (defamer) of his religion, though he would still be committed to Islam in both religious and moral aspects?

Yet Nielsen laid emphasis on the second point of his question, as it was a very important issue for the position of missionary activities and publications. Put more simply, as a missionary Nielsen did not want to put any other argument against Islam than that Muslims themselves agree upon. At the same time, he believes that enlightened Muslims are expected very soon to change their attitudes towards the Qur'ân, and soon they will

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<sup>49</sup> See the article written by Ridâ on the resolution in *al-Manâr*, XXVIII, no. 5 (Dhû al-Hijja 29, 1345/June 29, 1927), pp. 368-380. See also, Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

distinguish between religious and moral matters, on the one hand, and the scientific and historical on the other. This would be, Nielsen insinuated, the same as what had happened among the Christians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose thinking about the infallibility of the Bible became different from those of the eighteenth century, despite the fact that both Christian generations shared the same belief in Jesus as the only Saviour and mediator between God and the people. In addition, Nielsen hinted at some indications of the changes in the Muslim world, which he would have expected at that time, such as modernist movements in Turkey of his time, or the appearance of modern Muslim magazines.

Imbued by his missionary work, Nielsen went on to say that he had discussed the above-mentioned themes with many Muslim scholars, who never refused to discuss them with missionaries. But they, according to him, render all the discussions to the *ta'wîl*, since they take it for granted that there is not the least mistake in the Qur'ân whatsoever. Nonetheless, all of them agreed that any Muslim who reached a conclusion, which is contradictory to the historical and natural issues mentioned in the Qur'ân, could not be considered as a true Muslim. Nielsen, at the end of his statements, wonders whether *al-Manâr* would give some other reasons why Tâha Husayn is said to be a *kâfir*.

### **Ridâ's Reply**

In his answer, Ridâ did not hesitate to maintain that Nielsen is not right to defend the missionaries against 'defaming' Islam. Nevertheless there are also missionaries, Ridâ argues, who are paid salaries for preaching Christianity, but when they find another better means of earning money, they give it up altogether.

Ridâ also started his answer by pointing out that the Acts of the Apostles, Peter and John, which are said to prove the Death of Jesus and his Resurrection, are not binding for Muslims, for they can not be historically proved according to the Muslims. In addition, Ridâ challenged that the Christians cannot prove them historically through the 'chain of narrators', nor by attributing them to their original authors, as even some scholars and investigators of the history of Christianity in the West have taught.

In his understanding of the word *ta'n*, Ridâ lexically defined it as originally used to mean, 'to thrust or stab a spear or a lance'; it is also designated to mean 'to rebuke, insult, deny, and orally disregard'. The parallel between both definitions is that the latter spiritually hurts the person the same as the former materially does. What Tâha Husayn wrote in his formerly-mentioned book 'painfully hurt' the Muslims, so it is valid to say that he rebuked Islam. But Ridâ made it clear that if any Muslim, Christian, or Jew attempted to deal with each other's Book, stating the things they do not believe and what are contradictory to their own religion without going beyond the moral obligations, this would not be considered as *ta'n*. For example, he does not deem what Nielsen writes about Islam at the very beginning of his questions, and also his reply to be *ta'n*.

In a lucid answer to the second item of Nielsen's inquiry, Ridâ elaborated that whosoever intentionally believes in anything that is contrary to the clear-cut passages of the Qur'ân cannot be considered a member of the Muslim community. Thus anyone who denies the existence of Adam, Ibrâhîm and Ismâ'îl (as Tâha Husayn allegedly did) is definitely a *kâfir*, since he denies the Word of Allah. However, Ridâ maintains that whosoever tends to believe in the story of Adam and all the phrases mentioned in the



Qur'ân: such as those about his sin, repent, the prostration of all the Angels for him (except the Satan), and the Satan's speech to Allah as allegories representing the Divine Laws in the Creation, cannot be considered as someone denying the Qur'ân.<sup>50</sup>

Recurring to Nielsen's comparison between the changing attitudes of enlightened Christians and Muslims, Ridâ did not accept the very concept that enlightened Muslims, in the passage of time, may change their belief in the Qur'ân, making distinction between the religious and moral matters as infallible on the one hand, and the historical ones as vulnerable to criticism, on the other -as the Christians did. Such a comparison sprang to Nielsen's mind, he believed, because of his interested analogy between Islam and Christianity, and the Qur'ân on the one hand and both the Old and New Testaments on the other. However, both cases, in Ridâ's view, are completely different.

Regarding Husayn's denial of the historical existence of Adam, Ibrâhîm and Ismâ'îl, Ridâ consistently maintains that the existence or the non-existence of anybody who is said to have been living in the past eras cannot be proved by scientific methods, so far as it is not logically impossible. In the same way, nobody can deny the existence of someone called Ibrâhîm, as far as it is not logically impossible. At any rate, the very premise of the possibility of his existence, Ridâ contends, was supported by the Revelation according to both the Children of Israel and the Arabs. Thus Ridâ explains that his judgement on the case of Tâha Husayn is such because, according to him, both the belief in the Revelation and the denial of Ibrâhîm's existence cannot be reconciled.

In support of his argument, Ridâ discusses at considerable length the denial of the existence of some generally recognised men in history. He, furthermore, laments that there can be probably historical suspicion that might go against the existence of a reported famous person, such as those who deny the existence of Jesus on the ground of the historical account of Josephus, the Jewish historiographer [probably b. in AD 37 or 38, d. after AD 93], who was contemporary to the events at Jesus' time. And yet he did not allude in his writings on the Jewish history to Jesus, though he paid much attention to less important events. But Ridâ refuted this suspicion by pointing out that Josephus must have concealed this fact in his writings in order not to be considered a preacher of the Christian message, and to offer his readers no 'temptation', as he was no 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 many eloquent poems were attributed by the Greeks. Regarding the poetry of Qays, the pre-Islamic poet, it was said that someone had composed it during the Umayyad Empire, and attributed them to Qays in order to hide his own name.

In Ridâ's vocabulary, Muslim scholars are 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, devotions and legislation on the one hand, and what is mentioned in the Scripture about the secrets of the Creation on the other. The former is intended to

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<sup>50</sup> Ridâ here, following the same steps taken by his teacher 'Abduh, explains the interpretation of these verses metaphorically. All the statements mentioned in the Qur'ân about the Creation of Adam and the dialogue between Allah and the Angels should not be understood as real dialogues, for the Divine Entity is infallible against this, but they should be read as an indication for the Divine Laws in the Creation. About details, see: *Tafsîr al-Qur'ân al-Hakîm al-Mushtahir bi Ism Tafsîr al-Manâr*, 1st vol., Cairo, 1346 A.H.

reform and cultivate human beings, and prepare them for the best of their life. In contrast, the latter is mentioned as a manifestation of the Divine signs of the Creation, which indicate the Divine oneness, mercy and power. The latter category, Ridâ sounds his view, 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 may not be agreeable with the literal meaning of the Qur'ân, it should be subjected to *Ta'wîl* (re-interpretation).

In his concluding remarks, Ridâ outspokenly stresses that one of the characteristics of the Qur'ân is that there is no *qat'î* (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 the Muslim doubters, Ridâ expounded that ignorance of the Qur'ân in both spiritual and social matters has dominated some Muslim minds, though it is agreeable to logic and science. 'Unlike many Westerns who are ready to raise funds for the spread of their religion, despite the contradictions their Scriptures contain',<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Throughout his answers, Ridâ perhaps best exemplified his attitudes about missions when he makes a distinction between what he identifies as 'paid preachers' whose zeal for the belief always depended on their salaries from missionary organisations, seeking dissension, attacking Islam and ignorantly misrepresenting what they wished to criticise; and the 'sensible and honest Christians', who, like him, should work for the sake of each community respecting the belief of the other and together endeavouring for the good of all societies.

The discussions not only reflect an Islamic view on missions, but they represent Nielsen's thoughts, as a missionary, about Islam as well. From the beginning to the end, Nielsen's questions take the form of a missionary challenge to Islam. This remark can be clearly observed in the second discussion when he bluntly challenges Ridâ about his own belief as a Muslim and why he always turns his back on the 'call of Christianity'. In the researcher's view, it is clear that Nielsen did not raise such provocative and straightforward questions seeking an answer of which he was badly informed. However, he far attempted to probe the Muslim perception of missions through Ridâ's views.

Although the first group of Nielsen's questions focus on the position of the Holy Bible in the missionary enterprise, and the importance of independent investigation in the matter of adherence to religions, Ridâ found it incumbent on him as a Muslim scholar to refer to his own opinion on the political effects and implications of missionary work and schools in the Muslim world. On the contrary, Ridâ acknowledges that there would still be scientific advantages that such schools could accomplish in the Muslim society.

Ridâ, in many cases, did not wish to engage in anti-Christian polemics. His apologetics to missionaries were most of the time counterattacks directed to their polemics on Islam. It was distinctive that he not only opened the pages of his *Manâr* to someone like Nielsen, but also showed due respect to the questioner and the way he introduced his

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<sup>51</sup> *Manâr*, vol. XXVIII, *op. cit.*, p. 583.

remarks. Even when Nielsen introduced his questions with regard to the case of Tâha Husayn, Ridâ admitted that such questions are not ‘defamation’, and the same holds true for his answers to them. On the contrary, Ridâ’s broad-spectrum views on the case of Tâha Husayn *per se* were very severe and strict. But when addressing Nielsen, as an ‘outsider’, he dared to accept discussing such issues with non-Muslims. It can be also concluded that the Ridâ-Nielsen discussions reflect, to a great extent, the realities of some of the urgent intellectual themes preoccupying the Muslim world of that time, such as the case of Tâha Husayn. It can be also added that it is true that Ridâ’s anti-Christian polemic reveals that it was also “an apologetic directed towards Muslim doubters”.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> H.A.R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*, Chicago, 1947, p. 53.