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 Qur’ān 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. Ridā'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 da’wā.

The first chapter has argued that Ridā'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 Ridā's network of associates was. Ridā'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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which he always described as ‘fair-minded’. In that way, the translation
movement and Ridi’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

Arslan’s contributions in Ridi’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 Kiram. From Berlin, he was a useful informant for
Ridi, although he was on the periphery of the ‘first class’ group of Muslim
luminaries in al-Manār’s circle. On writing his book al-Wahy, Ridi was
interested in reading some Western biographies on the prophet Muhammad. As
an example, he requested Kiram to make an Arabic summary of Tor Andreæ’s
work, as mentioned above.

It was characteristic for Ridi 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
Qur’anic 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
Qur’an, 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, Ridi was provoked by Wensinck’s article to the degree that he
discharged the Dutchman’s meticulous investigation in indexing the hadith.
The observation of Elissa-Mondeguer was right that Ridi’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 Ridi’s multi-dimensional relation with his
contemporary Arab Christians. Due to his political bent, which was coupled

3 Haddad, ‘Manriks’, p. 60.
Décennie d’un Engagement Intellectuel’, Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée,
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 Farah Anṭūn. His critics see him as the ‘assassin’ of Anṭūn’s journal al-Jāmi‘a, 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

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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-Matār’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.\footnote{Al-Manār, vol. 31/6, p. 479.}

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.\footnote{Wood, op. cit., p. 57.} 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 shububār, 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 Ṣīdī on al-Manār’s stage.

In his Shububār, 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.’\footnote{Al-Manār, vol. 25/3, p. 227.}

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.\footnote{See, Leirvik, Images, p. 139.} Strangely enough Riḍā neither reacted to
Bājūrī’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.
The sixth chapter examined al-Manâr’s change of strategy by giving Șidqî a principal position in its polemics. Why Șidqî? As part of Ridâ’s network of associates, we have studied Șidqî’s place in the world of al-Manâr. The very reason why he came into contact with Ridâ was his intense discussions with his classmate and Christian convert to Islam ’Abduh ʿIbrâhîm. More importantly, Riḍâ 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 Riḍâ’s journal. Riḍâ 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-Manâr, it seemed that this protest had its effect. It is observable that Riḍâ directly stopped publishing Șidqî’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 Șidqî’s works included a survey of the sources accessible to him. Besides a limited knowledge of some Western rationalistic books on Christianity and Jesus, Șidqî’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 Qur’ân al-Qurṭûbî. Șidqî and Riḍâ shared many ideas, and the most noteworthy of these was their common belief in ‘illusory’ 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 Riḍâ 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. Riḍâ 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-Manâr’s ideas on Christianity through Riḍâ’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 Riḍâ included under the section of fârtwâs. Some of these questions focused on christological issues, with which Riḍâ 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, Riḍâ’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 Nushī, 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 Rida’s answer to the Danish missionary Nielsen. He
did not consider Nielsen’s discussions on the case of Taha Husayn as
‘defamation’ of Islam. Rida’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 Rida’s anti-Christian polemic
was ‘an apologetic directed towards Muslim doubters’.14

Rida’s fatwa 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 ‘Abduh 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 fatwa to the
Tunisian Umar Khujja on the rejection of Jesus as having been taken alive in the
Heaven, Rida 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 ‘Abduh and Rida in
this respect caused any Muslim repercussions in their time. But in 1942 the then
member of the High Corps of Al-Azhar ʿUlamāʿ and later Sheikh of Al-Azhar
Mahmūd Shaltūt (1893-1963), who was influenced by the spirit of al-Manār,
issued a similar fatwa 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 ‘Abduh, Rida and al-Marāghī after his analysis of classical interpretations of
the relevant Qur’ānic verses. It is interesting to know that Shaltūt specifically
cited Rida’s fatwa for Khujja. It was ironical that the questioner of Shaltūt was
an Indian officer of Ahmadi background, and the fatwa remains one of the
sublime specimens which the Ahmadiyya publications still use as a sign of

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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
16 Shaltūt’s fatwa was firstly published in the Egyptian weekly al-Risālah, vol. 10/462 (11 May
1942), pp. 515-517. The fatwa and Shaltūt’s later reactions were also published in his collection,
M. Shaltūt, al-Fatwâ, 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
triumph for their founder’s pioneering analysis of the subject. However, Shaltūt’s opponents were among his colleagues within Al-Azhar, who accused him of issuing the fatwā in a ‘Qadiyānī spirit’. Shaltūt was very upset about the critique, which he considered as an implicit ‘accusation’ of ‘Abduh, Riḍā and al-Marāghī. 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.

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19 Ibid., p. 364.  
20 Leirvik, op. cit., p. 143.