CHAPTER 2

A Handbook for Polemics

This chapter first seeks to determine as far as possible the date and circum-
stances of the composition of the *Ajwiba*. It then gives a general overview of its
structure and contents. Attention is also paid to al-Qarāfī’s explicitly stated pur-
pose in writing this work and who his intended audience might have been. The
rest of the chapter presents the five main written sources of the *Ajwiba*, begin-
ning with the Christian treatise that prompted al-Qarāfī to respond, namely,
Paul of Antioch’s *Letter to a Muslim Friend*. The other four are polemical writ-
ings composed by earlier Muslim scholars from whom al-Qarāfī derived most
of his arguments against Christianity (and against Judaism). Special consider-
ation is given to the circumstances of the composition of these works, some of
which are said to be written in response to Christian challenges. It will become
apparent that the *Ajwiba* represents much more than an isolated attempt by a
Muslim scholar in Mamlūk Cairo to respond to an apology for Christianity writ-
ten some decades earlier by an Arabic-speaking bishop in Sidon. Rather, it will
be seen that both Paul’s *Letter* and al-Qarāfī’s response are part of a larger con-
versation between two religious worlds in confrontation. One of the important
points made in this chapter is the verification that Christian-Muslim polemics
was indeed a collegial activity, and that a very extensive scholarly network con-
necting a number of otherwise unrelated Muslim thinkers coalesced around
the need to respond to the *Letter to a Muslim Friend*.

1 Date of Composition

Taken in isolation, the *Ajwiba* contains no explicit indication of its date of com-
position. Nor does al-Qarāfī refer to any particular historical event or situation
that could help us to determine with precision the period in which he wrote
this work. He refers to Acre as the capital of the kingdom of the Christians (i.e.,
the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem), but that is not helpful for our purposes
since Acre fell to the Mamlūks on 13 May 1291, almost six years after al-Qarāfī’s
death.¹ At a certain place, he refers his readers to one of his previous works,
the *Sharḥ al-arba‘īn li-Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī fī uṣūl al-dīn*, for an explanation of
the scene in which Moses hears God’s words emanating from the blazing bush

¹ *Ajwiba*, 134 (57).
(Exodus 3; Q 20:10–48), but this is not helpful either since we are ignorant of the date of composition of this now lost book. Early in the first chapter, however, al-Qarāfī mentions al-Malik al-Muʿazzam Tūrān Shāh, the last Ayyūbid Sultan of Egypt, who, having discovered the trickery of the ‘Holy Fire’ in the Church of the Anastasis (Holy Sepulcher) in Jerusalem, still allowed the monks to continue their scam in exchange for money. It does not seem very likely that al-Qarāfī would have written in these terms while the Ayyūbids were still in power in Cairo. Thus, we can take the establishment of the Mamlūk sultanate in 1250 as a terminus a quo for the composition of the Ajwiba.

As for the terminus ad quem, we can draw on information contained in another of his works, the Sharḥ tanqīḥ al-fuṣūl fī ikhtiṣār al-Maḥṣūl fī l-uṣūl, which is al-Qarāfī’s own commentary on his work on legal theory entitled Tanqīḥ al-fuṣūl fī ikhtiṣār al-Maḥṣūl fī l-uṣūl. Chapter fourteen of the Sharḥ tanqīḥ al-fuṣūl is devoted to the question of abrogation of divine laws. At one point, responding to the Jewish claim that such abrogation is impossible, al-Qarāfī seeks to establish its possibility on the basis of biblical history, advancing, among other arguments, five examples of abrogation supposedly sanctioned by the Torah. He then refers his readers to two other books in which he has discussed the issue, one of which is the Ajwiba. As it happens, Sharḥ tanqīḥ al-fuṣūl is one of the few extant works of al-Qarāfī that can be dated with precision, since, exceptionally, he recorded the date when he completed its composition: 9 Shaʿbān 677/26 December 1278.

We are therefore left with the interval between 1250 and 1278 for the period in which the Ajwiba was written. That being said, one must always keep in mind that establishing the chronology of medieval Muslim writings on the basis that a work mentioned in another work by the same author must logically have been written earlier than the book in which it is mentioned is not always an unassailable argument. Authors of the time often revised their works and in so doing referred to other writings which they had composed in the meantime.

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2 Ajwiba, 260 (146). On this work, see Appendix A, no. 14.
3 Ajwiba, 142 (64).
4 On these two works, see Appendix A, nos. 7–8.
6 Sharḥ tanqīḥ al-fuṣūl, 448.