CHAPTER TWO

RIDĀ AND ARAB CHRISTIANS:
ATTITUDES TOWARDS SYRIAN CHRISTIANS
AND THE EGYPTIAN COPTIC COMMUNITY

In order to present a good picture of Riḍā’s relations with Arab Christians, I shall first of all describe his relations with some of his Syrian Christian fellow-citizens, who, like him, made Egypt their new residence after migration. In the course of our discussion we shall turn our focus from a short sketch of Riḍā’s political ambitions with them and their struggle for independence from the colonial presence in the Arab East, towards an outline of the personal biographies of those among them with whom Riḍā had lively debates. This is suggested as a useful means of illuminating the historical context of the discussions at stake. Many of these Christian writers had championed secularism. Riḍā’s attitudes towards these individuals generated very interesting discussions on religion, history, Islamic philosophy and literature. At another level, Riḍā’s polemics with Syrians Christians was extended to include religious controversies with the Arabic Jesuit journal al-Machreq. The last part of the chapter is devoted to study his stances towards the Egyptian Copts, and his reflections as a Syrian émigré on their political demands, ending with his sharp reactions to the Christian writer Salāma Mūsā, who was a close disciple of Syrian Christian publicists in Egypt.


The Syro-Lebanese emigrant community in Brazil knew about al-Manār right from the start of its publication. The São-Paulo-based journal al-Aṣmaʿī, co-edited by the Christians Khalīl Milūk and Shukrī al-Khūrī, reviewed al-Manār describing it as ‘one of the best Islamic journals.’ Naʿūm al-Labakī (d. 1924), the founder of the Syrian


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journal *al-Munāẓir* (The Debater) in Sao Paulo, blamed Riḍā for restricting the subjects of his journal to religious issues, and that he stopped his discussions on Syrian national problems and religious strife in their homeland Syria. The contents of the journal, according to him, were not in agreement with the subtitle of his journal: ‘scientific, literary, informative and educating journal.’ In his reply, Riḍā explained that he used to write such items before the banning of his journal in Syria, and they would have been valueless as no Syrian Muslim, Christian or Jew had access to his articles anymore. As the circle of his readers became limited to the people in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, India, Java, and a group of Syrian emigrants in America, it was more appropriate for him to focus on other Islamic religious instructive issues. Riḍā was also convinced that his treatment of such Islamic themes was not only of benefit for his Muslim readers, but for Christians as well. He asserted that a Christian teacher at one of the high schools in Syria, after having read *al-Manār*, had ordered all previous issues. He also persuaded the director of the school to subscribe to the journal and collect its issues for the school’s library. Riḍā finally concluded that it was also reasonable to subtitle his journal as ‘informative and educating,’ since religious sciences are the most ‘venerated’ fields.

Born and bred in Syria, which is known for its religious and ethnic minorities, Riḍā was familiar with its substantial Christian population. His coming to Egypt coincided with the resumption of the emigration wave of Syrians (most of them Christians), who fled from the Hamidian oppression to Egypt towards the end of the nineteenth century. In his later political career, Riḍā gathered around his political project of Arabism an active group of Syrian émigré intellectuals,  

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2 ‘Al-Manār wā al-Munāẓir,’ vol. 2/40 (Sha‘bān 1317/December 1899), p. 683. In 1908 Labaki returned back to his birthplace Beirut, where he continued its publication. He was the president of the Representative Council of Lebanon. See, Ziriklī, *op. cit.*, vol. 8, p. 40.
