CHAPTER FOUR

FALSE ALLEGATIONS OR PROOFS? RIḌĀ’S FORMATIVE POLEMICS ON CHRISTIANITY

In his annotated translation of Riḍā’s above-mentioned monograph, *Shubuhāt*, Simon Wood argues that Riḍā’s specific wording of the title of his earliest work on Christianity as *Shubuhāt al-Naṣārā wā Ḥujaj al-ʾIslām* (Allegations of Christians and Proofs of Islam) was carefully chosen. It was no accident, Wood says, that the book was not entitled *Shubuhāt al-Naṣārā wā Ḥujaj al-Muslimīn* (The Criticisms of the Christians and the arguments of Muslims) or *Shubuhāt al-Naṣrāniyya wā Ḥujaj al-ʾIslām* (The Obscurities of Christianity and the Clear Proof of Islam). Wood does not give any reason why he has given three different English translations for the two keywords, *Shubuhāt* and *Ḥujaj* as appearing in Riḍā’s title. He further thinks that Riḍā’s ‘title reflected his understanding of an ideal or ultimate Christianity that was not opposed to Islam. Ideal Christianity, however, was not that represented by European missionaries or their local allies. In that sense, Riḍā felt that the majority of his contemporary Muslims had become an argument against their own religion.’

Wood’s argument is true when looking at how Riḍā understood the Christian Scriptures as a whole and their relation to Islam. But his analysis of Riḍā’s wording of the title is far-fetched and not convincing. Wood has only depended on Riḍā’s monograph bearing this title, but nowhere mentioned that it was a collection of sixteen articles that had appeared earlier as a special section in a number of issues that Riḍā had compiled a few years later in a small volume. As a matter of fact, and in contradiction to Wood’s argument, Riḍā headed eleven of these articles in *al-Manār* with the phrase, *Shubuhāt al-Masīḥiyyīn* (sometimes *al-Naṣārā*) *wā Ḥujaj al-Muslimīn* (The Allegations of the Christians and the Proofs of Muslims).\(^1\)

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As it was his initial work on the subject, Riḍā’s *Shubuhāt* only represents, as I shall show in the coming chapters, a formative phase of its author’s views on Christian belief. Drawing a final conclusion on the basis of Riḍā’s whole understanding of Christianity and his polemics with his Christian counterparts as a result of studying only this book would be misleading. The work itself should be evaluated in the light of Riḍā’s subsequent writings in the historical context mentioned above. Besides, Riḍā published these articles from time to time as a response to a variety of Christian Arab missionaries, roughly between 1901-1904. In that period Western missionary literature in Arabic was not very widespread among Muslims. As we shall see, this treatise was a rather unsystematic book, sometimes of an inconsistent and rhetorical style.

In the present chapter, we will discuss Riḍā’s responses as he selected them in the monograph, but we supplement them with other background ideas that appeared in the journal. Discussing the details of all articles under this section would, however, fall outside the scope of the present chapter. Riḍā composed six of his articles in *al-Manār* (which were excluded in his monograph) under the same title as answers to the Egyptian Protestant Magazine. Some of these articles also did not directly deal with his views on Christianity, but were mostly devoted to refute Christian ‘allegations’ against the Qur’ān. In a similar manner, Riḍā published four lengthy reactions to some other articles written in the above-mentioned Brazilian Arabic journal *al-Munāẓir* (see, chapter 2) by a Christian Syrian emigrant under the name of Rafūl Saʿādeh. These articles were not included in the monograph either. They mainly contain refutations of Rafūl Saʿādeh’s arguments that Islam had no success, except because of the Christian principles it bore; and that Muslims were not as wise as other conquerors of Syria (such as the Seleucids and Romans), who had never attacked the habits and feelings of the Syrians. But the reason why Riḍā did not include these articles in the monograph is not known.

It is also worth noting that the last two articles of Riḍā’s monograph were written as a reply to Faraḥ Anṭūn’s critique of Islam during his

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4 For more details, see *al-Manār*, vol. 7/1 (Muḥarram 1322/March 1904), pp. 17-27; vol. 7/2 (Ṣafar 1322/April 1904), pp. 94-100; vol. 7/6, pp. 225-231.