**Yazid Said: Review article of Beaumont, Mark & Maha El Kaisy-Friemuth, (ed.), *al-Radd al-Jamil – A Fitting Refutation of the Divinity of Jesus Attributed to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī*. (Brill: Leiden, 2016).**

**Introductory remarks and the question of authenticity**

Various attitudes have been adopted towards Christian thought and doctrine in the course of Islamic history. *Al-Radd al-jamīl* attributed to Abū Ḥāmidal-Ghazālī (d.1111) is considered the most extensive and detailed refutation of the central Christian doctrines: The Incarnation and the Trinity. The text was edited with a French translation by Robert Chidiac and Arthur J. Arberry provided a partial English translation. Mark Beaumont and Maha El Kaisey-Friemouth provided in this publication a new critical edition of the Arabic text and the first complete English translation. This project is a welcome and important contribution to those interested in the study of Muslim-Christian relations in the English language.

The first chapter seems to be mainly from the pen of Maha El Kaisey-Friemouth as the use of first-person pronoun suggests on pages 4 and 26 referencing her own work. She introduces the text with a discussion of various questions about the authenticity of its authorship and the direction of its philosophy. She rightly acknowledges the importance of the immediate context of *al-Radd* within the history of Arabic translations of the New Testament, its location within the history of Muslim polemical writing and its posture towards understanding conceptual elements that constitute Christian doctrine.

Whilst the editor raises the right questions and points to the right issues in the introduction, she does not always identify the deeper concerns at play. The discussion is often limited in its descriptive nature and regrettably appears to be poorly edited in some sections. There are repetitions; on pages 14 and 43-44, as in 4 and 26, investigative statements are repeated with a general impression of arbitrariness in the ordering of the discussion. The section titled ‘Arguments Supporting the Authorship of al-Ghazālī’ (p. 10) repeats points in previous pages, with various scholars, such as Massignon, Wilms, and Whittingham, referred to more than once with the same point. This is added to a confusing remark about the text of *al-Radd*. On page 8 we are told that the author responds to five quotes from John to refute the divinity of Jesus; more accurately, we have six quotes, one is from Mark’s Gospel Ch. 13, v. 32. Three of these verses he uses to interpret Christ’s union with God metaphorically, and the other three are used to reflect the humanity of Christ. There is a grammatical mistake in English on page 7 and spelling mistakes in Arabic on pages 17 and 132.

Sometimes, in a significant edition and translation of manuscripts such as this one, the reader may simply require a tighter introduction with an argument trying to break through. A focused introduction, as was evidently planned here, would have benefited from a better resourced argument. After some introductory notes on the ‘context’ of *al-Radd*, the discussion begins with the persistently unresolved question of the authenticity of the authorship of the text. The editor points out that she has changed her opinion on this debate and no longer accepts the attribution of the text to Ghazālī. This is due to the apparent ‘deep’ knowledge of the Bible in the text of *al-Radd* and the knowledge of Coptic Christianity (pp. 4-5 & 26).

There has always been a mystery surrounding certain books attributed to Ghazālī, not just *al-Radd*. Scholars such as Maurice Bouyges, Duncan Macdonald, Ignaz Glodziher, Miguel Asin Palacios and Montgomery Watt have put a great effort in this investigation.[[1]](#footnote-1) They remain important classic sources. The editor consults Bouyges’ study here, but does not make much use of the others. Also, the attempt to give a reasonable answer to these debates means that the discussion is flanked by other investigative questions about language, text and history. However, the discussion often consists of a descriptive summation of the various secondary sources and, at times, without consulting primary sources as would have been necessary for deeper connections and meanings. It is also a pity that there is no serious engagement with one edition of *al-Radd* that appeared in Arabic in 1973 by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ʿabd al-Ḥaqq Ḥilmi, which provides an extensively researched introduction with a critical exposition of the extant Manuscripts of *al-Radd* that is lacking in this edition.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Whilst raising some questions about the content of the editor’s arguments below, this extended review aims to show that the intellectual and spiritual identity of *al-Radd* remains most certainly authentic to Ghazālī’s teaching, as the editor often implies too; therefore, unlike the editor’s conclusion, it would make sense to still attribute it to him.

***Al-Radd* and Ghazālī’s polemical methodology**

El Kaisey-Friemouth begins with an outline of the references to *al-Radd* in classical Arabic sources (p. 5-7); the earliest mention appears in the work of the Christian polemicist Abu Khayr ibn al-Ṭayyib in the thirteenth century. Different slightly twisted titles appear in the seventeenth century, such as those mentioned by Hajji Khalīfa (d. 1068/1658) (*al-radd al-jamīl ʿlā man ghayyara al-tawrāti wa’l-injīl*), al-Murataḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1790) and ʿAbd al-Qādir al-ʿAydarūsī (d.1038/1628) (p. 6) (*al-Qawl al-jamīl fī al-radd ʿlā man ghayyara al-injīl*). To comment on these various titles, El Kaisey-Friemouth references Wilms’ conclusion that these variations cannot be plausible as they seem to suggest that the author rejects Christian scripture as corrupt, which is not in line with *al-Radd’s* position. This is followed by another reference to Chidiac’s argument that historians have been silent about *al-Radd* between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries because it ‘accepts the sovereignty of the biblical text and considers it to be a source of true knowledge’ (p.7). Later (pp. 8-10) we learn that the author agrees with Chidiac from her discussion on the ‘Attitude of the author to the Bible’. However, before she clarifies this position, she squeezes half a page on the possible visit of Ghazālī to Alexandria, which reminds us that the mystery was not just about certain books of Ghazālī. It was also about Ghazālī’s own biography and the places that he might have visited during his *ʿuzla*, retreat years.

Apart from noting the arbitrary manner of the order of the argument, the squeezing of a brief discussion on the Alexandria visit will, as noted below, require a better-sustained argument. Also, there are a couple of points to make in response to these various titles across the centuries and the method of using the Bible in *al-Radd*. First, if we compare these varied titles to Ghazālī’s authentic works, we note that a number of them have had variations in their titles. To determine whether they refer to the same work or not requires consulting the various manuscripts available, as Maurice Bouyges had long reminded us. It would be difficult to make a final judgment without access to such manuscripts. Second, our editor contradicts herself when she suggests that the text of *al-Radd* ‘follows al-Ghazālī’s concept of polemical writing’ (p.13) as with his refutation of the philosophers after accepting Chidiac’s point about the authority of the Bible for the author. The two claims cannot go together. Chidiac makes the same mistake and she seems to take his position here.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Following ‘Ghazālī’s concept of polemical writing’ would suggest following Ghazālī’s *argumentum ad hominum* approach in dealing with the philosophers and other opponents. Ghazālī explained this method in *al-Iqtiṣād fī al-iʿtiqād*,[[4]](#footnote-4) and in the *Munqidh*.[[5]](#footnote-5) In these passages, it is clear that Ghazālī is not claiming to accept the ‘authority’ of the text of his opponents as such; instead, he was refuting their argument through clarifying and referencing their own texts without giving these texts a clear assessment. Indeed, Ghazālī reminded us that he received a number of criticism from some of his contemporaries for using such a method when he presented his response to the Bāṭinites, accusing him of being one himself.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, the editor does not consult these sources to clarify what she means by ‘Ghazālī’s concept of polemical writing’; instead, she takes Chidiac’s position that the author follows al-Ghazālī’s concept of polemical writing as well as accepts the authority of the Bible. She supports her claim by discussing the attitude towards the crucifixion in *al-Radd* where we see an affirmation of Ghazālī’s view in his *al-Mustaṣfā min ʿilm al-uṣūl*, namely that ‘Christians did witness the crucifixion, though it was not real’ (p. 9). Does clarifying the narrative that Christians read in the New Testament mean that the author accepted also the authority of the Gospels? To have this claim sounds like those who accused Ghazālī of being a Bāṭinite with the Bāṭinites and a philosopher with the Philosophers. More importantly, the claim that ‘Christians witnessed the crucifixion though it was not real’ had already appeared in ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī’s (d. 429/1037) *Uṣūl al-dīn*.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is not a new Ghazalian observation. The denial of the crucifixion of Christ seems to be more rhetorical than historiographical. Thus, it would be better to suggest that the author of *al-Radd* is following the same Ghazalian method, using the *textus receptus* to undermine the Church’s claims about Jesus *without purporting to assess the authenticity of the Gospels*.

Two conclusions emerge in light of Ghazālī’s own clarification of his method in his other works: First, Reynolds and Wittingham had a better assessment of *al-Radd* than our editor credits them with (pp. 8-9); second, the variations on the titles of the text that confirm the author’s non-acceptance of the authority of the gospels may not necessarily mean that we are talking of different works either.

**‘Deep’ knowledge of the Bible?**

This leads us to the second point about the alleged ‘deep’ knowledge of the biblical text. The question follows from Hava Lazarus-Yafeh’s claim, among others, that *al-Radd* cannot be Ghazālī’s text as he does not show ‘good’ knowledge of biblical texts in his other main works (p.19), or at least they do not play a significant role in his other writings as they do in *al-Radd*.

It is true, as our editor points out, that in his *magnum opus*, *Iḥyā’ ʿlūm al-dīn*, Ghazālī’s collection of sayings of Jesus have a different purpose and do not always follow the canonical gospel sayings. They mirror instead the highest degree of *zuhd*, piety. Ghazālī’s main concern in the *Iḥyā’* is to portray Jesus as the perfect ascetic, the saint, who is liberated from all earthly bonds and who wanders about and sleeps ‘pillow-less’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Indeed, Ghazālī would call such ascetic piety, ‘following the way of Christ’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Miguel Asin Palacios argued that these sayings probably have varied origins, some from apocryphal writings, some from canonical gospels, and others from the desert fathers and mothers. In all cases, he sees the origins of the sayings of Jesus to go back to Christian circles.[[10]](#footnote-10) Tarif Khalidi later produced another edited anthology of these sayings titled *The Muslim Jesus*, showing how Ghazālī had a particular devotion to and interest in Jesus as the ‘Prophet of the Heart’, standing up to the ‘scholars of evil’ as Ghazālī himself does in the *Iḥyā’*.[[11]](#footnote-11) This ‘Muslim Jesus’, however, fits remarkably well with *al-Radd’s* portrayal of Jesus, who is given the right of theopathic locution, or the right to speak metaphorically in God’s place. As will be discussed below, Ghazālī shows great interest in engaging Christian language and thought for his own purposes in his authentic works.

The question remains: How do we assess this alleged ‘deep’ knowledge that helped change El Kaisey-Friemouth’s view about the authorship? The picture is again complicated. A closer look at *al-Radd* shows that its author did not always quote John’s gospel faithfully. For instance, when he refers to John 15: 1, the author says: ‘I am the true vine, and my father is the vine-grower of each branch in me’ (p. 124). This is a distorted quotation, which the editor here does not clarify. The full verse says: ‘my father is the vine-grower; he removes every branch in me that does not bear fruit’. It is difficult to determine the reason for this partial quotation. However, this could be a sign that the author had access to the New Testament not necessarily from Christian sources, but through other distorted Islamic sources.

Also, our editor noted earlier (p. 18, n. 79) that knowledge of the gospels was common to a number of Muslim polemicists before and after Ghazālī. Indeed, recent research suggests that an Arabic Bible was available already by the ninth century.[[12]](#footnote-12) The historian al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 284/897), in his *Tārīkh*, uses the canonical texts of Jews and Christians.[[13]](#footnote-13) Ibn Ḥazm (d.546/1064) in Spain produced a similar polemical work heavily dependent on various quotations from Mark, Luke and John in *Kitāb al-fiṣal wa’l-niḥal* (Cairo: 1899; 1: 48-65).[[14]](#footnote-14) Our editor will suggest also (p.48) that al-Baqillānī (d.403/1013) was happy to use John’s gospel before Ghazālī appeared. Therefore, apart from the need to clarify better *al-Radd’s* real method of using John’s gospel, as mentioned above, it is clear that the author of *al-Radd* and al-Baqillānī were not the only ones who were happy to use John’s gospel. One generation after Ghazālī, Abū al-Baqā’ Ṣāliḥ al-Jaʿfarī shows an extensive knowledge of the biblical text, using it more accurately than *al-Radd’s* text does, in his *Takhjīl man ḥarrafa al-tawrāt wa’l-injīl*.

Therefore, the difference in style between the two types of writings we find in the *Iḥyā’* and in *al-Radd* does not necessarily have to render *al-Radd* inauthentic. While one has a clear Sufi purpose, the second is a sustained philosophical argument against Christian doctrine. Indeed, our editor noted I. Peta’s article referring to six correct quotations from the gospels in the authentic works of Ghazālī (p. 19). At the same time, she rightly points to (p. 18) Ghazālī’s ability to write in different styles during the same period. If this were the case, it would seem natural that the sources for both works are different. The main concern of *al-Radd* is to prove that the doctrine of the Incarnation can lead nowhere, except to many problems of interpretations. This reflects a broader concern we find in Ghazālī’s other polemical texts.

**Textual analysis**

The examination of the literary and linguistic style of the text in relationship to Ghazālī’s authentic works plays an important role in our editor’s discussion (p.12-17), which is quite appropriate in light of the above; she rightly notes the striking textual similarities with other authentic works of Ghazālī. Indeed, here the editor provides an important corrective to Hava Lazarus-Yafeh’s views on the text. However, there are a number of important passages in Ghazālī’s authentic works that are missed out from the editor’s discussion, which show that he was interested in, and familiar with, the various Christian debates on Christology.

In his *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, Ghazālī explains the notion of *qurb*, closeness to God as part of his discussion on *zuhd*, asceticism. Here he suggests, as we find in *al-Radd*, that the words used of God are analogical (*majazi*), without implying that there is analogy between man and God either. Commenting on the Ninety Nine Beautiful Names of God, he draws on Muslim understandings of incarnationist ideas, assuming that what Christians believe is the same as what some extreme Sufis claimed. He does not mind using *ḥulūl* and *ittiḥad* to describe a state of closeness with God as long as they are interpreted metaphorically, not literally: ‘Those who claim *ḥulūl* to the extent of saying ‘I am the Truth’ commit the same error as the Christians when they see that same perfection in the essence of the messiah, Isa (Jesus) – may peace be upon him – and say he is God’.[[15]](#footnote-15) For Ghazālī, the Divine and the human are connected through the character traits of God; hence the call to acquire such character traits: *takhallaqū bi akhlāqi Allah*. It is an attempt to become, metaphorically, similar to God, mirroring Platonic ideas about the perfectability of the human being: Man ascends to God through spiritual discipline.[[16]](#footnote-16)

He repeats the argument in the Book of Love in the *Iḥyā’*, where he adds:

This is a place (closeness to God) at which one must rein in his pen for on this subject people have diverged, some flawed individuals tending towards open anthropomorphism and others inclining towards gross exaggeration, overstepping the boundary of mere affinity into full-scale union; these latter profess *ḥulūl* to such an extent that one of them could say, ‘I am God’. The Christians err concerning Jesus (upon him be peace) when they claim that he is God. Still others say ‘humanity (*nāsūt*) has donned divinity (*lāhūt*)’ or again, ‘Humanity has become one with Him’. Nevertheless, to whom it has been made abundantly clear that anthropomorphism and the drawing of resemblances to God are absurd, along with union (*ittiḥād*) and *ḥulūl*.[[17]](#footnote-17)

We begin to see in this passage his knowledge of various Christian doctrinal explanations. Another passage appears in *faḍāiḥ al-bāṭiniyya*, which spells out the differences between the various Christian views with different details. Here, he refutes ‘the doctrine of the Christians in the union (*ittiḥād*) between the divinity (*lāhūt*) and humanity (*nāsūt*) of Isa, upon him be peace, to the extent that some called him God and others Son of God, whilst some said he was half god and they agreed that he was not killed; what was killed in him was his humanity, but not his divinity’.[[18]](#footnote-18) A similar passage appears again in *Mīzān al-ʿAmal*.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Despite the fact that we don’t have great philosophical explanation about the various Christian doctrines here, as we do in *al-Radd*, it is obvious that Ghazālī is no stranger to Christian doctrine and arguments. More importantly, these various passages appear within a context where we find similar themes to those that appear in *al-Radd*. Ghazālī does not object to attributing divinity to Jesus, for the same reasons he would give for al-Hallaj and al-Bistami.[[20]](#footnote-20) He would say that divinity here is not original; it is acquired, in Jesus’ *character*, not in his *person*. Jesus remains immeasurably far from God, who is inaccessible. The relationship of God to Jesus is not an identity of being, but a *qualified* relationship. In other words, as he said in *al-Radd*, and is implied in *al-Maqsad*, Jesus is not God in substance; but he receives that son-ship as a development, due to his spiritual discipline. Jesus ascends to God. God does not descend in him.

Apart from these texts that explicitly refer to Christian doctrine, there are other passages that reflect Ghazalian authorship, not discussed by the editor. The opening concern in the introduction to *al-Radd* about *taqlīd* – what he perceives to be Christian imitation of traditional doctrine without rational investigation – is a distinctive concern that appears across Ghazālī’s authentic works, especially in *al-Munqidh*, *Iḥyā’ ʿlūm al-dīn*, *al-Mustaṣfā*, *Mīzān al-ʿAmal* and *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*. A striking passage in *Mīzān al-ʿAmal* criticizes blind imitation with the same force that we find in the introduction to *al-Radd*. Here Ghazālī says: ‘If the blind imitator attempted to contemplate matters of law, he will find contradictions in the text…He is weak to contemplate these contradictions because of the weakness of his reasoning power…if he were to see with the power of insight, he would be able to locate everything in its proper place and the contradiction will become invalid’.[[21]](#footnote-21) This mirrors exactly what we read in the opening two pages of *al-Radd* about the weak construction of Christian doctrine as they rely on bare imitation, received tradition, without explaining the obscure aspects of such teaching. Blind *taqlīd* for Ghazālī had bad consequences for Islamic thought too, not least in creating various groups that took advantage of the ignorance of the masses, as he explained in *Fadāiḥ al-bāṭiniyya*.

In addition, Chidiac referred to few terms that appear In *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* and in *al-Radd* that could sound minor but nonetheless have strong affinity.[[22]](#footnote-22) For example, Ghazālī uses the distinctive rare term (*khalaʿū ribqat al-dīn*)[[23]](#footnote-23) ‘they have entirely cast off the reins of religion’ that appears also in *al-Radd* (p.104). Here, Ghazālī is explaining the basis of the philosophers’ error, which he adds, is similar to the Christian and Jewish error of ‘imitation’, *taqlīd*, a point mentioned in the introduction to *al-Radd* as we noted. Another example appears when we read in *Tahāfut*: (*falammā ra’aytu hadha al-‘irqi min al-ḥamāqa nābiḍan ʿalā hā’ulā’ al-aghbiyā’…*), ‘when I perceived this vein of folly throbbing within these dimwits’.[[24]](#footnote-24) In *al-Radd*, the author says, (*lam yanbiḍu li’aḥadin minhum ʿirq al-ʿaṣabiyya*), ‘no vain of fanaticism throbs in any of them’ (p. 150). Also, in *Tahāfut*, we read (*fī maʿriḍ al-ḥijāj*), ‘in the course of an argument’;[[25]](#footnote-25) in *al-Radd*, we read (*fī maʿriḍ al-khuṣūṣiyya*, and *fī maʿriḍ al-takdhīb*) ‘in relation to what is exclusive about him, or in relation to a denial’ (pp. 174-175). All of these examples are rare, but important, conventional signals.

**The visit to Alexandria and Coptic Christianity**

El Kaisey-Friemouth points also to Ghazālī’s extensive knowledge of Coptic Christology as another obstacle behind accepting the authenticity of the authorship of Ghazālī (p.26). Given that the author of *al-Radd* refers specifically to Coptic translation of the Johanine verse, ‘The Word became flesh’ (p. 164), the use of a Coptic translation of the New Testament and a Coptic position has been acknowledged by all scholars (proponents or opponents of the attribution of the text to Ghazālī (p. 21)).[[26]](#footnote-26) This is not a new observation. There is no doubt that the use of Coptic translation of John’s Gospel and the undoubted Coptic position in this attack on Johanine Christology could form a strong point against the authenticity of the work. But, there are few observations one needs to remember here.

First, Coptic Christianity was not contained within Egypt. Its missionary outlook had far reaching influences and engaged with wider territories and languages, even all the way to Ireland.[[27]](#footnote-27) We know that the ecclesiastical language of the Coptic Church becomes Arabic in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries.[[28]](#footnote-28) According to Sydney Griffith, ‘Coptic translations showed a remarkable eclecticism in adopting and adapting Arabic translations already circulating’,[[29]](#footnote-29) whilst the earliest known dated Bible manuscript is at St. Catherine’s Sinai dating from 859.[[30]](#footnote-30) This observation suggests that more research is needed into the source of *al-Radd’s* biblical text, bearing in mind that it might have been an eclectic adaptation and adoption of various Arabic sources too, which may not be confined to Egypt alone. Chidiac had started this investigation;[[31]](#footnote-31) but the argument needs an update. This edition does not provide us with any new observations or clues on this particular issue. The point remains that whilst it is very evident that the religious milieu of *al-Radd* is Alexandrian, one cannot rule out the possibility that Ghazālī had access to Coptic texts.

Second, as Wilms noted (p. 21), the question of whether Ghazālī visited Alexandria or not has a significant weight in the discussion. However, as already mentioned above, only half a page (p.7) of a summary of sources is dedicated for this conversation, where we find one plain error and poor sentence structuring at the beginning. The editor says:

Part of the answer to the question of the[[32]](#footnote-32) whether the work can be attributed to al-Ghazālī depends on whether or not he visited Egypt. M. Al-Sharkawi argues that the visit to Egypt took place after al-Ghazālī left Jerusalem. Although Ibn ʿAsākir, Ghazālī’s contemporary, did not report this trip, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawi (d. 1229), Ibn Khallikān (d. 1282), al-Subkī (d. 1355), al-Ṣafadī (d. 1363), and al-ʿAyni (d. 1451), confirm this visit, *al-Ṣafadī seems to be the first to report it in great detail* (my emphasis).

The dates of the various scholars mentioned here suggest that al-Ṣafadī cannot be the first to report the visit, as the editor suggests. She does say that Ṣafadi was the first to report it *in great detail*. However, we don’t get great details in the reporting. Ṣafadi’s passage goes as follows (quoted on page 7):

He (Ghazālī) set himself towards Egypt and stayed a while in Alexandria. It is said that he intended to sail towards Morocco to meet the prince Yūsuf Ibn Tashfīn because of what he had heard of his enthusiasm and support for people of knowledge. But, after he [al-Ghazālī] was informed of his death he returned to his own land, Ṭūs.

This is a correct translation of the passage in Ṣafadi’s *al-wāfī bi’l-wafayāt*, volume 1 of the Istanbul edition, 1931, page 275. However, there is nothing more that Ṣafadi expands on in this text; and this exact passage, word for word, appears earlier in Ibn Khallikān’s *Wafayāt al-aʿyān*.[[33]](#footnote-33) To suggest that al- Ṣafadi was the first is simply incorrect. Ḥilmi listed a number of other medieval scholars[[34]](#footnote-34) who mention the possible Alexandria visit. Moreover, Ibn Khallikān refers to the Alexandria visit again in his longer entry on Prince Yūsuf Ibn Tashfīn where he mentions that he ‘came across this event (Alexandria visit) in some books, though I have lost the source for it’.[[35]](#footnote-35) It is, you might say, a great pity that Ibn Khallikān lost the source as that could have aided the enquiry.

Prince Ibn Tashfīn died in 500AH/1106AG; therefore, it is problematic to consider the visit to Alexandria happening that year. This would suggest that Ghazālī is either misleading us in *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* when he informs us that he returned to Nisabur to teach in 499AH after his retreat,[[36]](#footnote-36) or he ventured to visit Alexandria before 499AH during his ten years of roaming across the region. It is interesting to note here that one of Ghazālī’s important students, Abū Bakr Ibn ʿArabī, a native of Seville in Spain, spent a whole year in Alexandria after meeting his teacher in Baghdad in 490;[[37]](#footnote-37) Ibn ʿArabī travelled to Baghdad with his father to receive a caliphal document from Caliph al-Mustaẓhir and the Saljuq vizier in support of Prince Yūsuf Ibn Tashfīn.[[38]](#footnote-38) Ghazālī would have undoubtedly heard of the virtues of Ibn Tashfīn from them. Did Ghazālī visit his student between Rajab 491/June 1098 and Muharram 493/ November-December 1099 in Alexandria after the Crusades took over Jerusalem, as Louis Massignon believed?[[39]](#footnote-39) Ḥilmi accepted the possibility of a visit to Alexandria, especially that the Fatimid rulers at the time permitted Sunni jurists to visit Egypt, despite their mission to propagate Fāṭimid Shi’ite doctrine.[[40]](#footnote-40) Massignon also points to how the years that followed this possible visit saw Shāfiʿī and Ashʿarī scholarship flourish in Alexandria, as is evident from the writings of the Moroccan Ibn Tūmārt (d. 1130) who studied Ashʿarī *ʿaqīda* in Alexandria. He adds that Ashʿarism will eventually prevail in Egypt 50 years on in the heart of the Fāṭimid establishment.[[41]](#footnote-41)

El Kaisey-Friemouth does not discuss any of these questions. At the end of her brief summation of the various views, she concludes with ‘a plausible interpretation of the visit, going beyond al-Ghazālī’s plan of going to Morocco’, provided by F.E. Wilms (p.7). Wilms suggests that Ghazālī was ordered by the Caliph to write a series of polemical works against those who might introduce instability in the empire, such as the Ismāʿīlīs, the Philosophers and in this case, the Christians. This is an interesting interpretation and like the editor said, it is a plausible interpretation; but, she does not tell us why she thinks this is plausible. Neither does she clarify whether she accepts that Ghazālī did go to Alexandria given that this view is ‘plausible’. We are left to guess what her position is. If he had visited Alexandria during his student’s stay, would he not be exposed to the strong presence of the Coptic community, its scriptures and arguments, as one would expect? Indeed, Ḥilmi noted the rich Coptic polemical texts written in Arabic against various Muslim views from the tenth centuries onwards,[[42]](#footnote-42) which must have informed some of the material we find in *al-Radd*. Alexandria was not only the centre of Christian doctrinal debates that are summed up in his brief description above in *fadāiḥ al-bāṭiniyya* and *Mīzān al-ʿAmal*. It was also a centre of Christian polemical works too. More knowledge of these writings could provide better-resourced investigation about the urgency of *al-Radd’s* polemical attack at the time.

Also, by positing this interpretation, Wilms reminds us of the status of Ghazālī’s influence in pre-modern Islam, which was multitudinous. He disclosed ways by which the Muslim mind was capable of interpreting the Koran and the Hadith, and the extent to which the subsequent tradition was able to systematize what Muslims view to be a coherent salvation history. Therefore, it is no surprise that *al-Radd* is at least attributed to him. Being a major figure in medieval Islam, *ḥujjat al-Islam*, the defender of Islamic teaching, Ghazālī provides a very trustworthy source for medieval Muslim readers.[[43]](#footnote-43) One could argue that as he attempted to provide the right balance for classical Sunni Islam in his responses to the Bāṭinites and their political leaders in Egypt, the philosophers, the various warring theologians and others, a response to the Christians would not have been that surprising.

One should not necessarily exclude the possibility of Ghazālī engaging with Christian text and doctrine with such an erudite philosophical manner as is evident in *al-Radd*. Not only was he familiar with the Christian positions outlined in his authentic works, but was also a polymath. Those before him and after him who embarked on polemical works had almost always lacked an authorial voice in some instances as they often depended on borrowing other people’s writings, unlike him, who gets criticisms from his own friends, whom he calls *ahl al-ḥaqq*, for being meticulous in his criticism (*mubālaghatī fī taqrīr ḥijjatihim*).[[44]](#footnote-44)

**The Context of *al-Radd* and Christian theology**

As part of her attempt to contextualize the text of *al-Radd* within the wider polemical tradition, our editor makes a brief comparison with Ibn Ḥazm’s polemical text (p. 48). She rightly suggests that whilst both use the method of referencing accepted Christian text to undermine Christian teaching, Ibn Ḥazm, is evidently harsher in his tone. Whilst both texts reflect their concern to prove Islamic doctrinal certainties, *al-Radd’s* emphasis on ‘metaphorical’ interpretation would not sit happily with Ibn Ḥazm either (p. 52). This reflects Ibn Ḥazm’s affiliation with the Ẓāhirī *madhhab* (the exoteric school of Islamic theology, now extinct),[[45]](#footnote-45) which does not get much attention in this discussion. However, the editor concludes with another point that requires some examination, this time in reference to Christian doctrine. She says (p. 53):

The contrast between the literal and figurative interpretations is very vivid. **Ibn Ḥazm follows the Christian reading of the passage** and denounces it. The author of *al-Radd al-Jamīl* denies the validity of Christian literalism by finding metaphor in John’s writing that can be made to cohere with Muslim presuppositions of the humanity of Jesus and the transcendence of God. **Ibn Ḥazm accepts the Christian reading of 1: 14 that the word entered the world in human flesh**, not as inspired speech given to Jesus by God, but as the very nature of God in Jesus. His adherence to literalism in hermeneutics accords with the natural meaning of the text, and **his rejection of the truth of the teaching follows an accurate reading of the verse**.

A Christian theologian reading this passage might point out that the phrases in bold above beg a huge number of questions and would need another paper to respond to fully. Does Ibn Ḥazm’s ‘literalist’ reading truly reflect the Christian view as our editor suggests? This claim sounds more of a Muʿtazilite reading of Christian theology. What is implied, I think, is that the Christian confession that Jesus’ life, death and Resurrection was the ultimate active revelation of God would look like an obstacle to God’s otherness, for people like Ibn Ḥazm; the implication is that the only rational conclusion would be that this belief needs to be subjected to criticism. The author of *al-Radd* obviously has a similar concern. But, the important question here how the distinction between ‘literal’ and ‘metaphorical’ is to be understood. Does the literalism of Ibn Ḥazm really reflect Christian understanding? Hasty explanations are a recipe for inaccurate simplicity and occasional flaws. With a closer reading of Orthodox Christian theology and *al-Radd’s* critique of both the Jacobites and the Nestorians, a ‘metaphorical’ understanding of Christ applies both to *al-Radd* and to the Melkite Christians *in different ways*.

While the author of *al-Radd* accepts the description of Jesus as the *Logos*, he had his own classification of the meaning of ‘union’, *ittiḥād*. In this case, the special privilege, *khuṣūṣiyya*, that the author gives Jesus takes a ‘metaphorical’ value. The phrase ‘was made flesh’ is said to refer to God’s will in the coming of Jesus (p. 156-160). God is the direct cause of Jesus’ acts. So, when Jesus says ‘my Father is in me’, the author understands this ‘metaphorically’. Therefore, he allows Jesus to call himself Son of God and Lord, different from the rest of the prophets and refutes accordingly the three Christological positions, the Jacobite, the Nestorian and the Melkite.

To clarify this further, the author of *al-Radd* refutes what he calls the ‘*Ḥaqīqa thālitha*’, the third substance of the Jacobites (p. 128), distinct from the first two natures. He says that any composite substance depends on the existence of its components and on their specific combination. So the two components depend on one another; this amounts to saying that the divine essence depends on the human nature and this, he adds, is absurd. Interestingly, a similar argument appears in Ghazālī’s book *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*.[[46]](#footnote-46) The author of *al-Radd* then refutes the Nestorians who say that Jesus’ divinity is a communion, *ittiḥād*, between God’s will and the human will of Jesus. He will emphasize that there was no concordance of will, but discordance; to prove this, he quotes Jesus’ prayer at Gethsemane ‘Thy will be done, not mine’, (p. 146). Between these two positions stand the Melkites, who resort to the notion of ‘hypostasis as irreducible to the concepts of ‘nature’, or ‘individuality’. Hypostasis is the personal ‘acting’ source of the natural life; but it is not ‘nature’,[[47]](#footnote-47) as the Nestorians said. In other words, like the author of *al-Radd*, the Melkites also could not sacrifice the humanity and individuality of Christ, which is what the Jacobites were assumed to do. Instead, the Melkites said that had Christ not been really human, it couldn’t be our whole humanity, *al-insān al-kullī* (as the text of *al-Radd* put it (p. 138), which is restored.

But, here one finds closeness between the author of *al-Radd* and the Melkite position, not that of Ibn Ḥazm. The Melkites saw no way of explaining the unity of the human and divine in Jesus for fear of producing a third substance as the Jacobites did. The divine nature for the Melkites, like for the author of *al-Radd*, and indeed for Ghazālī, is ‘unchangeable, unknowable, un-begotten and imperishable’.[[48]](#footnote-48) For them too, Jesus was a historical person, a product of human history and nature. Yet, the Melkites still offered an explanation. Why? A notable scholar in the field, Rowan Williams, provides an answer:

The writers of the creed knew perfectly well that the Incarnation, or ‘humanisation’, as they sometimes called it, of the Word of God wasn’t a matter of somebody living in heaven moving to live somewhere else (earth); nor did they think the Word of God had come down from the sky to the human level. **They knew they were using a metaphor** (my emphasis), because they were convinced that God was timeless and bodiless, and that you couldn’t tell any stories of God’s life ‘in itself’, but only stories of his action and manifestations in the world. Yet, they spoke of a ‘coming down’….perhaps they were afraid – and rightly – of being too abstract.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Using a metaphor, then, does not necessarily mean that it is untrue. Rather, it is another way of saying, ‘there is no better way to confess clearly that the whole life of Jesus, in the light of his God-sized Resurrection, is God’s act and gift’. Or as another important scholar of Christian thought suggested that declaring the ‘son-ship’ of Jesus is a bit like confessing that ‘God exists’. God’s existence is beyond knowledge and beyond imagination, which we can’t compare to anything. It is only a confession, not an explanation. Therefore, one could say that God exists metaphorically too, but not untruly.[[50]](#footnote-50) In other words, to declare that Jesus was the Son of God for the Orthodox Christian does not mean that during his days on earth he was so evidently superhuman from the rest of those who lived with him in substance. It is, a confession, in the first place, in the *parenthood* of God. God, as Father, is revealed in the narrative story of a historical person; or, put differently, true personhood in God is revealed as a historical reality.[[51]](#footnote-51)

El Kaisey-Friemouth’s observation about Ibn Hazm and the Christian view needs some rethinking. The real difference between *al-Radd’s* interpretation and Orthodox Christianity is that for the Orthodox Christian, the freedom of God allows God to overcome the ‘distinction’ which assured space to that freedom, and do so without negating the ‘distinction’ itself, overcoming Neoplatonic determinism.[[52]](#footnote-52) The Church was attempting to put into liturgical practice an understanding that reflects the effects of an historical event – the life, death and Resurrection of Christ. History and narrative matters for understanding this development. The author of *al-Radd*, on the other hand, like Ghazālī, holds the divine essence to act not in personhood, in history, but as *attributes*, *ṣifāt*, in scriptures, the equivalent perhaps of the Names of God he discussed in *al-Maqṣad*. The author does not accept what he believed to be the Christian understanding of these attributes to be nothing but divinity itself, seen in different modes (pp. 158-160). For him, God does indeed have attributes. But, one cannot worship the thing specified by these attributes. God and the attributes are co-eternal, whilst there is a distinction between them. This distinction for the author is between Godhood and non-Godhood. Jesus, therefore, can be seen as emanating from, and eternally belonging to God, but not God. In this way, the author explains the statement of Jesus: ‘Before Abraham, I am’. (pp. 172-176).

As noted earlier, this theological understanding of the attributes of God reflect Ghazālī’s teaching too.[[53]](#footnote-53) Indeed, it can be argued that the emphasis on ‘metaphorical’ interpretation in refuting the doctrine of the Incarnation provides the author of *al-Radd* with an opportunity to refute other Muslim groups who had ‘*ḥulūl*’ (incarnationist) tendencies, as he alludes to in the text (p. 148). Such tendencies were the result of different syncretistic movements amalgamating with the Islamic tradition. For example, the Mazdakiyya and the Khurramiya in early Islamic Iran exalted their imams to the ranks of angels and divine beings with figures such as Abu Muslim al-Khurasāni recognized as an incarnation of divine spirit.[[54]](#footnote-54) Other Shīʿite groups had similar views.[[55]](#footnote-55) This sits well with Ghazālī’s wider targets; his works against the Bāṭinites and his Sufi texts, especially *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, included such refutations too.

**Conclusion**

One cannot deny that there are points which may prevent us from simply ‘reading off’ an intuitable conclusion with regard to the authenticity of the text. It is possible to suggest that a student of Ghazālī wrote parts of the text having sat at his feet and that it may not entirely be from Ghazālī’s own pen. However, the editor’s analysis has not provided any new convincing conclusion to suggest the impossibility of attributing the text to Ghazālī. Indeed, it still requires further investigation covering the polemical culture of Egypt at the time and investigating further the gospel sources of the text.

It is clear that there is a need to determine what can and cannot be considered authoritative about Ghazālī’s biography and have a framework that helps shape a clear view about what writings can be authentically attributed to him. This, in turn, requires a greater attempt to relate comprehensively to Ghazālī’s oeuvre if one is going to examine similarities within the text and ascertain whether there is any further signs of Ghazalian authorship. As argued above, these issues were not exhausted in this edition. If one follows the criteria set by Watt to examine the authenticity of works attributed to Ghazālī, there is nothing that prevents the book from being authentic. [[56]](#footnote-56) At some point, the editor suggested that the text is not orderly enough to make it similar to Ghazālī’s other works (p. 127). This observation was noted by Chidiac, however, who reminded us that Ghazālī was not always a stylist, or as Chidiac put it: ‘his writing was often a simple dress for his actual thought’.[[57]](#footnote-57) This is not sufficient evidence for the inauthenticity of the text, however. Indeed, one century after Ghazālī, another Muslim thinker, Ibn Sabʿīn al-Ghāfiqī will suggest that Ghazālī’s language lacked ‘style’, ‘*lughatun yanqiṣuhā al-uslūb*’.[[58]](#footnote-58)

The attempt to contradict what he believed to be the unperceivable doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation is obviously compatible with his other works and with Islamic ʿ*aqīda*. The formality of the argument is closer to the tone of *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*. The structure of the argument, however, follows the broad structure found in the *Iḥyā’*, where Ghazālī synthesizes scriptural texts with texts from Islam’s formative period and adds them to some logical argumentation, what he calls *shawāhid ʿaqliyya*. Similarly here, He meets the Christians in their own den and court by discussing their own scriptures to support his own claims and refute what he thought to be their ‘literal’ interpretations of the biblical text. He then follows the discussion with refuting their rational proofs to justify their teachings, explaining the main three Christian views at the time to show that their arguments are vain. For him it is difficult to justify the divinity of Christ either through revelation or through rational arguments, providing different interpretations for ‘Word’ and ‘Spirit’. Indeed, the examination of the main Ghazalian texts in this review with that of *al-Radd* suggests a very extensive connection between Ghazālī and the text *al-Radd*.

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3. Chidiac, R s.j. (ed.) *Réfutation excellente de la divinité de Jésus-Christ d’après les Évangiles*. Librarie Ernest Lerouz, Paris, 1939, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ghazālī, *al-Iqtiṣād fī al-iʿtiqād*. Abdullah Muhammad al-Khalīlī (ed.), Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, Beirut, 2004, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, p.61 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. al-Baghdādī, ʿAbd al-Qāhir, *Uṣūl al-dīn*. Maṭbaʿat al-dawla, Istanbul, 1928, p.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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13. Griffith, Sydney, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the “People of the Book” in the Language of Islam*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013, pp. 182-183. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The sources for Ibn Ḥazm’s biblical quotations in Arabic are still apparently unknown. (See Griffith, Sydney, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the “People of the Book” in the Language of Islam*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013, 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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16. Wisnovsky, Robert, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context*. Duckworth, London, 2003, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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20. See *al-Ghazālī: The Niche of Light Mishkāt al-anwār*, Buchnan (tr.), Brigham University press, Provo, Utah, 1998, pp. 17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Mīzān al-ʿAmal*, Ahmad Shams al-Din (ed.), dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, Beirut, 1989, pp. 127-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
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25. Ibid, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
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28. Griffith, Sydney, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the “People of the Book” in the Language of Islam*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013, p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid, pp.146-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid, p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Chidiac, R s.j. (ed.) *Réfutation excellente de la divinité de Jésus-Christ d’après les Évangiles*. Librarie Ernest Lerouz, Paris, 1939, pp. 71-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. ‘The’ here should have been deleted. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān*. Maktabat al-nahḍa al-maṣriyya, Cairo 1948, vol. 3, p.353-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Hilmi, Abd al-Aziz abd al-Haqq (ed.), *al-Radd al-Jamīl li’l-Imam al- Ghazālī*. (Cairo, 1973), p. 53-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān*. Maktabat al-nahḍa al-maṣriyya, Cairo 1948, vol. 6, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*. Samih Daghim (ed.), dār al-fikr al-lubnāni, Beirut, 1993, p.93. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The meetings took place after Ghazālī’s resignation from his illustrious position in the Abbasid capital; see, Ibn al-ʿArabī, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Abadallah, *ʿAwāṣim min al-qawāṣim*. ʿAmmār Ṭālibī (ed.), Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, Cairo, 1997, p.23. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibn al-ʿArabī, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Abadallah, “Shawāhid al-ajilla wa’l-aʿyān fī mashāhid al-Islam wa’l-buldān’. In *Trex textos árabes sobre beréberes en le occidente Islámico*, Muhammad Yaʿlā (ed.), CSIC, Madrid, 1996, pp.290-293. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
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41. Cited in Hilmi, Abd al-Aziz abd al-Haqq (ed.), *al-Radd al-Jamīl li’l-Imam al- Ghazālī*. (Cairo, 1973), pp. 114-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid, pp. 219-224. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh pointed to the medieval fashionable habit of attributing certain books to other notable authors to preserve their work. *Studies in al-Ghazzali*. The Magnes Press, the Hebrew University: Jerusalem, 1975, p. 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
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50. Lash, Nicholas, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*. SCM Press, London, 1986, p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
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