

“By virtue of your knowledge”: Scientific materialism and the *fatwās* of Rashīd Riḍā*

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Abstract

This article examines several *fatwās* by the important Muslim reformer Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā. It treats these *fatwās* as part of a broader Arabic debate on “materialism” at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In this context, Riḍā’s *fatwās* on materialism illustrate the changing nature of Islamic religious authority in this period, as new kinds of knowledge became available to new kinds of readers.

Keywords: Rashīd Riḍā, *fatwā*, materialism, science, authority, Islam

In September 1913, a reader submitted the following query to the *fatāwā* (responsa) section of the journal *al-Manār*:

1. It has become widely known that an atheist professor, who was educated at the Teachers’ College, completed his studies in the schools of Europe, and was appointed as a professor in the School of Commerce in Cairo, has denied the existence of the Creator – relying on natural science, in which the nature of the universe and the phenomena of existence are studied – saying in front of the students: “belief in the existence of God is a delusion unsupported by scientific evidence or empirical proof”.
2. A reader has inquired of *al-Muqtaṭaf*, how did some of the Greek philosophers believe in polytheism, despite the establishment of rational proof for pure monotheism? *Al-Muqtaṭaf* answered that rational proof neither refutes nor proves monotheism, which is only proven by divine inspiration. The questioner repeated the question, and *al-Muqtaṭaf* repeated the answer with no significant difference from the preceding. Kindly answer with rational, scientific, philosophical, and historical evidence, in the contemporary fashion. . .¹

As the above *istiftā’* (request for a *fatwā*, or responsum) suggests, the existence of God was a topic of debate in early twentieth-century Cairo, one that implicated multiple epistemic traditions and crossed the boundaries of particular religious communities. The *mustafī* (seeker of the responsum), Aḥmad Muḥammad

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1 “*Wujūd allah wa-wahdāniyyatuhu wa’l-qadā’ wa’l-qadar*”, *Al-Manār* 16, 1913, 741–2. For the second question’s references to *al-Muqtaṭaf*, see “*Bāb al-masā’il: ta’addud al-āliha*”, *Al-Muqtaṭaf* 42, 1913, 93; and “*Bāb al-masā’il: al-istiḍlāl ‘alā waḥdat al-khāliq*”, *Al-Muqtaṭaf* 42, 1913, 199–200. The *Al-Manār* questioner’s summary is accurate, except that the two questions in *Al-Muqtaṭaf* appear to have come from two different readers, not the same one.

al-Alfī of Fāqūs,² was apparently a believing Muslim. Aside from the tone of his reference to the atheist professor (*ustādh mulhīd*), he left as evidence of his religious convictions another *istiftā'* in the pages of *al-Manār*, in which he questioned the journal's criticism of the Sufi practice of *dhikr* by giving extensive sources for the practice's legitimacy.³ But his *istiftā'* here showed no interest in mystical affirmations of the divine. Rather, he asked for proof specifically of the kind that he heard being used against the existence of God: "scientific evidence" (*dalīl 'ilmī*) of the "contemporary fashion" (*alā al-ṭarīqa al-ʿaṣriyya*). A significant part of his inquiry followed from his reading of *al-Muqtataf*, the leading journal in which European science appeared in the Arabic-speaking world in this period.⁴ He was himself a person of significant scientific education, as evinced by his long publishing career in the same *al-Muqtataf*, mainly on agricultural issues.⁵

At the same time, al-Alfī's inquiry was more complex than a request for scientific proof of God's existence. In its reference to Greek philosophy, and the concluding request for "rational" (*ʿaqlī*) in addition to "scientific" (*ʿilmī*) proof, the *istiftā'* showed a continued awareness of classical ways of debating the existence of God, even as it confronted (especially in question one) the modern sciences. Meanwhile, the reference to *Al-Muqtataf*, whose Christian editors had a long history of debating such controversial ideas with their readers and contributors, suggested the confessionally porous boundaries of Islamic discourse. To such an epistemically and confessionally textured knot of questions, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, editor and publisher of *al-Manār*, was asked to give an authoritative answer.⁶

- 2 A Delta town north-east of Zagazig. In another *istiftā'*, Aḥmad al-Alfī is said to hail from Ṭūkh al-Qarāmūs, between Fāqūs and Zagazig (see below, note 4). It is likely that he belonged to the family of Shaykh ʿAlī al-Alfī (b. 1227 AH), also from Ṭūkh al-Qarāmūs, who studied with some of the pre-eminent scholars of al-Azhar in the early nineteenth century. One of the shaykh's sons, Muḥammad al-Alfī, was an editor at the Būlāq Press. See ʿAlī Mubārak, *al-Khiṭaṭ al-tawfiqiyya al-jadīda* (Būlāq: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Kubrā, 1305 AH), v. 13, 62. Aḥmad probably belonged to the next generation.
- 3 "*Al-Dhikr bi'l-asmā' al-mufrada*", in Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid and Yūsuf Khūrī (eds), *Fatāwā al-Imām Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā* (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-jadīd, 1970), 964 (*fatwā* 358, originally published in 1911).
- 4 The classic monograph on *Al-Muqtataf* is Nadia Farag, "Al-Muqtataf 1876–1900: A study of the influence of Victorian thought on modern Arabic thought" (DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1969). A more recent discussion, emphasizing the journal's political and trans-confessional context, appears in Marwa S. Elshakry, "Darwin's legacy in the Arab East" (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2003).
- 5 The last article attributed to him appeared in volume 83, 1933, 237. For all but one of the *mustaftīs* whom I discuss below, I have been able to find additional material published in their name. I cite such material when introducing a *mustaftī* in part to shed more light on the person's life and interests, but also to dispense with the problem of the "fictitious *fatwā*". On the problem of authenticating historical *fatwā* questions, see the introduction to Khalid Masud, Brinkley Messick and David S. Powers (eds), *Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and Their Fatwas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- 6 A good deal has been written on Rashīd Riḍā and his journal. C.C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) was among the first studies to treat Riḍā as the prime heir to Muḥammad ʿAbduh's legacy. Most scholarship

In this article, I try to understand the exchange between Riḏā and al-Alfī, along with several related *fatwās* in *al-Manār* from the same period, as part of a broad debate in Arabic at the turn of the century on the meaning and validity of scientific materialism. I begin with the iconoclastic doctor and polemicist Shiblī Shumayyil, who more than anyone else introduced the materialist doctrine into the Arabic language in the 1880s, spurring the publication of major critiques by two of Rashīd Riḏā's most important intellectual influences, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Ḥusayn al-Jisr. From the polemics of such great intellectuals in the 1880s, I turn to the debates over materialism as they continued in the pages of the Arabic press through the 1890s and early 1900s. Editors, contributors and readers of periodicals both Christian and Muslim were eager for information about the new doctrine. They debated its meaning and its consistency with religious belief and, in so doing, they shaped and reshaped the idea itself. These public debates are the backdrop against which we can read the exchanges in *al-Manār*. Drawing on these debates and *fatwās*, I suggest that controversy over materialism arose not only because of the work of individuals such as Shumayyil, but also because of new educational institutions that were refashioning the intellectual world of Cairo.

Riḏā's entrance into these debates and his approach to the theological challenges of modern science⁷ illuminate his understanding of the role of mufti, and specifically the changing nature of the authority he drew upon in constructing responsa. Given this focus on Riḏā's work as a mufti, this article draws on the other genres within which Riḏā wrote only where they are particularly relevant; for the most part, the discussion of his work centres on the *fatwās*. The substance of his *fatwās* on materialism was, we will see, generally conservative. Riḏā defended traditional doctrines of corporeal resurrection and the createdness of the universe, for example. His method, however, was usually – though not always – to engage directly with the scientific knowledge in question, to accept its basic validity and, framing it in the traditions of *kalām* and natural theology,

has focused on Riḏā's political and legal thought, on which the classic study remains Malcolm Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1966). Cf. Ahmad Dallal, "Appropriating the past: twentieth-century reconstruction of pre-modern Islamic thought", *Islamic Law and Society* 7/1, 2000, for an important critique of Kerr's approach. More pertinent to my study, however, is Mahmoud Haddad's argument that Kerr's philosophical critique of Riḏā misses the pragmatism of Riḏā's politics, which had to respond to the evolving circumstances of a thirty-year period; Mahmoud Haddad, "Arab religious nationalism in the colonial era: rereading Rashīd Riḏā's ideas on the caliphate", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117/2, 1997, 253–77. In a sense, I follow Haddad's lead by reading each *fatwā* as a response to a specific question within a particular debate, not necessarily the component of a consistent, overarching philosophy.

7 Relatively little Anglophone scholarship has focused on Riḏā's engagement with the modern sciences. Two recent Arabic studies do so. Sāmī 'Abidīn, *Aṣl al-insān 'inda al-Afghānī wa-Muḥammad 'Abduh wa-Rashīd Riḏā* (Beirut: Dār al-ḥarf al-'arabī, 2005), includes a brief discussion of Riḏā's views on Darwinism and the origin of man. Tāmīr Muḥammad Maḥmūd Mutawallī's *Manhaj al-Shaykh Muḥammad Rashīd Riḏā fī al-'aqīda* (Jadda: Dār Majīd 'Asiray, 2004), is an encyclopaedic but hagiographic study.

to show its consistency with Islamic belief. Such a method, I will argue, entailed a dynamic in which the assertion of religious authority rested on the mustering of a certain degree of scientific authority – which in turn, for Riḍā, meant relying on the work of contemporaries outside the bounds of Islamic jurisprudence, or even outside of Islam. If the result was authoritative, it bore a reconfigured notion of authority, one that moved the mufti closer to being something like a public intellectual.

Shumayyil and his critics: introducing *Māddiyya*

The notion of “scientific materialism”, at least as it came to be debated in Arabic, developed largely in mid-nineteenth-century Germany among a radical group of intellectuals and medical doctors. Building on the work of Ludwig Feuerbach in particular, they argued that the universe is essentially material: even the human mind and consciousness are mere functions of the material body; a non-material entity (such as God) is a contradiction in terms.⁸ Not God but the unity of matter and energy is the cause of all phenomena, and empirical evidence the only standard of knowledge. The German doctor Ludwig Büchner was among the most widely-read materialists in Europe, and it was principally through his work that scientific materialism entered Arabic discourse in the 1880s. Büchner focused particularly on developing Darwin’s work towards an explicitly materialist, atheistic position.⁹ In addition to his provocative espousal of atheism in *Kraft und Stoff* (*Matter and Force*, 1855) and in his commentary on Darwin’s theory of evolution (1868), Büchner was also associated with political ideas bordering on socialism.¹⁰

It was apparently the combination of Darwinism and socialism that the Syrian doctor Shiblī Shumayyil found most appealing.¹¹ Shumayyil, born to a Catholic family in present-day Lebanon, attended the medical school of the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut, lived in France for two years (c. 1875),¹² and

- 8 See Frederick Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in 19th Century Germany* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977), for a helpful introduction to the origins of this group and its thought.
- 9 Gregory, *Scientific Materialism*, 120. Darwinism and scientific materialism should not be confused. Büchner, for example, did much of his work before the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Nevertheless, in the intellectual landscape of the late nineteenth century, the ideas became intertwined. Materialists argued that natural selection and descent by modification confirmed the ultimately material causality behind nature.
- 10 Gregory, *Scientific Materialism*, 208. He was not, in fact, a socialist, as Shumayyil would become.
- 11 The most accessible overview of Shumayyil appears in Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1789–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 245 ff. However, the most comprehensive account of Shumayyil’s life and thought is Georges Haroun, *Šiblī Šumayyil: une pensée évolutionniste arabe à l’époque d’an-nahḍa* (Beirut: l’Université libanaise, 1985). See also Susan Ziadeh, “A radical in his time: the thought of Shiblī Shumayyil and Arab intellectual discourse (1882–1917)”, (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1991). The latter study fills certain lacunae in Haroun’s account (for example, Shumayyil’s family was Roman Catholic, rather than Greek Catholic).
- 12 Haroun, *Šiblī Šumayyil*, 52.

eventually settled as a doctor and author in Egypt.¹³ At the Syrian Protestant College he entered a milieu in which a number of people were interested in the theory of evolution; some went on to become key popularizers of the idea in Arabic.¹⁴ However, while Shumayyil encountered and probably even accepted the idea of evolution in Beirut, it was in Europe that he came to give this idea the radical interpretation of scientific materialism. Colleagues, including Rashīd Riḍā, later wrote that Shumayyil was a believing Christian until his experiences in France. One of them specifically attributed Shumayyil's radicalization to his acceptance of proofs for the theory of spontaneous generation he saw there.¹⁵ Thus in 1884 we find Shumayyil translating into Arabic and publishing *Büchner's Commentary on Darwin (Sharḥ Bukhnar 'alā madhhab Dārwin)*.¹⁶ A controversial text, it was but the beginning of a storied career in which Shumayyil advocated a unique mix of materialism, Darwinism, and socialist ideology that was as much his own as Büchner's.¹⁷ Until his death in 1916, Shumayyil published widely in defence of these controversial views on science and society, provoking a heated response in a variety of periodicals and treatises.

Several attributes of this early period in the debate are noteworthy. The idea of "scientific materialism" entered Arabic discourse with a particular set of associations. It was associated scientifically with Darwinism, itself a topic of lively conversation at the time among Arab intellectuals, who were interested in its social and theological implications.¹⁸ And it was associated to some extent with a political ideology, namely socialism, as articulated by Shumayyil. These contexts are important to keep in mind, as it may be seen that reactions to the scientific "kernel" of the idea – the claim that the universe is fundamentally material – varied according to the perceived danger of other ideas associated with it.¹⁹

- 13 Shumayyil was among a number of Syrian intellectuals who moved to Egypt during the 1880s, when the economic and political climate afforded by the British occupation (which began in 1882) compared favourably with the opportunities under Ottoman administration in Syria (Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 246).
- 14 Most notable are Shumayyil's lifelong colleagues Ya'qūb Ṣarrūf and Fāris Nimr, publishers of *al-Muqtataf*. On Darwinism at the Syrian Protestant College, see Marwa Elshakry, "The Gospel of Science and American evangelism in late Ottoman Beirut", *Past and Present* no. 196, 2007, 173.
- 15 Haroun, *Šiblī Šumayyil*, 53. This account is credible enough, in that no other member of Shumayyil's generation from the Syrian Protestant College became such a radical materialist.
- 16 Haroun has shown that the text is based on Auguste Jacquot's French edition of Büchner's *Die Darwinische Theorie von der Entstehung und Umwandlung der Lebenswelt*, but that it is more summary and interpretation than direct translation. Haroun, *Šiblī Šumayyil*, 91.
- 17 For a detailed review of Shumayyil's thought, see Haroun, *Šiblī Šumayyil*, 125. For a specific discussion of the link between Darwinism and socialism in Shumayyil, see also Ziadeh, *A Radical*, 226.
- 18 Scholarship on the Arab reading of Darwinism is growing. See: Elshakry, "Darwin's legacy", Olivier Meier, *Al-Muqtataf et le débat sur le Darwinisme: Beyrouth, 1876–1885* (Cairo: CEDEJ, 1996); and Adel A. Ziadat, *Western Science in the Arab World: The Impact of Darwinism, 1860–1930* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986).
- 19 A comparison could be made with the development of materialist thought at the Turkish-speaking centres of the late Ottoman Empire. Figures such as Büchner were important to a certain radical circle, and scientific materialism made its way into the

It must also be said that “scientific materialism” was introduced to Arab readers not only by Shumayyil himself, but more directly, in fact, by his critics – two of whom were especially important for Rashīd Riḍā’s intellectual formation.²⁰ Most famously, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, mentor to Riḍā’s mentor Muḥammad ‘Abduh,²¹ published his *Refutation of the Materialists* (*Al-Radd ‘alā al-dahriyyin*) in 1886.²² In its origins, the *Refutation* was not a response to Shumayyil at all, but to Sayyid Ahmad Khan in India, where al-Afghānī lived from 1880 to 1882.²³ In the wake of Shumayyil’s translation of Büchner, Muḥammad ‘Abduh thought to translate the *Refutation* (from its original Persian) while he and al-Afghānī were living in Beirut. While the result first appeared in 1886, such was its popularity that at least five subsequent editions were printed in Cairo by 1914.²⁴

In al-Afghānī’s view, Shumayyil – even Darwin – brought little new to ancient ways of attacking belief in God and explaining the universe atheistically. The *Refutation* placed materialism in a long tradition going back to Democritus and atomism.²⁵ Al-Afghānī’s terminology illustrates the approach: he

ideology of the CUP. See M. Şükrü Hanioglu, “Blueprint for a future society: late Ottoman materialists on science, religion, and art”, in Elisabeth Özdalga (ed.), *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy* (London: Routledge, 2005). However, while men such as Shumayyil, Riḍā and al-Afghānī were certainly aware of the Turkish debates, their Arabic writings made little direct reference to them. Since I am primarily concerned with Riḍā in this article, I do not give the work of men such as Abdullah Cevdet the treatment it would be due in a broader discussion. One could also argue that the Turkish scene, in so far as it included a significant set of people explicitly committed to materialism, differed categorically from a milieu wherein the idea was discussed predominantly through critique.

- 20 For my discussion of al-Afghānī and al-Jisr on materialism, I am particularly indebted to Elshakry, “Darwin’s legacy”, 168 ff.
- 21 Al-Afghānī’s role as a religious reformer has been the subject of revision. Most radically, Elie Kedourie argued that al-Afghānī (and to a lesser degree ‘Abduh) was a religious sceptic who used religiosity as a cover for political ambition. Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and ‘Abduh: an Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London: Frank Cass, 1966). Kedourie’s approach, including his sharp demarcation between “politics” and “religion” proper, has been subject to powerful critique, e.g. Talal Asad, “Politics and religion in Islamic reform: a review of Kedourie’s *Afghani and ‘Abduh*”, *Review of Middle East Studies* 2, 1976. In my view, the best approach is to understand the importance of political context to al-Afghānī’s undeniably evolving views, but without concluding that these views were necessarily irreligious or hypocritical. See Nikki Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “al-Afghani”: A Political Biography* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1972).
- 22 Al-Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, *Al-Radd ‘alā al-dahriyyin*, trans. Muḥammad ‘Abduh (Miṣr: al-Maṭba‘a al-Maḥmūdiyya al-Tijāriyya, 1935).
- 23 Keddie argues persuasively that the *Refutation* represents the beginning of al-Afghānī’s attempt to position himself as a “defender of orthodoxy” during this period. Nikkie R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn “al-Afghānī”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 53.
- 24 Elshakry, “Darwin’s legacy”, 169. As Elshakry notes, al-Afghānī’s “manservant” Abu Turāb assisted with the translation. This collaboration is noted in early editions of the *Refutation* but has often been forgotten. We have no indication that ‘Abduh ever learned Persian, however, so Abu Turāb probably played an important role in the project.
- 25 Al-Afghānī, *al-Radd*, 21.

interchangeably used *nayshariyya* (naturalism), *dahriyya* (materialism, but from *dahr*, meaning “time” or “eternity”, and a reference to the medieval debate between those who held by the createdness of the world and those who held by its eternity), and *māddiyya* (from *mādda*, matter), the term employed by Shumayyil and many of his critics alike.²⁶ Having placed his adversaries in this lineage, al-Afghānī was able to show that Darwinian materialism was but the latest, fundamentally absurd, variation on the rather tired theme of trying to explain how the universe could come to exist without a divine creator.

Here it might be useful to pause and consider precisely what resonances scientific materialism had in the Arab–Islamic heritage. One of the most famous debates in Islamic history revolved around the question of the createdness of the universe. Culminating in the eleventh century AD, this debate matched the Aristotelian *falāsifa*, who thought that the universe was eternal and God a “necessary cause” thereof, against the theologians (*mutakallimūn*), who thought that the universe was created and God its “voluntary cause”, which is to say He decided to make it, and at a certain point in time.²⁷ In the standard historical narrative, al-Ghazālī’s (d. 1111) *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*) destroyed the credibility of the *falsafa* position in the Islamic world (west of Persia) until the nineteenth century.²⁸ This account is a bit of a caricature, as major figures in Islamic thought continued to participate in the Aristotelian tradition,²⁹ but it remains fair to say that the notion of an eternally existing, uncreated universe fell into serious and lasting disrepute.³⁰

Debating creation thus had long roots in Islamic heritage, on which al-Afghānī and others could draw when confronting the materialists.³¹ Absent from the *Refutation*, however, is much engagement with what might have

- 26 Riḏā, we will see, used *māddī* to describe the idea – arguably a sign of his greater familiarity with the modern idiom, or perhaps just his greater desire to display such familiarity. That said, the term may have simply become more established by Riḏā’s day.
- 27 Herbert Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 2. Such, at least, was the Neoplatonic form in which Aristotle’s idea (which originally concerned motion and the necessity of an “unmoved mover”, rather than existence and the necessity of a creator) entered Islamic philosophy. See Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman (eds), *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), xxii.
- 28 Oliver Leaman, *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 7.
- 29 Barry Kogan, “Eternity and origination: Averroes’ discourse on the manner of the world’s existence”, in Michael Marmura (ed.), *Islamic Theology and Philosophy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1984), 206. See also Leaman, *Introduction*, 7.
- 30 Given the seemingly *ex nihilo* cosmogony of the Quran itself, this development might appear too obvious for explanation. In fact, Quranic cosmogony has historically been open to interpretation, and was only one element of the complex relationship between *falsafa* and *kalām*. McGinnis and Reisman, *Arabic Philosophy*, xxviii.
- 31 For a full discussion of modern Arab reinterpretation of *falsafa* and the problem of causality, see Anke von Kügelgen, *Averroes und die arabische Moderne: Ansätze zu einer Neubegründung des Rationalismus im Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 360 ff. Also relevant is von Kügelgen’s analysis of the famous debate between Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Farāḥ Anṭūn on Islam, science, and philosophy, although the book does not discuss Rashīd Riḏā in any detail.

been different about the materialism of the late nineteenth century. For example, the issue of creation in a medieval context was not exactly a debate on the existence of God; it was a debate over what “God” should mean as an object of proof.³² Moreover, the “opposite” of proving God in the medieval context was not to disprove his existence, but to hold the more traditional position that human reason is insufficient for the task³³ – a profoundly theistic view, in contrast to the atheism that al-Afghānī confronted.

Certainly Shumayyil felt that al-Afghānī was confused. He wondered that al-Afghānī, a “philosopher of old”, should attempt to argue on matters of modern science, and he dismissed the *Refutation* as a classical argument, irrelevant to the world of empirically-based discourse in which he made his claims.³⁴ The point here is threefold. First, scientific materialism was widely disseminated to Arabic readership through a refutation that treated it principally as a part of the classical tradition of arguing over God and the createdness of the world. Second, the refutation was penned by one, and translated by another, of Rashīd Riḍā and *al-Manār*’s critical influences: al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh. Third, we should note the appearance already of a certain epistemic entanglement, the confluence of apparently similar ideas that may in fact carry substantially different ways of thinking about reality, and the consequential disagreement over the correct mode of argumentation.

The second refutation of importance, penned by another of Riḍā’s teachers, was *Al-Risāla al-ḥamīdiyya fī ḥaqīqat al-diyāna al-islāmiyya wa-ḥaqqiyyat al-sharī‘a al-muḥammadiyya* (The Hamidian Epistle on the Reality of the Islamic Religion and the Truth of the Muhammadan Way) of Ḥusayn al-Jisr.³⁵ Al-Jisr (b. 1854) was Riḍā’s teacher, and the pupil’s later interests resemble his teacher’s experiments in combining traditional and modern education – although al-Jisr disapproved of *al-Manār* in some respects.³⁶ The *Hamidian Epistle*, first published in 1888, provided a full exposition of a strategy on which Riḍā would later call when addressing materialism: natural theology. Like al-Afghānī, al-Jisr argued in a traditional mode. Instead of rendering scientific materialism into a school of ancient philosophy, however, he turned to a venerable theme of natural theology: the proof of God from the design of nature. Most striking, for example, is the appearance of the famous watchmaker analogy, along with similar arguments that so complex and well-ordered a system as nature must be the product of conscious design.³⁷

32 Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity*, 3.

33 Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity*, 1.

34 Elshakry, “Darwin’s legacy”, 175–6.

35 A good biography, placing al-Jisr in the context of late Ottoman Tripoli, is Johannes Ebert, *Religion und Reform in der arabischen Provinz: Husayn al-Gisr at-Ṭarābulusī (1845–1909) – Ein islamischer Gelehrter zwischen Tradition und Reform* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991).

36 Among the disagreements between al-Jisr and his former pupil was a debate over Riḍā’s critique of his contemporary ‘ulamā’. Al-Jisr felt that Riḍā’s criticisms were unduly harsh, while Riḍā thought that al-Jisr was too quick to excuse his colleagues from their duty to guide the community. Ebert, *Religion und Reform*, 158–9.

37 Al-Jisr, *al-Risāla*, 131. See Elshakry, “Darwin’s legacy”, 213. The watchmaker analogy has classical roots, perhaps, but eighteenth-century European origins in its modern usage;

Al-Jisr's refutation differed from al-Afghānī's in other respects too, and specifically in ways that make al-Jisr's approach a more immediate precedent for the strategies that Riḍā later employed. First, al-Jisr's writing evinces a more substantial engagement with the scientific knowledge in question. He gives a far more detailed presentation of materialist thought than does al-Afghānī, and repeatedly attempts to point out its internal contradictions.³⁸ And second, at the same time that al-Jisr is concerned with refuting materialism, he is equally concerned with presenting the "correct" Islam. This dual focus makes the *Hamidian Epistle* a kind of "link between 'Abduh's *Risālat al-tawhīd* and al-Afghānī's *al-Radd 'alā al-dahriyyin*", as Johannes Ebert has argued.³⁹ I will suggest below that this dual concern, the need to refute materialism coupled with the effort to present a "correct" Islam that is essentially in harmony with modern science, explains certain aspects of Riḍā's work as well.

Al-Risāla al-ḥamīdiyya is relevant to our understanding of Riḍā in at least one other way. As Marwa Elshakry has argued, the continued vitality of natural theology in works such as al-Jisr's illustrates the special predicament of the late Ottoman 'ālim. Facing educational reforms and related political pressure, on top of intellectual challenges such as materialism, the traditional Muslim scholar sought to maintain his intellectual relevance by demonstrating facility with the new sciences – while maintaining enough authority over their interpretation and boundaries to guard against the extreme represented by Shumayyil.⁴⁰ This dilemma, the need to be relevant in a world of new sciences while protecting the integrity of the old, would bear directly on Riḍā's attempt to formulate authoritative responses to materialism.

Debating materialism: questions and answers

Al-Jisr's polemic, like al-Afghānī's, was widely distributed and read. Sultan Abdülhamid II (the epistle's eponym) awarded the author an annual income, and 20,000 copies were printed in Istanbul.⁴¹ Given the popularity of such critiques, and the stature of their authors, it is safe to say that a great many Arabic readers – including, perhaps, Rashīd Riḍā – first encountered scientific materialism as an object of refutation. This is not to say, however, that the idea remained static, defined only by the work of famous intellectuals. On the contrary, readers, correspondents and editors of Arabic periodicals debated and reconstructed the notion of *al-māddiyya*, and its relationship to faith, through the 1890s and into the twentieth century. These exchanges were the immediate backdrop to the exchanges in *al-Manār*.

Al-Muqtaṭaf and its editors, Ya'qūb Ṣarrūf and Fāris Nimr, were among those who had originally introduced scientific materialism by way of criticism. Unlike

see D.L. LeMahieu, *The Mind of William Paley* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 60.

38 Ebert, *Religion und Reform*, 141.

39 Ebert, *Religion und Reform*, 139.

40 Elshakry, "Darwin's legacy", 227.

41 Elshakry, "Darwin's legacy", 203.

al-Afghānī and al-Jisr, they gave space to Shumayyil's own words, publishing his work from the early days of the journal until Shumayyil's death. In the early days, these articles were accompanied by disclaimers and sometimes harsh criticism; an 1884 review famously called Shumayyil's work "pure unbelief" (*kufṛ mahq*).⁴² But this initial treatment, on which most histories of *al-Muqtataf* have focused, does not reflect the breadth of the journal's engagement with scientific materialism – or perhaps we should say "materialisms".

The precise theological claims and implications of materialism became a topic of ongoing negotiation between *al-Muqtataf* and its readers.⁴³ One wrote in 1909 to enquire: "What are among the strongest scientific proofs (*al-barāhīn al-ilmīyya*) to convince materialists who deny the existence of God"? The editors answered that no such scientific proofs exist, for if they did, the materialists (who, after all, champion empirical evidence) would accept them. Moreover, the editors added, materialists do not deny God, they only deny that reason can demonstrate his existence.⁴⁴ In response to further queries, the editors held to the principles of this answer, expounding the main tenets of materialism – the primacy of empirical evidence and the unity of matter and energy – and insisting that materialism was reasonable in so far as it did not deny God, but pointed out the absence of a certain kind of evidence for his existence.⁴⁵ In answers such as these, a kind of agnostic materialism began to take shape. In fact, the resemblance between this kind of materialism and agnosticism was a topic of further confusion among readers, one of whom enquired in 1912: "What is the difference between the materialists and the agnostics (*al-māddīyyīn wa'l-lā-adriyyīn*)"?⁴⁶ The *Muqtataf*'s answer focused on the relationship between matter and energy, neglecting to mention explicitly the question of God's existence, on which the most famous materialists were surely not agnostic. This omission reflected the ambiguity of the emergent position, wherein materialism was defended as a matter of epistemology, while restrained – indeed, turned against itself – in order to protect a certain realm of the spiritual that was precisely the target of materialism's more radical advocates.

One should not imagine that such conversations were the province only of Christian periodicals. First, although the editors of *al-Muqtataf* were Christian, there is little reason to suppose that their interlocutors were too: the journal regularly published Muslim contributors – including, as previously noted, our

42 Farag, *al-Muqtataf*, 268.

43 Dagmar Glass has thoroughly investigated the relationship between *al-Muqtataf* and its readership, with particular attention to the question and answer section. See Dagmar Glass, *Der Muqtataf und seine Öffentlichkeit* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2004), 260. Glass also chronicles *al-Muqtataf*'s history of debating religion and science specifically. Of special interest is the author's argument that these debates helped to shape a culture of "logical-rational reasoning and respect for the differing opinion of the opponent". Glass, *Der Muqtataf*, 404. This argument, like the book as a whole, persuasively treats the periodical not as a single mouthpiece, but as a venue in which a diverse community of voices shaped the ideas of the day. The materialism exchanges I analyse here are but one example of this.

44 "Al-Masā'il: al-māddīyya wa-wujūd allah", *al-Muqtataf*, 1909, 812.

45 "Al-Masā'il: al-māddīyyūn wa munājāt al-arwāḥ", *al-Muqtataf*, 41, 1912, 200.

46 "Al-Masā'il: al-farq bayn al-māddīyyīn wa'l-lā-adriyyīn", *al-Muqtataf* 41, 1912, 606–07.

mustafī Aḥmad al-Alfī. As for the readers whose enquiries appeared in the “Question and answer” section, there is insufficient information to say much about them beyond what they included in their letters.⁴⁷ Second, similar exchanges appeared in the Islamic journals of Cairo at around the same time, indeed earlier than some of the exchanges in *al-Muqtataf*.

One such exchange appeared in the monthly journal *al-Mawsūʿāt* in 1901. Over the first two months of that year, a certain “M.M.” wrote a serialized essay discussing “the eternity of matter” (*qidam al-mādda*), “the unity of matter and energy” (*ittiḥād al-mādda biʾl-quwwa*), and the impossibility of permanence (*baqāʾ al-ḥāl muḥāl*).⁴⁸ The author’s claims included:

1. The universe has existed for ever. The author demonstrated the point with a detailed description of an experiment meant to show the conservation of mass, concluding: “this is a matter that has been settled decisively, one which chemical experiments have established and other sciences have confirmed, which is what intelligent people should follow. As for the notion of existence from nothing, it is materially impossible”.⁴⁹ This first point, on the eternity of the material universe and the impossibility of *ex nihilo* creation, became especially controversial.
2. Second, matter which used to belong to human beings decomposes after death and rejoins other parts of nature. Thus, “When the dead body is stripped of the elements of its life, which rise as gas in the air or (return) to a liquid, and its matter dissolves and breaks apart, all of it gathers and comes together in other, new, living bodies”. This point was not particularly debated in *al-Mawsūʿāt*, but will return in the *fatwās* from *al-Manār*.

The month following publication of the final part of M.M.’s essay, a certain “Rafiq” rebuked the editor for its publication, writing:

An esteemed gentleman, M.M., has taken to writing in your journal fragments of Darwin’s doctrine . . . claiming the pre-existence of the world. Better the writer had limited himself to examining the origin of species, for that is a lofty and useful subject, and had not gone past it to speak of the pre-existence of the world and plunge into a subject that was the downfall of the presumption of many philosophers of old and of late. This is among the subjects that cannot rightfully be published in a widely-circulated Islamic journal such as *al-Mawsūʿāt*, not all of whose readers are aware of the scientific evidence that refutes the basis of the claim for the pre-existence of the world, and nullifies all its tenuous premises.⁵⁰

“Rafiq”, like al-Afghānī twenty years earlier, understood that the claims of materialism implicated long-standing philosophical controversy. Specifically, he understood M.M. to be attacking the doctrine of the createdness of the

47 On Muslim authorship in *al-Muqtataf* in this period, see Glass, *Der Muqtataf*, 342.

48 See “Qidam al-mādda”, *al-Mawsūʿāt*, 1901, 228–9; and, “Baqāʾ al-mādda”, *al-Mawsūʿāt*, 1901, 265–9.

49 “Qidam al-mādda”, 266.

50 “Ilā al-Mawsūʿāt”, *al-Mawsūʿāt*, 1901, 425–6.

world.⁵¹ Indeed, it is hard not to think that this is precisely what M.M. intended with references to the “illusion” of “existence from nothing” having prevailed for “countless generations”. But the debate in *al-Mawsū‘āt* was not, of course, medieval. Rather than opposing the arguments for the createdness of the world with the counter-arguments of Ibn Sīnā or Ibn Rushd, for example, M.M. had introduced a modern chemistry experiment. And the objections of “Rafīq” are just as modern. In some ways like al-Jisr, he accepted the legitimacy of a Darwinian discussion of species, but rejected the extension of such enquiry into the origin of the universe. The publication of such ideas was offensive to “Rafīq”, however, not because they were wrong or heretical per se, but because they appeared in a “widely-circulated Islamic journal” [my emphasis], whose readership might not possess the requisite knowledge to resist such ideas.

The debate in *al-Mawsū‘āt* continued. The editors defended their publication of the essay mainly on the terms on which it had been attacked: that is, by appealing to other parts of the Islamic philosophical tradition (specifically to Ibn Rushd and al-Fārābī), which held by the eternity of the universe, rather than with reference to the natural-scientific argument with which M.M. had begun.⁵² Further readers’ objections appeared in the following issue.⁵³

These exchanges provide a great deal of light in which to consider the *fatwās* of *al-Manār* that follow. By the turn of the century, materialism and its associated notions were the subject of ongoing debate in Arabic, across confessional boundaries. These debates took place not only on the level of polemics but among everyday readers of popular journals. The emergence of such a discourse provides a broader context of “questioning and answering” in which to consider the *fatwās*. These questions and answers reflected the unstable nature of “the idea” of materialism itself, an ongoing public negotiation over its meaning and theological implications. Such negotiation and debate drew on diverse epistemic traditions, mixing classical argument from philosophy with modern science. Even where classical thought was cited, it was brought explicitly into a modern context – as in the problem of “wide circulation”.

Materialism and the Islamic creed: the *fatwās* of *al-Manār*

Such ongoing debates form the background to a set of exchanges that appeared between 1904 and 1913 in *al-Manār*, a journal that was very much a part of the intellectual world inhabited by materialism’s other interlocutors, from al-Afghānī to *al-Muqtaṭaf*. As Umar Ryad elucidates in *Islamic Reformism and Christianity*, Riḍā had a collegial relationship with the *al-Muqtaṭaf* editors, whom he saw as sharing his vision of the harmony between science and

51 Leaman, *Introduction*, 7.

52 *Al-Mawsū‘āt*, 1901, 426–7.

53 Or did not appear, as was the case with one submission that failed to observe “the principles of debate and the opposition of evidence with evidence, the falsification of proof with proof”. The author and “activists of his kind” (*amthālihi al-nāshīḥīn*) were requested kindly to submit less impassioned, more beneficial criticisms. “Su‘āl ilā ṣāhib maqālat al-mawjūd”, *al-Mawsū‘āt*, 1901, 451–3.

religion.⁵⁴ Riḏā would draw on his reading of *al-Muqataṭaf* when responding to questions about materialism.

The first *istiftā'* related closely to these debates appeared in 1904 and concerned the notion of resurrection. 'Abd al-Raḥīm Effendī Muḥammad al-Qanawī al-Ḥusaynī, a student at the Law School,⁵⁵ wrote to *al-Manār* describing a conversation with a friend of his, who claimed that the resurrection cannot occur through our earthly bodies. According to what this friend had studied in the natural sciences, the body's elements separate after death, decompose, and join new bodies. Thus, there is a finite amount of matter in the world, which has been reused through the generations. Corporeal resurrection (*al-ba'th al-juthmānī*) is impossible, because there won't be enough matter to go around! Al-Ḥusaynī forwarded his friend's challenges to Riḏā, asking the mufti "to remove, by virtue of your knowledge, any doubt pertaining to the matter".⁵⁶

Riḏā's *fatwā*, several pages long, greatly illuminates his thinking about the role of modern science in contemplating matters of religious doctrine. He began by noting the astounding progress of chemistry such that it can even approach the question of resurrection scientifically. Very quickly, however, he warned that matters of eschatology (*umūr al-ākhirā*) are unverifiable truths (*min 'ālam al-ghayb*) to which we must acquiesce without trying to understand how they work (*al-kayfiyya*), so long as they are not logically impossible. Whether he followed this principle is unclear, though, for he proceeded to use modern science's understanding of the materiality of human beings to ridicule certain eschatological doctrines – and to affirm that the resurrection will, in fact, involve our earthly bodies.

The objections of your interlocutor, said Riḏā, fall upon those '*ulamā'* who have argued that resurrection must occur in our earthly bodies so that God might punish or reward the very body that sinned or was righteous. What would these scholars say, Riḏā wondered, were they to consider what science has lately established, that the material of a person's body completely changes every few years? If someone's body is no longer composed of the same material it comprised when he sinned, is he not liable for punishment? Thus far, Riḏā could have been launching a materialist critique of a certain Islamic doctrine. But his point was not to disprove the notion of resurrection and punishment. Rather, he said, the essence of the physical body itself is not the material it

54 Among the intriguing episodes that Ryad highlights from Riḏā's diary is an encounter between Riḏā and Ṣarrūf shortly after the former's arrival in Egypt: "Riḏā made it clear that his intended journal was ... an attempt to remove the idea in the minds of the majority of Muslims that philosophy contradicts religion". Umar Ryad, *Islamic Reformism and Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 84. However, Ryad's main concern here is to explore the relationship between Riḏā and his Christian contemporaries, not to untangle Riḏā's understanding of philosophy or science.

55 Al-Ḥusaynī is the only *mustafī* for whom I have been unable to find evidence outside of his *istiftā'* in *al-Manār*. We must imagine Riḏā to have been quite audacious, however, to worry that he would not only fabricate a question, but then attribute it to a specific person supposedly at a specific school that had an entering class that year of only 88 students. On the size of the Law School, see Donald Reid, "Educational and career choices of Egyptian students, 1882–1922", *IJMES* 8/3, 1977, 360.

56 For the text of the *istiftā'* and *fatwā*, see "Al-Ba'th al-juthmānī", in al-Munajjid and Khūrī, *Fatāwā*, 86–9 (*fatwā* 34).

comprises, but the soul (*al-rūḥ*). It is the soul that gives life to matter and maintains the unique characteristics of the individual human. While the resurrection cannot be through the material we occupy in our present lives, Riḍā wrote, it does not follow that the resurrection will not occur corporeally. The problem of sufficient mass is no problem at all, because the resurrection will occur – as several Quranic verses attest – not on earth, but after a cosmic disturbance involving the collision and reordering of the heavenly bodies.⁵⁷ Thus the resurrection will occur “in a star, or a world larger than this world, and the eternal souls will take from it their material. People will be just the same (*hum hum*), just as a person’s body is recomposed (*yatabaddal*) in the mortal world several times and he remains just the same in his beliefs, morals, and customs”.

This *fatwā* is remarkable in several ways. First, the context of the *istiftā’* strikingly relates a conversation between friends, more evidence that these topics were widely debated. The attendance of the *mustafī* at the Law School further suggests (in conjunction with the al-Alfī *istiftā’* from the School of Commerce) that new faculties of higher education were the particular breeding grounds of such debate. The specificity of the *istiftā’* is also striking. Whereas al-Alfī would relay a very broad challenge to belief (modern science contradicts the existence of the creator), al-Ḥusaynī related a more narrowly constructed problem: how to explain the physical plausibility of an Islamic eschatological event, the resurrection of all humanity to face judgement, in light of what science (as in the article from *al-Mawsū‘āt*) has revealed about the finite materiality of human beings and the world. The two queries share, however, this quality of a scientific challenge to faith from a third party. Riḍā appears not exactly as a legal authority, but as an especially competent resource – “by virtue of [his] knowledge” – for helping readers respond to new intellectual challenges.

What was the nature of this knowledge? A clue can be taken from Riḍā’s choice to answer partly in a language resembling materialist polemic itself. His critique of the notion of “just recompense” as demanding the resurrection of the material body was not responsive, after all, to the question at hand – but it did afford him the opportunity to demonstrate his own facility with modern scientific knowledge. Even his defence of corporeal resurrection involved a good deal more naturalization of the idea than was necessary, or even consistent with his avowed methodology. Having started with the principle that such claims should not be subject to scientific inquiry, so long as they do not contradict reason, he could easily have concluded the point without so precise a discussion of the way in which the material of resurrection will be supplied by astronomical events. That he did so, I suggest, reflects a sense that in order to assert authority over the doctrinal question of whether resurrection will be corporeal, he needed also to assert authority – or at least let us say “competence” – in the scientific discourse that confronted his readers so pressingly.

Such a dynamic is apparent in Riḍā’s response to another 1904 *istiftā’*, in fact a question that built on this very *fatwā*. Muṣṭafā Rushdī al-Mawarī, of

57 Riḍā cited *Sūrat Ibrāhīm* 14.48, *Sūrat al-Wāqī‘a* 56.4–7, and *Sūrat al-Infīṭār* 82.1. Each evokes a time of cosmic upheaval, which Riḍā understood to solve the scientific problem presented in this *istiftā’*.

Zagazig,⁵⁸ was puzzled by Riḍā's understanding of the ephemerality of the human body: how can it be that the body's material changes, when a tattoo will remain visible throughout a person's life? In response, Riḍā explained that every time a cell dies, another cell, in many respects identical, takes its place. Thus, "a tattoo is among the qualities that moves from dead cells to living cells, for it is not a dye on the surface of the skin, but rather part of what the blood and nerves are affected by – like a natural colour. So too, surgical scars on the stomach are permanent, for the living cells that are left by the dead ones at the site of the scar, take their form, and by this you may analogize".

This is a difficult exchange to categorize as *iftā'*. To begin with, it is only in a world of print and the "public" *fatwā* that such a back-and-forth can even occur.⁵⁹ Note, too, that while the ultimate object of the question remained eschatology, the specific point of dispute on which it turned was a phenomenon of biology. And it is emphatically in the language of biology that Riḍā answered the challenge. The result was a *fatwā* that was substantially a piece of scientific exposition. The mufti had become a biology tutor.

One context in which to understand this development is the similar exchanges happening in *al-Mawsū'āt* and *al-Muqtaṭaf* at around the same time. Riḍā's readership had access to multiple sources of information on these ideas, including multiple sources that were happy to answer questions. All of them – at least to judge by the three we have looked at, including Riḍā thus far – were interested in negotiating a space in which one could accept certain methods and claims of natural science, without giving up on basic religious tenets. All of these attempts were the subject of a certain resistance or questioning from readers. Granted, there was a significant difference between the specific positions articulated – Riḍā thus far appears more conservative, to put it bluntly, than the *Muqtaṭaf* editors or *al-Mawsū'āt* – but that level of substance is not the only point of comparison. As emergent forms of public questioning and answering, some of the materialism exchanges in *al-Muqtaṭaf*'s "Masā'il" (questions) section do not look all that different from this exchange in the "Fatāwā" of *al-Manār*. It is worth noting, in fact, that the early volumes of *al-Manār* do not contain a "Fatāwā" section, but rather a section of *as'ila dīniyya* (religious questions, e.g. in volume four), or a *Bāb al-as'ila wa'l-ajwiba* (question and answer section, e.g. in volume five).

58 "Fanā' al-ajsād wa'l-ḥashr: ishkal", in al-Munajjid and Khūrī, *Fatāwā*, 174–5 (*fatwā* 70, originally published in 1904). The author requested two other, unrelated, *fatāwā* from *al-Manār*. See "Al-Talfīq wa'l-taqlīd", in al-Munajjid and Khūrī, *Fatāwā*, 67–70 (*fatwā* 27, originally published in 1903), and "Ṣundūq al-tawfīr fī idārat al-barīd wa-bayān ḥikmat taḥrīm al-ribā", in al-Munajjid and Khūrī, *Fatāwā*, 84–6 (*fatwā* 33, originally published in 1904). While the later *istiftā'āt* are methodological and practical questions in Islamic jurisprudence, Muṣṭafā Rushdī's interest in science surfaces in other published writings. See Muṣṭafā Rushdī, "Ilāj li-ḍu'f al-ma'ida", *al-Hilāl* 15 September 1900, 725–6; and "Bāb al-masā'il: al-wilāda min ghayr tazawwuj", *al-Muqtaṭaf* 30, 1905, 487. (The latter concerns the potential for asexual reproduction in humans.)

59 Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen has explored this idea further, arguing that *al-Manār*'s pioneering role in printing *fatwās* was part of a modern reinvention of the genre (Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State*. Leiden: Brill, 1997, 68).

Riḍā differed critically from the *Muqtaṭaf* or *Mawsūʿāt* editors in that he positioned himself as a mufti, an Islamic authority. His decision to rename the relevant section *Bāb al-suʿāl waʾl-fatwā* (the question and responsum section) in volume seven, and *Fatāwā al-Manār* (the responsa of *al-Manār*) from volume ten onwards, underscores this distinction. At the same time, the way in which Riḍā positioned himself as an Islamic authority can only be understood in the broader context of a public, printed discourse on the very questions he was called upon to address. In this context, in a world of rapidly expanding, widely circulated knowledge, we can make some sense of an *iftāʾ* in which the mufti's authority to pronounce on matters putatively beyond comprehension (*min ʿālam al-ghayb*) turns out to rest on his ability to explain cell reproduction.

If in these 1904 *fatwās* Riḍā engaged with such questions largely on the modern-scientific terms in which they were posed, at other times he responded in the Islamic-philosophical vein favoured by al-Afghānī and, for example, the angry readers of *al-Mawsūʿāt*. In 1912, Abu Hāshim Qurayṭ wrote from al-Sharqiyya⁶⁰ to enquire about a certain material account of the human soul. “What is your opinion”, he asked, “regarding what Ibrāhīm Effendi ʿAlī has claimed in his book, *Secrets of the Islamic Sharīʿa* – that Sunni scholars have said that the soul weighs an ounce (*uqiyya*)?”⁶¹

Ibrāhīm Efendi ʿAlī was a graduate of the *Dār al-ʿUlūm*⁶² and an instructor at the Khedivial College – thus, another example of the way in which these conversations seemed to flourish in the new educational institutions of colonial Cairo. But Ibrāhīm Effendi was no “atheist professor” like his colleague at the School of Commerce. His 1910 (1328 AH) book, to which the *istiftāʾ* refers, was a lengthy exposition of Islamic creed and jurisprudence, from belief in the Prophet's message to the details of inheritance law. The book's front matter boasted a *taqrīz*, a brief review and note of approval, from the Shaykh al-Azhar Salīm al-Bishrī.⁶³ The author sometimes went beyond traditional accounts, however, to include modern scientific evidence that supported the positions he wished to vindicate. Thus, in a discussion of varying doctrines on the definition of the soul, Ibrāhīm Effendi wrote: “The American Doctor MacDougall and his colleagues have affirmed that the soul weighs approximately an ounce, according to a test they performed on many bodies at the time of death . . . If correct, this supports the Sunni position (*madhhab ahl al-sunna*)”.⁶⁴ This kind of argument,

60 The same year, an Abu Hāshim Qurayṭ asked *al-Muqtaṭaf* whether Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and Gustave Le Bon's *La Civilisation des Arabes* had been translated into Arabic. (They had not.) “Aṣl al-anwāʿ wa-madaniyyat al-ʿarab”, *al-Muqtaṭaf* 40, 1912, 95.

61 “Wazn al-rūḥ”, in al-Munajjid and Khūrī, *Fatāwā*, 1147 (*fatwā* #442, originally published in 1912).

62 Established in 1873, this *Dār al-ʿUlūm* was an effort to incorporate a teacher's college into *al-Azhar*. See Reid, “Educational and career choices”, 353.

63 Ibrāhīm Effendi ʿAlī, *Asrār al-sharīʿa al-islāmiyya* ([Egypt:] Maṭbaʿat al-Wāʿiz, 1328). The biographical information also appears in the front matter of the book.

64 ʿAlī, *Asrār*, 47 n. 1. The author contrasts this notion of a material, organ-like soul with the view of the *muʿtazila*, for example. The reference to MacDougall vividly illustrates the diversity of sources which made their way into these *fatwās*. According to the *New York Times*, Dr Duncan MacDougall, “a reputable physician of Haverhill”, carried out a series of experiments in which a patient's deathbed was rigged to work as half of a

demonstrating the consistency of recent empirical discoveries with traditional doctrine, resembles Riḍā's own response to the 1904 questions.

This time, however, Riḍā disdained such an approach. In his relatively brief response he wrote:

I have not come upon a text in the Qur'ān (*al-Kitāb*) or the tradition (*al-sunna*) establishing the weight of the soul ... Scholars have many opinions that contradict each other [on this matter], as you can see in *The Book of the Soul (Kitāb al-rūh)* by Ibn al-Qayyim. Some of what is attributed from these positions to some of the Ash'arī Imams – were a Muslim today to say it, the mass of scholars of al-Azhar and others would consider him an unbeliever (*kāfir*): for example, the saying of al-Qādī Abu Bakr al-Bāqillānī, “the spirit is a manifestation of the body”, which is precisely what the materialists say today and of yore. You should not pay attention to opinions that are unconnected to any proof supporting them, regardless of their advocate.

Whereas the 1904 *fatwās* dealt directly with the empirical science of the questions presented, here Riḍā was more elliptical. Like al-Afghānī before him, he placed materialism, and specifically a way of talking about the materiality of the soul, in the context of a certain philosophical heritage. What he thinks of this heritage, however, is ambiguous. Is his observation that the theology of al-Bāqillānī⁶⁵ would today be considered unbelief a critique of the medieval theologian, or of the contemporary scholars of al-Azhar?

Riḍā had a complex relationship with both medieval *kalām* and the contemporary al-Azhar. According to Hourani, Riḍā's understanding of the *salaf* was more exclusive than 'Abduh's, which had included such early theologians as al-Bāqillānī.⁶⁶ Based on this *fatwā*, as well as the following one I analyse, a more complex assessment seems warranted. *Kalām* remained, if not a major source for Riḍā's agenda, at least a significant resource on which he drew when necessary. And an approving reference to al-Bāqillānī is perhaps not so surprising given Ibn Taymiyya's favourable opinion of the theologian, which would place him (along with Ibn al-Qayyim) safely within the bounds of *Salafī* sources.⁶⁷

very large, delicately calibrated balance, on the other half of which was placed a weight equal to that of the bed with the living patient in it. “In every case after death the platform opposite the one in which lay the subject of the test fell suddenly, Dr. MacDougall says. The figures on the dial index indicated the diminishment in weight.” “Soul has weight, physician thinks”, *New York Times*, 11 March 1907, 5.

65 Al-Qādī Abu Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ṭayyib “al-Bāqillānī” (d. 1013 AD), traditionally reckoned one of the key figures in the development of Ash'arī *kalām*. R.J. McCarthy, “Al-Bāqillānī (i.e. the greengrocer), the ḳādī Abu Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ṭayyib b. Muḥammad b. Dja'far b. al-Ḳāsim”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill Online, 2009).

66 Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 149 and 230.

67 McCarthy, “al-Bāqillānī”.

As for al-Azhar, Riḍā had a famously critical view of the contemporary ‘*ulamā*’. Their blind traditionalism, he felt, was a major obstacle to the revitalization of the Muslim community. The opposition of certain scholars to teaching modern science at al-Azhar was among the aspects of their intransigence that he singled out for criticism as early as the first issue of *al-Manār*.⁶⁸ In fact, recent scholarship has argued that Riḍā and like-minded ideologues of the early twentieth century were so forceful in these criticisms that they helped to create something of a myth of long-standing Azhari opposition to educational reform, when in fact such opposition – to the extent that it existed – was more concerned with protecting the autonomy of the institution than with rejecting useful knowledge.⁶⁹ Whether or not such an interpretation fully captures the reality of the late-nineteenth-century al-Azhar, it underscores quite well the fact that, in the early twentieth century, a debate over the value of different kinds of knowledge lay at the centre of a very public feud between Riḍā and certain of his ‘*ulamā*’ contemporaries. Riḍā’s critical view of the traditional centre of learning is another reason to think that the ambiguous reference to al-Bāqillānī was meant to be at the expense of the “scholars of al-Azhar”.

Another puzzling feature of Riḍā’s answer here is his dismissive treatment of a scientific point that appears to confirm an orthodox tenet, whereas in the 1904 *fatwās* he had been happy to take a scientific doctrine putatively opposed to a creedal point, and show how the two were in fact consistent. One possible reason for Riḍā’s shift in approach is that he felt comfortable using modern scientific justifications of religion himself, but thought it dangerous when others took to playing around with the same strategy. Malcolm Kerr has argued that Riḍā, in his later years, often rejected liberal conclusions that other thinkers reached using legal methodology that resembled his own. According to Kerr, this inconsistency makes sense in light of the “great gulf in educational background and cultural exposure” between Riḍā and major figures of the 1920s such as ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq. Riḍā would sooner contradict his earlier views than see them abused by those unqualified to interpret them properly.⁷⁰ Perhaps a similar phenomenon can explain the inconsistency we face in Riḍā’s willingness, or unwillingness, to use modern science as an element of theological reasoning. In his own hands, such a strategy might be useful; in the wrong hands, it might be dangerous.

Since this article focuses on Riḍā’s *fatwās*, I have not generally incorporated the rich body of his writing in the Quranic commentary called *Tafsīr al-Manār*.⁷¹ However, a short digression into Riḍā’s exegetical thoughts may shed more light on the tension he felt between, on the one hand, the harmony

68 See *al-Manār* 1, 1898, 812.

69 Indira Falk Gesink, “Beyond modernisms” (PhD dissertation, Washington University, 2000), 168.

70 Kerr, *Islamic Reform*, 207.

71 The authorship of the *tafsīr* that Riḍā published in the pages of *al-Manār* (actually entitled *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Ḥakīm*) is complex. Riḍā attributes much of the early material to Muḥammad ‘Abduh, whose lessons in *tafsīr* he attended at al-Azhar between 1899 and 1905. The section I analyse here, however, is late enough that it should simply be attributed to Riḍā. For Riḍā’s own discussion of the relevant textual history, see Al-Sayyid al-Imām Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-qur’ān al-ḥakīm al-mashhūr*

of Islam with modern science and, on the other, the potential for modern scientific thinking to encroach on religious territory. In his commentary on *Sūrat Yūnus*, Riḍā discusses the issue of miracles (*muʿjizāt*) and the scepticism of the materialists (*māddiyyīn*). He opens the discussion by casting it as part of his effort towards the “reform of Islam” (*iṣlāḥ al-islām*), which requires that people reach “the highest level of faith, befitting the human species’ rational sense”.⁷² In this spirit, Riḍā says that God gave the prophets two kinds of signs of his power and will. The first type of sign works according to the usual order of nature, whereas in the second kind of *muʿjiza*, God violates the normal rules. In Riḍā’s view, the first type of sign – the natural miracle, as it were – is not only the more common type, but also the more demonstrative of God’s power, because “the order of creation” (*nizām al-khalq*) illustrates God’s wisdom and mastery.⁷³

Yet, Riḍā insists, God has reason to violate this order from time to time. To maintain otherwise, Riḍā argues, is to reduce the world to a machine. The materialists, who adopt this mechanical view:

make themselves invent causes for everything that they see as violating the customary rules of nature (*al-sunan*), and call these exceptions “wonders of nature”, and analogize that of which the cause has not appeared to them with that whose cause they are convinced of, even if there is no certain proof for it.⁷⁴

This criticism of materialism calls to mind the earlier position of the *Muqtataf* editors, who pointed out that a dogmatic insistence on the natural causality of all phenomena can actually violate the standards of evidence by which materialists supposedly hold. For Riḍā, however, it seems that the mechanical worldview is not only unproven, but *a priori* unacceptable. It does not make sense to him to conceive of God as unable to violate the rules of his own creation.

At the same time, Riḍā’s critique of materialism in the *Tafsīr al-Manār* is framed within the discussion of a greater danger. Having defended the existence of supernatural miracles against the scepticism of materialists, he immediately remarks that the great majority of such supposed miracles are “superficial” and “artificial” phenomena, performed by the skill of humans, and credited as miracles due to the ignorance of the “masses” (*awwām*).⁷⁵ This point launches him into an attack on popular practices of saint veneration and the like. Thus, Riḍā has embedded his critique of materialism within the following context: the “highest level of faith” is the one befitting humanity’s “rational sense”; the greatest proof of God is the ordinary functioning of nature; most of history’s supposed supernatural miracles can be explained by the ignorance of the masses.

bi-tafsīr al-manār, ed. Ibrāhīm Shams al-Dīn, v. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1999), 19–20.

72 Riḍā, *Tafsīr*, v. 11, 199.

73 Riḍā, *Tafsīr*, v. 11, 200.

74 Riḍā, *Tafsīr*, v. 11, 200.

75 Riḍā, *Tafsīr*, v. 11, 201.

Riḍā may have disliked materialism, but he saw something like its antithesis – superstitious credulity – as a more common problem in the Muslim community, and a greater obstacle to the “reform” he advocated. This balancing of concerns, reminiscent of the dual focus that Eber has noted in al-Jisr’s *Hamidian Epistle* (see above), may also help explain why Riḍā appears to have been generally comfortable drawing on modern science in his *fatwās* (as in the 1904 answers to ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Ḥusaynī), yet occasionally pushed science away from the theological sphere, as in the 1912 answer to Abu Hāshim Qurayṭ.

How, then, would Riḍā choose to address the questions of Aḥmad al-Alfī in 1913? First was the question of the *ustādh mulḥid*, the atheist professor who was telling his students that natural science disproved the existence of a creator. Second, and in the same vein, was the question of *al-Muqtataf*’s assertion that only divine inspiration, and not scientific evidence, could prove God’s existence and unity. Riḍā responded to each question separately, weaving together the strands of classical philosophy, traditional natural theology, and contemporary scientific knowledge that we have seen in his previous *fatwās* and the debates of his peers.

The professor, said Riḍā, is ignorant on two levels, knowing neither theology (*al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*) nor natural science (*al-‘ilm al-ṭabī‘ī*). No thinking person – scholar or scientist⁷⁶ – has claimed that science disproves the existence of the creator. Only a few confused people have claimed that natural science neither proves nor disproves the existence of the creator. The great majority of scholars have affirmed the creator with rational proofs (*al-barāhīn al-‘aqliyya*) and scientific evidence (*al-ḥujaj al-‘ilmiyya*). Before detailing the nature of such proofs, then, Riḍā began by casting the atheist professor’s views as bizarre and extreme, far outside the bounds even of the scientific discourse which he claimed to advocate. Of course, the claim that science disproves the existence of the creator had been made explicitly, seriously enough for Riḍā’s former teacher, al-Jisr, as well as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, to write major refutations. And the notion of an agnostic science had emerged repeatedly in venues such as *al-Muqtataf*. If Riḍā was not being entirely faithful to the diversity of his contemporaries’ views, however, he was making a reasonable generalization about the relative popularity of the atheistic, agnostic and theistic camps. More importantly, he was underlining his own view – as expressed in the 1904 *fatwās* – that scientific knowledge posed no threat to traditional belief.

From this initial characterization of the debate, Riḍā proceeded to outline the kinds of proofs available to refute the professor’s claim. First, he referred the *mustafī* to the books of theology (*kutub al-kalām*), in which can be found many “rational proofs” (*al-adilla al-‘aqliyya*) for the existence of the creator. Next, he brought in the Quran and its “rational proofs and scientific, natural proofs” (*al-adilla al-‘aqliyya wa’l-adilla al-‘ilmiyya al-kawniyya*). To explain what he meant by the latter, Riḍā referred his *mustafī* to a certain article *al-Manār* had published in 1910: “the editor of *al-Muqtataf* wrote an article ... in which he explained the rational and natural evidence for the existence

76 Literally, “scholar or rational person” (*‘ālim aw ‘āqil*), which idiomatically means something like “no one with a brain”. Given the context, however, I understand Riḍā to be invoking the specific categories of *‘ilm* and *‘aql* (science and reason) at the same time.

of the creator, which we published in Dhū al-Ḥijja of 1328 [December 1910]". Riḍā unfolded his understanding of these proofs in more detail in his response to the second part of the *istiftā'* (on the unity of God), leaving the first *fatwā* more concise. This first response is still quite illuminating, however, in so far as it reveals his own classification of the sources of authority to which he appealed: rational, speculative theology (*kalām*), and natural theology (proofs from nature). Still more revealing is Riḍā's explanation of the latter – even as he characterized it as the method of the Quran – by reference to an article in *al-Muqtaṭaf*. In a sense, the reference invokes a third category of authority, namely the cultural authority of the premier Arabic journal of modern science, to buttress the appeal to reason and nature.⁷⁷

The reprinted article to which the *fatwā* refers is worth examining, as it reveals much about the confessionally and epistemically porous context in which Riḍā and his contemporaries debated God and science. The article appeared originally as the lead essay in the December 1910 issue of *al-Muqtaṭaf*, under the banner "His signs in His creation".⁷⁸ *Al-Manār* reprinted it the same month, with Riḍā penning an introduction entitled "Religion, atheism, and socialism: *al-Muqtaṭaf's* vindication of faith over scepticism".⁷⁹ In the introduction, Riḍā referred to a popular belief that the proprietors of *al-Muqtaṭaf* were atheists, and confessed that he himself was once under the same impression. A few years ago, however, he happened to have a debate with Ya'qūb Ṣarrūf, in which Riḍā argued that all existence must have been created. As proof, he cited the amazing system of the universe, which can hardly be a coincidence (the natural theology argument, similar to al-Jisr). We do not know the reality of its source, but we call it God, said Riḍā, and if the materialists acknowledge the truth of this position but call the source "matter", then the disagreement is merely semantic.

To Riḍā's surprise, Ṣarrūf agreed. "I wondered that day", wrote Riḍā, "is Dr. Ya'qūb Ṣarrūf really a materialist?" Riḍā found an answer to this question in *al-Muqtaṭaf's* lead essay that month, wherein the editor refuted one of the "socialist unbelievers" (*al-mu'aṭṭilīn al-ishtirākiyyīn*),⁸⁰ taking evidence for the creator from His signs in creation, "in the manner of the Quran, not in the theoretical manner of the theologians" (*'alā ṭarīqat al-Qur'ān, lā 'alā ṭarīqat al-mutakallimīn al-nazariyya*). Here Riḍā did reveal a preference for natural

77 Note that this appeal came in Riḍā's answer to the part of the question not related to *al-Muqtaṭaf*. Nor did Riḍā quote *al-Muqtaṭaf* only to a *mustafī* known to read it. See, for example, the *fatwā* on "natural age", in which Riḍā cited an article from *al-Muqtaṭaf* in order to defend the *ḥadīth* position that a person may live as long as 250 years. "Al-'Umr al-ṭabī", *al-Manār* 7, 1904, 266.

78 "Āyātuhu fī khalqihī", *al-Muqtaṭaf* 37, 1910, 1135–7.

79 Ryad refers to this article as evidence of Riḍā's growing respect for *al-Muqtaṭaf's* editors (Ryad, *Islamic Reformism*, 85.)

80 The article originally appeared in response to a provocative letter from Salamah Musa, a young Egyptian who had become a disciple of Bernard Shaw while in London, and who was translating into Arabic Shaw's eclectic brand of moderate socialism and eugenics. See Vernon Egger, *A Fabian in Egypt* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986). As I suggested earlier, the response to materialism could vary in relation to the political context in which it appeared.

theology, proving God from observation of nature, over the rationalist approach of *kalām*. He also showed a certain pleasure, it would seem, in taking a powerful example of natural proof for God from the pen of a Christian – reputedly sceptical – widely recognized authority on modern science.

By referring the reader to the article from *al-Muqataṭaf*, Riḍā also avoided constructing his own proof of God’s existence. In his response to al-Alfī’s second question (on the unity, as opposed to the existence, of the creator), however, Riḍā shed more light on how he himself would go about such a proof. He reminded al-Alfī – whom he recognized as a “knowledgeable person” (*min ahl al-‘ilm*) who would not need more than a reminder⁸¹ – of some of the rational and natural proofs for God’s unity. He began with the rational, setting out the classical proof of the “uncaused cause”. All consequents have a cause. If we agree that nothing in the universe can be the cause of its own existence, but must owe its existence to a previously existing cause, we cannot explain the ultimate origin of creation without reference to another type of cause, one which is not a consequent at all, but whose existence is sufficient unto itself (*dhātī lahu*). It is this ultimate cause that gives rise to everything else in existence – and to suppose the existence of a second such cause would lead to absurdity, since not more than one thing can be the source of everything else. This proof of the absurdity of polytheism resembles the basic *kalām* approach.⁸²

From this purely rational proof, in the style of al-Afghānī, Riḍā echoed al-Jisr and moved to a discussion of nature, and the commonplace observation that the oneness of the universe’s order must reflect the will of a single creator. Riḍā connected this principle with the Quranic verse, “Why, were there gods in earth and heaven other than God, they would surely go to ruin” (Q21.22).⁸³ He further observed that the natural proofs of monotheism include the opinion of most natural scientists (*‘ulamā’ al-kawn*) that all beings have a single source in matter and energy, whose essence and reality are unknown (*majhūl al-kunh wa’l-ḥaqīqa*). Thus he wove together an old trope of natural theology (the oneness of nature), scriptural exegesis, and the contemporary view of natural science.

Probing the last element more deeply, Riḍā took up the issue of matter and energy. Scientists, said Riḍā, have said that “the actor (*al-fā’il*) on the original matter of the universe, which transformed it into evolving stages (*aṭwāran*) that moved from one to the other . . . is naught but an existing thing they call energy”, whose essence they cannot understand, but which can only function with knowledge and wisdom (*‘ilm wa-ḥikma*). If one were to claim that this force is merely a phenomenon of matter, proof is to the contrary, for such a claim would require that the evolving stages (*taṭawwurāt*) of the universe go

81 One notes here the emergence of a certain kind of autonomy for the *mustaftī*, who receives not a definitive, self-contained ruling, but a general guide to some reading he should do.

82 McGinnis and Reisman, *Arabic Philosophy*, xxix.

83 Translation, Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1955). Riḍā must mean that the “they” who would go to ruin (*la-fasadatā*, in the dual form) are heaven and earth; hence the idea that the existence of more than one god would produce some kind of cosmic disharmony.

back infinitely (*azaliyyatan*), when in fact they were created at a definite point (*ḥādīthatan qaṭ'an*). Here, the strands of modern science and classical thought, which together have wound their way through these exchanges, finally disappear into each other. The entire statement is made on the authority of modern science, which has advanced this theory about the interaction of matter and energy. By the end of the discussion, however, we could easily be in the world of medieval *kalām*. The question of the relationship of matter and energy blends into the terms of the createdness or eternity of the universe: independent energy acting on matter is divine creation *ex nihilo*, while energy-as-a-function-of-matter requires the absurd position that the existence of the universe goes back eternally. Finally, Riḍā punctuated the *fatwā* with a reference to another article in *al-Muqtataf*, a piece on “subliminal intelligence” from August of the same year.⁸⁴

The convergence of rationalist philosophy and modern, empirical science is on one level a philosophical problem: what we have assumed to be different epistemes might not be categorically distinguishable. As epistemic traditions, however, they are at least historically distinct in so far as we can identify the varying contexts out of which they emerged for Rashīd Riḍā, and the varying purposes they served in his responses to materialism. For Riḍā, trying to respond with authority to basic challenges to Islamic faith, and doing so in a world of increasingly available and multiple venues of knowledge and debate, philosophical coherence was perhaps not even a priority. The point was to answer, and if the tradition of rational proof could answer, then let it be a rational proof; if modern science could be used for natural theology, then let it. And if the Christian editor of a popular journal of science seemed to have a similar answer to similar questions, then borrowing some of his cultural authority would be a good idea, too. As with the debate on Riḍā's political thought, much can turn on whether one approaches him as a theorist, who should have a consistent body of doctrine – in which case one may well be disappointed – or one understands him primarily as a journalist, whose writing acutely reflects the changing circumstances of each day, or each question, not out of intellectual poverty but out of commitment to a certain kind of activism.⁸⁵

In making use of eclectic tools, however, Riḍā was also refashioning the role of the mufti and of *iftā'* in society. The kind of knowledge which Riḍā evinced in these *fatwās*, after all, was impressive but hardly singular. How many people understood a bit of biology, or read articles in *al-Muqtataf*? The origin of these *istiftā's* in educational institutions suggests a growing number. In a sense, then, the very assertion of authority over explaining cell reproduction, for example, or the interpretation of popular science more generally, was itself a concession, in

84 “Al-‘Aql al-bāṭin”, *al-Muqtataf* 43, 1913, 153–6. Riḍā did not elucidate his purpose in citing this article, but he could have understood from it that the existence of a universal, animating intelligence was a hypothesis of contemporary science.

85 Paradigmatically, herein lies the difference between Kerr's critique and Haddad's re-reading of Riḍā's views on the caliphate. More recently, Dyalah Hamzah has argued strongly for understanding Riḍā as a journalist. Cited in Umar Ryad, “A printed Muslim ‘lighthouse’ in Cairo: *al-Manar*'s early years, religious aspiration and reception (1898–1903)”, *Arabica* 56, 2009, 27–60.

so far as it opened the door for the burgeoning population of people with knowledge of such areas to participate in a discussion. Thus we begin to see a shift from a “relation of power” between *‘ālim* and *jāhil*,⁸⁶ to a place in which the mufti certainly pieced together a kind of authority, but in some respects was only leading a debate.

Conclusion

Ahmad Dallal has argued that a seminal characteristic of Riḍā’s contribution to Islamic thought was his effort to make Islam speak definitively to all aspects of life.⁸⁷ Dallal emphasizes that Riḍā’s legal methodology expanded the authoritative voice of the sharia into domains traditionally beyond its purview. He points out that this expansive vision of the sharia makes sense in light of the fact that Riḍā (unlike the classical jurists of Islam) lived in an age of nation states, in which law was understood to be unitary and all-encompassing.⁸⁸ Elsewhere, discussing Quranic exegesis, Dallal has made a parallel observation concerning the modern vogue of *tafsīr ‘ilmī*, a kind of exegesis that, he argues, radically expands the traditional scope of its genre in order to read the Quran as “a book of science of sorts”. Dallal observes that this trend only arises in an age in which a “hegemonic culture of science” has come to compete with scripture’s claim to knowledge.⁸⁹ In both cases, Dallal highlights the unprecedented expansion of religious authority that follows from the approach of Riḍā (or his intellectual cousins) to aspects of modernity.

Dallal’s analysis is persuasive, but it does not tell the whole story. As I have emphasized in this article, the expansion of religious authority, at least where the modern sciences were concerned, gave it a peculiar character, both composite and unstable. Riḍā’s *fatwās* on materialism show his acquaintance with and interest in the new sciences, as well as his ability to read them in light of the older traditions of philosophy and natural theology on which his teachers had relied. As *fatwās* on a particularly empirical, atheistic brand of materialism, debated in print by people educated in new institutions, they are nothing if not an expansive effort to make Islamic tradition speak authoritatively to modern challenges. At the same time, they show the precariously constructed nature of Riḍā’s authority. Drawing not only on traditional ways of addressing the challenge of materialism, but also trying to master the popular scientific literature of his own day, Riḍā could appeal in one breath to *kalām* or the Quran, and in the next to his Christian colleague at *al-Muqtataf*. The point was not to answer questions in a way that articulated a consistent interpretation of science and religion, but simply to answer every question. To do so convincingly required a

86 Cf. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Brinkley Messick and David S. Powers, “Muftis, fatwas, and Islamic legal interpretation”, in Khalid Masud et al. (eds), *Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and Their Fatwas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 21.

87 Dallal, “Appropriating the past”, 355.

88 Dallal, “Appropriating the past”, 357.

89 Ahmad Dallal, “Science and the Qur’ān”, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān* (Washington, DC: Brill, 2009). The parallelism of these two arguments is my characterization, not Dallal’s, so far as I am aware.

mastery of sources that would carry weight in an ongoing, public conversation. But these sources, the knowledge on which rested the mufti's authority, were no longer privileged territory. The invocation of a dynamic blend of the traditional and the new, scientific and philosophical, Christian and Muslim, gave even the most substantively conservative *fatwā* new, open-ended implications for the role and authority of the mufti.