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Christian-Muslim Relations
A Bibliographical History

Volume 11. South and East Asia, Africa and
the Americas (1600-1700)

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Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī

Nūr al-Dīn ibn ‘Alī ibn Ḥasanjī ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥamīd
al-Shāfi‘ī l-Ash‘arī l-‘Aydarūsī l-Rānīrī

7

DATE OF BIRTH Late 16th century

7

PLACE OF BIRTH Rānīr (present-day Rander), Gujarat, India

DATE OF DEATH 21 September 1658

PLACE OF DEATH India

BIOGRAPHY

Information about the early life of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī is limited. His full name points to his likely place of birth, his identification with the Shāfi‘ī legal school and his having studied *taṣawwuf* with the founder of the ‘Adarūsīyya order, Sayyid ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd Allāh Bā Shaybān al-‘Aydarūsī (d. 1656). It is also likely that he was of Ḥaḍramī ancestry.

Al-Rānīrī undertook a *hajj* to the Arabian sacred sites in 1620/1. According to his monumental seven-volume historical work ³¹ *ustān al-salaṭīn*, he arrived in Aceh in 1637 to take up an ¹ appointment as Shaykh al-Islām under the new sultan, Iskandar Thānī. He remained in this position for seven years before being driven from Aceh by adversaries who were championing the cause of his successor, Sayf al-Rijāl. Al-Rānīrī wrote 14 works during his time in Aceh, and up to approximately twice that number throughout his lifetime, covering a range of the Islamic sciences: theology, law, traditions and Sufism, as well as writing on history.

Al-Rānīrī was a dedicated polemicist, and he was the principal driving force behind several instances of book burning and a number of executions. In much of his writing, he bitterly attacked those followers of the Wujūdiyya whom he deemed heretical, especially the followers of the two famous earlier Acehnese Sufi scholars, Ḥamza Fanṣūrī and Shams al-Dīn al-Samatrā‘ī. However, at times his ire was turned on adherents of other faiths, especially Christians.

His style as Shaykh al-Islām was divisive, and his tenure of the position was marked by great social and religious turmoil. After ¹² being driven from Aceh, al-Rānīrī returned to his native Rānīr, where he spent the remaining 14 years of his life writing on various subjects, including matters of debate that had arisen during his time in Aceh.

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WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Ḥujjat al-ṣiddīq li-dafʿ al-zindīq, 'The proof of the truthful in refuting the heretic'

DATE 1641-4

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic

DESCRIPTION

The Arabic and Malay text of this work contained in the London manuscript occupies 27 pages, of which only two make direct reference to Christians.

In this work, al-Rānīrī sets out to refute what he considered to be the pantheistic teachings of his two predecessors as spiritual leaders in the Sultanate of Aceh. He establishes a clear dichotomy at the outset, declaring, '... whoever has the fine succour of God then he would assuredly follow them, but as for him who fails to follow them, verily he is from amongst the Deviators and the Zindīqs' (al-Attas, *Raniri and the Wujudīyyah*, p. 98; references that follow are to this work unless otherwise stated).

Al-Rānīrī categorises doctrines regarding the being of God according to the four schools of Islamic thought he identifies: the theologians, the Sufis, the philosophers and the Wujūdiyya, or those adhering to the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, of which there are two groups: the true and the heretical. He considers the founder of *wujūdī* thinking, Ibn al-ʿArabī, as a follower of the *ṭ*th. However, he declares, the heretical Wujūdiyya consider that '... the creatures are God's Being and the Being of God is the being of the creatures... nothing exists but God' (p. 98). He warns of violent retribution for such heretics, insisting that they are deserving of death and fire.

It is at this point that al-Rānīrī's polemic equates the heretical Wujūdiyya with Christians. He cites Qur'anic verses in support of his views:

Their sayings and belief are like those of the Christians who say that Jesus is the son of God. As God most exalted says: “And the Christians say that the Messiah is the son of God” [Q 9:30]. Some of them... that God is the third of three, as God says: “They have become unbelievers who say that verily God is the third of three” [Q 5:73]. And some of them say that the prophet Jesus is in fact God. Furthermore the Christians maintain that God descended from the realm of divinity... into that of humanity... and that having done so He proceeded to return to the sphere of divinity. Such sayings and beliefs are a rejection of the truth, for God says: “They have disbelieved who say that God is Jesus son of Mary” [Q 5:72] (pp. 104-5).

After further polemic against the heretical Wujūdiyya, al-Rānīrī restates the link between this group and Christians: ‘Thus whosoever wishes to interpret God as the Universe and the Universe as God, and man – so they say – is God, then he has committed perfidy against God and His Messenger, and has upheld as true the beliefs of the Jews and the Christians’ (pp. 104-5).

Similar references critical of Christianity are found in other works by al-Rānīrī. Elsewhere, he portrays the biblical materials as falsified, and therefore suitable for being used as toilet paper. Furthermore, in describing Jews and Christians he tends to favour the term *kuffār* (infidels) over *ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book) (Steenbrink, *Jesus*, pp. 194-5).

SIGNIFICANCE

The extent of reference to Christians in this work is limited. However, the significance of the views expressed in these brief references is increased by the polemical discussion that precedes them. In effect, al-Rānīrī suggests that the measure of heresy among the ‘heretical Wujūdiyya’ can be gauged by the extent to which their views resemble those of Christians. For him, it is evidently a given that Christian doctrines regarding the nature of Jesus Christ represent heresy, so a method of delegitimising the views of his opponents is to equate them with Christian views.

This may well provide a window into his own context, whereby the equating of any contentious Muslim group with Christians was a device to undermine the authority of the group concerned.

Al-Rānīrī was driven out of Aceh in 1644, so the impact of this work and his other writings in providing a template for future Christian-Muslim interaction must have been limited. Nevertheless, similar views are found in later Muslim polemical writing from the region, and for

some Muslims, at least, al-Rānīrī no doubt played a role in shaping and supporting negative attitudes towards Christians.

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Peter Riddell

Tibyān fī ma'rifat al-adyān, 'An exposition on the understanding of the religions'

DATE Between 1641-4

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Jawi Malay

DESCRIPTION

This work was commissioned by the Acehnese Sultana Şafiyat al-Dīn Shāh (r. 1641-75). It occupies around 130 manuscript pages and draws heavily on *Kitāb al-tamḥīd* by Abū Shukūr Muḥammad al-Sālimī (d. c. 1080). Al-Rānīrī's major goal in this work is to undertake a study of the world's religions and to make an assessment of the truth of other faiths. The first part considers the religions of the world apart from Islam, while the second part is devoted to a study of Islam and its 72 sects.

In discussing Christianity in the first part, al-Rānīrī reports that some Sunnī scholars recount that Jesus was able to recite the Torah, having received revelation directly from God. The Jews did not believe him so, in an unusual twist to the biblical timeline, the prophet Ezra was raised from the dead and testified that Jesus was correct. Satan intervened, declaring Jesus and Ezra to be sons of God, thus corrupting the message of Jesus.

Al-Rānīrī engages in a further polemic against an unnamed Jewish scholar, almost certainly the Apostle Paul, who serves as the teacher of Nestor, Jacob and Melchion, after whom are named three Christian sects, the Nestorians, Jacobites and Melkites. They in turn contribute to the further corruption of the message received by Jesus, resulting in Christianity's divergence from God's revealed word.

In this work, al-Rānīrī describes Christians as 'a wicked people'. These references supplement other sporadic mentions of Christians in his *Bustān al-salaṭīn* and *Hujjat al-ṣiddīq li-daf' al-zindīq*, emphasising his attitude of exclusivism and hostility towards Christians and Christianity.

SIGNIFICANCE

This work represents a pioneering study of comparative religion in the Malay world. Although the polemic against Christianity only represents a relatively small part of the work, it is consistent with prior and later accusations of the corruption of Christianity at the hands of Paul and his students.

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