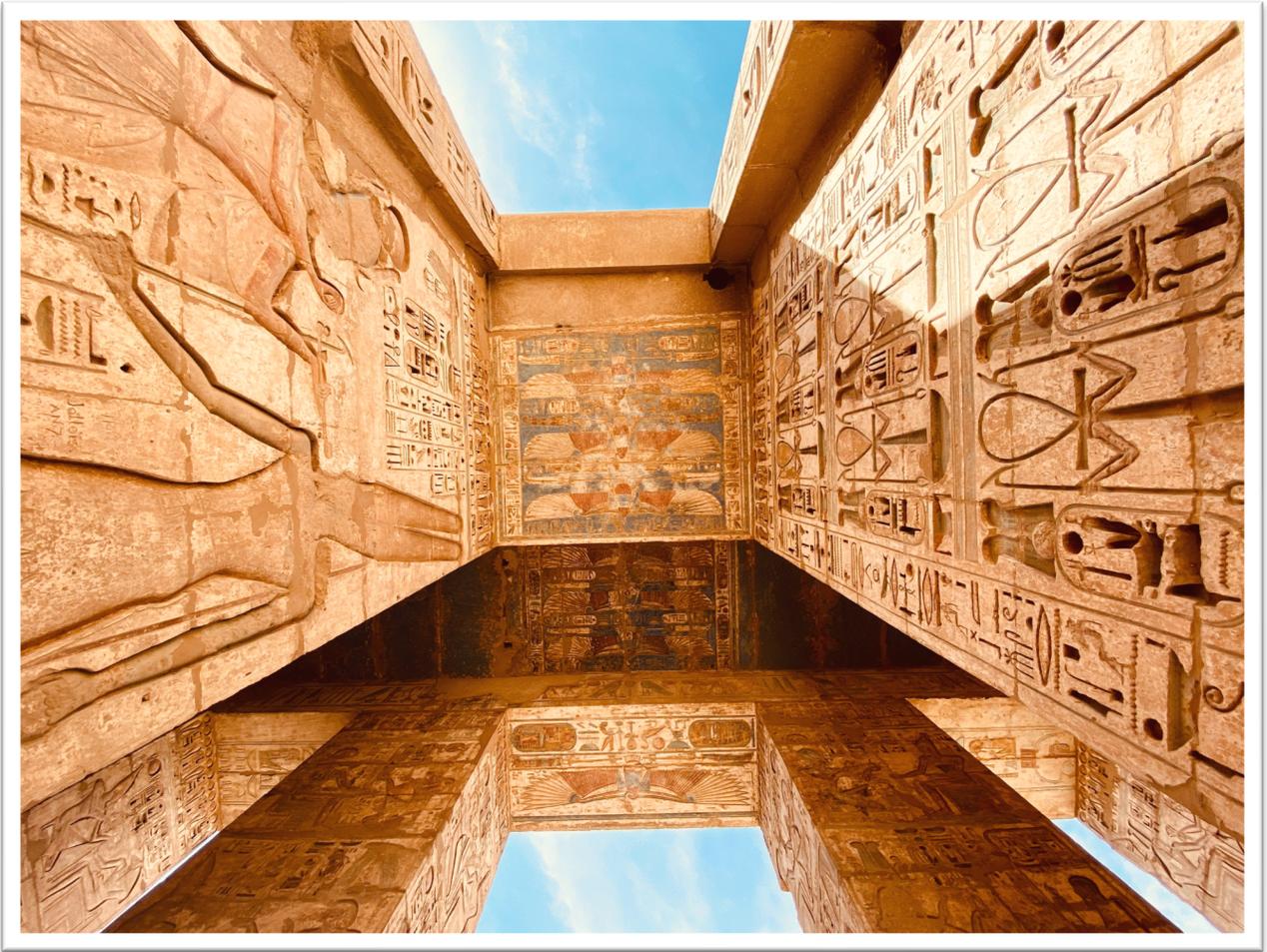


# The Spirituality of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Egyptian Cinema

*The Case of Sitcom Titr,  
Novels of Naguib Mahfouz  
and Poems of Sayyid Hijāb*



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A cursory analysis of the social and religious landscape of contemporary Egypt, since the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and until the present day, might portray a once religious society overwhelmed by various secularizing trends, embodied by the socialist regime of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser (d.1970), ushering forth of *al-qānūn al-madanī* (civil law) and contemporaneous rise of *'ilmāniyya* (secularism proper). Such investigations might also conclude that the only remaining bastions of religiosity in this once thriving region of the Ottoman Empire are movements of politicized Islam, such the Muslim Brotherhood, or official institutions like the prominent al-Azhar University.

Indeed, Saba Mahmoud's *Politics of Piety* presents one such portrayal of the contemporary religious landscape in Egypt, wherein the experience of faith revolves around debates about law, marital problems or controversial lectures given by female scholars in mosques. However, what this study, and others, unfortunately miss is an altogether different manifestation of faith that more harmoniously, I believe, captures the drastic changes which took place in this country during the past century. The distinct contours of this new religious aura seem to transcend boundaries of organized religion to focus instead on deep spiritual motifs, found in many faith traditions; including those most visible in Egypt's history and present reality: Christianity and Islam.

The subtle dynamics governing the circulation and production of this 'different manifestation of faith', has made its detection and appreciation more difficult in academic research. First, the advent of *al-qawmiyya al-'arabiyya* (pan-Arab nationalism) and its manifestation, in this country, in the form of Egyptian pride, has propelled *'āmmiyya* (vernacular Egyptian Arabic) beyond the confines of everyday use to a national language of cultural



efflorescence, alongside *fuṣḥā* (classical or Modern Standard Arabic). Second, also due to the rise of nationalism, any discursive exploration of faith and religion that wishes to gain wide circulation must be presented, in terms of both content and style, in a narrative that can address this new ‘Egyptian citizen’ in all of his or her cosmopolitanism, regardless of any ethnic, political or religious affiliation.

In this light, proceeding from – and in response to – the intellectual attempts of the *Nahḍa* (Arab Renaissance) movement to steer away from the pre-modern homage to spirituality – or religion altogether – and more towards the enlightened European fascination with rational science and civil rights coupled with the idea of the nation state, a new genre of literature emerged to capture and propagate this new cosmopolitan and universal spirituality. One may choose from many examples as revolutionary works here; for the purposes of this presentation however, I would like to briefly discuss the immense contributions of Naguib Mahfouz (d. 2006), *amīr al-riwāya al-‘arabiyya* (prince of the Arabic novel), and his countless novels which helped usher in an age of universal faith, suitable for cosmopolitan, nationalist Egyptians.

A fitting place to begin is Mahfouz’s acceptance speech for the illustrious Nobel Prize in Literature, which he was awarded in 1988 and where he described himself as “the son of two civilizations that at a certain age in history have formed a happy marriage. The first of these, seven thousand years old, is the Pharaonic civilization; the second, one thousand four hundred years old, is the Islamic one.” Mahfouz succinctly characterizes one important aspect of this new cosmopolitan spirituality in post-Ottoman era and post-*Nahḍa* Egypt: the pre-Islamic heritage of the ancient Egyptian civilization, which is still regarded by some religious scholars, from many



faith traditions, as a polytheistic abomination from the age of *jāhiliyya* (ignorance), is now considered an essential component in defining the identity of the Egyptian citizens; in turn, also molding their sense of spirituality and tradition.

This becomes even clearer in Mahfouz's definitions of these two civilizations and what he perceives to be their greatest achievements. First, the novelist sarcastically recounts, very briefly, various aspects of the ancient Egyptian civilization which he does not want to 'linger' upon; among these he includes: "conquests and the building of empires", "it was guided for the first time to the existence of God and its ushering in the dawn of human conscience" and "its achievements in art and literature, and its renowned miracles: the Pyramids and the Sphinx and Karnak." Among these, the perception that the ancient Egyptians were the first to believe in the existence of God emerges as an extraordinary example of this new cosmopolitan spirituality and its re-imaginization of its sacred past.

This is supplemented by what Mahfouz actually wishes to discuss about this first ancestral civilization of his: a short story meant to highlight the humanistic achievements of the first Egyptians. To paraphrase, one of the Pharaohs heard that one of his wives engaged in an extramarital affair with a man from his royal court. Instead of killing them both immediately, which Mahfouz states was "in the spirit of the time", the Pharaoh seeks council from his 'men of the law', in order to apply justice accordingly. With this story, Mahfouz remarkably portrays Pharaohs as pre-Islamic paragons of legal due process, for which the Islamic *sharī'a* is itself praised. All the while, an arch nemesis of God and his messengers in the Qur'an, 'Pharaoh', emerges here as the upstanding figure who undertook this project.



Transitioning to Mahfouz’s description of the Islamic civilization, the author begins the same way he introduced his other ancestral origins: by recounting those aspects of Islam he does not wish to linger upon. These include: “the establishment of a union between all Mankind under the guardianship of the Creator, based on freedom, equality and forgiveness”, “great prophet”, “conquests which have planted thousands of minarets calling for worship, devoutness and good throughout great expanses of land from the environs of India and China to the boundaries of France” and “fraternity between religions and races that has been achieved in its embrace in a spirit of tolerance unknown to Mankind neither before nor since.”

Clearly, Mahfouz has in mind not any specific superiority of Islam, above and beyond other world religions, but rather its universal emphasis on a primordial belief and worship of God, combined with the key description he provides at the end, pertaining to a ‘fraternity between religions and races in a spirit of tolerance’. The Egyptian author continues to provide further context for this inherent cosmopolitanism which he perceives in Islam by recounting another historical incident; this time between the medieval Muslim and Christian communities, respectively represented by Arabia and Byzantium. Mahfouz states that in a decisive battle against the Byzantines, the Muslims gave back their enemies’ “prisoners of war in return for a number of books of the ancient Greek heritage in philosophy, medicine and mathematics.”

What Mahfouz presents us with here is a re-imagining of one’s sacred history in lieu of new contemporary motivations and biases. The brilliance of this reformulation is that it does not change the past itself, but only the lens of language and thought through which the events and



people from that period are described and interpreted. During a time period of Egypt's contemporary history, particularly the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this universal spirit of faith and cosmopolitanism, evident in Mahfouz's writings and perspectives, flourished in Egyptian artistic productions, including – most auspiciously – cinema and television. The imprint Mahfouz himself had left in this arena of culture is vivid in the numerous adaptations of his works to *aflām* (films) and *musalsalāt* (television sitcoms/serials).

First, it is worthwhile mentioning that not only were Mahfouz's novels adapted into films and sitcoms, but the author himself wrote screenplays specifically for these mediums, during the 1940's and until the end of the 50's. These are nineteen screenplays in total in a variety of genres, from love stories, like *'Antar wa 'Abla*, to horror narratives, like *Rayya wi Skīna*. Beginning in the 1960's, however, Mahfouz's own works became the center of attention for Egyptian cinematography, with twenty-eight of the most iconic films in Egyptian film history being adaptations of his novels. Thenceforth, beginning in the mid-seventies, the author's novels also entered the circulation of television series. It is in this latter genre that Mahfouz's spiritual motifs flourish vividly and eloquently.

We need only focus on one such work, *Ḥadīth al-Sabāḥ wa-l-Masā'* (Conversation of Morning and Evening); a familial and genealogical drama that focuses on an Egyptian family carrying the name 'al-Naqshbandī'. This appellation by itself reveals Mahfouz's spiritual inclinations; for Naqshbandiyya is one of the most prominent Sufi *ṭuruq* in Islamic history, with a considerable presence in Egypt. However, here, the Egyptian novelist, in a similar fashion to his creative rendering of early Islamic history, also situates this name of a Sufi order within a new



context of post-Ottoman Egypt, where religion and spirituality are distinctly nationalist and encompassing of the country's entire – even pre-Islamic – history.

Whereas Mahfouz's original novel explores the numerous characters in this family in an alphabetic order, the sitcom adaptation, produced in 2001, instead weaves these figures in a masterful epic, where a young descendant – removed several generations – of the family's progenitor, Yazīd al-Maṣrī, is on his death bed and trying to traverse his way through purgatory to paradise. However, this young man, known simply as 'Naqshbandī', is at the peril of suffering an eternal life of misery because he had strayed from the pious ways of his family. Lest that happens, the sitcom begins in the first, from some thirty, episode with this Naqshbandī meeting the spirit of his ancestor, Yazīd, who helps to save his distant grandson precisely by telling him about the mystical heritage of his family.

It is this spiritual ambiance of the Naqshbandī family in *Hadīth al-Ṣabāḥ wa-l-Masā'* that augments Mahfouz's, and the show's producers, sense of spirituality undergirding Egyptian culture. First, all members of this family appear to merit the colloquial Egyptian epithet, *makshūf* 'anhum al-ḥigāb (the veil is lifted from them); they are all able to communicate and perceive certain aspects of the 'unseen'. A couple of scenes where this 'unveiling' emerges emotionally involves Yazīd al-Maṣrī himself and his immediate family. This entire narrative is set in Ottoman-era Egypt, during which the Ottoman governors of the region take one of al-Maṣrī's sons, Dāwūd, to be trained in the janissary army. Naturally, al-Maṣrī's wife and Dāwūd's mother, 'Faraga', spends her days and years in misery due to the absence of her son. Then, some two decades later,



Faraga wakes up in the middle of the night and tells Yazīd to open the door because Dāwūd is waiting outside.

The figure of Dāwūd standing calmly at the door propels Faraga as one person who is *makshūf ‘anha al-ḥigāb*. A few episodes later, Yazīd receives a premonition that his hour of passing is drawing near. In order to prepare for this, al-Maṣrī hires workers to dig and prepare his own grave, with a small decorative shrine, and sells his shoe store. In an emotional exchange, when his assistant asks al-Maṣrī: “why do you want to sell this store that’s feeding so many poor workers?”, the former responds: *awiya, lākin bi-nbī‘ ayh wi bi-nishtrī ayh? ... Anā ba-fakkar wa rabbak huwa-lli bi-ydabbar* (Yes, but we’re selling what and buying what? ... I’m thinking, while your lord is the one who decrees!). All of this takes place while the actor who plays the role of al-Maṣrī, Aḥmad Māhir, is staring in the direction of heavens and weeping profusely.

The choice of Māhir for this role of al-Maṣrī is not haphazard, for the actor is himself a devout Sufī Muslim who, like this character, always has *dmū‘u ‘alā khaddu* (his tears are always on his cheeks). Undoubtedly, however, the actor’s spirituality harmonized with the character’s life in this scene due to the nuanced sense of spirituality and mysticism that originated in Mahfouz’s novel and was then brought to life more poignantly in this art production. This convergence of life and imagination emerges clearly in an interview with Māhir when he was shown the scene of al-Maṣrī preparing his grave and, upon its completion, looking up – again – towards the heavens and sighing: “Alḥamdulillāh!” When the camera returned to Māhir, the actor was, not surprisingly, crying. When asked by the show’s host about the reason for his weeping, the former replied:



“because this scene reflects *tadayyun wi rūḥāniyyit el-sha‘b al-maṣrī fi aṣāltu* (the religiosity and spirituality of the Egyptian people in its most pure tradition).

Beyond these words, both Māhir and his character al-Maṣrī embody the universal spirituality Mahfouz is trying to convey in his novels. Although both figures – actor and character – are Muslim, neither of them holds a religious profession (Māhir is an actor and al-Maṣrī is a shoe-maker); nor do they appear to be ‘religious’ in demeanor or dress (Māhir is clean shaven while his character al-Maṣrī only has a mustache and traditional Egyptian dress). In other words, this is an artistic rendition of the mystical spirit and faith that encompasses all Egyptians: Muslims or Christian, secular or religious. Of course, this is also evident in universal idioms present in the novel and screenplay of *Ḥadīth al-Ṣabāḥ wa-l-Masā’* that, aside from the fact that the Naqshbandī family is Muslim and the story’s language includes terms like ‘Shaykh’, the story does not really designate an Islamic experience, exclusive to its Christian – or any other – counterpart.

On the contrary, it is precisely the possibility that a Christian Egyptian actor or actress might play a role seminal to the Islamic faith which augments the universal spirit of faith undergirding such contemporary art productions. This was indeed the case in Mustafa al-Akkad’s groundbreaking film *al-Risāla* (The Message) that depicts the *sīra* (life and mission) of the prophet Muḥammad. There, the role of Sumayya, mother of the prophetic companion ‘Ammār b. Yāsir, who along with her husband were tortured and killed, was played by the prominent Christian Egyptian actress, Sanā’ Gamīl. In other words, this universal spirituality does not obliterate the identities of separate faith traditions, but rather combines them together into a kaleidoscope of a national treasure for all the Egyptian – or Arab – people to explore and engage with.



Our last stopping point in this presentation pertain to another aspect of these moving arts wherein the universal spirituality of contemporary Egypt emerges clearly; away from the plotlines and acting towards the highly celebrated soundtracks of T.V. sitcoms, known as *titr*. Like the frontier of screenplays and novels, the creative soil is also tremendously fertile in this area of Egyptian art. For our purposes here, I would like to focus on the poems of the Egyptian *shā'ir sha'bi* vernacular poet, Sayyid Ḥigāb. There are two main reasons for focusing on the contributions of this author. First, his poems ornament the most iconic *musalsalāt* (sitcoms) in Egyptian television. Second, his poetry capitalizes on the unique power of Egyptian vernacular *'āmmī* Arabic in order to captivate the listener and convey the universal mystical spirituality we have explored so far.

With this in mind, I would like to share some excerpts from two *titrs* by Ḥigāb, both of which belong to T.V. shows that depict the social reality of Egyptians during the late Ottoman and early nationalist period. In *Bawwābt el-Ḥalawānī* (The Gate of the Sweets-Maker), Ḥigāb eloquently encompasses the 'religiosity and spirituality of the Egyptian people in its purity' that caused Māhir to weep above:

*Illī banā banā maṣr kān fī-l-aṣl ḥalawānī*  
*Wi 'ashān kida maṣr ya-wlād, maṣr ya-wlād, ḥilwit il-ḥilwāt*  
*Wādī wi-bawādī wi-bḥūr wi-uṣūr wi-mawānī.*  
*Tawḥīd wi fīkr wi ṣalāh. Taratīl ghunā wi-btihalāt*  
*Wi kull da fī maṣr ya wlād, maṣr y awlād ḥilwit il-ḥilwāt.*

The one who built Egypt was originally a sweets-maker  
This is why, Egypt y'all ... Egypt y'all is the sweetest of sweets.  
A valley, steppes, seas, castles and sea ports.  
Monotheism, reflection and prayer. Singing chants and divine praises!  
And all of this in Egypt y'all, Egypt y'all. The sweetest of sweets.



The power of vernacular emerges clearly in Ḥigāb's masterful use of semi-homonyms, such as *wādī wi-bawādī* (a valley and steppes). This is only possible in vernacular, since in *fus'ḥā* (classical or modern standard Arabic) the plural of *bādiya* (steppe), *bawādin*, would render the rhyming endings in the *titr* impossible; a similar observation can also be made about *mawānī* (sea ports), the standard plural form of which is *mawāni*, also disrupting the rhyming 'ī' sound.

In this spirit, Ḥigāb encompasses both Muslim and Christian religious expressions in the next verse with the keywords: *tawḥīd* (monotheism), *fikr* (reflection), *ṣalāh* (prayer), *taratīl ghunā* (singing chants) and *ibtihalāt* (divine praises). As before, Ḥigāb capitalizes on the power of vernacular to offer a melodious alliteration to the listener's ear as they transition from *tawḥīd* to *taratīl* and finally *ibtihalāt*. Likewise, the ending rhymes of *ṣalāh* and *ghunā* make the flow of this verse effortless and symbolically encompassing of the diverse colors of the Egyptian religious life. Also, as before, this would be difficult in *fus'ḥā*, especially in the case of *ghunā*, the standard spelling of which is *ghinā*; breaking the harmonious flow of the poem.

Aside from the 'Gate of Ḥalawānī', it is perhaps Ḥigāb's poem that decorates the *titr* for *Layālī-l-Ḥilmiyya* (The Nights at Ḥilmiyya) which is more immortalized in the consciousness of contemporary Egyptians. This epic saga consisting of six parts, each of which has 30-40 episodes, narrates the social strife and daily life in the *sha'bī* (popular/folk) Cairene neighborhood of *ḥilmiyya* during the tumultuous period of British occupation and transition from monarchy to socialism in the 1940's and 50's. As above, Ḥigāb eloquently captures the main motifs enlivening Egyptian spirituality:

*Wi-mnīn bi-yīgī-l-shagan ... min-khtilāf-izzaman*  
*Wi-mnīn bi-yīgī-l-hawā ... min-i'tilāf il-hawā*



*Wi-mnīn bi-yīgī-l-sawād ... minil tama' wi-l- 'inād*  
*Wi-mnīn bi-yīgī-l-riḍā ... minil īmān bi-l-aḍā*

*Min-inkisār ir-rūḥ fi dūḥ-il-waṭan*  
*Yīgī-iḥtiḍār l-shaw' fi sign-l-badan*  
*Min-ikhtimār-il ḥilm yīgī-l-nahār*  
*Yi 'ūd gharīb-il-dār la-ahl wa sakan*

From where does anguish come from? From differing times  
From where does desire come from? From harmony between winds  
From where does darkness come from? From greed and stubbornness  
From where does contentment come from? From faith in divine decree

With the breaking of the spirit in the dawn of the nation  
Comes the passing away of longing in the prison of the body  
From the fermentation of a dream comes morning  
Whence one returns a stranger, no family or abode

Ḥigāb masterfully combines nationalist themes with expressively religious terms to mold this new universal Egyptian faith and mystical spirit ornamenting recent Cairene history. As before, the power of vernacular allows the poet to versify these sentiments in a manner that is difficult in *fuṣ'ḥā*.

This is vividly clear in the second verse, wherein Ḥigāb uses the same colloquial term, 'hawā', to refer to two standard Arabic words: *hawā* (desire) and *hawā'* (wind); thereby offering a linguistic performance of the harmony between the 'air of the Nile' that fills Cairo with life and moves all manifestations of divine and human love rooted in the life of the Egyptian people throughout history. In the second set of verses, the poet relies less on rhetorical techniques and more on his ability to render love of one's nation as a resurrection of ancient mystical spirituality. This is how transitions from the 'breaking of spirits' to 'dawn of country', 'death of longing' to 'prison of body' and 'fermentation of dreams' to 'morning' all synthesize to culminate in the contemporary Arab nostalgia for *il-zaman-il-gamīl* (the good ol' days); until then, the listeners are



bound by the agony of the last verse, they also are instances of this ‘stranger who returns to no family or abode’.

The next set of verses affirm this contemporary Egyptian – and Arab – dilemma of longing and pride; whence the poet asks: “why oh time, did you not leave us innocent? And why are you taking us down a road of no return? Our most painful wounds have caused an explosion of mockery, and the purest of laughs drowns in a sea of tears.” As readers, however, we wonder about the exact cause of this pain in Ḥigāb’s poetry and exact ‘good ol’ days’ which the nostalgia of his words capitalizes upon. Is the time period during which these masterful art productions were produced not a ‘golden period’ in its own right?

In order to appreciate the perplexity of this mixture (universal spirit and nostalgia), we need to situate this richness of contemporary Egyptian film and cinema within the recent history of the country; in itself, a paradoxical emergence. On the one hand, the arrival of Nassir’s regime in the mid twentieth century represents a triumph for Egyptian nationalism and departure from the corruption of King Farouk’s government and Ottoman ineptness to defend Egypt against, first, French then British occupation. On the second hand, this victorious rise of Nassir represents a series of short-lived joyful moments mixed with spikes of political disasters, such as the Six-Day war against Israel. Together, the *al-muwāṭin al-maṣrī* (Egyptian citizen) is left constantly nostalgic for a ‘golden age’ that is neither Nassirian nor Islamic-Ottoman, but a mixture of both.

This is clearly preserved and performed in the marriage between ‘love for the nation’ and ‘divine love’. It is a relationship that attempts to liberate motifs and concepts from their original



settings and presents them instead on a contemporary stage where all Egyptians can engage with them in their continuous journey for a nostalgic past; a path that in its solemn reflection upon bygone times, allows for an energetic motivation to improve a decadent present and unpredictable future. In other words, the story of spirituality and faith in contemporary Egyptian film and television is a tale of drastic fast changes in politics, society and religion and a people's attempt to make sense of this in lieu of their equally quickly maneuvering coming days.

And yet, it is precisely this 'sacred' devotion to art, in all its forms, that provides a sense of constancy for Egyptians. Lest we forget, art resides at the heart of Egypt's history since pre-Islamic times, attested to by the architectural mastery of the ancient Egyptians and their drawing or poetry that ornament the insides of the pyramids. Likewise, during both the Christian epoch and later Islamic rule, poetry and various other instances of flowering humanities exalt the history of this region. This is perhaps why the prominent Egyptian director, Aḥmad Ṭantāwī, saw it fit to produce a massive saga of Egyptian religious history, titled *Lā Ilāha Illa Allāh* (There is no god but God), narrating the emergence of Judaism in Egypt at the hands of Moses, and *Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh* (Muḥammad is the Messenger of God), exploring the coming of Islam to this country. Ultimately, Egyptians were able to engage their history, spanning thousands of years, only through a language as universal and embracing as art dressed in their vernacular dialect.

