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# From Repentance to Pious Performance

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The late Shaykh Mitwalli al-Shaarawi is one of the preachers most connected to the “repentance” of Egyptian artists. In the TV serial about his life “Imam al-Da’ah” his influence on artists is represented through the character of Badriyya. Badriyya is a good-hearted poor girl from the Shaykh’s natal village. At a young age she starts working in a coffeehouse and eventually becomes the owner of this coffeehouse. She constantly feels remorse and does not want her child to be raised in a coffeehouse. Instead of opening a “proper” business she is tempted to invest in the lucrative but “sinful” branch of entertainment and opens a nightclub. During her meetings with Shaykh al-Shaarawi she expresses her sincere intention to veil, to leave the sinful profession, and to open an orphanage but it takes many years and encounters with al-Shaarawi to finally “repent.”

Whereas Shaykh al-Shaarawi has always been modest about his influence on the repentant artists—stating that guidance is from God—many artists acknowledge his influence on them. Interestingly this also holds true for some of the leading actors and actresses in the TV serial. Shaykh al-Shaarawi is played by the actor Hassan Yusuf who stopped performing for a while after he and his wife Shams al-Barudi met with the shaykh. In the serial, Shaykh al-Shaarawi’s wife is played by Afaf Shoeib. She also met with al-Shaarawi and stepped down in 1992. She returned after ten years and started acting with a veil. Badriyya, played by the actress Sawsan Badr, also stepped down but returned unveiled.

Shaykh al-Shaarawi’s view on the shameful of art has apparently waned and new discourses on art and religion have gained relevance. Two decades later the star preacher Amr Khaled even begged the repentant artists to return and to use their God-given talents in support of the *nahda*, the Islamic revival.

## Two decades of “repentant” artists<sup>1</sup>

Shams al-Barudi was the first artist to publicly announce her repentance in 1982. During her pilgrimage to Mecca she had several spiritual experiences after which she totally changed her life from a seductive actress into a devoted believer, mother, and housewife. The dancer Hala al-Safi left the profession in 1986 after a vision in which the Prophet covered her loose hair. Actress Hanaa Tharwat and her husband quit immediately after their meeting with Shaykh al-Shaarawi. The singer Yasmin al-Khiyyam, daughter of the renowned Quran reciter Shaykh al-Hosari, continued until 1990 despite the pressure of al-Shaarawi who deemed Yasmin’s profession a disgrace for his friend Shaykh al-Hosari. She eventually left due to her responsibilities as manager of the charity organization al-Hosari, named after her late father.

**Since the 1980s, many Egyptian singers, dancers, and actresses, donning the veil, stepped down and publicly denounced art as shameful. Recently, such performers have reappeared veiled on screen. This article highlights the changing discourses on art that inform the artists’ choices. These celebrities have been instrumental in fashioning Islamic lifestyles suitable for the higher classes, a phenomenon which ultimately gave birth to a market for pious performances.**



**Shaikh al-Shaarawi and the artists, book cover**

In the early 1990s, a “caravan” of singers, dancers and actress “repented,” probably speeded up by the 1992 earthquake. Dancers Amira and Sahar Hamdi as well as actresses Shahira, Afaf Shoeib, Soheir al-Babli, Sawsan Badr, and Soheir Ramzi veiled and stepped down. They were accused of being paid by “Islamist groups” and forced to defend their genuine devotion. Spiritual experiences featured less prominently in their stories. Contacts with other repentant artists who gave religious lessons, preached, and invited preachers such as Omar Abd al-Kafi were crucial.

In the mid 1990s, young singers Hanan and Mona Abd al-Ghani, and actresses Abir Sharqawi, Abir Sabri, and Mayar al-Bablawi caused another shock in the secular press when they announced their decision to veil and to step down. Yet most of them returned after a few years of religious study and contemplation as a veiled actress or TV presenter of religious programmes. This inspired the older generation of stepped-down artists to return as well and presently Afaf Shoeib, Mona Abd al-Ghani, Soheir Ramzi, Soheir al-Babli, and Shahira are back on screen, the latter with a religious programme in Amr Khaled style. The latest case of “repentance” by an actress was Hanan Turk. Interestingly, she did not even retire but immediately started acting with a veil. Whereas initially it was difficult to find appropriate roles with a veil—it is forbidden on the Egyptian channels except in religious and historical plays—presently many serials and programmes financed by Saudi

Arabia and the Gulf States find their way into the Egyptian homes of the lucky “dish”-owners. During my fieldwork in 2006, a new Saudi channel, al-Risala, was opened and many veiled artists I had interviewed paraded on the screen.

## From Shaykh al-Shaarawi to Amr Khaled

The return of artists is partly related to a more relaxed religious discourse on art that emerged in the late 1990s. Whereas the repentant artists of the 1980s and early 1990s were mainly inspired by the conservative Shaykh al-Shaarawi and Omar Abd al-Kafi, around the turn of the century the moderate Islamist al-Qaradawi and young preacher Amr Khaled are favoured.

Shaykh al-Shaarawi (1911–1998) was venerated by many and died with an almost saintly radiation. He did not extensively tackle the topic of art but generally held that art is like a glass or knife. It can be used for good purposes or for bad ends. Female artists, however, are “itching the sexual instincts.” Shaykh al-Shaarawi was generally unfavourable towards work by women except out of sheer necessity. Citing that God rather prefers a woman’s prayer to be in her house than in the mosque, in her room than in her house, and in her bedroom rather than in her room, he concluded that acting, even with a veil, is not permitted.

Dr Omar Abd al-Kafi was born in 1951 and is a modern-looking shaykh without the customary imam head-covering and caftan. He has become (in) famous for his lectures on Judgement Day and "the torments of the grave." He was banned by the government. Although in general he holds that art is creativity whose right is right and wrong is wrong, he calls cinema the devils' home. Like Shaarawi his view on work for women is that the best place for them is to be protected at home.<sup>2</sup>

Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi is considered a moderate Islamist belonging to the *wasatiyya* movement.<sup>3</sup> He is very influential through new media such as *al-Jazeera* and *Islam Online*. Several pious performers presently consider his views on art authoritative and final. He firmly states that there is no conflict between piety and moderate entertainment. Reasoning that everything is permissible except if it is clearly stated that something is *haram*, he infers that art is *mubah*, permitted. Diversion is essential to recreate but one should find a balance between religious obligation and recreation. The present state of art, however, is totally corrupt and needs immediate repentance. Also his gender discourse is not encouraging for working women. He considers the home their "great kingdom." Anyone attempting to remove women from their kingdom in the name of freedom, work, or art is the enemy of women and is rejected by Islam.<sup>4</sup>

His younger colleague satellite preacher, Amr Khaled, is a rising star. In 1995, he entered the religious arena without religious education. He was banned by the government but through his connection with Yasmin al-Khayyam, he started working in her mosque. When he was faced with another prohibition, he left Egypt and now works for Dream TV and Iqra satellite channel. Amr Khaled treats women as serious believers and is not against women's participation in work on the condition that they are veiled. He emphasizes the immense importance of art. Beauty is essential in Islam and the Prophet enjoyed beauty and art. The Prophet did not reject the art present at his time but turned it into a tool for building and vitalizing the new community. This is according to Amr Khaled exactly what needs to be repeated at present. He calls upon all male and female artists to return and support the Islamic revival.

### Trend watchers and trendsetters

Although the discourse on art became more encouraging, the discourse on gender initially remained conservative. It is only with preachers such as Amr Khaled that ideas on gender, religion, and art are favourable for women's veiled return to art. The current stage of Islamization in Egypt is described as "post-Islamist": "thick in ritual, thin in politics" and mockingly referred to as "air-conditioned Islam."<sup>5</sup> After a period of violent clashes with militant Islamists, the broad piety movement that had been waxing in the form of mosque attendance, religious lessons, and religious literature and cassettes came to the fore. It did not only involve the lower and lower-middle classes but also reached the higher echelons of Egyptian society. Yet upon reaching the higher classes, the Islamization of life style got a distinctive flavour. It became comfortable and not too strict. To be wealthy, have fun, and recreate is no longer perceived as contradictory to piety. The post-Islamist trend created a need and a market for art and recreation in accordance with Islamic sensibilities.



opened an Islamic school, and Yasmin al-Khayyam has been influential in promoting preachers and in spreading Islamic charity to the higher classes. Artists have thus been influential in Islamizing the higher classes to which they themselves belong.<sup>6</sup>

When the market was open for Islamic recreation they were eager to return. When the options to return as a veiled performer increased, despite the discouragement of the Egyptian regime, they were happy to develop Islamic productions. They are no longer repentant artists but *multazim* or pious performers. Soheir al-Babli stipulates conditions in her contract: only with a veil, not being touched or embraced by men, except for a kiss on the hand or the forehead if the play needs it. The texts should only contain respectable dialogues on themes which make sense to people. Besides, the play should be about important themes in the Arab world and not a plain imitation of the West. Pious performers try to develop new Islamic aesthetics. When I asked them to mention good pious productions, the list was still fairly short. The TV serial on the life of the venerable Shaykh al-Shaarawi, though, was one of them.

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Veiled artists reflect the changing tides, yet they have also been influential in changing this tide. When the general climate and discourses on art and gender were restrictive, they stepped down. Like many women they veiled, followed religious classes, and became pious. Yet, if celebrities choose to veil and to leave the spotlights for the mosque it has an enormous impact on millions. They are trendsetters whether in fashion or veiling, in trendy lifestyles or in Islamic ways of lives. The early repentant artists started "Islamic salons," a new venue for displaying religious sensibilities and socializing for the bourgeoisie which is nowadays a widely-spread phenomenon in upper-middle class neighbourhoods. Several studied at Da'wah institutes and established themselves as preachers or—after returning to the screen—as televangelists such as Shahira. They decided which preachers were given the floor: first Omar Abd al-Kafi and later Amr Khaled. They started to work in Islamic businesses: Soheir al-Babli in Islamic fashion, Hassan Yusuf started an Islamic film company, Hala al-Safi

**Amr Khaled  
and the artists,  
book cover**

### Notes

1. I collected dossiers about 26 stepped-down or repentant artists and conducted interviews with 13 of them. There are many interviews and stories about them in newspapers and tabloids. The Islamist press warmly embraced their stories of guidance and revelation and widely circulated them.
2. M. Fawzi, *Shaykh al-Shaarawi ... al-'ilag bi 'l-Qur'an wa umur al-dunya* (Cairo, 2000); G. Abdo, *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
3. R. W. Baker, *Islam without Fear* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).
4. Y. al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* (Cairo, 1997).
5. A. Bayat, "Piety, Privilege and Egyptian Youth," *ISIM Review*, no. 10 (2002): 23; H. Tammam and P. Haenni, "Chat Shows, Nashid Groups and Lite Preaching. Egypt's air-conditioned Islam," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 2003.
6. See also Karin van Nieuwkerk, "Piety, repentance and gender: Born-again singers, dancers and actresses in Egypt," in M. Janson and D. Schultz, forthcoming.

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