A GOD IN SPITE OF HIMSELF

Introductory note

In Fathi Radwan (1911- ), literary interests have since childhood been coupled with ardent patriotism. The Faculty of Law of Cairo University, which he attended from 1929 to 1933, was the forcing ground of many literary and political as well as forensic talents. After his graduation, it was mainly in political trials that he exercised his professional skill, and a great deal of his energy also went into writing and into active politics. Like many Angry Young Egyptians of the thirties, he joined the Misr al-Fatih party and became its Secretary. Later, he transferred his allegiance to the Nationalist Party which had fallen on evil days since its foundation by his idol Muṣṭafā Kāmil, but which he hoped to regenerate; he was soon elected Secretary, then President. In the last years of the Monarchy, he was more than once accused of subversive activities and interned. His hour came in 1952 when he became the new régime's first Minister of National Guidance, then Minister of Culture until 1958.

He has published approximately forty books. Many consist of political memoirs, histories, and biographies of political figures (including Gandhi, Mussolini, de Valera, and Muṣṭafā Kāmil). Several are on Islamic subjects. One is a substantial survey of pacifism through the ages. Others are collections of thoughtful essays on a wide variety of topics. Finally, there are several volumes of short stories, and not a few plays, although it was not until 1955 that Fathi Radwan began writing for the theatre.

In realistic plays such as Shaggab li l-ijār, Fathi Radwan is not above making some of his characters speak colloquial Arabic. More often than not, however, he is dealing with philosophical themes, and for these it is the classical idiom that he favours; this he uses with dignity, but also with not a little suppleness, for—without ever straining the rules of classical grammar—he is able to give his dialogue some light touches, and even occasionally indulge in some facetiousness.

The translation below is of a one-act play, Ilāḥ raghīm anfīb, published in a collection of the same name in 1962. In a prefatory note, the author tells us that it was inspired by a news item according to which the Prime Minister of “a Far Eastern country”—actually, Nehru—was incensed to hear that he had been deified, and he ordered the police to destroy the statues erected in his honour.
The argument bears some resemblance to Muslim teaching on Jesus, and the play has some specific features that seem to point the finger to Christianity: the reference to the poor “inheriting the earth”, for example, and the stress laid on humility not merely in Man, but also in the incarnate Deity. Yet—as the translator has argued on a previous occasion (J. A. L., 2, 1971, pp. 185-6)—far from being prejudiced against Christianity, the playwright has attracted attention by his partiality to attitudes and ideas usually labelled Christian, such as pacifism and belief in the redemptive power of sacrificial love. These reached him through Tolstoy, whom he acknowledges as the supreme influence in his intellectual formation. His very references to humility and concern for the poor in this play betray not a polemical approach, but an assumption that such should be the distinguishing features of pious men of any confession. His Islamic background may have edged him towards the form in which the argument is presented, but the line taken is humanistic rather than distinctively Islamic. Although a good—perhaps a rising—proportion of Fathi Raqāwān’s writings is concerned with Islam, his interpretations are always markedly liberal. When he writes of the Prophet Muḥammad, it is always his human qualities that he stresses; indeed in one book he characterizes him as “the Supreme Revolutionary”. And it is not irrelevant to note that in Min Falsafat al-tashri’ al-Islāmi (1969, pp. 103-6), he makes the point that to expect God to speak through superhuman messengers is an aberration inconsistent with Man’s own God-given dignity.

Scene 1

(The last hours of the night, in thick darkness. Among the rows of statues in a long temple, someone is moving. He is walking cautiously and slowly, now appearing and now disappearing, his heart filled with fear and dread. At the end of the temple, behind the statues, some monks are assembled dressed in black, their heads shaven, burning incense in a censer from which elongated rings of smoke rise to commingle in the upper parts of the temple. Silence dominates the place, and the entire atmosphere inspires fear).

FIRST MONK: Did you hear?
SECOND MONK: Hear what?
FIRST MONK: The sound of movement . . . movement over in this direction (he points to where the man hiding among the statues is moving) . . . footfalls, clearly . . .