

Geographical Itineraries and Political-Social Paths in Amīn al-Rihānī's Journeys

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I. Introduction

In Muslim culture, *rihlah*² [journey] has always played an important role given that the Islamic faith is based on the journey, known as *hijrah* [departure-migration], of the Prophet Muhammad who moved from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD. According to Islamic tradition, after his move, the Prophet made two essential mystical journeys: the *isrā'* and the *mi'rāj*. The first, performed on the saddle of Burāq, the mythical winged horse, took Muhammad, accompanied by the angel Jibrīl, from Mecca to the esplanade of Jerusalem. The second journey, the *mi'rāj*, was a night journey in which Muhammad crossed the seven skies where he met the prophets who had come before him. Still, on the religious level, it must be emphasized that one of the five pillars of Islam is the *hajj* [pilgrimage] to Mecca, which in itself represents a critical travel opportunity. It is a mandatory journey to be undertaken at least once in a lifetime by all those who are physically fit and have the financial means to do so.³

With the advent of the classical (medieval) period, travelling retained its importance by becoming one of the main themes in Arabic literature, as evidenced by the many *rahbālah* [travellers] who have left a significant legacy. Some good examples are the Iraqi Ibn Hawqal, the Andalusian Ibn Jubayr (1145-1217), and the Moroccan Ibn Battūtah (1304-

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² In this article a simplified transliteration has been chosen to facilitate the reading of Arabic names. However, for the Arabic geographical names, the denomination with which those places are best known in the West was chosen.

³ About the travel in the Islamic religion see *Viaggio e ansia del ritorno nell'Islam e nella letteratura araba*, ed. A. Pellitteri and L. Denooz (Canterano: Aracne, 2019). The book also explores the journey in some works of modern and contemporary Arabic literature. On this topic see also *Tropes Du Voyage: Le Voyage Dans la Littérature Arabe. 1. Départs*, ed. A. Ghersetti (Padova: Studio Editoriale Gordini, 2010).

1368/1377). Ibn Hawqal, a traveller and merchant who lived in the tenth century, left Baghdad in 943 and, usually travelling on foot, he visited North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Sicily; the latter being visited in 973. Returning to Baghdad in 976, he described his many journeys in *Kitāb al-masālik wa 'l-mamālik*.⁴ A chapter of this work is dedicated to the city of Palermo, in all its architectural and cultural splendour inherited from the Arab civilization.⁵ The initial motivation behind both Ibn Jubayr's and Ibn Battūtah's departures was the pilgrimage, but they ended up visiting many other lands. The poet and geographer Ibn Jubayr crossed the Mediterranean several times and the account of his first voyage, which took place between 1183-1185, is recorded in the book *Rihlah*:⁶ departing from Granada, he saw Ceuta, travelled to Alexandria and then along the Red Sea coast up to Jeddah. After the pilgrimage to Mecca, where he stayed for several months, he set off again reaching Iraq, Syria, and Palestine, where he embarked on his return trip. He reached Messina, but was shipwrecked there. After a while, he resumed his travels, leaving Sicily by embarking at Trapani. He then headed to Carthage and, from there, returned to Granada. Later, the judge, botanist, and geographer Ibn Battūtah, called the Arab "Marco Polo," travelled for almost a quarter of a century (1325-1354) recording the places he had seen. From the lands of pilgrimage, he ventured beyond *dār al-Islām*,⁷ going as far as the Chinese ports. On his return to Morocco, he dictated the account of these travels through over forty countries, and the book, commonly known as *Rihlah*,⁸ in addition to describing places and cities, is accompanied by a rich array of geographical, historical, and socio-economic contemporary information.

⁴ For the entire text, see Ibn Hawqal, *Kitāb al-masālik wa 'l-mamālik* [The Book of Roads and Kingdoms], ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

⁵ F. Gabrieli, "Ibn Hawqal e gli Arabi di Sicilia," *Rivista degli studi orientali* 36 (1961): 245-253. See also *Viaggiatori arabi nella Sicilia medievale*, ed. C. Ruta (Messina: Edi.bi.si., 2003).

⁶ See *Ibn Jubayr, Viaggio in Spagna, Sicilia, Siria e Palestina, Mesopotamia, Arabia, Egitto, compiuto nel secolo XII*, ed. and trans. C. Schiapparelli (Palermo: Sellerio, 1995).

⁷ *Dār al-Islām* and *Dār al-Harb* are terms used by early Muslim jurists to define the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds.

⁸ The full title is *Tuhfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharā'ib al-amsār wa 'ajā'ib al-asfār* [Gift to Those Who Observe the Curiosities of Cities and the Wonders of Travels]. See F. Gabrieli, *I viaggi di Ibn Battuta (brani scelti)* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1961); *Ibn Battuta, I viaggi*, ed. M. C. Tresso (Torino: Einaudi, 2008). See also H. Kilpatrick, "Between Ibn Battuta and al-Tahtāwī: Arabic Travel Accounts of the Early Ottoman Period," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 11 (2008): 233-248.

Since the nineteenth century, the genre of travel literature has been one of the most important vehicles for Arab interaction with the West, introducing the Arabs to Western culture and civilization. Leaving aside the modality and any possible consequence stemming from the encounter of the two culture which are not the subject of this work, here we shall limit ourselves to stressing the fact that with the economic, social and cultural awakening, known as *nahdah*, journeys to Europe on the part of Arabs intensified. This factor favoured the birth of an intellectual élite of travellers who, on their return, brought with them the knowledge acquired abroad and strove to renew and modernize Arab society. It is in this period that “the ‘sacred’ journey gives way to the study mission or ‘profane’ journey to the West. Although pilgrimage was also aimed at acquiring scientific knowledge, the nature of science has changed from Islamic to modern.”⁹

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Arabs, mostly Christians from the Syro-Lebanese region, began to migrate in waves towards the United States and Brazil.¹⁰ Among these emigrants, driven mainly by political and economic reasons, rose a class of intellectuals which, without losing contact with the motherland and especially with Egyptian innovators, contributed to the renewal of Arab literary production, in prose and poetry, giving life to the so-called *adab al-mahjar* [emigrant literature, better known as Mahjar School].¹¹ These writers and poets, known as *mahjarīyyūn* (or *mubājirūn*), reached the highest expression of Arab culture in America when they founded, in 1920, in New York, the *al-Rābitah al-qalamīyyah* [The Pen League]. The purpose of this association, in the words of his secretary Mikhāʾil Nuʿaymah (1894-1988), was “to lift Arabic literature from the quagmire of stagnation and imitation, and to infuse a new life into its veins so as to make of it an active force in the building up of the Arab nations.”¹²

⁹ M. Salvioli, “Migrazioni a Nord. Visioni d’Occidente nella letteratura araba,” *Between*, I, 2 (November 2011), www.Between-journal.it (accessed January 29, 2019).

¹⁰ On the travel memoirs of two Lebanese intellectuals, who visited Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century see M. Avino, “Impressioni europee di viaggiatori siro-libanesi all’alba del XX secolo,” *La rivista di Arablit* 11 (2016): 5-19.

¹¹ I. Camera d’Afflitto, *Letteratura araba contemporanea dalla nahdah a oggi* (Roma: Carocci, 2007), 95-100.

¹² N. Naimy, *The Lebanese Prophets of New York* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1985), 18.

Among the *mahjarīyyūn* who made America their second home and English their second language, the names of Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān (1883-1931), Mikhā'il Nu'aymah, Amīn al-Rīhānī or al-Rayhānī (1876-1940), stand out, next to Rashīd Ayyūb (1881-1941), Nasīb 'Arīda (1887-1946), Nadrah Haddād (1887-1950), Iliyā Abū Mādī (1889-1957), and 'Abd al-Masīh Haddād (1890-1963).

II. Amīn al-Rīhānī: literate-traveller

Born in Frayki (al-Furaykah or al-Fraykah, also known as Freike or Fraike), a small Lebanese village,¹³ Amīn al-Rīhānī emigrated to New York when he was only 12 years old, together with his uncle 'Abduh, and his elementary school teacher and future brother-in-law Na'ūm Mukarzil. It was the year 1888 and, considering that the first Lebanese, a certain Antūn Bishalānī from Salima, arrived in New York in 1854, it is clear that, when al-Rīhānī arrived, the history of Lebanese emigration to the United States was barely thirty four years old: not enough time to allow Lebanese migrants to emancipate themselves economically, let alone culturally and artistically.¹⁴ So it is no surprise that most of them were forced to start out as peddlers, moving from the Atlantic coast to the farthest city in the country. Even the very young al-Rīhānī started working in his uncle's small business as an accountant. Then, studied law for a while, always striving to perfect his English and assimilating the culture of the new environment.

Thus Amīn al-Rīhānī differs from all other Arab travellers who had grown up in the East and only later came in direct contact with the West. He moved backwards, since he rediscovered the East and became acquainted with European culture after studying in the United States.¹⁵ He, in fact, returned to his homeland, for the first time, only after ten years, for health reasons, going back a few more times before the outbreak of the First World War. These trips were fundamental for his cultural education, since they gave him the opportunity to get closer to the Arabic language and culture.

Soon, however, Amīn al-Rīhānī rebelled against the type of life and work reserved for most Arab migrants who landed in America at that

¹³ 80 km north east of Beirut.

¹⁴ N. Naimy, *The Lebanese Prophets of New York*, 12.

¹⁵ N. Saba Yared, *Arab Travellers and Western Civilization* (London: Saqi Books, 1996), 138.

time. A few years after arriving in New York, he left family and job to join a theatre company that played in Kansas City. Shortly thereafter the group broke up and he was forced to return home. The bankruptcy experience notwithstanding, that trip was crucial for him since, as a result of that adventure, he made up his mind to live for the arts and to be himself a man of letters. In other words, that trip changed him radically. He went “from business to art, from a seeker of money to a seeker of beauty and truth.”¹⁶

In 1905 he visited Cairo where he made lasting contacts with the Egyptian poets Ahmad Shawqī (1868-1932) and Hāfiz Ibrāhīm (1872-1932), alongside some of the greatest Syro-Lebanese intellectuals who had emigrated to Egypt, such as Shiblī Shummayil (1850-1957), Ya‘qūb Sarrūf (1852-1927), Jurjī Zaydān (1861-1914), Khalīl Mutrān (1872-1949), Farah Antūn (1874-1922). He also got to meet the Egyptian *muftī* Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), one of the key founding figures of Islamic modernism¹⁷.

In 1910 he published in Beirut the first two volumes of *al-Rihāniyyāt*, a collection of articles, essays and prose poems.¹⁸ The same year, he returned to the United States via Paris where he met a number of Syrian and Lebanese dissidents who had fled there after the Young Turks revolution against the Ottoman regime. In fact, several secret societies had sprung up in the French capital, which supported the cause of Arab nationalism and the right to self-determination for the territories subjected to the Sublime Porte.¹⁹ Also in Paris he met in person, for the

¹⁶ N. Naimy, *The Lebanese Prophets of New York*, 14.

¹⁷ About a travel of Muhammad ‘Abduh to Italy see A. Pellitteri, “La Sicilia oltre l’Orientalismo: alcune note a partire da un viaggio di Muhammad ‘Abduh a Palermo nel 1902 e da scritti sulla figura di Maometto di arabisti siciliani,” in *Oltre l’Orientalismo e l’Occidentalismo. La rappresentazione dell’Altro nello spazio euro-mediterraneo*, ed. R. Griffi et al. (Milano: Guerini e Associati, 2009), 113-130.

¹⁸ In 1923-24 volumes 3 and 4 of *al-Rihāniyyāt* [The Rihani Essays] appeared. *al-Rihāniyyāt* was subsequently re-edited and republished by his brother Albert, as *al-Rihāniyyāt* (1956), *al-Qanmiyyāt* [Nationalisms, 1956], comprising the political articles, and *Hutaf al-awdiya* [Hymn of the Valleys, 1955], which collects most of his prose poems. The main literary critical articles that were not included in *al-Rihāniyyāt* appeared in the collection *Adab wa fann* [Literature and Art]. A new and complete edition of his works has subsequently been published under the patronage of his nephew Amīn, by Dār al-Jīl, Bayrūt. For bibliographical information of Amīn al-Rihānī’s production, see the references.

¹⁹ F. Medici, “Figli dei cedri in America. Il carteggio tra Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān e Amīn Fāris al-Rihānī,” *La rivista di Arabit* 1 (giugno 2011): 85-86.

first time, Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān. With him, and with the sculptor Yūsuf Sa‘d Allāh al-Huwayyik (1883-1962), he moved to London,²⁰ where the three compatriots stayed for a few weeks attracted by the varied British cultural activities. To these contacts were added those accrued in his travels in the East, always in the years following 1908. Between Syria and Lebanon, for example, al-Rihānī had the opportunity to meet two other important intellectuals like him, tireless travellers between Europe and the East: the Syrian, of Kurdish origin, Muhammad Kurd ‘Alī (1876-1953)²¹ and the Lebanese Druze Shakīb Arslān (1869-1946). al-Rihānī returned to Paris in 1913 as representative of Lebanese-American emigrants within the Arab Congress.

At the outbreak of the First World War, he was in America and from there followed the historical events that also involved the Arab countries. In 1916 he married Bertha Case, an American painter and together they travelled to Spain, France, and Great Britain, since he had in the meantime become a correspondent in Europe for a number of American newspapers. His Andalusian experiences were collected in *Nūr al-Andalus* [The Illumination of Andalusia].

In 1917, al-Rihānī visited the Vatican where he met Pope Benedict XV. Also, in 1917 he returned to New York where he published *Khārīj al-harīm* [Out of the Harem], a novel originally written in English and then translated into Arabic. During this time, he also took a trip to Mexico, traces of which can be found in the English-language work *The Land of the Mayas*, which however was never published.

In February 1922 he began his famous journey to Arabia, via Egypt, where he assumed the unofficial role of ambassador and mediator in political and economic matters, in the name of nationalism and Arab unity. As for the unity of the Arabian Peninsula, it is worth remembering that this geographical area, at the time, was still under Turkish sovereignty, at least in theory. In actuality, several local dynasties had managed to make themselves more or less independent by taking advantage of the difficult geographical conditions of the region that

²⁰ Ibidem, 84.

²¹ Muhammad Kurd ‘Alī travelled and stayed in many European cities, where he met the greatest European orientologists of the period, including the Italian ones. For further information see A. Pellitteri, “Muhammad Kurd ‘Alī e l’orientistica italiana,” in *Studi arabo-islamici in onore di Roberto Rubinacci*, ed. C. Sarnelli Cerqua (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1985), 493-501.

prevented the Turkish army from exercising effective control. Here al-Rihānī met the various local authorities with whom he discussed the political future of those lands: in Hejaz he had several audiences with King Husayn ibn ‘Alī al-Hāshimī (1854-1931), *sharīf* of Mecca. Then, he headed to San‘ā’ where he met Yemen’s ruler, Imām Yahyā bin Hamīd al-Dīn (1869-1948). After that, it was the turn of the ruler of the then reign of ‘Asir. From there, he left for Iraq via Bombay. After a short rest, he moved to Najd where he met King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn al-Sa‘ūd (1876-1953), and on his behalf negotiated some agreements between local Arab leaders and the British authorities.

These journeys, made on the back of mules, camels, and horses, allowed him to gain extensive political experience, as evidenced by the first two volumes of *Mulūk al-‘Arab* [Kings of the Arabs]: the picture that emerges from these extensive travel reports is that of a politically complex Arabian Peninsula. According to al-Rihānī, unity in that area was difficult to implement but not impossible. The difficulties could be attributed to the presence of many local dynasties, their political rivalries and their adherence to different religious denominations: for example, Yemen was Zeidite, Najd Wahhabi, Hejaz mostly Sunni. In his opinion, the mutual aversion among the tribes and the British interference made matters even worse. The solutions he proposed, however, although dictated by principles of freedom and human rights, seemed naive and oblivious to the pervasive role played by the Islamic culture, as when he proposed to recognize King Husayn al-Hāshimī, as Chaliph but limiting his role to that of a spiritual leader.²²

In 1923 he went back to Beirut by car crossing the Iraq-Syrian desert. The following year, in November of 1924, he returned to Hejaz, at the invitation of King Husayn al-Hāshimī who asked him to mediate the conflict between him and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn al-Sa‘ūd. The book *Ta’rīkh Najd al-hadīth* [The Modern History of Najd] reflects the insight gained as a result of these journeys. The trips to Hijaz were also the source for a series of monographs published in English, including *Maker of Modern Arabia*; *Ibn Sa‘ūd of Arabia: His People and His Land*; *Around the Coasts of Arabia*; *Arabian Peak and Desert*. *Travels in al-Yaman*.

In 1927 he visited Jeddah for the third time. In 1932 he returned to Iraq and two years later he wrote in Arabic *Faysal al-Anwal* [Faysal the

²² E. Rossi, “Lo scrittore arabo-libanese Amin er-Rihani,” *Oriente Moderno* XX (1940): 557.

First]: a biography of Faysal I, praised as founder of modern Iraq and promoter of Arabism in greater Syria. *Qalb al-'Irāq* [The Heart of Iraq] too is based on the Iraqi experience. It is a work that illustrates the social development achieved by the country under Faysal I and subsequently under his son, Ghāzī. Between 1907 and 1937 he took about fifteen short trips to Lebanon. His travel notes and impressions were collected in the work *Qalb Lubnān* [The Heart of Lebanon], which was left unfinished and was published posthumously by his brother Albert. A year before his death in 1939, he visited Morocco and, from there, moved on to Spain. The reports of these trips were collected in *al-Maghrib al-Aqsā* [The Far Morocco].

Amīn al-Rihānī's voyages were the source of his travelogues, but also of other works, including *Wujūb sharqīyyah gharbīyyah* [Eastern and Western Figures], a posthumous collection of lectures given between 1904 and 1939, on Eastern, Arab, and Western cultures, with reference to prominent personalities, some of them met in his travels. It should also be noted that "His travels in the cities of Europe and America and the countries of the East, predisposed him to a wide circle of learnings, interests and creative exploration."²³ Indeed, al-Rihānī was constantly exploring new literary avenues and genres, both in English and in Arabic. He was a poet, an essayist, a prose writer, an author of political articles, a critical historian and a translator. In the literary field al-Rihānī is considered the first Arab American to have composed, in 1905, poems in the *shi'r manthūr* genre [prose poetry], typical of the literary production of the Mahjar Shool which, influenced by W. Whitman, set out to break out of the poetic patterns of the past. Thus the 1911 work *The Book of Khaled* is considered the first novel by an Arab author published in English in America.²⁴ He also wrote costume novels, such as *Zanbaqat al-Ghūr* [The Lily of al-Ghore], in which, once again, through the characters, the author symbolically proposes a tentative encounter between Eastern and Western cultures.

²³ A. Imangulieva, *Gibran, Rihani and Naimy: East-West interactions in early twentieth-century Arab literature* (trans. from the Russian by R. Thomson) (Oxford: Inner Farne Press, 2009), 86.

²⁴ When in 1918 Jubrān made his debut in English literature by publishing *The Madman*, al-Rihānī had already published in English *The Book of Khaled*, his collected poems *Myrtle and Myrrh* of 1905 in addition to English writings in manuscript.

As evinced so far, his works, although initially inspired by curiosity and wanderlust, contain numerous political and social elements, to the point of representing a valid historical testimony of the period. In this regard, it is worth remarking that “What remains to be Rihani’s most important and far-reaching legacy in Mahjar literature is, perhaps, his understanding of literature as being necessarily dedicated to a message, and of the writer’s role as being thoroughly committed.”²⁵ This belief is implicit in all his travel works, where al-Rihānī, in addition to having literary or political objectives, also plays the role of social reformer. In his view, however, not all writers have the ability to perform this task, as he elucidates in the article *al-Kuttāb* [The Writers].²⁶

His absolute conviction that art, including writing, can contribute to changing and improving the historical-political conditions of a people is strikingly evident from the texts of his conferences. For instance, following a brief visit to Palestine in 1927, where he met with Palestinian leaders, including Hajj Amīn al-Husaynī (1897-1974), he gave a series of lectures travelling between United States, Canada and England. On those occasions, thanks to him, the Anglo-American public became acquainted with the Palestinian-Zionist cause. In this regard, it should be noted that although al-Rihānī died eight years before the *nakbah*,²⁷ he saw the premonitory signs of what would become the unresolved Palestinian issue. In the 1931 article *Zionism and Palestine*, taken from *The Fate of Palestine*,²⁸ the author, in several places, asserts that peace in the Near East depends upon peace in Palestine, demonstrating a highly prophetic and forward-looking vision, in light of the dramatic events that have caused so much bloodshed in the Middle East in the last 70 years or so, partly related to the Palestinian issue. He strongly condemns European

²⁵ N. Naimy, *The Lebanese Prophets of New York*, 23.

²⁶ In this article, al-Rihānī analyzes the various types of writers highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, to the point of describing the figure of the ideal writer: the one who does not market his business by flattering the powerful élite of the moment, but he does not live detached from the surrounding reality either, immersed in books and newspapers. See E. Diana, “Brevi note sul ‘filosofo di al-Furaykah,’” in *Il conforto della ragione. Studi in onore di B. Razzootti*, ed. E. Fazzini et al. (Lanciano: Editrice Itinerari, 2010), 301-312.

²⁷ The word, which literally means “catastrophe,” has come to indicate the year of foundation of the State of Israel (1948).

²⁸ The book, which includes part of the conference texts and articles written in English and dedicated to the Palestinian-Zionist cause, was published posthumously by his brother Albert. It was then translated into Arabic under the title *Masir Filastin*.

interference in Middle East politics and, with regard to the disastrous Balfour Declaration, he writes:

But it is specified in this Declaration that the Jews shall have a right to build a national home in Palestine, and not to have Palestine for a national home. The difference is significant. For a national home in Palestine does not mean that they may have the whole country for that purpose. A right to a room in a house cannot be interpreted as a right to the whole house. But how can you crowd a nation in a room?²⁹

Later in the article, he refutes the alleged historical and religious rights advanced towards Palestine by the Zionists. Concerning the historical rights, he says:

Because the Jews conquered and ruled Palestine they believe that they still have a claim to it. On the same ground it may be rightfully claimed by the Egyptians, by the Persians, by the Greeks, and by the descendants of the Romans, the Italians...On the same ground Spain may rightfully claim Mexico and South America; the Arabs may rightfully claim Southern Spain: and with more reason the Indians of this country would have a right to establish an Indian national home in New York. [...] Suppose the British or the French were still in occupation of the Holy Land from the days of the Crusades, do you for a moment believe that they would give it to the Jews for a national home? The historical claim is preposterous.³⁰

In spite of this, he continued to have sincere hopes for a peaceful solution to the Palestinian-Zionist problem, calling for mutual understanding between the two peoples: “The Arabs and the Jews can then settle their differences among themselves in a peaceful and friendly manner, as they have always done in the past, before the Balfour Declaration, which is like a bird of evil omen, spreading its black wings over the Holy Land.”³¹

²⁹ Ameen Rihani, *The Fate of Palestine*, 23-24.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 31-32.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 40.

Therefore, being a peace lover and a free thinker, his journeys were an expression of his desire to create a secularized Arab nation, made up of citizens free of sectarian divisions where minorities could coexist peacefully with the majority; a nation free of political or cultural tyrannies, whether of Eastern or Western origin.³² This mentality, highly impregnated with values such as freedom and human rights for all, is also reflected in his religious position, although it is still difficult to define: belonging to a Maronite Christian family, he presumably converted to Islam. However, when he died on September 16, 1940, the Beirut newspaper, *L'Orient*, announcing his death, informed its readers that the funeral was held at the church of Frayki.³³

Beyond any classification, through his travels in the East, he discovered and came to appreciate the spirituality of those lands, characteristic that is in direct opposition to the materialism of the West. At the same time, he was an admirer of America, even though he condemned some aspects of its industrialization believing that the new civilization had brought with it new forms and methods of slavery, as stated in the article *Fawqa sutūh Nīm Yūrka* [Over New York's Roofs],³⁴ dated 1906. Quite significant are his words uttered years earlier, on 9th February 1900, in his famous speech *al-Tasābul al-dīnī* [Religious Tolerance] at the Maronite Society in New York, in which he expounded his firm belief that “God does not favour one nation or group over another. Nor does He elect a particular people on this earth. [...] The monotheistic religion is one and we are all united before the Lord and worship only one God.”³⁵ The project cultivated with Jubrān in their London days, which unfortunately did not go beyond the planning stage, is emblematic of his firm beliefs on the subject. The plan called for “the building of an opera house in Beirut, half church and half mosque, whose double dome would have symbolized the union between Christianity and Islam under the banner of art.”³⁶

³² About al-Rihānī's political thought see A. Pellitteri, “al-Qawmiyyāt: Note sul pensiero politico di Amīn al-Rihānī,” *Oriente Moderno* LXIV (1984): 109-120.

³³ E. Rossi, “Lo scrittore arabo-libanese Amin er-Rihani,” 558.

³⁴ Amīn al-Rihānī, *al-Rihāniyyāt. Maqalāt ijtimā'yyah wa falsafyyah*, ed. Albert al-Rihānī (Bayrūt: al-Mu'assasah al-'arabiyyah li 'l-dirāsah wa 'l-nashr, 1982), 128-132.

³⁵ Amīn al-Rihānī, *al-Tasābul al-dīnī*, in *Ibidem*, 53-54.

³⁶ F. Medici, “Figli dei cedri in America,” 86.

We would like to conclude this short essay dedicated to one of the most fascinating and interesting Arab personalities of the early twentieth century, entirely devoted to cultural, social and political commitment, whose intellectual formation is an amalgam of various experiences, of places that he visited and personalities that he met both in the East and in the West, by citing an extract from his article *Man Anā?* [Who I am?], in which our author gave a definition of himself:³⁷

Sometimes I feel, and I am sure, that my personality is made up of numerous personalities, incompatible on the surface, but harmonious in their essence and in the eternity of their existential cycles.

From an ethnic point of view, this personality is: Semitic-Aryan, that is Assyrian, Iranian, Greek and Arab (see the religions of these countries).

From a religious point of view, it is: follower of Baal, of Dionysius, of monotheism, of Christianity, of Islam and of Sufism (see religious history of these countries).

From a literary point of view, it is: Eastern and Western, poetic and philosophical, scientific and practical (my passion for Eastern poets and philosophers, and my love for Western scientists and workers).

From a political point of view, it is: aristocratic (Eastern) and democratic (Western). Aristocratic in volition, but democratic in conduct. Simple and complex at the same time, superior and complete, yearning for freedom and independence of nations within the framework of human faith and in the shadow of brotherhood and peace.

In addition, I also have the personality of an artist who sees truth and beauty not only in things that are visible, but perceives and venerates them, both in their external forms and in their inner soul.

This old and new personality, old for its roots and new for its fruits, which contains plants, flowers and fruits growing

³⁷ This article was written in 1936, in response to the request to clarify his text *Law lam takun anta nafsaka fa-man tawaddu an takūna?* [If you are somebody else, who would you be?]. It was included in Albert al-Rihānī's edition of *al-Rihāniyyat*.

in the garden of geniality and prophecies, in the most fertile soil in the history of the world, that is, in these countries. However, it remains a free personality bound only to what is strictly necessary for its growth and development and its spiritual continuity.³⁸

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³⁸ Amīn al-Rihānī, *Man Anā?*, in *al-Rihāniyyāt. Maqalāt ijtimā‘iyyah wa falsafiyah*, 40-41.

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