MEDIEVAL MUSLIMS AND CRUSADERS IN MODERN ARAB CINEMA: REASSESSING YOUSSEF CHAHINE'S EPIC *AL-NĀṢIR ṢALĀḤ AL-DĪN (SALADIN THE VICTORIOUS)*

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Abstract

In the modern Arab World, the medieval images of Saladin and the Crusaders were frequently deployed by state leaders to convey modern political messages. This is best illustrated in Youssef Chahine's 1963 cinematic epic, Saladin the Victorious. *It has been frequently argued that Chahine's film portrays Saladin's reign and his rivalry with King Richard the Lionhearted as an homage to the Arab Nationalist movement and its Egyptian leader, Nasser. Similarly, it has also been argued that the director Chahine, an Egyptian Christian, highlighted the equality between Christians and Muslims in his production, one of the major tenets in Nasser's supra-sectarian, Arab Nationalist project. This paper will alternatively argue that Chahine's film goes beyond these obvious, exoteric, balanced parallels. It will reveal that Chahine esoterically embeds a deeper image of Christianity throughout the film, one achieved*

* M.A., Ph.D., University of Toronto. I would like to thank Ahmed M. Sheir and Amar S. Baadj for their invitation to contribute to this volume and for their comments and suggestions regarding my chapter. I also would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their helpful recommendations. Finally, I would like to dedicate this chapter to the memory of the great Egyptian actor Hamdy Gheith and his magisterial, enthralling, and fascinating performance as King Richard the Lionhearted in the film *Saladin the Victorious*, a masterpiece of a role that magnetically captured my curious spirit from a young age and, unmistakably, motivated me to write this chapter as an homage to his brilliant re-enactment of the King of England and his trials and tribulations during the Third Crusade.

through its many Christian figures, themes, symbols, language, and hymns, which are relatively lacking when it comes to Islam in the epic. Here, Christians and Christianity take center stage, especially through the multi-dimensional Crusader characters of King Richard and the Hospitaller knight Louisa, along with their pilgrimage-odysseys to the Holy Land during the Third Crusade. In fact, the film, this chapter will demonstrate, transforms into nothing less than a modern Christian epic—a didactic message on Christianity from the Arab Christian director Chahine to his Arab Muslim audiences across the Middle East.

> *"Historical epics are not simply used by Chahine to illustrate historical events, but as a lens on the present. In this sense, his epics emerge more as national allegories. Al-Nasir Salah al-Din (1963) is perhaps the most important epic film in Arab cinema"*
> Joseph Massad (1999).[1]

Introduction

The Crusades constituted a significant epoch in the history of medieval Europe and the Islamic Near East. Fought over a span of two hundred years, the wars of the Crusaders in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt brought political, military, and cultural encounters between the central Islamic lands and European Christendom. The period witnessed Frankish armies descending onto the eastern Mediterranean, with the primary objective of capturing Jerusalem, the Christian faith's holiest city, from the Muslims. The era also witnessed the reign of one famous Muslim ruler—Saladin. Al-Sulṭān al-Malik al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Abū 'l-Muẓaffar Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb (1138–1193), or "Saladin," as he is known in Europe,[2] ruled over Egypt, Sudan, Syria, Palestine, the Hijaz, and parts of North Africa.[3] As the founder of the Ayyūbid

[1] Joseph Massad, "Art and Politics in the Cinema of Youssef Chahine," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 2 (Winter, 1999): 77-93, 81.

[2] "Saladin" is a Latinized rendering of "Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn," his *laqab*, or honorific. Hereinafter, the chapter will use the Latinized name "Saladin" to refer to the Muslim sultan.

[3] On Saladin and his reign, there are a plethora of monographs and articles. For earlier studies, see, for example, H. A. R. Gibb, *The Life of Saladin*, reprinted ed. (London:

dynasty (1169-1252), Sultan Saladin's reign saw some of the most renowned Muslim achievements during the Age of the Crusades: his victory against the Franks at the Battle of Hattin in 1187; the capture of Jerusalem/Bayt al-Maqdis;[4] his diplomatic and military confrontations with King Richard the Lionhearted; and his successful rebuff of the Third Crusade. Saladin's entanglements with Richard even proliferated many a European legend, and their duel remains one of the most renowned examples of Muslim-European encounters during the medieval centuries, thus generating a lasting legacy in the West.[5]

Saqi Books, 2006); Andrew S. Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1972); and M. C. Lyons and D. E. P. Jackson, *Saladin: The Politics of Holy War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). A summary of the earlier scholarly debate on the interpretation of Saladin and his career is found in P. M. Holt, "Saladin and His Admirers," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 46, no. 2 (1983): 235-39. More recent studies on the sultan include A. R. Azzam, *Saladin* (Harlow, U.K.: Pearson Longman, 2009); Anne-Marie Eddé, *Saladin*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); and, most recently, Jonathan Phillips, *The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

[4] "Bayt al-Maqdis," which means "the House of the Sacred," is the medieval Arabo-Islamic name for the city of Jerusalem. For the Islamic names of Jerusalem during the medieval Islamic centuries, see Guy Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems. A Description of Syria and the Holy Land From A.D. 650 to 1500* (London: Alexander P. Watt for the Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1890), 83-84.

[5] For example, Saladin's person makes an appearance in Dante's *Inferno*. He is also one of the protagonists in Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman*, which formed part of the plot in Youssef Chahine's film. Saladin's fame in the West today is also evident in, for example, the 1935 film *The Crusades* and the more recent Hollywood production *Kingdom of Heaven*. For studies on the memory of Saladin in the West during the late medieval, early modern, and modern periods, see Margaret Jubb, *The Legend of Saladin in Western Literature and Historiography* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2000); Eddé, *Saladin*, 463-91; and Phillips, *Life and Legend of Sultan Saladin*, 309-28. For a survey of Muslim-Frankish encounters during the Age of the Crusades, see Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999), 171-92. For the memory of the Crusades in European history, see the studies in Nicholas Paul and Suzanne Yeager, eds., *Remembering the Crusades: Myth, Image, and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Marcus Graham Bull and D. Kempf, eds., *Writing the Early Crusades: Text, Transmission and Memory* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014); and Mike Horswell and Jonathan Phillips, eds., *Perceptions of the Crusades from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-first Century:*

The memory of the reign and accomplishments of the medieval Muslim sultan also experienced a strong literary and historiographical revival in the modern Arab Middle East.[6] For example, the figure of Saladin, along with his wars against the Crusaders, has been frequently used by Arabs in the Middle East today to draw parallels between the present conditions of Arab states and the grander achievements of past medieval rulers, such as Saladin. More significantly, Arab leaders in the past century used the figure of the Ayyūbid sultan to communicate their political, ideological, and military messages to their citizens and the broader region. For instance, after the first Gulf War in 1991, the past Iraqi president Saddam Hussein frequently employed the image of Saladin battling the European Crusaders as a symbol of his own rule,

Engaging the Crusades, Volume One (Oxford: Routledge, 2018). For the study of the Crusades through the lens of remembering, see M. Cassidy-Welch and A. Lester, "Memory and Interpretation: New Approaches to the Study of the Crusades," *Journal of Medieval History* 40.3 (2014): 225-36.

[6] For reasons for the ebbs and flows of the memory of Saladin and the Crusades in pre-modern and modern Arabo-Islamic historiography, see Fadi Ragheb, "New Sources on the Memory of Saladin in Islamic History: An Explorative Essay into the Arabic Chronicles of the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period," in Amir Harrak, ed., *The Political and Cultural History of the Kurds* (New York: Peter Lang, 2022), 218-21. On the memory of the Crusades in modern Arabic historiography, see Emmanuel Sivan, "Modern Arab Historiography of the Crusades," in *Interpretations of Islam: Past and Present*, ed. Emmanuel Sivan (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1985), 3-43; Hillenbrand, *Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 4-5, 589-614; Jonathan Riley-Smith, "Islam and the Crusades in History and Imagination, 8 November 1898–11 September 2001," *Crusades* 2 (2003), 151-67; John M. Chamberlain, "Imagining Defeat: An Arabic Historiography of the Crusades," M.A. diss., Naval Postgraduate Academy, 2007; M. Determann, "The Crusades in Arab School Textbooks," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19 (2008), 199-214; Haim Gerber, *Remembering and Imagining Palestine: Identity and Nationalism from the Crusades to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), especially 14-79; S. Heidemann, "Memory and Ideology: Images of Saladin in Syria and Iraq," in *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image*, ed. C. Gruber and S. Haugbolle (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 57-81; Phillips, *Life and Legend of Sultan Saladin*, 345-86; and recent research by Oleg Solokov, including Oleg A. Sokolov, "The Memory of the Crusades in the Arabic Folk Epics: Images and Patterns," *Oriens* 6 (2022): 172-81; and Oleg Sokolov, "The Crusades in the Arab Social and Political Discourse of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Crusades* 22, no. 1 (2022): 100-14. For a review of scholarship on Arabic historiography of the Crusades, see the chapter by Ahmed Mohamed Sheir in this volume.

thus comparing himself and his struggles against the U.S., Israel, and his enemies in the region to the medieval dynast and his wars against the Franks. The employ of Saladin's person at the service of political messaging in the Arab world was present even earlier, as was the case with the rhetoric during the 1970s and 1980s of Yasser Arafat of Palestine and Hafez al-Assad of Syria.[7]

Yet the strategic use of the medieval image of Saladin for modern political, military, and ideological purposes was best deployed in the service of the Egyptian president Jamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir (referred to hereinafter as "Nasser"), especially in the magisterial cinematic epic *al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn* (*Saladin the Victorious*).[8] Directed by the Egyptian Yūsuf Shāhīn (Youssef Chahine)[9] during the golden age of Nasser's pan-Arabism, the 1963 visual masterpiece *Saladin the Victorious* portrays the reign of the twelfth-century Muslim sultan as an *homage* to the modern Arab Nationalist movement and its leader Nasser.[10]

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[7] Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 595; Heidemann, "Memory and Ideology"; Phillips, *Life and Legend of Sultan Saladin*, 368-86; Omar Sayfo, "From Kurdish Sultan to Pan-Arab Champion and Muslim Hero: The Evolution of the Saladin Myth in Popular Arab Culture," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50, no. 1 (2017): 65-85; and Niall Christie, *Muslims and Crusaders: Christianity's Wars in the Middle East, 1095-1382, from the Islamic Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 112-19.

[8] Although the proper transliteration of the title of the film is "*al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn*," there are many different transliterations in modern scholarship, such as "*El Naser Salah Ad-Din*," "*El Naser Salah el Dine*," and "*Al-Nasir Salah al-Din*." However, some scholars opted for simply "*Saladin*." I will use "*Saladin*" or "*Saladin the Victorious*" to refer to the film throughout the study.

[9] On Youssef Chahine, see Massad, "Art and Politics"; Ibrahim Fawal, *Youssef Chahine* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001); Malek Khouri, *The Arab National Project in Youssef Chahine's Cinema* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010); and Tamara Maatouk, "On the Heels of 1967: Chahine, Cinema, and Emotional Response(s) to the Defeat," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55 (2023): 25-42. The commonly used transliteration of the director's name in Middle East Studies is "Youssef Chahine." I will be employing this transliteration when referring to the director in this chapter.

[10] On the film *Saladin the Victorious*, see Hala Halim, "The Signs of *Saladin*: A Modern Cinematic Rendition of Medieval Heroism," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 12 (1992): 78-94; John M. Ganim, "Reversing the Crusades: Hegemony, Orientalism, and Film Language in Youssef Chahine's *Saladin*," in *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*, ed. Lynn T. Ramey and Tison Pugh (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 45-58; Khouri, *Arab National Project*, 42-52; Adam Sayfo, "From Kurdish Sultan to Pan-Arab Champion," 74-77; and for the most recent and detailed

Throughout the film, Chahine juxtaposes the person and politics of Nasser with that of Saladin, where Chahine portrays the struggle between Saladin and the Crusaders as a medieval epic that parallels the mid-twentieth century confrontation between Nasser's "progressive" Arab Nationalist camp and the Western "imperialistic" bloc.[11]

The timing of the film, the year 1963, is crucial here, as it was exactly two years after the failure and the dissolution of the Egyptian-Syrian United Arab Republic. Hala Halim has stated that the importance of the film lies in its contemporaneous political message at the time:

> The crucial timing of [the film] *Saladin* is clearly understood if one contemplates the year of its production. 1963: a year during Nasser's regime; a year that comes after 1948 and 1956 with their harrassing and dangerous events; a year, moreover, that follows the unity between Egypt and Syria (1958) and its dissolution (1961). 1963 is, therefore, a year when it is timely — if not imperative — to launch a propagandist film making the statements *Saladin* makes about a powerful Arab political leader who, by uniting the forces of the Arabs (and Saladin unites Egypt and Syria specifically), manages to achieve a difficult victory over the dangerous colonizing forces of the West in Palestine.[12]

analysis of the film, see Paul Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser: Nasser's Political Crusade in *El-Naser Salah Ad-Din*," in *Hollywood in the Holy Land: Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Relations*, ed. Nickolas Haydock and E. L. Risden (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009), 123-46. For the image and memory of Nasser in literature and film more generally, see Omar Khalifah, *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Sayfo, "From Kurdish Sultan to Pan-Arab Champion." On Arab Nationalism, including Nasserism, see Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, new ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). On the deployment of film and popular media in the service of Nasser and the Arab Nationalist movement, see Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser's Egypt* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2002). For (Arab Nationalist) historical dramas in Egypt before, during, and after Nasser's reign, see Joel Gordon, "Film, Fame, and Public Memory: Egyptian Biopics from *Mustafa Kamil* to *Nasser 56*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999): 61-79.

[11] For Chahine's use of film as an allegory on contemporary affairs, see Massad, "Art and Politics."

[12] Halim, "Signs of Saladin," 78.

The film, then, was a needed timely reminder to Arab audiences of the importance of Nasser and his principles of pan-Arabism. As Malek Khouri notes in his study *The Arab National Project in Youssef Chahine's Cinema*:

> The creation of the United Arab Republic itself was informed by a political moment in which the notion of unity itself was high on the agenda of political discourse; the eventual failure of that union exacerbated internal tensions—even among those who agreed on the general parameters of the pan-Arab project. Thus Chahine's film on the twelfth-century Muslim leader Saladin clearly informed and was informed by this critical moment in contemporary Arab history, with all its preoccupations, hopes, and anxieties over the prospect of national unity.[13]

Indeed, Chahine's epic was an opportunity to highlight Nasser's Pan-Arab Nationalist principles, especially the tenets of supra-religious Arab unity and equality between Arab citizens, both Muslim and Christian.[14]

The film *Saladin* thus clearly employs balanced parallels between Islam and Christianity. Chahine presents each religion's figures, their attachment to Jerusalem, and their "justified" pursuit of holy war to capture the city, while using each faith's symbolisms, traditions, and language throughout the narrative. In Chahine's storyline, both Saladin and Richard are depicted as ideal rulers in search of a noble cause, but who similarly suffer treachery at the hands of figures within their respective camps. The Egyptian director also fills his film with an equally diverse set of Muslim and Crusader characters, including some who are noble and loyal, and others who are cunning and treacherous. On the surface, therefore, Chahine's masterpiece provides a balanced view of medieval Arabs and Crusaders and equality between Islam and Christianity.

Yet at a closer examination, Chahine's epic, this study will argue, goes beyond these obvious balanced parallels between Islam and Christianity. Chahine's production, it will become apparent, conveys to its predominantly Muslim Arab audiences a particularly *favourable* image of Christianity

[13] Khouri, Arab National Project, 44.

[14] On the history, politics, and ideology of Arab nationalism, including Nasser's manifestation of it, see Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism*, 135-251. For a biography of Nasser, see Joel Gordon, *Nasser: Hero of the Arab Nation*, reprinted ed. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2012).

throughout the film, one achieved through the plethora of representations of Christian beliefs, narratives, rituals, symbols, language, and even songs and hymns. This is a reflection, I propose, of a personal, *didactic* message to Arab Muslim audiences by Chahine, a Christian Egyptian and an avid adherent to Nasserist Arab Nationalism, especially to the idea of equality of Muslim and Christian Arabs under the secular rule of a pan-Arab state.

To achieve his political—and personal—objectives, Chahine posits, this study will demonstrate, a more complex and multi-dimensional image of Christian characters, along with deeper and more detailed Christian beliefs, symbols, and language throughout the film, a depth that, I contend, is lacking when it comes to Muslim figures and traditions in the script. The film does not simply provide a balanced view between Christianity and Islam, but, rather, throughout the epic Christians and Christianity take center stage, especially through the characters of King Richard the Lionhearted and the Hospitaller knight Louisa de Lusignan. In fact, the film, it will be revealed, transforms into nothing short of a *Christian* epic: on the one hand, King Richard is depicted as *the central*, but fallen, Christian hero who, unlike Jesus of Nazareth, succumbs to the temptations of the devil, while on the other hand, Louisa, the spiritually-reborn and newly-devout Christian, succeeds in overcoming her temptations and the brewing forces of sin within her to become in the process an ideal Christian hero and even a Christian martyr.

Through this stunningly sophisticated portrayal of his faith on the screen, Chahine is able to construct and achieve greater depths—and intimacy—in his unprecedented setting of Christians and Christianity in modern Egyptian cinema. As a result, Chahine alters this seemingly-balanced, equal image of Muslims and Christians in his film, thus resulting in what I describe as Chahine's own personal and didactic message regarding his Christian background. After all, the director was clear about the film's element of "instruction" towards his Arab audiences.[15]

Therefore, this study is a new interpretation of the film that, instead of seeing it mainly through the exoteric Saladin-as-Nasser lens, it will unfold the film's esoteric message. Here, the Christian characters, symbols, language, and motifs are, in fact, the central themes of the film—what the film is really all about. By uncovering the esoterical in his creation, we come to understand how Chahine forms a narrative all about Christian elements in order to impart to his Muslim Arab audiences a detailed portrait of his Christian faith—and its centrality. This chapter will thus reassess Chahine's film by first extracting

[15] See Khouri, *Arab National Project*, 45-46.

the Nasserist tenets embedded within it, especially Muslim-Christian equality, before proceeding to decipher in greater depth how this seemingly precise balance between the two camps is pierced by Chahine. The study will unveil Chahine's disruption of this poised equilibrium by delineating his extensive portrayal of Christian heroes, symbols, traditions, and language that ultimately come to predominate in the film's plot, characters, and images.

Figure 1. The DVD cover for the film *Saladin the Victorious*.

The Plot: Saladin, Battle of Hattin, Richard the Lionhearted, and the Third Crusade

The film *Saladin*[16] narrates the career of the medieval Muslim sultan, played by Aḥmad Maẓhar, beginning with his capture of Jerusalem from King Guy of Jerusalem and Prince Renaud de Chatillon following the Battle of Hattin to his defence of Jerusalem against Richard the Lionhearted, played by Ḥamdī Ghayth, and the Third Crusade. After his victory at the Battle of Hattin and his conquest of Jerusalem, Saladin kills Renauld de Chatillon when the latter challenges the sultan to a duel. This defeat, and the loss of Jerusalem, angers the Crusader princess Virginia, played by Laylā Fawzī, who is also Renauld's wife. Virginia is a cunning and power-hungry figure who is also renowned

[16] Almost all versions of the film have English subtitles, which contributes to the film's wider appeal to both Arab and non-Arab audiences.

for her looks, thus given the epithet "the beauty of all beauties." She decides to head to Europe to convince the Christian kings there to launch a crusade and take back Jerusalem from Saladin. Before leaving the east, Virginia strikes an agreement with the treacherous Muslim governor (*wālī*) of Acre, played by Tawfīq al-Dhiqn, whereby he would receive the governorship of Acre and Jaffa in exchange for opening the gates of Acre to the Crusaders once the invading European legions arrive at the city's walls.

Figure 2. Aḥmad Maẓhar as Saladin. ©The Criterion Channel

In Europe, Virginia exhorts the English King Richard the Lionhearted to launch a holy war to liberate Jerusalem from the Arab Muslims. She misleads the idealistic king by claiming that Christians suffer persecution at the hands of Arabs in the Holy Land; Christian pilgrims are enslaved and sold by the enemy; and the Sepulchre of Christ is defiled by Muslim rule. Enraged by the pitiful conditions of Christians in the East, Richard embarks upon a holy war—the Third Crusade—with a European army that includes the French King Philip (played by ʿUmar al-Ḥarīrī), the English Duke Arthur (Aḥmad Lūksur), and Conrad de Montferrat (Maḥmūd al-Milījī).

Figure 3: Ḥamdī Ghayth as Richard the Lionhearted.
©The Criterion Channel

The armies of the Third Crusade sail by sea towards Acre. At the gates of Acre, they face initial Arab resistance to their siege. Yet the Crusaders break the enemy's resistance and enter the city through the help of the treacherous governor of Acre, who fulfills his promise made earlier to Virginia. Once Acre is captured, the Crusaders move next to Ascalon, which they easily conquer due to their use of impregnable and fire-resistant siege towers.

Once Saladin realizes the advantage that the Crusaders possess with their siege towers, he tactically outmaneuvers the Crusader armies by leading them to battle outside the cities and in a swamp-filled battlefield, where their towers are rendered useless. Here, Saladin strikes a heavy blow against Richard and the rest of the European armies and defeats their camp with a comprehensive victory. This astute military stratagem did not pass unnoticed by Richard, who realizes that the sultan and the Arabs are not as weak and "barbaric" militarily as he has been told. Surveying the large number of Crusaders killed, Richard demands a truce to reorganize his troops and give his armies a rest.

As a result of Richard's pursuit of a truce with Saladin, conspiracies begin to unfold in the Crusader camp against the English king, where first King Philip—along with Virginia—conspires to end the truce struck between Saladin and Richard. However, his ploy is discovered and, as a result, Richard expels Philip back to France. Next, Virginia colludes with Conrad de Montferrat in a plot to bring down Richard through offering their assistance to Saladin against Richard and his English armies during battle. Specifically, Conrad offers Saladin a chance to defeat Richard by agreeing to withdraw his French troops in the middle of battle, which would expose Richard and weaken his forces. Saladin, however, refuses this offer, and maintains the truce. Yet even Conrad's conspiracy is discovered, this time by Duke Arthur, Richard's seemingly loyal, right-hand man, and the Frenchman is also forced out of the Crusader camp.

Enraged by all the machinations in his camp and fatigued by all the warring he has experienced, Richard decides to accept Saladin's offer to visit Jerusalem as a Christian pilgrim. However, out of greed for power, and in alliance with Virginia, Duke Arthur arranges for an Arab arrow man to assassinate Richard at the gates of Jerusalem, in a ploy to show that it was Saladin himself who cunningly invited Richard to Jerusalem only to kill him at the entrance of the Holy City. Although Richard is struck in the chest, he survives the attempt on his life. Saladin is angered by this unexpected twist and decides that he himself should go to Richard's camp and treat him. Although Saladin succeeds in healing his enemy, nevertheless Richard insists on going to war against the Muslim sultan for one final battle over Jerusalem.

Earlier during the truce between Saladin and Richard, a Muslim chemist, Al-Dimashqī, develops a flammable liquid that can set the Crusader siege towers on fire. He is smuggled out from Crusader territory by the Christian Arab commander ʿĪsā al-ʿAwwām, played by Ṣalāḥ Dhū 'l-Faqqār, and therefore the chemist joins Saladin's camp to mass produce his potion for the Muslim armies. As a result, during the final battle at the gates of Jerusalem, the Arab Muslims are able to burn the Frankish towers and eliminate them from the battle equation. What ensues is a comprehensive defeat of the Crusaders by the Arab armies. Saladin's victory compels Richard to sue for peace and leave the Holy Land.

However, in the process of rescuing the chemist, ʿĪsā al-ʿAwwām is stabbed by a Crusader soldier, and he ends up at a Hospitaller hospital, where he reconnects with his love, Louisa, played by Nādya Luṭfī. Louisa at the time had left her post as a soldier and leader of the Hospitaller battalion and decided to become a devout nurse to the injured in battle. In fact, a subplot that develops throughout the film is this love affair between the Christian Arab ʿĪsā and the Crusader Louisa, which begins during their first encounter at the Battle of Hattin. ʿĪsā, which means Jesus in Arabic, is one of Saladin's closest friends and a trusted commander who is famed for his ability at swimming, hence his epithet "al-ʿAwwām," or "the Diver." The two fall in love, but despite sharing the same Christian faith, it is their national affiliations and the war between the two camps that keep them apart.

When ʿĪsā is brought to Louisa's hospital, she is shocked to find him there among the injured. He asks her to leave with him, but she refuses, and instead she helps him escape from the Crusader camp. However, Louisa is caught in the act by Virginia, and she is put on trial for aiding an Arab escape, in a trial scene that is simultaneously set along the trial of the treacherous governor of Acre, who is captured by the Muslims and put on trial for treason by Saladin. The love affair between Louisa and ʿĪsā ends with their marriage at the end of the film.

Naturally, the film mixes between historical reality and outright fiction. It is true that Saladin pitched battle against the Franks at Hattin and defeated them, thus capturing Jerusalem. He also resisted the Third Crusade and prevented Richard the Lionhearted from recapturing the Holy City. Yet beyond that, most of the events and figures are, understandably, made up. ʿĪsā al-ʿAwwām does exist in the Arabo-Islamic chronicles but he was a

Muslim, and not a Christian.[17] Similarly, while women did fight in the Crusades, we are unaware of a specific Louisa among the Hospitallers.[18] Moreover, Saladin was not necessarily known as a physician, nor did he ever meet Richard face-à-face and heal the English king. In fact, this portrait of Saladin and his meeting with Richard is influenced by Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman*, where Saladin is imagined as a noble king with great qualities, including those of a physician.[19]

Yet the fictional narrative of the film should not detract too much from its magisterial production. True, much of the plot and the themes of the film serve Chahine's Nasserist propaganda, as the next section will demonstrate. Nevertheless, the film should be judged more on *how* these themes were portrayed to the audience—in its brilliant filming and production, along with its intended meanings. The next two sections will provide just that: an attempt to decipher the obvious, or the exoteric, and the more veiled, or the esoteric, in Chahine's messages, and the manner in which these aspects were conveyed to the audiences of his time.

Chahine's Nasserist Themes: Anti-Imperialism, Supra-Sectarian Pan-Arabism, and Muslim-Christian Parallels

Chahine's film is unabashedly Nasserist in its message. As Paul Sturtevant explains in his insightful analysis of the film:

> Three main facets of Nasser's political ideology are entwined with the Crusade narrative throughout the film: ideologies of anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, pan-Arab nationalist unity. Each has distinct ramifications in the context of how these ideologies employ and impact on the crusade narrative. One of the ways in which the film allegorizes its political climate is by constructing the Crusaders as congruous with the imperialist, capitalist European nations against which Nasser defined his regime.[20]

[17] See Bahāʾ al-Dīn ibn Shaddād, *al-Nawādir al-sulṭāniyya wa-l-maḥāsin al-Yūsufiyya: Sīrat Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī*, edited by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1994), 206-07.

[18] See Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 136.

[19] See Ganim, "Reversing the Crusades," 46; Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 124-25.

[20] Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 130.

Sturtevant's study demonstrates, albeit briefly, this interpretation by showing how the film portrays the major precepts of Nasserist pan-Arabism: Arab unity, anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, and secular Arab nationalist identity.[21] His interpretation is one that has been commonly identified in most studies of the film.[22] This section will further advance the discussion on the theme by providing a hitherto unexplored angles of analysis of Nasserist principles in the film's events, figures, and dialogue, especially highlighting the exoteric messages of Muslim-Christian equality and poised parallels between the two faiths and their adherents, respectively.

Right at the beginning of the film,[23] the tenets of Nasserist Arab Nationalism are projected onto the scene where one of Saladin's generals, Ḥusām al-Dīn, is pleading with the sultan to help liberate Jerusalem from the Crusaders. Ḥusām al-Dīn refers to the people of Jerusalem as the "Arabs" of Jerusalem, and not the "Muslims" of the city. This is a clear allusion to the affairs of the Middle East at the time of the film and the struggle of the Arab progressive camp, under the leadership of Nasser, against Israel and Western imperialism. Ḥusām al-Dīn even goes further by stating that the Arabs of Jerusalem are "refugees" in their own land, which is a clear and obvious reference to the Palestinian refugee problem.[24] The next scene further emphasizes the "Arabness" of the people of Jerusalem, when an old and famished refugee sheikh perceives the echos in the swamp water as the drums of Saladin's armies, and he declares that "God has sent to us the rescuer of Arabism!"[25]

Similarly, after the opening credits, the generals of Saladin affirm their sultan's status as the leader of the "Arabs." After disembarking off their horses and approaching Saladin, the officers address him as the "Sultan of the

[21] Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 130-33.

[22] See Halim, "Signs of *Saladin*," 78-79, and passim; Khouri, *Arab National Project*, 42-52; Khalifah, *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary*, 170-72.

[23] All pinpoint references to the film below are indicated in the following time coordinates: "hour:minute:second." These time stamps refer to the time when the scene or dialogue under discussion *begins*. In this study, time stamps will refer to the film edition available on the streaming platform The Criterion Channel, which also includes English subtitles. See *Saladin the Victorious*, directed by Youssef Chahine (Lotus Films, 1963), https://www.criterionchannel.com/videos/saladin-the-victorious. I thank Jonathan Phillips for directing my attention to the film's availability on Western film-streaming platforms.

[24] 00:06:20.

[25] 00:01:45. Note that all translations of dialogue are mine.

Arabs," instead of "Sultan of the Muslims," which would be his title during the medieval period.[26] This is yet another unapologetic assertion that the film's hero is not only a medieval figure, but a modern one as well. And the dialogue does not fail to press this point even further to the audiences when Ḥusām al-Dīn states, "The Arabs await you with all the patience they can muster," to which Saladin answers back immediately, "And we will not be late to answer the call of the Arabs."[27]

The theme of Nasserist pan-Arabism is further evident when Saladin, with a voice full of sympathy, equanimity, calmness, and fortitude of conviction, explains to his commander the following:

> The dearest of my wishes O Ḥusām al-Dīn is that the flag of unity flutters high above the entire Arab nation. With this unity, this unity only, are we able to liberate Arab Jerusalem from the hands of the rapist Franks.[28]

This stance of "Arab unity equals Arab victory" is repeatedly proclaimed. For instance, with the Arab armies heading to the Battle of Hattin, the medieval leader declares, "O how beautiful it is when the hearts of Arabs become united."[29] Yet from this exhortation for Arab unity, the audience is introduced to the breaker of such unity, and the symbol of its very opposite—the treacherous Arab governor of Acre.[30]

The governor of Acre is particularly swarthy, with trimmed facial hair and a depicted wickedness that is too obvious to any observer. It is very much a strong possibility that the governor of Acre here, who is depicted in the next scene machinating with Virginia, the Crusader "Beauty of all Beauties,"[31] represents the conservative Arab camp at the time of Nasser—that of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Jordan, those nations who, at the time, had a strong alliance with the capitalist Western bloc. This camp was also an obstacle to any unifying plans that Nasser had had for Arab states during the period, since they do not adhere to his socialist, pan-Arab policies, considering that they are, with the exception of Jordan, wealthy, oil-

[26] 00:09:38.
[27] 00:10:12.
[28] 00:10:19.
[29] 00:11:55.
[30] 00:12:01.
[31] 00:13:44.

producing Arab nations. The governor of Acre thus represents the major wedge between Saladin and the unity of all Arabs, which is highlighted in the next scene when the *wālī* of Acre, full of lust and desire for the seductive Virginia, agrees to help her in any plans she may have against the Arab camp.[32]

Figure 4. Virginia striking a deal with the governor of Acre.
©The Criterion Channel

After Renaud de Chatillon attacks a Muslim (Arab) pilgrimage caravan heading to the Hajj, Saladin gathers his army and heads to the base of the hills of Hattin, where the Crusaders, led by King Guy of Jerusalem and Renauld de Chatillon, are encamped. After a while, the Crusader camp is forced to begin battle since Saladin and his armies were able to attack the Crusader camp secretly and quietly at sunrise and destroy their water storage tanks, a tactic that led to the Franks' extreme thirst and dehydration. Renauld fool-heartedly decides to attack Saladin, even against the advice of King Guy. Here, immediately before battle—i.e., the Battle of Hattin—Saladin delivers a spectacularly-filmed speech, arousing his troops' vigor and mustering their strength to attack and defeat the Franks. In his speech, Saladin proclaims the tenets of Nasserist pan-Arabism by addressing his troops as "Arabs" again: "O Arabs, this is the battle of honour…"[33]

[32] 00:14:20.
[33] 00:37:38.

Figure 5. Battle of Hattin. ©The Criterion Channel

After Saladin's victory at the Battle of Hattin, the film has the Arab Muslim armies praying together. At the same time, we see Louisa, the Hospitaller knight, and ʿĪsā al-ʿAwwām, one of Saladin's trusted commanders and an Arab Christian, both kneeling together in Christian prayer behind the prostrating Arab troops.[34] Here, Chahine portrays a parallel between Islam and Christianity, reflecting one of Nasserism's themes of equality of faiths and the supra-sectarian message of Arab nationalism and unity. This is one of the most crucial scenes in terms of exoterically expressing to the audience said theme. Louisa is stunned that ʿĪsā, who is an Arab, is also a Christian, praying along with her. She desperately inquires, "You are a Christian, and you fight with them!" to which ʿĪsā responds, "With *them*? They are my brothers and my kin!" She then asks, "And what about your brothers in the Cross?" ʿĪsā goes on to explain to Louisa another tenet of Nasserist pan-Arabism—its anti-imperialist stance: he informs her that he is not convinced by the intent and motivation of foreigners who use the Cross as a cover for invading his country.

This significant exchange ends with Louisa asking him about his name, to which he answers her with "ʿĪsā," which means "Jesus" in Arabic. At that moment, Louisa is stunned, but her shock is drowned by the Arab troops' exclamation, "God is Great! God is Great!" thus displaying another moment of the parallel and equality between Christianity and Islam: uttering the name Jesus is immediately followed by the Islamic expression "God is Great!"—one of the most important expressions of the faith.[35]

[34] 00:45:13.

[35] 00:46:53.

After the victory at the Battle of Hattin, and the departure of the remaining Frankish knights, including Virginia, the film sets the scene for Saladin's victorious entry into a grand mosque in Jerusalem, the very same place where we earlier saw King Guy praying before an image of Mary and the child Jesus.[36] What is intriguing here is that as Saladin is walking through the place, he is feted and glorified by his troops with exclamations that are quite uncanny and particular, ones that reflect the equality of Islam and Christianity. On the one hand, a soldier shouts out, "Bayt al-Maqdis has returned to the Arabs," using the Islamic name of Jerusalem. On the other hand, we hear another proclamation stating, "Long live the rescuer of Ūr Shalīm," using the Arabic Christian name for the city.[37] These alternating proclamations using both Muslim *and* Christian names of the city are evidence yet again of the exoteric equality and parallelism between Islam and Christianity, one of the major goals of Nasserist pan-Arabism.

Yet this theme does not stop there. When Saladin orders one of his soldiers to read his decree to the captured Frankish knights and soldiers, once again this tenet reappears unmistakably at the scene:

> To the Christians in Bayt al-Maqdis they have all the rights that Muslims in the city possess…To the Christians of all corners of the world, they have the right of pilgrimage to Bayt al-Maqdis…[38]

Once again, the equality of Islam and Christianity here is expressed clearly and unambiguously: Christians and Muslims both have the same rights to the city, including pilgrimage rights. This scene ends with a dual between Saladin and Renaud, which ends, as it does historically, with Saladin killing Renauld: a message of the triumph of good over evil, of the pious, noble king over the greedy, cunning knight.

[36] 00:49:56. Perhaps this is the Dome of the Rock, since it was recorded that the Franks converted the Dome of the Rock into a shrine with Christian images inside it, and a cross posted atop the outer dome. However, it is not clear whether this is the Dome of the Rock or another edifice, perhaps Al-Aqṣā Mosque, which lies in the Noble Sanctuary, just south of the Dome of the Rock.

[37] 00:49:46. On the different names for Jerusalem, including ancient Hebrew, Christian, and Arabic names, see Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems*, 83-84; and George Adam Smith, *Jerusalem: the Topography, Economics and History from the Earliest Times to A.D. 70*, vol. 1 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907-1908), 250-71.

[38] 00:50:19.

Nasserist themes are further projected during the scene that concludes the first part of the film, when all the released Frankish prisoners of war march out of Jerusalem and head back to Europe after their defeat at Hattin (the expeditions of the Third Crusade constitute the second part of the film).[39] Once again, we have Louisa and ʿĪsā jostling over the rights and wrongs of the war and, by extension, their relationship. Louisa refuses to marry ʿĪsā and be "just another slave" for an Arab. She decides to leave Jerusalem and return with her fellow countrymen back to Europe. Marching with other departing Franks, Louisa is in a state of shock, almost a disembodied ghost, disappointed by her side's defeat, her forced decision to leave the Holy City, and by her inner tormented soul that vacillates between leaving with her people and staying in Jerusalem to marry her Arab lover.[40] It is an internal conflict pitting her emotional heart, which is her love to ʿĪsā, against the rational forces of her mind that pull her towards union with her fellow countrymen and Frankish Christian brothers and sisters. In this scene, Louisa declares her desire to leave, since, according to her, Jerusalem must be in the hands of the Crusaders to protect Christians there. ʿĪsā refuses her assertion, and exclaims that Ūr Shalīm is Arabic and in Arab land.[41]

On the one hand, this exchange asserts that Christians have a right to Jerusalem, but, on the other hand, Jerusalem is Arab land and belongs to Arabs and, by extension, to Muslims as well. Thus the equality and parallel between Christianity and Islam is once again presented to the audiences, furthering the supra-religious, secular agenda of Nasserism. Moreover, ʿĪsā angrily protests to her that she wants to join those who turn faith into commerce, an allusion to the Western imperialist bloc's exploitation of religion to control the Holy Land and to advance their financial and power-hungry interests, a clear reference to Nasserism's anti-capitalist stance. ʿĪsā angrily emotes that he hates those who "convert religion into commerce, who transform the Sacred Sanctuary to a market...pay to acquire a blessing and after that the monies flow back (*tataḍaffaqu)* to Europe."[42]

This anti-capitalist element is present throughout the film.[43] You have Virginia filmed on several occasions clutching onto the jewels and pearls of

[39] 00:56:24.

[40] 00:57:55.

[41] 00:58:06.

[42] 00:58:20.

[43] This motif is also discussed by other interpreters of the film: see Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 130-32.

the "Orient," those riches that, she hypnotically divulges, can be garnered only if she and her Crusader co-conspirators control the Holy Land.[44] Indeed, upon her return to Europe, Virginia delivers a long, impassioned, but albeit deceptive speech to King Richard about the conditions of Christians in the east, thus lying about their persecution, enslavement, and suffering at the hands of the Arabs, not to mention, she adds, the defilement of the Sepulchre of Christ.[45] Her speech is an apparent reflection of the Nasserist view on modern "capitalist" motivations behind the West's expansion to and dominance over the Middle East, to which Nasser was vehemently opposed. After her speech to Richard, we witness Virginia convincing the French King Philip to go on a crusade to recapture the Holy Land by enticing him with a trove full of jewels, seductively informing him that all these riches will be his if he ventures to the Holy Land and defeats Saladin.[46]

The launch of the Third Crusade under the leadership of Richard and the expedition's capture of Acre from the Muslims constitute the beginning of the second part of the film.[47] The siege of Acre is a scene filled with Nasserist themes. First, there is the betrayal of the city by the treacherous governor of Acre, who orders his soldiers to open the gates of the city to the besieging forces of the Third Crusade. Once again, the governor of Acre represents the conservative Arab bloc and their alliance and cordial relations with the U.S. and other Western countries, along with their opposition to socialist pan-Arabist ideology.

[44] See, for example, 00:59:18 and 1:10:13. See also Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 139, where Sturtevant notes that the Crusaders are filmed clinging to "the Eastern jewels."

[45] 00:54:11.

[46] 00:59:18.

[47] 1:00:17.

Figure 6. Richard the Lionhearted leading the Third Crusade.
©The Criterion Channel

Furthermore, amidst the siege, one of Saladin's commanders gives an arousing speech to those in Acre who are beginning to fear the Crusading forces, especially that the European armies are led by the strong and powerful Richard. He states right at the beginning of the speech, and in very clear terms, that you *Arabs* are being forced to face Europe's finest, and that you must fight them with all that you possess—another nod to the modern period: this battle is not between medieval Muslims and Crusaders, but between modern-day *Arabs* and Western imperialists.[48]

After the capture of Acre, the Frankish forces are in celebratory mood, all in a drunken state watching acrobats, fireworkers, and even belly dancers entertain the troops.[49] Sturtevant has indicated that this scene is Orientalism in reverse, where Chahine is positing a pre-supposed stereotype of the Westerner who loves his alcohol and loose in morals as he watches belly dancers swaying their seductive bodies in temptation.[50] Be that as it may, this is only a too-obvious a tactic deployed by the sometimes not-too-subtle Chahine to indicate clearly to the Arab audiences that the Crusaders are drunken with power, ignoble, and even reckless. Yet what is crucial in this scene is how the image of Richard emerges among the multitude of revelers in their unearned victory.

[48] 1:05:49.

[49] 1:08:39.

[50] See Sturtevant's assessment of the film's Occidentalist angle in its negative depictions of the Crusaders: Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 139.

Richard refuses to discuss the spoils of war and who will rule over Acre, angrily reminding his fellow kings and knights that "There is no talk at all concerning the distribution of the spoils of war, O protectors of the Cross! We are still in a Holy War!"[51] What is further telling is how this scene, where Richard reminds his fellow Crusaders that they are conducting a *holy war*, is immediately followed by the figure of Saladin in his tent reading the Qur'an after the Arab defeat at Acre. Here, the Crusading *holy war* that Richard mentions is immediately paralleled with *Muslim* holy war, since we see that Saladin is facing a copy of the Qur'an and reading in silence the famous Qur'anic verse concerning the fate of Muslims who die fighting a *holy war*, such as those who fell defending Acre: "do not think of those who have been killed in God's way as dead. They are alive with their Lord, well provided for."[52] Saladin's brother then enters his chambers, and consoles him with yet another Qur'anic verse: "We deal out such days among people in turn."[53] Therefore, Chahine presents an immediate parallel between a Christian holy war, uttered by Richard, and an Islamic *jihad* alluded to by the Qur'anic verse Saladin is reading, thus further providing the recurrent theme of Muslim-Christian parallels and equality, even in the concept of holy war.

The ubiquity of this Nasserist theme is matched with the preponderant references to two other tenets—that of anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism.[54] There is no better scene to convey and fulfill this message to the Arab audiences than when Saladin decides to visit the Crusader camp to negotiate a peace deal with the enemy after his initial defeats at the hands of Richard and the armies of the Third Crusade.[55] Saladin believes that Richard is a noble and true knight of the Cross whose interest is only to protect Christians in the Holy Land, and not to seek financial gains. The Arab sultan arrives at the Crusader camp with only a couple of his commanders, and with the absence of a ceremonial retinue. Indeed, the Muslim leader appears before the

[51] 1:14:49.

[52] 1:15:10; Qur'anic verse 3:169 (translation from *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 47.

[53] Qur'anic verse 3:140. The full verse is even more telling about Saladin's defeat and Richard's victory. The full verse reads as follows: "If you have suffered a blow, they too have suffered one like it. We deal out such days among people in turn, for God to find out who truly believes, for Him to choose martyrs from among you—God does not love evildoers." See *The Qur'an*, trans. Abdel Haleem, 44.

[54] See also Sturtevant's analysis on Saladin and his troops' socialist, anti-capitalist stance: Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 131-32.

[55] 1:18:56.

Crusaders in the most humble of entourages a royal can muster. He is riding without an army, flags or banners; there are also no foot soldiers accompanying him, or swordsmen—only Saladin and his closest of commanders appear at the enemy's camp. This is the image of pro-socialist Nasserism, one of humility, asceticism, and understatement.[56] Yet what faces Saladin is the capitalist, opulent kings on the Crusader side, with all their armies' pomp and circumstance. Chahine conveys a very stark contrast between the two camps during this meeting in order to assert the admirable Nasserist tenets of socialism in the face of the arrogant and greedy Western imperialistic bloc.

During this scene, one of the major epithets of Nasserism is presented to the audience. After all the kings and princes of Europe announce themselves to him using their most imperial of titles and honorifics, Saladin introduces himself as merely "Saladin, worshipper of God, servant of the *Arabs*."[57] Of course, all throughout the film Saladin is Nasser and Nasser is Saladin, and here it is no different. But what emerges is a testy exchange between Saladin and the leaders of Europe on who should rule Jerusalem, where once again another parallel between Islam and Christianity emerges—between a humble, believing Muslim sultan and a humble, believing Christian king. During the scene, Richard suddenly emerges from afar, advancing towards the Crusader camp but humbly dressed, with no crown or sword, and not even riding on a horse, very much paralleling the form in which Saladin has chosen to appear.[58]

Once again, the two royals mirror each other, revealing yet another expression of the equality between the *noble* Muslim and the *noble* Christian, the parallel between the believing and just rulers of both the abode of Islam and the realm of Christendom. Richard berates Saladin with accusations that no Christian can accept the persecution of Christians in the Holy Land and the defilement of the tomb of the "Son of God." In response, Saladin angrily rejects such accusations, informing Richard that he, Saladin, a man who believes in all the prophets, would never defile the grave of the Messiah, Jesus,

[56] As Sturtevant explains when describing a different scene, "Saladin is portrayed as a socialist warrior-revolutionary fighting against the opulence and greed of the wealthy imperialists. His simple military camp and the functional, often monochromatic dress he and his men wear are juxtaposed against the opulence and extravagance of the Crusaders": Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 131.

[57] 1:20:57.

[58] 1:22:42.

who is also, Saladin emphasizes, a prophet in Islam. He further asserts that Jerusalem is Arab land (rather than *Muslim* land) and it is open for visitation to people of *all* faiths.[59]

The Muslim sultan then proceeds to ask ʿĪsā to speak on his behalf, as a Christian Arab and one of his closest friends.[60] At this moment, the climax of Nasserist principles is uttered by the *Christian* ʿĪsā: "Our motto is 'Religion belongs to God and the Nation is for all.'"[61] Yet the Crusaders remain unconvinced, revealing once again their "capitalist" ethos when Conrad dismisses ʿĪsā as just another paid mercenary—a projection, I would argue, of Conrad and the Crusader camp's own intentions in this war: to enrich themselves with the monies and resources of the Holy Land. Saladin then objects, stating that only Conrad knows those who are bought by money. Once again, Nasserist anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist banners raise their heads here. The scene ends with Saladin offering his hand in peace, only to be rejected by Richard and the Crusaders with the proclamation "War! War! War!" loudly booming out from the entire European camp.[62] After appealing to Richard's Christian conscience to stop this war, Saladin departs after warning the enemy that they and their decisions will only "burn the branches of [the Mount of] Olives…"[63]

The teachings of equality and parallels between Islam and Christianity re-surface after the battle at Ascalon. Realizing that it is impossible to defeat the Crusaders with their impregnable and fire-proof siege towers, Saladin devises a tactic to deceive them into battle outside fortified cities and in open fields. The Arab Muslim armies thus entrap the Frankish camp, attacking them in open fields.[64] During the battle, many enslaved Arabs pulling the Crusader towers shout "Go Arabs! Go Arabs!"[65] (In fact, throughout the film, Saladin's camp is referred to as "the Arabs," instead of "the Muslims.") Yet after his side's victory, Saladin remains in his tent, pensive, tired, fatigued, and in no mood to celebrate.[66] One reason here is that his son Ismāʿīl is missing, and may have been killed in battle.

[59] 1:23:04.
[60] 1:24:00.
[61] 1:24:08: "shiʿārunā al-dīn li-llāh wa-l-waṭanu li'l-jamīʿ."
[62] 1:24:25.
[63] 1:24:56.
[64] 1:29:36.
[65] 1:35:50.
[66] 1:37:50.

Importantly, Saladin's mood after his victory is paralleled by Richard's state of mind. The English king is also seen in his tent with his wife in a complete state of shock, displeased and saddened by the defeat. It is at this moment that he realizes that Saladin is a shrewd tactician of war, and not a so-called "barbarian."[67] The English king then walks through the fields of battle to inspect the fallen troops in a deeply moving—and eerie—scene, which includes a vulture hovering over the dead bodies, edging forward on a tree branch and looking down onto Ismāʿīl, thus foreshadowing the imminent death of the sultan's son.[68] Again, Richard's mood is pensive, very much that of Saladin's. The English king then demands of his war council that a truce be struck between the Crusader camp and the Arabs, a decision vehemently opposed by the Frenchmen King Philip and Conrad de Montferrat.[69]

The parallel here is that neither Saladin nor Richard is a true winner or loser after battle. Instead, the war is affecting both equally: the dead are everywhere, both Muslim and Christian, Arab and European. Holy war is costly. Even kings lose their sons, which is the case with Saladin when the audience finds out that his son is dead. Incidentally, the Christian ʿĪsā mourns the loss of Ismāʿīl the most. He cannot fathom his death, and enters a state of hysteria, screaming in delirium that Ismāʿīl is still alive.[70] It is significant here that it is the *Christian* ʿĪsā who mourns the dead Muslim Ismāʿīl: in an analysis of their names, ʿĪsā (Jesus in Arabic) is mourning the death of Ismāʿīl (Ishmael, the biblical father of the Arabs and the ancestor of Muslims in the Islamic tradition). This scene is once again a reaffirmation of the unity of Arab Muslims and Arab Christians, one of the central tenets of Nasserist Arab Nationalism.

This parallel between Islam and Christianity is also seen when Richard discovers Conrad's attempt to conspire with Saladin against the English king.[71] When Richard reads Conrad's treacherous letter to Saladin and realizes the depth of deception being concocted by men of the Cross, Richard is shocked, enraged, and full of despair. He invokes the biblical tale of Judas's betrayal of Jesus as a parallel to Conrad's treacherous plot against him.

[67] 1:39:43.
[68] 1:40:30.
[69] 1:40:21.
[70] 1:38:21.
[71] 2:07:38.

Similarly, Saladin is offered a deal by Duke Arthur to defeat Richard, but Saladin refuses it as well.[72] Just like Richard's reference to the Christian tradition, Saladin also cites his own Islamic traditions when he rejects Arthur's offer, including citing Prophet Muḥammad's example on the proper conduct of war. Saladin declines his brother's argument that he should accept the deal since the Prophet himself used to win over opposing factions through similar stratagems. Saladin, paralleling Richard's angry reflection on the biblical story of Jesus's betrayal, also references the Islamic tradition by angrily reminding his brother that the Prophet was in the midst of war when he was deploying such tactics, when it was necessary to do so to win battle. However, the Muslim camp, Saladin reminds his brother, is in a truce with the Crusader enemy and hence should respect the agreement and not conspire to sow discord between Richard and his Crusader allies. Thus appears another parallel between the Muslim and Christian rulers, where the traditions of *both* faiths are cited, discussed, and reflected upon, further engendering in the film Nasserist tenets of equality between the two religions.

This is very much on display in the same scene, when both Richard and Saladin reflect on the nature of holy war. Richard furiously and rhetorically asks his wife:

> Is this the Holy War for which thousands of our sons have been martyred? Nay a punishment in the world could exorcise the crime of these treacherous kings! ... Is this the war that the knights are conducting? Are these honourable battles, or poisoned traps? And what is the difference then between Saladin [if he agrees to Conrad's plot] and the ancient pagan emperor who paid some followers of the Messiah and so they sold him the body of Jesus?[73]

In parallel, Saladin reminds his brother why they fight, the nature of war they are conducting, the value of honourable triumphs, and the disgrace of tainted victories:

> We should not celebrate a victory gifted to us by a Christian king at the expense of the corpses of his brothers…What is the value of this victory that is defiled by dishonour. We do not fight to attain a land, but we fight to further the spiritual and moral

[72] 2:15:55.
[73] 2:07:50.

> principles…And you, as a man of politics, how are you assured that a man such as this prince [referring to the treacherous Conrad who is offering Saladin the chance to defeat Richard], who betrays his people and the cause he is fighting for, and lies to his allies, how are you assured that this man would respect his word or his agreement with you?[74]

The scene ends with Saladin ordering his brother to write back to Conrad explaining that the Arabs will teach him and the Franks that an honest defeat is nobler than victory imbued with betrayal and dishonour.

One of the most telling scenes on the parallels and equalities between Islam and Christianity appears later at the haunting trial of Louisa and the governor of Acre.[75] The audience is presented with two courts side by side. On the right hand side is the Christian Crusader court with Louisa under trial, after she was caught helping an Arab soldier, ʿĪsā, escape the Crusader camp. On the left, we have the Muslim Arab court, with Saladin acting as prosecutor over the fate of the treacherous governor of Acre. This scene, which is discussed in more detail in the next section, is the epitomy of the poised, balanced view of Muslims and Christians in the film. Above the Christian court, there are several crosses; similarly, atop the Muslim court we read the words "Allāh" and "Muḥammad" in Arabic, coupled with crescents—all symbols of Islam. The two camps are prosecuting treachery. On the Muslim side, it is the actions of the governor of Acre. On the Christian side, it is Louisa who is charged with aiding and abetting the escape of an Arab, here her lover ʿĪsā, from the Crusader hospital. The speech of Saladin to the governor of Acre is filled with references to Nasserist pan-Arabism. He reminds the governor of his actions, telling him, "You hated your *nation*[76] and your *Arabness*,[77] and you were too willing to surrender Acre!"[78]

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[74] 2:16:50.

[75] The scene begins at 2:23:33. For more on the significance of the trial, see infra.

[76] Here Saladin uses the anachronistic Arab Nationalist term "*waṭan*" for nation, a term he imports from the modern discourses and political realities of the twentieth-century Middle East.

[77] "ʿUrūbataka."

[78] 2:25:12.

Figure 7. The scene of parallel trials.
©The Criterion Channel

Then, towards the end of the trial, Richard, in bringing forth the climax of the scene, angrily rejects Conrad's prosecution of Louisa and turns the trial against Conrad himself, charging him with betrayal, which is the same charge laid by Saladin against the governor of Acre in the Muslim court. The charge against Conrad is based on Richard's discovery of the Frenchman's treacherous offer to Saladin: his proposal to withdraw his French troops during battle so that Saladin can defeat the English king. The finale of the trial is concluded by Richard railing against Conrad and his actions by lacing his angry words with Christian references, exclaiming at the end, "For let the Lord's strike descend upon all who conspire against Ūr Shalīm!"[79] Similarly, Saladin ends his trial by using Islamic religious language to adjudicate on the punishment of treason.[80]

Yet these poised parallels between Islam and Christianity are only too obvious an exoteric message of the film. This is a major part of the political message of Nasserism that Chahine is deploying in the film. However, there are many times during the film that this balanced and equal portrayal gives way to a much deeper elaboration on Christianity, Christian figures, and Christian traditions. As the next section will show, while Muslim Arabs are depicted favourably in the film, much of the figures of the Muslim Arab camp are one-dimensional, predictable, and homogenous in their portrayal. It is the Christian symbols, narratives, and personalities, the analysis will unveil, that

[79] 2:27:20.

[80] 2:27:30. The end of Saladin's speech is spoken in a tone that appears as if the sultan is citing a Qur'anic verse. However, I have not been able to locate his final sentences in the Qur'an. There are similarities between his phrasing and verse 7:56.

come to dominate the film. In particular, it is the Christian characters, especially Richard and Louisa, who reveal intriguing complexity and multi-dimensional depth. In fact, the Christian figures, it will be argued next, are the real heroes of the film, and, together with the elaboration of Christian themes, represent the deeper esoteric meaning of the film.

Christian Themes, Fallen Heroes, Ideal Martyrs, or, How Richard and the Crusaders Stole the Show

Much has been written about the images of Saladin and Richard in this film. Scholarship on Chahine's cinematic production has mainly asserted that both Saladin and Richard are ideal rulers, honourable, strong, and both intent, and rightly so, on their just cause of capturing Jerusalem.[81] This is part of Chahine's parallel depiction of an equal Islam and Christianity, a balanced image of a Muslim Arab and a Christian Crusader. Yet the plot unravels to reveal much more than this too-obvious a parallel. Indeed, we witness, as the present analysis will unfold, how Richard emerges as *the* central figure. We become privy to his test-laden odyssey in the Holy Land, to how he loses his focus and becomes seduced by earthly power and fame that winning Jerusalem would bring to him when he sails back home with the keys to the Holy City. While it is true that Saladin and Richard are seemingly equal counterparts in the film, Richard's personality, I will argue, is much more nuanced and multi-dimensional, a portrayal, I affirm, that is part of how Chahine projects the themes of Christianity and Christian figures center-stage in his epic. It is also how, based on Chahine's didactic message on Christianity,[82] Richard—and other Christian figures—stole the show, becoming triumphant cinematically with their fascinating characters.

In Chahine's portrayal, Richard is the tragical protagonist who, reminiscent of Shakespeare's Hamlet and his moral conundrums, is incensed, confused, and paralyzed as a result of the treachery in his camp, which reaches its unfortunate apogee in the assassination attempt on his life. As a result of the numerous treacherous acts of the Crusader leaders surrounding

[81] On this prevalent thesis in studies on *Saladin the Victorious*, see my introductory remarks above. See also Halim, "Signs of Saladin," 85-87.

[82] I here affirm the theory of director as "auteur," which is adhered to by Hala Halim but rejected by Sturtevant: Halim, "Signs of Saladin," 78; Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 143, n. 5.

him, Richard loses faith in his God and in his sacred pilgrimage-crusade[83] to capture Jerusalem and defend the city's Christians. The film, it can even be argued further, is *less* about Saladin—at least in the second part of the film with the beginning of the Third Crusade–and more about the story of Richard's *odyssey*, in how a Christian, believing knight succumbs to the devil's temptation—Richard as the fallen hero.

Richard's odyssey reaches its crossroads in a scene reminiscent thematically and cinematographically of Sir Laurence Olivier's setting of "To be or not to be" soliloquy in his 1948 Shakespearean masterpiece *Hamlet*.[84] Here, Richard stands over a cliff set above waves crashing against it, and succumbs to the voice of the devil whispering in his ear the glories that the conquest of Jerusalem would bring, along with the humiliations that the King of England would suffer in Europe if he returns home empty handed without the keys to Jerusalem.[85] This scene is unapologetically Christian in its image: Richard here is in the image of Jesus when Jesus was being tested by the devil in the wilderness atop the mountain overlooking the kingdoms of the world. In this biblical scene, the devil tester shows Jesus the great rewards of earthly power and its splendour, and seduces him by whispering to him that of "all these things will I [Satan] give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me."[86] Jesus of course resists the devil's temptation and declines the earthly deal by declaring, "Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."[87]

[83] On the Crusades as a form of pilgrimage, see discussion below.

[84] *Hamlet*, directed by Sir Laurence Olivier (Two Cities Films, 1948), https://www.criterionchannel.com/videos/hamlet.

[85] 2:31:51. In fact, immediately prior to this scene, Duke Arthur presents to Richard what glorious, earthly gains conquering Jerusalem would bring to the English royal. In a sense, Arthur here is offering Richard the Devil's Temptation. The duke repeats this offer in the next scene when Richard looks over the hills of Jerusalem while experiencing the Temptation of Christ.

[86] Matt. 4:9 KJV.

[87] Matt. 4:10 KJV.

Figure 8. Richard's "To Be or Not To Be" Hamlet-esque moment.
©The Criterion Channel

Similarly, Richard in this scene attempts to push the lure of Satan, represented here by the voice of the treacherous Duke Arthur inside Richard's head. However, unlike Jesus, Richard falls short of holding steadily onto his beliefs. Instead, the English king loses his faith, succumbs to the devil's temptation, and begins to ponder "the banner of Richard over Jerusalem." Now fully within the devil's clasp, Richard exclaims, "Satan, tell Saladin I accept his offer [to visit Jerusalem as a pilgrim]," but he conditions his acceptance by elaborating, "this does not mean peace or the end of the battle," thus insisting that he will continue to war until he *himself* is enthroned king of Jerusalem.[88] The scene ends with Arthur, the testing devil, smiling contently after conquering the Christian spirit of Richard.

Figure 9. The Temptation of Richard, with Duke Arthur as the testing Devil.
©The Criterion Channel

[88] 2:32:11.

Thus Richard has fallen to the Devil, who appears behind him in the scene as the seemingly loyal but treacherous Duke Arthur. An unChristian warrior Richard becomes, now hell-bent over capturing Jerusalem at any cost.[89] And yet Richard's fall from grace and loss of faith is further deepened by the assassination attempt on his life at the gates of Jerusalem, after he had agreed to Saladin's invitation to visit the Holy City as a pilgrim. The assassination attempt was orchestrated by none other than Duke Arthur.[90] Richard's brush with death further drowns him in the lust for earthly spoils that a seemingly holy war would bring him by the conquest of Christianity's most sacred city. Richard thus becomes the fallen Christian, the believer who loses his faith and desires instead the Faustian deal. This is most evident in the dialogue between him and Saladin, when the latter comes to heal the Englishman in his tent after the assassination attempt on his life.

Here is yet another stunningly filmed scene by Chahine. We observe Saladin and a couple of Muslim commanders, including ʿĪsā, ride in disguise through the Crusader camp, which at the time is enraged by the assassination attempt on Richard's life.[91] The scene is fascinatingly tense: you see Saladin and his generals on horseback disguised as Crusader knights, marching slowly through the European camp, where we find thousands of Crusader soldiers seething in anger against and hatred towards any Arab; it is a brewing volcano at the precipice of erupting into a sea of fired-up soldiers wanting to wage nothing short of a bloody and vengeaful war against their enemy. Moreover, it is night time, and the camp is lit by thousands of burning torches, and, to further add to this nail-biting scene, there is Duke Arthur (who arranged for Richard's assassination attempt) and his co-conspirator Virginia giving moving speeches to arouse the Crusader troops' hatred of Arabs and edge them closer and closer to launch a holy war against Saladin and his armies.

Saladin finally ends his horse-back ride through the dangerous cauldron when he arrives at Richard's tent, where the English king lies there asleep. After silently treating the wounded royal, Saladin begins to have a fascinating

[89] On how some of the Crusaders in the film, including eventually Richard, are cynically motivated by economic gain and lust for power rather than the noble goal of securing the right of Christians to perform pilgrimage at the birthplace of Christianity, see Halim, "Signs of Saladin," 87-89.

[90] Richard's visit to Jerusalem begins with a priest blessing him and other Crusader figures before they embark onto their pilgrimage to the city. See 2:32:24.

[91] 2:35:48.

exchange with his counterpart Richard on the purpose of the Crusades and who should rule Jerusalem.[92] Here, Richard explicitly reveals his weakness to Saladin, pronouncing—so eloquently—his lust for earthly power as a confession of a sinner, a fallen Christian hero, of a believer who lost faith during his pilgrimage odyssey to the Holy Land. When asked by Saladin why should he rule over Jerusalem, Richard very pensively informs him of all the *earthly* glories capturing *earthly* Jerusalem would bring to him:

> But you don't know, O sultan of Muslims, how the Pope in Rome, and all the woodcutters on the remote mountains and the peasants in their fields, the old around the fireplace during the winter nights; thousands and thousands of Christian folk await the return of Richard and in his hand the keys of Jerusalem.[93]

In response, Saladin angrily warns Richard that he is no longer a *Christian* king but a fallen hero, an earthly ruler seeking the vain glories that titillate the puffed ego of a greedy warrior at the expense of all Christian values. Indeed, angered by his noble counterpart's ignoble goals, Saladin reminds Richard of his fall from grace and its dangerous consequences:

> Richard! You are gambling over a deceptive dream! You are not fighting to seek the glory of the Cross but *your* glory. I warn you O king of the English, for you are seeking your own grandeur! You push forth the peasants and the woodcutters to death in order for you to become king over Jerusalem. You search for the booty of war, you push forth the thousands of simple folk to death in a foreign land in order to become king over Jerusalem, so that the bugles of war declare to you, "Richard the Lionhearted has recaptured Jerusalem!" You want war, so let your wish come true, but I warn you: for you will not win it. *Beware from yourself O noble knight*. [94]

Yet one cannot falter Richard for such descent into the moral abyss, for being so close to death, and believing that the arrow that pierced his heart is a treacherous Arab arrow, Richard inevitably—and predictably—loses faith

[92] 2:41:30.

[93] 2:43:39.

[94] 2:44:04 (emphasis added).

even further. And how couldn't he, after an assassination attempt seemingly concocted by the cunning Saladin after the sultan himself had invited him to a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Figure 10. Saladin healing Richard at the Crusader camp.
©The Criterion Channel

This image of a struggling protagonist, vacillating between his spiritual faith and his earthly ambitions, is, in my opinion, a more fascinating narrative of a hero, this fallen Christian pilgrim-king, and it is in stark contrast to the *one-dimensional* image of the perfect Muslim sultan in the film. Saladin is continuously portrayed as the epitomy of the ideal ruler, a great leader, and a noble and merciful king. He is also a great tactician, defeating the Crusaders on more than one occasion due to his military acumen. He never waivers in his holy mission to defend Jerusalem, which, to him, is Arab land and belongs to the Arabs.[95] When offered a conspiring deal to defeat Richard by, first, a treacherous Conrad and, later, by a backstabbing Arthur, Saladin, as the noble hero, firmly rejects all ignominious offers—and without hesitation.

Only in one occasion do we see a Saladin in a less-than-ideal image. After learning that his son was killed during a battle that the Arab camp had won against the Crusaders, Saladin trembles and kneels down in weakness of body and soul, unable to deal fully with the loss of his son. He reaches out to God and prays, "My Lord, give me the capacity to endure and to forbear."[96] Overall, however, Saladin's image in the film is one of an ideal, unwavering

[95] Sturtevant also indicates that Saladin never refers to himself as a holy warrior (*mujāhid*) or to his war as a holy war (*jihād)*: Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 134.
[96] 1:39:28.

pinnacle of nobility in both war and peace. A far cry it remains, though, from the deeper and more multifaceted figure of the Christian king Richard.

While on the exoteric surface, the parallels between Saladin and Richard, as two equal foes, reflect a parallel equality between Islam and Christianity, the multi-dimensional Richard versus a one-dimensional Saladin is part of Chahine's esoteric positing of Christianity at the center of the narrative. In fact, this contrast between a multi-dimensional Crusader figure and a one-dimensional Arab figure is also evident in another European-Arab relationship in the film—that of Louisa and ʿĪsā. To be fair, there are several one-dimensional and uninteresting Christian characters in the film: Renaud de Chatillon as the power-hungry, ignoble, impetuous knight; King Guy of Jerusalem as the calm and wise older man; and the cunning figures of King Philip, Conrad, and Arthur. They are all, generally speaking, limited characters, lacking depth or development.[97]

Still, Chahine's depiction of the enemy camp is not as one-dimensional and stereotypical as, for example, Sir Laurence Olivier's portrayal of the lazy and cowardly French court in *Henry V*, with the exception of Montjoy.[98] On the contrary, some characters here are complex.[99] Take Louisa, for instance. Her character as a Christian knight is much more intriguing, and is in stark contrast to that of the Arab ʿĪsā, her lover. ʿĪsā's character is typically one-dimensional, exactly like that of Saladin: ʿĪsā is an Arab who is always noble, always steadfast, always loving, and always forgiving. Louisa's character, on the other hand, experiences development and growth, and conveys yet another heroic odyssey as a Christian figure who struggles with her faith and the earthly world's inescapable horrors and temptations. In fact, Louisa's character, and her love affair with ʿĪsā, is much more than the typically-required romantic subplot inserted to entertain audiences, as it has been argued in scholarship on the film.[100]

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[97] See also Halim, "Signs of Saladin," 87, where she attempts to categorize the Crusader characters based on the motives undergirding their pursuit of war in the Holy Land.

[98] *Henry V*, directed by Sir Laurence Olivier (Two Cities Films, 1944), https://www.criterionchannel.com/videos/henry-v.

[99] I disagree here with Sturtevant's opinion that Chahine's portrayal of Crusader characters is too stereotypical and is imbued with Arabs' biased presuppositions of the Western personality: Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 139.

[100] See Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 137, where he states: "The relationship between Louisa and 'Issa fulfills two of the generic requirements for the Hollywood historical epic: the romance and the happy ending." See also Halim, "Signs of Saladin," 84-85.

Figure 11. Louisa and ʿĪsā.
©The Criterion Channel

Louisa is the Hospitaller knight who later, as part of her transformation into a devout Christian and firm believer, turns to the peaceful vocation of nursing as a refuge from warring and its sinful horrors, shocking stratagems, maddening intrigue, and ceaseless cunning. Giving up her arms was the result of Louisa's growing disillusion with war, along with, importantly, her budding feelings towards a member of the enemy camp—the Arab commander ʿĪsā. At the beginning of the movie, Louisa's Crusader character is one of a strong and beautiful female knight—a femme fatale even—who is also the leader of the Hospitaller troops at Hattin. Before battle, she encounters ʿĪsā for the first time while bathing unarmed and naked in what is assumed to be Lake Tiberius.[101] After pleading with him to give her time to get dressed before arresting her, which he obliges, Louisa cunningly pierces his back with her shooting arrow, before warning him that the next time the arrow will strike his heart, a predictive innuendo in the film for how later his heart will be struck by her love. Yet during the Battle of Hattin, their roles reverse, where this time ʿĪsā was given the chance to kill the swordless Louisa and, instead of striking her a deadly blow, he allows her to escape, thus beginning his love for her.[102] His mercy and restraint at that moment perhaps help convert Louisa from a fighting warrior full of hatred for the Arab camp to a more pietistic Christian who sees the imperfections of war and its corruptive power to a Christian soldier, such as herself.

[101] 00:26:48.
[102] 00:33:33.

At the end of Battle of Hattin, and with the comprehensive defeat of the Crusaders, Louisa, along with fellow Christian fighters, is captured by Saladin's army. As mentioned earlier, here we have one of the film's most famous scenes. The Muslim army begins to pray after the conclusion of battle, with Louisa also simultaneously performing her Christian prayers.[103] It is here that she is surprised to learn that her lover ʿĪsā is a Christian Arab fighting among Muslims against his fellow Christians from Europe. What is significant in this scene is that Louisa is not only troubled by the fact that ʿĪsā decided to fight on the side of his co-nationals against his Christian kin, but by also sensing her own growing feelings of love towards an Arab, even if he was Christian, a feeling that, in her developing religious conscience, represents a temptation and a sin that, surely, demands resistance from a Christian believer like herself.

In fact, Louisa's tension with her feelings towards an Arab parallels her disillusion with a seemingly holy war. In regards to her love for ʿĪsā, she refuses to stay with him after the Crusaders have left Jerusalem at the end of Hattin, and tells him she is a Crusader knight who cannot marry an Arab, thus leaving him and Jerusalem to return to Europe. Yet when she arrives back to the Holy Land as part of the armies of the Third Crusade, Louisa decides to shun war and to turn instead to nursing the wounded. In a way, Louisa, it can be argued, morphs from a one-sided ideologue, who, as leader of the Hospitallers, is determined to wage war against Arabs, to a character whose experience fighting in the Holy Land helps her pierce through the blinding veil of an aimless war full of violence, deceit, and ignobility.

In other words, Louisa has exited the cave in Plato's *Republic*, thus overcoming the *shades* of the real, here the naïve belief in a holy war, and she begins to see the *true* forms of reality, here the sobering realness of war, with all its unChristian evils. Louisa's character thus experiences a quantum leap to the next stage of human (Christian?) development. Her new stage of humanness is represented by her new vocation as a nurse, dedicating her life to peacefully helping others in need.

Yet when she is surprised by ʿĪsā's presence as a patient at her hospital tent, after he was rescued by some Crusaders who found him floating off the coast, Louisa begins to gravitate towards the sinful temptation of being with her Arab lover, thus for a brief moment lovingly embracing ʿĪsā's bare chest while he is lying unconscious in one of her hospital beds.[104] However, Louisa resists

[103] 00:45:23.

[104] 2:10:36.

the temptation of being with her (Arab) lover, and immediately leaves his side, even as she struggles with her feelings towards him. She feels incapable of being with ʿĪsā due to the current war that has been driving a wedge between the union of their two souls. Significantly, Louisa here is also trying hard to maintain her faith, thus kneeling and trembling with fear and desperation before an image of a crucified Christ on a cross. She then begins to pray desperately to her God in order to resist the temptation of being with her lover who is also her enemy in this war, pleading to Him in tears:

> O Lord, I have left warring and devoted myself exclusively to nursing in order not to face circumstances that are too burdensome for me to bear. O Lord, if it was written that once again I endure the torment of experience…[105]

Figure 12. Louisa, as a nurse, encountering ʿĪsā at her Crusader hospital. ©The Criterion Channel

Yet Louisa successfully escapes the temptation and emerges unscathed by sin, with her faith intact. She even resists another temptation to be with her lover, when ʿĪsā attempts to convince her to leave the Crusader camp and be with him. Knowing that his life is in danger, Louisa refuses his offer and instead helps him escape. She even resists one final plea to join him and escape

[105] 2:11:13. Her prayers are interrupted by ʿĪsā's sick voice and his incomprehensible utterances as he wakes up from his sleep.

together, before ʿĪsā flees the enemy's camp on a horse given to him by Louisa.[106]

Even aiding ʿĪsā's escape is an obvious *Christian* act of sacrifice, for in her act of setting him free, Louisa sacrifices herself, her feelings for ʿĪsā, her status, and even her life altogether, as she is caught in the act by Virginia and is sent to trial to face the possible punishment of "burning like the witches"—her own sacrificial crucifixion.[107] In other words, by setting her lover free, Louisa was possibly redeeming ʿĪsā and facing, as a result, her own crucifixion. Louisa, as such, becomes the Christian martyr. When she is queried by Virginia regarding her "treacherous" action of setting an Arab free, she rejected Virginia's accusation, and even rebutted Virginia's charge that she is the lover of an Arab. She holds steadfast to her faith, responding, "God doth knows, I am of no sin."[108]

I have previously detailed how Louisa's ensuing trial by the Crusaders' council of war[109] is one of the most stunning and unforgettable scenes in the film.[110] Her trial, as has been described in the previous section, is another example of the *seemingly* juxtaposed parallel between Islam and Christianity, with two courts set side by side: one Crusader court set for her, and another Muslim court for the treacherous governor of Acre, with Saladin presiding over the latter. Yet once again, Chahine esoterically brings Christianity to the forefront of the scene, this time through the Christian teaching of *love*, which is the underpinning theme of prosecution in *both* trials—in the Christian *and* Muslim courts.

[106] 2:21:59.

[107] 2:22:50.

[108] 2:23:11.

[109] 2:23:25.

[110] Sturtevant interprets the trial of Louisa as follows: "Louisa becomes a Joan of Arc figure, her virtue highlighted by the evil of those accusing her. Her tolerance and love is superior to their 'sacred hate'": Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 137.

Figure 13. The trial of Louisa. ©The Criterion Channel

Side by side stands the Arab Muslim court and the Christian Crusader court. At the Arab Muslim corner is the trial of the governor of Acre; in the Christian corner the trial of Louisa. She is being prosecuted by Conrad de Montferrat, while Saladin himself is leading the tribulations against the governor of Acre. In a brilliant setting we see Richard who is not only present at the Christian court, but who is also able to simultaneously hear and see Saladin's prosecution of the governor of Acre at the parallel Muslim court. Atop the Muslim court is the Muslim symbol of the crescent. Above the Crusader court is its counterpart, the cross, this Christian symbol that, incidentally, fills the screen ubiquitously during much of the film, at times even with dominating grandeur.

Conrad accuses Louisa of possessing *love* which, according to him, blinds the sacred duty of hatred of the enemy in a holy war, while Saladin warns eloquently against the *relinquishment of love* by the governor of Acre. Love here, of course, is one of the main teachings of Christianity and a foundational tenet of the message of Jesus. Intriguingly, it is the *Muslim* leader Saladin who is espousing the *Christian* theme of love.[111] Of course, this is not to say that Islam does not teach love, for it does, and much of the teachings of Islam and Prophet Muhammad extol love, including a Muslim's love for God and his fellow man, and God's love for mankind. Yet what makes this scene particularly Christian in its theme is that Chahine could have had Saladin preach to the governor of Acre about the evils of disloyalty and the disheartening vice of betrayal, about the unreligious sin of treachery committed by the governor of Acre against his own Muslim community.

[111] 2:25:05.

Instead, Chahine chose "love" as the theme for *both* trials. Saladin, the hero, follows love, while Conrad, the soon to be revealed traitor, is advocating the *opposite* of love. Both parallel trials, then, are adjudicating over a *Christian* ethic. The scene comes to a climax when the Muslim sultan angrily crosses the illusionary barrier between the two courts and preaches to Conrad, in a pulsating and compelling dialogue, the merits of love and its necessity:

> Conrad: She should be killed as a result of who she loves!
>
> Saladin: No! For you [Conrad] don't understand that with your killing of *love* you yourself and whoever is around you shall perish!
>
> Conrad: No victory without hate!
>
> Saladin: No liberation without *love*.
>
> Conrad: Let our sacred hatred win back its rights.
>
> Saladin: Let hatred be erased from the world!
>
> Conrad: Burn her like the witches![112]

Finally, while Islam and Christianity are poised equally in a side by side balanced depiction, during much of the film it is Christian language, symbols, narratives, and even Christian music that unmistakably dominate screen time—what I argue here as Chahine's personal *homage* to his own Christian faith, and his use of the film as a tool of didacticism to his Muslim Arab audiences. For example, Christian terminology is deployed throughout the movie: for instance, Jerusalem is almost always referred to as "Ūr Shalīm," the Arabic Christian name for the city. "Bayt al-Maqdis," the Islamic name for the city, is rarely used, while the modern Arabic name for the city, "al-Quds," is never even mentioned. Even Saladin himself, a *Muslim* leader, refers to Jerusalem in much of his dialogues with its *Christian* name—"Ūr Shalīm."[113]

Additionally, the Muslim connections to Jerusalem are never mentioned: the Islamic exhaltation of Jerusalem by way of Prophet Muhammad's visit to

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[112] 2:26:08 (emphasis added).

[113] On Jerusalem's many names, see Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems*, 83-84; and Smith, *Jerusalem*, vol. 1, 250-71.

the city during his miraculous Night Journey, *al-Isrāʾ*, is never stated in the film by the Arab Muslim protagonists. Nor is Jerusalem ever connected to Islam as the faith's first *qibla*, or direction of prayer for Muslims, to invoke or highlight the importance of Jerusalem to the Muslim armies in the film. Even missing throughout the film is the image of the Dome of the Rock—the Islamic epicenter in Jerusalem and the destination of every Muslim pilgrim and visitor during the medieval period.[114] In fact, the Dome of the Rock, that glorious Islamic shrine and stunning example of medieval Islamic architecture that symbolizes the connection between Jerusalem and Islam, is never even alluded to by Saladin and his Muslim camp. The only justification for Saladin's defence of the city is that Jerusalem is "Arab" land, a *secular* justification to capture and defend the Holy City, and an obvious reference to Nasser's secular Arab Nationalist manifesto.[115]

While the connection of Saladin and the Muslim camp to Jerusalem is justified only under the secular tenet of the Holy Land's "Arabness," in contrast, the explanation of the Crusader connection to Jerusalem in the film is unapologetically Christian and religious in nature—and numerous, to the point of ubiquity even. It is affirmed repeatedly by Richard, Louisa, Virginia, and other Christian characters throughout the epic. The "Christianness," if I may, of Jerusalem is invoked on many occasions, as it is called in the film "the city of the living God (*madīnat al-Ilāh al-Ḥayy*)," "the city where the good tidings were brought by the Son of God"; the city where "the Sepulcher of Christ lies" ("*qabr al-Masīḥ* or *mahd al-Masīḥ*"); "the city of the Mount of Olives" ("*madīnat al-zaytūn*"). It is even spoken of in the most infamous of

[114] Islamic pilgrimage to medieval Jerusalem has a long and rich history during the Middle Ages. See, for example, Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995). See also the studies by the present author in Fadi Ragheb, "City as Liminal Space: Islamic Pilgrimage and Muslim Holy Sites in Jerusalem During the Mamluk Period (1250-1517)," in *The Friday Mosque in the City: Liminality, Ritual, and Politics*, edited by A. Hilâl Uğurlu and Suzan Yalman (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2020), 75-122; Fadi Ragheb, "Sharing the Holy Land: Islamic Pilgrimage to Christian Holy Sites in Jerusalem During the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 95 (Fall 2023): 69-99; and Fadi Ragheb, "History of Islamic Pilgrimage to Mamlūk Jerusalem During the Later Age of the Crusades (648-922 A.H./1250-1517 C.E.): A Study in the Corpus of the Faḍāʾil al-Quds Texts from the Mamlūk Period," Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2024.

[115] On the emphasis of the ethnicity of "Arabness" over the Muslim identity of Saladin and the Muslim connections to Jerusalem, see Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 133-35.

Biblical titles, "Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets" (*"Ūr Shalīm, yā qātilat al-anbiyā'"*).[116]

Furthermore, Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem is a major justification for Richard's holy crusade.[117] Invoking the importance of securing for Christian pilgrims access to Jerusalem and its Christian holy sites reveals Chahine's sophisticated, historical knowledge of this medieval war. As the historian Ernest Barker famously pronounced in his revered scholarly article on the Crusades in the early twentieth century, the Crusades are nothing but "pilgrimage under arms,"[118] which is still a valid interpretation today of the mission and purpose of the Crusades. As Jonathan Riley-Smith explains when he discusses the launch of the First Crusade by Pope Urban II at Clermont in 1095:

> The goal of Jerusalem made the crusade both a war and a pilgrimage. While on the one hand Urban used of it the language of pilgrimage – *iter, via, labor* – on the other he also employed the military term "Jerusalem expedition" (*Jherosolomitana expeditio*)… For one crusader it was not only the "Jerusalem pilgrimage", but also "such a…great…expedition of the Christian people contending to go to Jerusalem to fight for God against the pagans and the Muslims"…[119]

[116] Matt. 23:37 KJV.

[117] On this point, see also Halim, "Signs of Saladin," 87-89, where she also highlights Chahine's skepticism regarding the motives of some of the Crusaders in the Holy Land, pointing out how Chahine highlights the Crusaders' "earthly" ambitions of conquest, profit, and economic gain.

[118] "When the First Crusade finally came, what was it but a penitentiary pilgrimage under arms—with the one additional object of conquering the goal of pilgrimage? That the Pilgrims' Progress should thus have turned into a Holy War is a fact readily explicable, when we turn to consider the attempts made by the Church, during the 11th century, to purify, or at any rate to direct, the feudal instinct for private war (*Fehde*)": Ernest Barker, "Crusades," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (London, 1911), online: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Crusades (last accessed 12 May 2019).

[119] Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 32.

Chahine fills his narrative with the theme of Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the image of Christian pilgrims: pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem; pilgrims entering Jerusalem; pilgrims leaving Jerusalem; pilgrims praying at churches in Jerusalem. Christian pilgrimage here is conveyed as an extension of Crusading. Yet *Islamic* pilgrimage to Jerusalem is never filmed, and very infrequently mentioned. In fact, the Muslim caravan of pilgrims that was attacked by Renaud de Chatillon and thus sparked the Battle of Hattin was for pilgrims heading to the Hajj in Mecca. Although Islamic pilgrimage to Jerusalem was an important religio-social phenomenon in the history of the city during the medieval period,[120] Muslim pilgrims to Jerusalem are never depicted on screen. Instead, we are constantly reminded, both visually and in dialogue, of the importance of Christian pilgrimage to the city.

In fact, Christian symbols, including, among many others, crosses, crucifixion images, and icons of Mary and the Jesus child, are everywhere in word and image. Similarly, Christian language, traditions, and narratives are also prevalent throughout the film. For example, when Richard discovers Conrad's plot to betray him in battle, he exclaims in great anger and references the life of Jesus as follows, "The head of Christ is being sold by 30 pieces of silver (*raʾs al-Masīḥ yubāʿu bi-thalāthīn qiṭʿat-in min al-fiḍḍa*)." Richard further commiserates angrily in unequivocal Christian terms, bluntly pronouncing, "Judas Iscariot returns to the living once again (*Yahūdha yubʿathu min jadīd*)," thus comparing his own betrayal by Conrad to Jesus's betrayal by Judas.[121] We even witness Louisa quietly vocalizing the Lord's Prayer at the end of the final battle at the gates of Jerusalem, when she discovers that Virginia had suffered extreme face burns during battle.[122]

Even Christmas Eve appears in the film in a cinematically stunning scene. Following the final battle, and with the victory of Saladin and the Muslim camp all but secured, Saladin decides to strike a final blow to the Crusader camp, only to realize, by seeing his commander ʿĪsā standing silently and sadly in the corner with a cross hanging on his chest, that the very same night is actually Christmas Eve.[123] As a result, Saladin pauses pensively, and

[120] See, for example, Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship*; Ragheb, "City as Liminal Space"; Ragheb, "Sharing the Holy Land"; and Ragheb, "History of Islamic Pilgrimage to Mamlūk Jerusalem."

[121] 2:07:38.

[122] 2:53:00. Similarly, sin is referred to repeatedly in its Christian Arabic terminology, *khaṭīʾa*, with no mention of the Islamic term for sin—*dhanb*.

[123] 2:57:06.

remorsefully tells his commanders, "Have you wished greetings to your brother ʿĪsā and your other Christian brothers for the birth of the Messiah?" to which everyone turns to ʿĪsā, including Saladin, with warm embraces.[124] As a result, Saladin refrains from fighting on such a momentous occasion, announcing that the Muslim camp will not fight today in honour of Christmas Eve. Immediately after, the Muslim call for prayer is heard rising aloud, and Saladin states his intention to pray. Simultaneously, the Christian hymn "Come All Ye Faithful" in Latin is faintly heard. However, the Christian chant slowly grows louder and louder and, in yet another puncture to the poised equilibrium between Islam and Christianity, it *fully* drowns the Islamic call for prayer, giving way to a spectacular Christian scene depicting Christmas outside Jerusalem, and even inside the Holy City's churches.[125] At this moment, the Latin hymn dominates the screen vocally and all the defeated Crusaders encamped around the city look towards Jerusalem, now a mountain alit with sparkling pearls of light at early sunrise. Louisa and Richard's wife kneel down singing, and Richard himself is emotionally moved, after which he pays a visit to Saladin and offers to surrender. Even Orthodox Christian priests make an appearance in this scene, singing and gazing towards the city.[126] Overall, the scene of Christmas Eve lasts for more than three minutes, which constitutes a significant portion of time. In fact, Chahine chooses Christmas Eve to conclude his epic.

Figure 14: The scene of Christmas Eve in Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. ©The Criterion Channel

[124] 2:57:33.

[125] The scene begins with the Islamic call for prayer at 2:58:05, after which it is drowned by the Christian hymn.

[126] 2:59:00.

Here, a major Christian celebration is presented to the audience but with *no* Muslim parallel, save for the short call for prayer, which is then drowned by the rising Christian voices singing a Christian hymn in Jerusalem on a *snowy* night, which is yet another allusion to the perfect Christian day: Christmas Eve with falling snow over the Holy City and the Mount of Olives (even though snow is infrequent in that part of the world). While there is an apparent parallel between the call for prayer and the Christian hymn, once again, however, Chahine, through the memorable depiction of Christmas Eve, brings Christianity front and center. The poised, balanced parallel between Islam and Christianity gives way one more time to a predominant Christian theme.

Nor is this hymn the only time we hear Christian devotional music. There are several instances when Christian chants are heard. For example, Christian chants are played when Christian soldiers and pilgrims are leaving Jerusalem after the Battle of Hattin. Christian hymns are also heard when King Guy of Jerusalem is seen praying before an image of Mary on the wall in a church in Jerusalem.

Moreover, this painting of Mary is only one of many Christian symbols and images placed throughout the film. In fact, crosses, both small and large, abound in Chahine's masterpiece, ubiquitously placed in almost every scene that involves the Crusader camp.[127] At the Battle of Hattin, there is a huge cross set atop the highest hill where the Franks are encamped. Crusader flags and banners are filled with crosses, while Muslim images or flags with Islamic epithets are rarely used. To be fair, there are images of the Qur'an and Saladin reciting verses from it, but these few scenes dwarf in comparison to the number of scenes in which crosses fill the screen.

Conclusion

With such preponderance of Christian images, symbols, and language, Chahine's film brings Christianity to the forefront of his epic. The audience learns so much about Christianity, and viewers become overwhelmed by the

[127] I disagree with Sturtevant's observation that most crosses are "corrupted," leaning 90 degrees at either side to give the image of a fighting sword, while other crosses, he adds, are even turned upside down. See Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser," 132. While there are instances where the crosses appear crooked or upside down, nevertheless the film is ubiquitously filled with a plethora of upright crosses that dominate the screen on so many occasions.

amount of Christian symbols splattered across the entirety of the film. Most importantly, though, it is the well-developed Christian characters of Richard and Louisa, with their heroic journeys wavering between steadfast faith and the temptations of sin, who leave, in my view, the strongest impact on the audience. In fact, it could be argued that if this film is renamed *The Third Crusade*, or *The Odyssey of Richard the Lionhearted*, or even *The Temptation of Richard*, it would take, I think, a simple task of editing out several scenes that openly glorify and praise Saladin on the screen, and the film would become one about the Christian camp in the Holy Land and its fate during the reign of Saladin and the Third Crusade.

Yet as I have argued all along, this is part of Chahine's objective. The film is a testament to his personal and political outlook, as a Christian Egyptian espousing the Arab Nationalist tenets of supra-sectarian equality between Arab Christians and Arab Muslims under a secular Arab state—and led by Nasser. While the purpose of the film was to portray the modern Nasser as the medieval Saladin, the director took the opportunity to produce a film of majestic proportions that heavily engages Christian figures, teachings, language, and symbols. Not only did Chahine attempt to exoterically equate Islam and Christianity, but, as this analysis has demonstrated, he went one giant step further by esoterically projecting his own faith onto the center of the film.

Malek Khouri elaborates on Chahine's stance here by providing an example of how Chahine wanted to reduce Christian-Muslim tensions:

> Recognizing that his audience would include both Muslim and Christian Arabs, Chahine sought to underplay Christian-Muslim enmity, admitting that the chaotic fragmentation of the images of the charging Faranga was used to "create the impression of violence without showing actual violence."[128]

He also indicates that in the scene after Saladin's final victory over Richard, and when the audiences simultaneously hear the call for prayer and the Christian hymns during Christmas Eve, Chahine "uses the familiarity with the two religious references to reiterate a powerful message that rejects religion-based sectarianism."[129]

[128] Khouri, *Arab National Project*, 47 (references omitted).
[129] Khouri, Arab National Project, 51.

This study, however, goes even further by arguing that Chahine not only attempts to portray an amicable rapprochement between Muslims and Christians, but he also, as I have argued, deploys a didactic message about Christianity and its values to his predominantly Arab Muslim audiences. Even Chahine himself admitted to the need for education to achieve not only victory over the enemy, in this case the Western imperialist bloc and Israel, but also to address the Arabs' *own* divisive problems when he states:

> Before achieving victory against others one needs to first conquer one's own demons, prepare the adequate power to confront the invader or those who are planning to oppress him. … You need to provide the means for the success of such confrontation, and this is why the film emphasizes issues such as *education*, organization and unifying resources. Saladin was able to defeat the Crusaders because he succeeded in uniting people and adequately prepared for his battles.[130]

In fact, Chahine does not stop there, but his message of Muslim-Christian harmony, as he informs us, is even a didactic directed towards Western Christian audiences as well:

> In *Saladin*, I was not hesitant in telling Christians that they were wrong in coming over to occupy our land. I, myself a Christian, have lived in the heart of Muslim culture where 90 percent of the people whom I loved were Muslims. … From the times of Andalusia to [today's] Alexandria, the idea of diversity within a predominantly Muslim culture has been much more integrated than it has ever been within mostly Christian societies. These are not just words. … This is how I exactly feel.[131]

The film *Saladin*, therefore, is a laudable attempt by Chahine to educate his Arab Muslim audiences on his own faith, a task he took up in this film in order to reject sectarianism and its dangers in mid-twentieth century Egypt and the wider Arab world. Thus lies yet another merit to this masterpiece—its universal, timeless message, and urgent reminder, of the dangers of internal strife and religious divisions that had plagued the modern Middle East,

[130] Quoted in Khouri, *Arab National Project*, 46 (emphasis added).
[131] Quoted in Khouri, *Arab National Project*, 45.

which, judging from the events of the past two decades or so, continues to do so even in our present day.