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## An Early Arab Encounter with America: The Story of Mikha'īl Nu'āyma

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Mikha'īl Nu'āyma<sup>1</sup> (1889-1988), Lebanese poet, critic, essayist, biographer, fiction writer and dramatist, is a major figure of modern Arabic literature, and particularly within what came to be known as the *Mahjar* School, referring to the literary movement which evolved in the US among emigrant Syro-Lebanese poets and writers, who operated through a literary gathering in New York by the name *al-Rābita al-Qalamiyya*, (the Pen Association) during the second and third decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and until the death in 1931 of JubrānKhalīl Jubrā<sup>2</sup>, its guiding spirit. Nu'āyma began his education at the elementary Russian school in his native village in Lebanon, Baskintā, before going on to the Russian teacher training school in Nazareth, whence to the Diocesan Seminary at Poltava in the Ukraine (1906-1911).

In 1911 he joined his two elder brothers, already settled in the US, and enrolled at the University of Washington in Seattle, graduating in 1916 with two bachelor's degrees in the Arts and Law. Soon after he moved to New York, and in 1918 was drafted in the US army and sent to the frontline in France. On his return he continued to pursue his literary interests while earning a meager living from working for a commercial

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business. In 1932 he returned to his native Baskintā, where he led a quasi-hermetic life, devoting himself to literature until his death. During his study years in Seattle, he first learned of the belief in the transmigration of souls through a Scottish roommate and member of the Theosophical Society; a belief that he was to embrace with unwavering conviction all his life, and which was to have a profound effect on his life and writing, eventually turning the man into a near ascetic, and injecting into his writing a strong element of Emersonian Transcendentalism, and a kind of pantheistic mysticism.

### 1. The Author as a US Emigrant

Mīkhaʿīl Nuʿayma's arrival in America in 1911 was a deviation from the original plan to continue with his studies at the Sorbonne in Paris. He had been persuaded by one of his elder brothers, mentioned above, to join them in the US for financial reasons.<sup>3</sup> This he accepted only reluctantly, as he did not want to go to the US. He explains how he felt in his autobiography, *Sabʿūn: Hikāyat ʿUmr* (Seventy: the Story of a Life, 1959): 'Whenever I thought of the [New] World, I felt that a wide gulf existed between me and it ... For the dollar, which attracted millions of people from all corners of the earth, did not attract me because I was looking for things that the dollar could not buy...'<sup>4</sup> It appears that he arrives in New York, already predisposed against modern civilisation. This attitude had already formed in Poltava, which he describes as a mere village, compared to New York. Civilisation had led man astray onto paths of greed, devoid of compassion, justice and love, he tells us. Thus rather than being dazzled by New York on first sight, the city's 'huge buildings and feverish movement' oppress him, and leave him nostalgic for the Lebanese mountains where he grew up.<sup>5</sup>

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As Nu ʿayma's account of those early impressions was written in 1959, nearly half a century after their occurrence, it would be difficult to accept that it was not coloured by the author's subsequent experiences, readings and adopted stance in life. To my mind, it is in fact difficult to separate Nu ʿayma's attitude towards America from his well-known romantic stance which characterised his poetry and general outlook on life, as it has many of his cotemporary fellow compatriots in the Americas, the so-called poets of the *mahjar* or emigrant poets.<sup>6</sup> On visiting the plains of Walla Walla, he witnesses for the first time of his life the practice of mechanised agriculture: 'machines to sow wheat, and other machines to harvest, winnow, and collect it in bags...' This puts him in mind of his farmer father's plough, shovel, and scythe in the plains of his native Shakhrüb. He laments the loss of communion with nature in the modern world and man's surrender of his life to the rule of the dollar and the machine.<sup>7</sup> What we have here is nothing particularly anti-American or anti-Western; only the romantic stock-in-trade argument against urbanisation, industrialisation, mechanisation, and the movement away from nature.

Nu ʿayma's decision to return to Lebanon in 1932 after twenty odd years of living in the United States is presented in a highfalutin language, steeped in romanticism, and a mystical sense of vision or calling that was the hallmark of the author's notion of himself expressed, sometimes directly sometimes indirectly, in his autobiographical writing. The idea of the poet or artist as visionary or prophet is of course one that has been central to romanticism in general, and that has found expression elsewhere in Nu ʿayma's critical writing, notably in his famous iconoclastic critical essays, *Al-Ghirbāl* (1923), where he proclaims, 'a poet is a prophet ... because he sees with the eye of his spirit what not all humans see ...'<sup>8</sup> What

he theorises about in *Al-Ghirbāl*, he embodies in his perception of himself as a visionary, as a writer with a prophetic voice, with a duty to proselytise; an unmistakable note in his oeuvre generally, and particularly in the one work in which he poured in cryptic allegorical form and high poetic language his vision of life and eternity, namely *The Book of Mirdad*,<sup>9</sup> at once reminiscent of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Nietzsche's *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, and Gibran's *The Prophet*. It is in this light that we need to understand his attribution of the decision to leave New York and return to Lebanon to 'reaching a state of satiety with civilisation,' and the way he depicts the period leading up to his departure from America as 'rich in signs and intimations that I was approaching a turning point in my life.' He recounts how during that period he had asked a friend to open the Bible and place her finger at random on a verse that would serve as a pointer for the future. Conveniently, the verse she picks is 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you!' (Luke 8:39) The same friend, we are told, had also seen him in a dream 'digging a [solitary] road for myself in the mountain.' Nor was he without his own pictorial epiphanic dreams, invoking spectacular visions of angelic choruses singing in peaceful unadulterated woods, complete with sparrows chanting the name of God in Spanish, a language Nu<sup>ç</sup>ayma did not know, to add to the sense of mystery.<sup>10</sup>

A more cynical reading however of other 'signs' with which Nu<sup>ç</sup>ayma's text is replete may suggest that his life in America appeared to have reached a stalemate, which demanded radical choices to be made. Sixteen years after graduation from university, he did not seem to be getting anywhere. No permanent, self-fulfilling job or source of income, and although he had established his literary fame in exile, the *Rābiṭa Qalamiyya* or Pen Association, whose guiding soul was

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Jubrān and in which Nuᶜyama was probably the one with the most intellectual clout, appeared to have spent its force. Literary activity and publication in Arabic was becoming increasingly difficult, as was much else in the US during the years of recession. Then came the death of Jubrān in 1931, signalling the end of an era. All this is fully detailed in the author's autobiography, but none of it is given the faintest credit as a force behind the decision to return to Lebanon. It is far too practical and banal to fit the bill. What is needed is a profound explanation that reaches beyond appearances and practicalities; an interpretation in terms of the rejection of a false civilisation to embrace again the innocence and simplicity of a culture still closer to Nature. And that is what we are given.

During his life in the US, Nuᶜayma had fallen in love with two married women at different periods, and entered into extended, consummated relationships with them, the stories of which and the burden they placed on his conscience and puritanical ideals he relates at some length in his autobiography.<sup>11</sup> In each case, he ends the relationship to regain his peace of mind. The second severance coincides with his decision to depart from the US. At the age of only 43 in 1932, this relationship, we are told, marked the end of his carnal knowledge of woman. His return to Lebanon was to open a new chapter in his life, where 'lust had no power over my body; only the spirit that sought to unify man and woman into the complete human being, whole and stronger than all desire.'<sup>12</sup> The gratuitous symbolism available in the coincidence of his departure from America marking the beginning of the renunciatory phase of his life (i.e. the following 56 years, as he lived to be 99) where the spirit reigned supreme is perhaps more telling than any metaphor that Nuᶜayma may have created by design.

In the concluding chapter of his voluminous autobiography, Nu<sup>ʿ</sup>ayma reaffirms his central pantheistic belief, and his unwavering faith, as death approached with advanced years, in the eternal cycle of nature which belied the idea of extinction. He laments however the failure of modern humanity to learn from the past, ‘to look for the essence in the froth.’ He asserts his belief that the evils of modern civilisation will not be dispelled save by a ‘voice to wake the human conscience and instil in it an awareness of the goal behind existence...’ That voice, he assures his readers, ‘shall come from the East.’<sup>13</sup>

## 2. The US in the Author’s Work

The one work by Mikha<sup>ʿ</sup>il Nu<sup>ʿ</sup>ayma that best characterises his attitude to the West, and particularly the US is probably his short story ‘Sā<sup>ʿ</sup>at ak-Kūkū’ (The Cuckoo Clock), written in 1925 according to the author, and first published in his short story collection *Kān Mā Kān* (Once upon a Time) in 1927. The story is a simple allegory based on the binary opposition of East and West in terms of spirituality and materialism.<sup>14</sup> The story is set in a small Lebanese village in the early 1920s. Its protagonist is a villager by the name Khaṭṭār, who worked in tilling the land. Khaṭṭār was in love with Zumurrud, the girl next door, and she with him. They had been promised for each other by their families since childhood, and at the start of the story, the wedding day was approaching. However, it is at that time that a native of the village who had immigrated to America returns for a visit. Villagers, including the young betrothed and their families, go to bid welcome to the returnee. In his house, they see on display some of the gadgets he brought back from ‘those foreign lands,’ including a cuckoo clock. The villagers, who had never imagined, let alone seen, such a thing were utterly fascinated by this mechanical,

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talking bird, especially Zumurrud, who, a few days later, was to be found nowhere on her wedding night. Such was the lure of the cuckoo clock that she eloped with the man who owned it upon his return to America. The shock leads Khaṭṭār to a reassessment of his life. For the first time, 'he sees everything around him ugly and shameful: his oxen and plough, his trees and vines...' <sup>15</sup> He is unable to blame Zumurrud in his heart and decides to take up the challenge and seek happiness in the land of the cuckoo clock.

After initial hardship in America, Khaṭṭār, realises that he is in 'a country whose key is the dollar.' He fights hard to possess that key, and with the aid of the Great War, he becomes a millionaire and owner of extensive stores within a few years. However, twenty years of life in the land of the cuckoo clock come and pass leaving him an unhappy man. Coincidence brings him into a chance encounter with his erstwhile great love, now the wreck of a woman, working in a restaurant, having been dumped a long time ago by the man who lured her away with his cuckoo clock from simple but happy life at her native village in Lebanon. After some melodramatic developments and twists in the story, Khaṭṭār returns home to his village where he spends the rest of his life, preaching to his fellow villagers the beauty of their simple life and the horror of Western life.

It is interesting to note the extent to which the views expressed in the story were those of the author, and the way in which Khaṭṭār's final act seemed to point the way to his creator: Nu'ayma was to leave the US after some twenty years of life there to return for good to his native village in Lebanon only a few years after writing the story, not to mention that he had originally written it to dissuade a younger brother of his, who at the time was still living in Lebanon, from immigration. The story is indeed entwined with the author's life in more

ways than that. For its central symbol, i.e. the cuckoo clock was borrowed from his childhood. He recounts how his mother accompanied him on one occasion to visit a cousin of hers recently returned from the US. It was there that he and other equally astounded youngsters and adults, completely unaware of the gadgets of modern civilization at the turn of the century, made their first encounter with the cuckoo clock. In retrospect, Nu<sup>ʿ</sup>ayma was to employ in the story under discussion this ‘magical’ gadget as a symbol of his, and by extension, his culture’s encounter with the material achievements of Western civilisation. Of his first intention in writing the story, he declares in his autobiography, ‘I shall write a story revolving round the cuckoo clock, and I shall use that clock as a symbol of the complexity of modern civilisation, and the happiness that people look for at its heart without avail.’<sup>16</sup>

By every account in the story, this encounter was a disastrous one. As Khattār preaches tirelessly to his fellow villagers in Nu<sup>ʿ</sup>ayma’s best poetic language, their life is one of ‘nature’, which is ‘pure truthfulness’, while ‘civilisation’ consists in nothing but ‘ornate pretence.’<sup>17</sup> (p.11) In a series of parables, reminiscent of, if not directly modelled on, those of Jesus in the Gospels, he advocates attachment to the land, and to mother Nature as the ultimate and unfailing provider: ‘From soil is what you wear. From soil is what you eat. From soil is your shelter. How ignorant you are to try to deceive life to obtain your clothing, your food, and your shelter without touching soil... Blessed are those who take the soil as partner in their toil for livelihood for they shall sleep soundly... Trade is but a ruse to attract money, and money a ploy to swindle partners of the soil of the fruit of their toil, but it is a ploy that rebounds on the perpetrator.’ (p.13) Happiness is within the soul and nowhere else; it is not to be sought through the change of continents or cultures: ‘The happy man is he who



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rejoices in his place, and unhappy is he who seeks contentment in other places.’ (p.14) Let each man (and each culture?) be content with what they are: ‘How beautiful is the crow speaking with the tongue of a crow, and not envying the nightingale its voice! And how beautiful is the nightingale speaking with the tongue of a nightingale, and not envying the crow its strength!’ (p.17)

To Nu<sup>c</sup>ayma and his protagonist the West is the civilisation of cuckoo clocks, of mechanical cuckoos, while his own is that of natural cuckoos and crows and nightingales; his own is a culture of affinity with earth, with survival that is the fruit of human toil in nature, not by trade in the stock exchange. Through the mouthpiece of his character, Nu<sup>c</sup>ayma typifies East and West in terms of a metaphor where they are travellers in the pilgrimage of life, the East riding in the chariot of the ‘heart’, driven by horses of ‘emotion’, reigned in by timeless ‘faith and traditions.’ Conversely, the West rides in a chariot of ‘steel’, driven by ‘steam or electricity’, and powered by ‘conceit and arrogance.’ The speed and glamour of the West’s chariot dazzle the Eastern rider, who begs the West to let him hang on to the wheels. The meaning of the image is spelt out: ‘Thus speaks the East to the West when they meet. It casts aside its own chariot, and sells its soul in order to obtain a chariot like its co-traveller’s.’ (pp.26-7) *That* was Khaṭṭār’s error, when he ‘turned his back on his oxen and field and made his way «westwards» to the sea.’ (p.27) He wanted to conquer ‘the cuckoo clock’, but instead it possessed him and turned him into one of its screws. (p.29) For Nu<sup>c</sup>ayma the cuckoo clock (the material progress of Western civilisation) can only be had at the price of one’s soul. It was too dear a price, in his view. On the personal level, he rejected the deal. On the public level, he devoted his writing to bring his personal conviction across to his Arab readers.

A narrower interpretation of the materialism of the West can be found in a negligible short story by the title *‘Uḥbat Kabrīt’* (A Matchbox), in Nuḥayma’s collection *Akābir*, first published in 1956. Not unlike ‘The Cuckoo Clock’, the story is based on the binary opposition of two allegorical situations. The protagonist recounts to his friend, the narrator, two separate events from his life in order to illustrate ‘which is more greedy for matter, East or West?’<sup>18</sup> The first event tells how on one occasion his car became stuck in the mud as he was driving at night on a mountainous country road during a heavy storm. The people of the nearby village to whom he was a total stranger rush to his help at extreme difficulty for themselves, and offer him hospitality for the night. In the morning, they free his car for him and refuse, despite their poverty, any recompense. The second event takes place in Paris, at the time when the protagonist was studying at the Sorbonne. He had stayed for years at a small hotel, with whose proprietor, his family and staff he had become on the friendliest of terms, buying them presents and giving tips on every occasion. He had even lent the proprietor at one time some money to pay back a debt and refused to accept interest. After emotional goodbyes on the day of his departure, having completed his studies, the proprietor runs after the protagonist’s taxi, and stops it to ask for the price of a matchbox that he had forgotten to add to the final bill.<sup>19</sup> The story ends on this, with the protagonist leaving it to his friend (and to us) ‘to conclude what you want from these two episodes.’<sup>20</sup> The emerging opposite images of the two cultures is clear: one is generous and gallant (the East), the other greedy and ungrateful (the West).

Nuḥayma’s literary representations of his ideas on East and West are underpinned by some clearly argued polemic in his essays. One of the earliest such essays goes back to 1922, i.e.

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prior to writing ‘Sā‘at al-Kūkū’. The essay carries the title ‘The Rise of the Arab East and its Attitude towards Western Civilisation’, and was written in response to a questionnaire on the subject among notable Arab intellectuals of the day conducted by Cairo’s respectable literary magazine, *Al-Hilāl*.<sup>21</sup> Nu‘ayma works out a grand structure in which he fits minor questions as to the differences between the two cultures. This structure seems to attribute a static view of the world to the East, as opposed to a dynamic one to the West: ‘the East finds the world perfect because it was made by a perfect God, while the West finds in it many imperfections, which it seeks to “make better”.’ For him the West’s attempt at improving the world is a form of doomed ‘arrogance’, akin to ‘a fish in the sea trying to “improve” it and comprehend its secrets.’<sup>22</sup> He argues that the East has given the West immutable ‘revealed truths’,<sup>23</sup> while the West’s contribution consisted only in ‘scientific truths’, which changed everyday. If the West was compelled to discard all its books and keep only one, he argues, it would probably choose to keep The Holy Book which came to it from the East. By contrast, what would the East want from the West? His answer is: ‘Aeroplanes, trains, machines ... and many ailments and problems, which would not bring it any closer to the secret of life, nor give it the spiritual reassurance it obtained from faith.’<sup>24</sup> Nu‘ayma however seems well aware of the lure of Western civilization, and is certain that its day would not be spent ‘until it has swept the whole world over’ including the Arab countries. Nevertheless, this awareness does not serve to abate his contempt for Western civilisation. He is willing to live with the accusation of being ‘a reactionary who wants to take us back to the ignorance of religion and superstition’, rather than relinquish his ‘belief that the East with its faith is closer to the Truth than the West with its thought and scientific evidence.’ It is the West, he concludes,

that needs to be a disciple in the school of the East.<sup>25</sup> One should perhaps mention that some forty years later, Nu<sup>ʿ</sup>ayma added a little gloss on his position. In his autobiography, *Sab<sup>ʿ</sup>ūn*, he refers again to the circumstances in which he wrote his reply to the questionnaire in a chapter entitled ‘Thawra wa Hudna’ (Revolution and Truce), and points out that the “faith” which he ‘called on the East to hold on to did not mean submission, fear, and acquiescence in humility and poverty, but rather the ability to comprehend the limitations of the mind and transcend them to ... a spiritual wealth that outshines all material wealth...’<sup>26</sup>

In a much later essay titled ‘*al-Taw<sup>ʿ</sup>amān: al-Sharq wal-Gharb*’ (The Twins: the East and the West), included in his collection, *al-Bayādir* (The Threshing Floors), published in 1945, Nu<sup>ʿ</sup>ayma can be seen to have maintained his polemic against Western civilisation. After waxing lyrical on the morphological genius of Arabic that produces from the same root such nouns as *ba<sup>ʿ</sup>ṣar* and *ba<sup>ʿ</sup>ṣīra*, ‘sight’ and ‘insight’ or ‘inner sight’, respectively, he goes on to label the West as the world’s *ba<sup>ʿ</sup>ṣar* and the East as its *ba<sup>ʿ</sup>ṣīra*. These are terms not much different from their more familiar correspondents: ‘matter’ and ‘spirit’. Nu<sup>ʿ</sup>ayma argues that while the East gave the world prophets, the West gave it scientists. He diagnoses the illness of the modern world in terms of the ‘the supremacy of sight over insight,’ a supremacy that did not spare the East itself, which is ‘dazzled’ by Western civilisation that addresses itself to the senses and is therefore more accessible and pleasurable, according to him. The East, he argues, has sought from time immemorial the ‘eternal truth’. This quest however has been helped by the modern science of the West, which has made life easier with its inventions, nature less mysterious with its discoveries, the world smaller, and which has brought people closer together the better to concentrate on the great quest.

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Nuʿayma is clearly at pains to do justice to the role played by Western civilisation in humanity's quest for the truth. However, the great prize is preserved for the East. For he predicts that when 'the materialistic sciences of the West have reached their farthest ... «the West» will have completed its role in this cycle of mankind's life, and the East will take over anew.' It is the East that will be able to build on the West's achievements that rid humanity of ignorance and superstition, and lead it again with unwavering determination towards its ultimate goal.<sup>27</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A variant spelling of his name in English is Mikhail Naimy.

<sup>2</sup> A variant spelling of his name in English is Jibran kahlil Jibran.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhaʿil Nuʿayma *Sabʿūn*, in *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila*, vol. 1, Dār al-ʿIlm li-Malāyīn, Beirut, 1970, p. 284.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 284-5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 290-1.

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to this group of poets, see Chapter Five of M.M.Badawi, *Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, CUP, Cambridge, 1975.

<sup>7</sup> Mikhaʿil Nuʿayma, *Sabʿūn*, in *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila*, vol. 1, pp.294-5, 309.

<sup>8</sup> Mikhaʿil Nuʿayma, *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila*, vol. 3, Beirut, 1971, p. 401.

<sup>9</sup> *The book of Mirdad* was first published in English in Beirut in 1948. Later, Nuʿayma published the Arabic version in 1952. See Mikhaʿil

Nuʿayma, *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila*, vol.6, Beirut, 1972.

<sup>10</sup> Mīkhaʿīl Nuʿayma, *Sabʿūn*, in *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila*, vol. 1, pp. 584-6.

<sup>11</sup> During his earlier study years in Russia (1906-11), he first came to know women carnally also through a relationship with a married woman. For the author's account of the relationship, see *ibid.*, pp. 258-74.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 603.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 835-41.

<sup>14</sup> In adopting this duality and giving it literary expression, Nuʿayma was more than ten years ahead of the Egyptian Tawfiq al-Hakīm's better known novel, *ʿUsfūr min al-Sharq* ( Bird of the East, 1938), which propagated a similar conceptualisation of the two cultures, if in a more complex context

<sup>15</sup> Mīkhaʿīl Nuʿayma, *Kān Mā Kān*, Dār Ṣādir, Beirut, 1966 (First published, 1927), p. 24. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>16</sup> Mīkhaʿīl Nuʿayma, *Sabʿūn*, in *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila*, vol. 1, Dār al-ʿIlm liʿl-Malāyīn, Beirut, 1970, p. 75. For a detailed account of how he came to write the story in the mid-1920s, see the chapter with the eponymous title, which he devotes for that purpose, *ibid.*, pp. 515-22.

<sup>17</sup> In his autobiography, *Sabʿūn*, Nuʿayma tells the story of how his father, who spent six years in California, working as a peddler, with little material gain before returning to his wife and children in the Baskintā, their native mountain village in Lebanon. When he came to know America at first hand, Nuʿayma wondered how a man with an honest, upright nature like his father's managed to survive for six years as an emigrant in a country where success was difficult without a measure of 'cunning, ambition, and contempt for truthfulness and honesty for the sake of gain,' *ibid.*, pp. 62-70.

<sup>18</sup> Mīkhaʿīl Nuʿayma, 'Ulbat al-Kabrit' in *Akābir*, Dār Ṣādir, Beirut, 1967 (First published, 1956), p.107.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., see the story, pp.107-113.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.113.

<sup>21</sup> The Arabic title of the essay is 'Nahdat al-Sharq al-ʿArabī wa Mawqifuh bi-ʿizāʾ al-Hadāra al-Gharbiyya'. Nuʿayma included it in his book of essays, *Al-Marābil* (The Stages, first published in 1932). see Nuʿayma, *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila*, vol.5, Beirut, 1971, pp.45-50.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.47.

<sup>23</sup> We will do well to remember that when Nuʿayma speaks of the East in terms of spiritually, he does not have in mind only the Semite religions of the Middle East, but also the Buddhism and Taoism of the Far East. See his article 'Thalāthat Wujūh' (Three Faces), where he talks about the Buddha, Lao-tzu, and Jesus, Ibid., pp. 7-44.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.49.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.50.

<sup>26</sup> Nuʿayma, *al Majmūʿa al Kāmila*, vol.1, p.482.

<sup>27</sup> Nuʿayma, *al Majmūʿa al Kāmila*, vol.4, 1971, pp.560-585.