

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36719/2706-6185/46/100-109>

**Noureddin Abdelwahed Hadou**

Moulay Tahar University, Saida | Algeria

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6002-0149>

wahidh@yahoo.fr

**Mohammed Lazaar**

Moulay Tahar University, Saida | Algeria

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0327-0140>

mohammed.lazaar@univ-saida.dz

## Portrayal of Characters in Religious Films: Artistic and Sacred Controversy

### Abstract

This article examines the contentious portrayal of religious figures in films, highlighting the intersection of art and the sacred. This issue continues to spark debate, as filmmakers struggle to balance adherence to religious texts with the creative demands of cinema. The study contrasts world cinema, which has depicted religious figures through various interpretations, with Arab cinema, which faces strict censorship. These restrictions prohibit the portrayal of prophets, companions, and caliphs, limiting artistic expression. The paper also explores some of the most controversial films on this subject, including *The Message*, *The Passion of the Christ*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Ultimately, the study finds that the relationship between cinema and religious institutions remains complex. Addressing this challenge requires creative solutions that uphold both artistic freedom and respect for religious beliefs. Additionally, there is a need for clear guidelines to support religious film production while minimizing controversy.

**Keywords:** religious film, cinematic censorship, representation of sacred figures, religious and artistic controversy, Arab and international cinema

**Nureddin Abdelwahed Hadou**

Moulay Tahar Universiteti, Saida | Algeria

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6002-0149>

wahidh@yahoo.fr

**Mohammed Lazaar**

Moulay Tahar University, Saida | Algeria

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0327-0140>

mohammed.lazaar@univ-saida.dz

## Dini filmlərdə personajların təsviri: bədii və müqəddəs mübahisə

### Xülasə

Bu məqalə filmlərdə dini şəxsiyyətlərin mübahisəli təsvirini araşdıraraq incəsənətlə müqəddəs olanın kəsişməsinə diqqət yetirir. Bu mövzu hələ də müzakirələrə səbəb olur, çünki rejissorlar dini mətnlərə sadıqlıqla kino sənətinin yaradıcı tələbləri arasında tarazlıq qurmaqda çətinlik çəkirlər. Araşdırma, dini şəxsiyyətləri müxtəlif yozumlarla təqdim edən dünya kinosu ilə peyğəmbərlərin, səhabələrin və xəlifələrin təsvirini qadağan edən ciddi senzura qaydalarına tabe olan ərəb kinosunu müqayisə edir. Bu məhdudiyyətlər bədii ifadə azadlığını əhəmiyyətli dərəcədə məhdudlaşdırır. Məqalədə həmçinin bu mövzuda ən çox müzakirə olunan filmlərdən bəziləri, o cümlədən *The Message*, *The Passion of the Christ* və *The Last Temptation of Christ* təhlil edilir.

Nəticədə, tədqiqat göstərir ki, kino və dini institutlar arasındakı münasibət mürəkkəb olaraq qalır. Bu problemin həlli bədii azadlıq və dini inanclara hörməti qoruyan yaradıcı həllər tələb edir.

Bundan əlavə, dini filmlərin istehsalını dəstəkləyən, eyni zamanda mübahisələri minimuma endirən aydın qaydalara ehtiyac var.

**Açar sözlər:** *dini film, kino senzurası, müqəddəs şəxsiyyətlərin təsviri, dini və bədii mübahisələr, ərəb və beynəlxalq kino*

## Introduction

Cinema has long been a powerful tool for conveying ideas, history, and culture. However, its depiction of religious themes, particularly sacred figures, has sparked intense debate among filmmakers, religious institutions, and audiences. Since the early days of cinema, religious stories have served as inspiration, presented in formats ranging from faithful adaptations to highly controversial interpretations. As the film industry evolved, discussions surrounding the legitimacy of portraying prophets and religious figures intensified, especially given the stark contrast between Western and Arab cinematic approaches to this issue.

### Problem Statement

Despite their significance in religious and cultural heritage, the portrayal of sacred figures in cinema remains a highly sensitive issue. This ongoing controversy raises several key questions: What factors influence the depiction of these characters in international and Arab cinema? How can the differences between Western and Arab cinematic perspectives be explained? What are the primary censorship and religious challenges faced by films that feature religious figures? Most importantly, is it possible to reconcile artistic creativity with respect for religious beliefs?

### Research Objectives

This study seeks to:

1. Analyze how religious figures are portrayed in both global and Arab cinema, with a focus on significant cinematic examples.
2. Explore the religious, cultural, and commercial factors shaping these portrayals.
3. Examine public and religious responses to such films and assess the impact of censorship on film production.
4. Investigate the possibility of achieving a balance between religious adherence and high-quality artistic expression in cinema.

### Significance of the Study

This research addresses a complex issue at the intersection of religion and art, shedding light on the dynamic relationship between cinema and religious beliefs. It also provides insights into the mechanisms of religious filmmaking and the challenges faced by filmmakers and producers in this domain. By doing so, the study opens the door to new approaches that seek to harmonize artistic creativity with religious sensitivities.

### Research Hypotheses

1. The portrayal of religious figures in Western and Arab cinema differs due to variations in cultural and religious influences as well as censorship laws.
2. Religious and political censorship has significantly reduced the number of films addressing religious figures in the Arab world.
3. The artistic treatment of religious films influences public and religious reactions, with the most controversial films often presenting unconventional interpretations of religious texts.
4. A balance between religious sanctity and creative cinematic expression can be achieved through innovative visual storytelling techniques and indirect representation of sacred figures.

### Research

#### 1. Religious Film

The term "religious film" often overlaps with "historical film." According to cinematic terminology, a historical film is defined as: "A film depicting historical events that took place at one or more stages of history, a film that shows the career of a historical hero who played a significant role in a past era. The subject may be based on real life or fictional, and it may portray a specific historical period, the biography of a historical figure, or an adaptation of a literary masterpiece that

reflects life in the distant or recent past" (Al-Sudani, an article published online: [www.islamoline.net](http://www.islamoline.net)).

This definition highlights the overlap between religious and historical films, as religious films often focus on a particular historical period or depict a historical figure. Some scholars differentiate between the two based on the type of events and characters portrayed. Ali Abu Shadi defines a religious film as "a cinematic work that addresses religious events or figures, distinct from historical films, which focus on historical events and characters through analysis and interpretation shaped by the filmmaker's perspective on history" (Abu Shadi, 1998, pp. 148-149).

From this perspective, the distinction depends on the filmmaker's approach—whether they present the subject from a religious or historical viewpoint. Additionally, religious films are not limited to those that portray religion positively. Any film that uses religion as an artistic theme falls within this category. A religious film might promote faith, teachings, and religious laws, or it could seek to challenge or criticize religious principles. Some films openly mock religious values and figures, creating tension with Christian and Islamic religious institutions (Fanous, 1996, p. 155).

## 2. Religious Films in Global Cinema

Religious films have been present since the early days of cinema. Filmmakers have used religion as an artistic theme to attract audiences and increase revenue. Many early films drew inspiration from the lives of saints, prophets, and monks' sermons. At the dawn of cinema, two American filmmakers presented *Passion of Christ* in 1898, consisting of ten cinematic scenes. A year later, French director Georges Méliès released a film about the *Passion of Joan of Arc* (Robinson, 1998, p. 37).

Before and after World War I, religious themes became popular among filmmakers, especially for religious holidays and events. The high demand for films about Christ and the prophets led to rapid production growth. Between 1908 and 1914, competition among production companies intensified. This period also saw the rise of horror films that disregarded audience sensitivities. The Church grew concerned about the portrayal of religious figures and the moral teachings of the Gospel. As a result, the Vatican intervened in 1913 when Pope Pius X banned the use of cinema for education within churches (Bardeche & Brasillach, 1964, p. 57).

Despite this ban, some religious films continued to emerge. Notable examples include Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Leaves from Satan's Book* (1922) and Julien Duvivier's *Mount of Doom* (1935). Eventually, the Church took a more active role in guiding religious film production. In 1935, Pope Pius XI approved Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (Habtah, [www.islamonline.com](http://www.islamonline.com)). Following this, religious films gained further recognition. Films such as *Saint Joan* (1957) and *The Cardinal* (1963) explored the lives of prophets and monks. Many countries produced epics about their saints, with France alone releasing five films about Saint Thérèse between 1926 and 1989 (Habtah, [www.islamonline.com](http://www.islamonline.com)).

Since Pope Pius XI's endorsement, the Church has recognized cinema's power in shaping public behavior and spreading Christian teachings. The Vatican took steps to monitor and guide cinematic productions. Pope Pius XI issued a message to cinema, followed by another for television in 1957, stating: "We expect television to reveal eternal truths to those with open minds" (Dupré, p. 65).

The Church remains actively involved in cinema-related events. Since the World Conference on Communication in Canada, the Vatican has consistently sent messages to filmmakers and media professionals. On cinema's centenary in 1995, the Vatican urged filmmakers to uphold moral and spiritual values in their work. The Church emphasized that cinema, with its vast artistic potential, can be a powerful tool for spreading the Gospel. It encouraged Christian filmmakers to integrate their faith into their productions and take an active role in shaping cinematic narratives that align with their beliefs.

To illustrate the ecclesiastical adoption of cinema, it is sufficient to present key facts that demonstrate the relationship the Church has established with this art form. For instance, in France, the only non-specialized intellectual magazine that seriously and regularly engages with plastic, cinematic, and television works is *L'Esprit*, founded by Monnet in 1932. Additionally, the *Seventh*

Art series, which compiles critical and intellectual texts on cinema under the supervision of Dominican priests, further exemplifies this connection. Other significant contributions include *Télérama*, a television magazine specializing in image ethics, along with various other critical and intellectual publications dedicated to cinema. This engagement followed intense debates regarding the moral function of cinema, particularly after the Vatican's decision in 1913. In response, Christian clergy resolved to guide cinema, ensuring that, if it was not inherently moral, it would be shaped to serve moral purposes.

The Catholic Press Foundation took concrete steps by establishing a production house and launching a cinematic magazine under the direction of Father Kwasak in France in 1919. Furthermore, in 1925, a book on the history of cinema was published, reinforcing the Church's active role in shaping the industry. Another notable example includes a statement by a Catholic figure in a newspaper, repeatedly questioning the possibility of using photographic images as a means of spreading Christian teachings (See: Régis Dupré, M. S, pp. 76-77).

The Church's interest in cinema and television aligns with the broader spirit of scientific and technological progress, leveraging these mediums as powerful tools for communication across diverse social segments. Recognizing cinema's rapid and profound influence on mass audiences, the Church saw an opportunity to fulfill its objectives more effectively. Likewise, governments and nations sought control over this field, understanding that the world had become an interconnected visual domain where messages could reach all people, regardless of class or status. The increasing dominance of imagery in power struggles and influence battles made cinema an invaluable tool—its ability to capture, impact, and remain memorable was heightened by aerial footage and satellite stations.

With this global expansion of visual media, intellectual and ideological contradictions inevitably surfaced, reflected in the images presented to the masses. Given the vast and uncontrollable quantity of cinematic production, cinema has historically portrayed religious perspectives in diverse ways, shaped by the beliefs and orientations of directors. While it is impossible to quantify the exact number of religious films produced since the inception of cinema, the Church has persistently emphasized the role of religion in guiding individual and societal behavior. However, this did not prevent the emergence of films that challenged Church authority and traditional portrayals of the sacred.

One such example is Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964), which depicted Christ as a figure emerging through the eyes of the believing masses. Using non-professional actors and a naturalistic approach, Pasolini diverged from traditional representations of religious figures, leading to considerable controversy (See: Ali Abu Shadi, M. S, p. 147). Similarly, *The Nun* (1965), directed by Jacques Rivette, exposed the themes of domination and subjugation within 17th-century French monasteries. Based on Denis Diderot's 18th-century novel, the film became a landmark case in French censorship history. The intervention of President Charles de Gaulle and then Minister of Culture André Malraux to ban the film underscored the Church's significant influence in suppressing content deemed offensive (See: Dr. Mohammed Al-Rumaihi, *Al-Arabi Magazine*, Issue 39, Ministry of Information, Kuwait, p. 18).

Another notable instance of Church-cinema friction is *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) by Martin Scorsese, which sparked global controversy. The film's release led to protests, acts of arson at cinemas in Canada and the United States, and even a bombing in a Parisian theater (See: Régis Dupré, M. Q, p. 10).

Ultimately, the Church's approval or discontent with cinematic portrayals of religious subjects depends on the nature of the artistic representation. Religion is considered sacrosanct, and any perceived offense to religious figures is often interpreted as an attack on the institution and faith itself. Consequently, the intersection of cinema and religion remains a dynamic and often contentious space, where artistic freedom and religious reverence continuously negotiate their coexistence.

### 3. Religious Films in Arab Cinema

Arab cinema has long attempted to imitate Hollywood, but it has yet to reach the same level of international film production, particularly in religious films. This applies to both Islamic and Christian-themed productions. Publicly screened films related to Christianity are rare in Arab cinema. The term "religious films" in this context usually refers to works associated with Islam. However, the Coptic Church in Egypt produced approximately twelve films between 1988 and 1997, depicting the lives of Egyptian Christian saints and martyrs. Notably, *The Secrets of the Heart* (1997) by Khairi Bishara was produced by the Evangelical Church. However, these films were only shown within church halls (Ali Abu Shadi, Eng.S, p. 148).

Like many other film industries worldwide, Arab cinema has faced strict censorship and strong opposition from religious authorities. The first major confrontation occurred in 1926 when Youssef Wehbe attempted to portray the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in collaboration with director Widad Orfi. This faced fierce resistance, particularly from Al-Azhar, which, with media support, pressured the Egyptian government. King Fouad himself intervened, warning Wehbe that taking on the role would result in losing his Egyptian nationality. As a result, Wehbe withdrew from the project (M. N., p. 152).

This controversy discouraged filmmakers from addressing religious themes, leading to a limited number of religious films in Arab cinema. One of the first was *The Appearance of Islam* (1951) by Ibrahim Izz al-Din, based on *The True Promise* by Taha Hussein. This was followed by *Victory of Islam* (1952) and *Bilal, the Muezzin of the Prophet* (1953), both directed by Ahmed al-Toukhi. Other notable films include *Khalid ibn al-Walid* (1958) by Hussein Sidqi, *Al-Shaymaa, the Prophet's Sister* (1972) by Hussam al-Din Mustafa, and films portraying Sufi figures such as *Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi*, *Baha al-Din Sharaf*, and *Rabi'a al-Adawiyya* (1963) by Niazi Mustafa. Additionally, *Al-Qadisiyah* by Salah Abu Yusuf and *The Message* by Moustapha Akkad are significant contributions to the genre.

Critics argue that most religious films in Arab cinema suffer from low budgets, limiting their ability to accurately depict historical and religious narratives. Many follow the commercial cinema formula, incorporating dance, music, and even explicit elements, rather than focusing on deep character development. These films often oversimplify religious conflicts, portraying them as mere battles between good and evil, without considering the historical complexities of the periods they depict. One exception is Salah Abu Saif's *The Dawn of Islam*, which provides a nuanced analysis of pre-Islamic Arabian society. The film highlights the injustices and oppression prevalent at the time, showing Islam as a response to these social conditions. However, like other religious films, it exaggerates the portrayal of non-Muslim women in a morally negative light (Ali Abu Shadi, Eng.Q, pp. 150-151).

Religious films in Arab cinema have frequently faced censorship, often being rejected or criticized before production even began. A notable example is *Victory of Islam*, which required direct intervention from Taha Hussein, then Egypt's Minister of Culture, to gain approval. Similarly, *The Sacred House of God* by Ahmed al-Toukhi, which depicted Abraha Al-Habashi's attempt to destroy the Kaaba, was rejected due to concerns over high production costs and the complexity of required special effects (Al-Sudani, M.S.). These challenges demonstrate the difficulties faced by filmmakers in producing religious narratives within Arab cinema.

#### 4- Religious Figures in World Cinema

Many religious films in world cinema focus on the lives, struggles, and tragedies of religious figures. Numerous films depict the lives of monks and priests, including *A Man Named Peter*, *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, and *Saint Joan*. Other notable films include *Cardinal Samson*, *Delilah*, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, *The Song of Bernadette*, *Saint Teresa*, and *Saint Vincent de Paul*. Over more than a century, world cinema has portrayed all the prophets mentioned in the Torah and the Gospel. However, Prophet Muhammad remains the only widely recognized prophet who has never been depicted on screen. The *La Bible* film series portrays many biblical prophets, including David, John the Baptist, Joseph, Zechariah, Noah, Moses, Abraham, and Jesus (Isa ibn Maryam). Among these, Jesus has been the most frequently represented, with *The Passion* (1898) being a significant early example (Habtah, M.S.).

Hollywood has frequently depicted the life of Prophet Moses. Nearly every decade, a film emerges portraying his story or aspects of it. Among the most well-known is *The Ten Commandments*, directed by Cecil B. DeMille, produced twice in 1927 and 1959. This film covers Moses' life from birth to old age, much like *Moses* (1975).

*The Ten Commandments* was a large-scale production with extensive technical preparation. It follows the biblical account of Moses' life and his struggle with Pharaoh. The film vividly portrays his miracles using special cinematic effects. It presents Moses in two stages: before his prophecy, as an ordinary man living as a prince in Pharaoh's palace, and after receiving divine revelation. Upon descending from Mount Sinai, his face appears illuminated, symbolizing his connection to God. From that moment on, this divine glow remains with him, signifying his prophetic mission. The film portrays Moses as a man with a divine message, confronting Pharaoh with supernatural strength demonstrated through his miracles. Charlton Heston played the role of Moses in this adaptation. Another film, *Moses*, was produced by the English company ETC, in collaboration with the Italian Rai Foundation. The film follows the Torah's narrative, with some additions highlighting signs of Moses' prophecy. It also includes the prophecy that terrified Pharaoh—the prediction that a newborn would rise and threaten his rule. This adaptation remains relatively conservative in its depiction of Moses before his prophetic mission.

Prophet Yahya (John the Baptist) has also appeared in several films, primarily because of his connection to the life of Jesus, as they lived during the same period. Films featuring Yahya include *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1963), *Salome* (1953), *King of Kings* (1961), *Simon of the Desert* (1959), and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Many other films depict various prophets, such as *Noah's Ark* (1928), *The Kingdom of Solomon*, *Saul and David*, *The Song of the Cradle*, *The Garden of God*, and *Joseph in Egypt*. Filmmakers have used all available cinematic techniques to recreate these historical figures and their time periods. Researcher Majed Habtah identified approximately 360 films that portray Jesus (Isa ibn Maryam). He remains the most frequently depicted prophet in cinema, with each adaptation sparking debate (Habtah, M.S.). The following sections highlight some of the key portrayals of Jesus in film.

After Pope Paul VI approved Pier Paolo Pasolini's depiction of Jesus in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), cinematic portrayals of prophets became more common. This approval set a precedent, leading to a steady stream of films presenting Jesus in various artistic forms. Some gained international recognition, while others stirred controversy in both critical and popular circles. The debate often centers on how Jesus is represented—his appearance, relationships, and manner of depiction.

In medieval religious art, strict rules governed the portrayal of Jesus and his followers. These rules later influenced cinematic representations, ensuring that Jesus was depicted with reverence, avoiding any portrayal that might offend believers worldwide. The biblical image of Jesus serves as a boundary for filmmakers, and crossing this line is considered a violation of the sacred.

Cinema, as a modern medium with a unique and complex language, presents new challenges for religious storytelling. It offers an opportunity to spread and defend Christian teachings, but adapting religious messages for a cinematic audience raises many questions. How can religious themes be modernized while remaining faithful to tradition? What new meanings emerge from cinematic portrayals of Christ? How can filmmakers ensure respect for Jesus while appealing to diverse audiences? Furthermore, some viewers might admire the actor playing Jesus more than the character himself. This raises another question: how can Jesus be given a definitive on-screen identity while maintaining his religious significance? Additionally, how can his portrayal be integrated into contemporary society without distorting his spiritual essence?

Many filmmakers have relied on deeply ingrained cultural images when depicting religious figures, including representations of God. Some films have attempted to illustrate God using symbolic elements. For instance, in *The Ten Commandments*, light is used to represent God speaking to Moses on Mount Tor, while his voice is delivered off-screen (*voix off*). When portraying Christ, filmmakers often adhere to his traditional evangelical image, emphasizing moral and sacred attributes. Many directors have avoided showing Christ's face directly. In the 1959 film

*Ben-Hur*, directed by William Wyler, Christ's presence is depicted through distant, elevated, or rear-facing shots to maintain a sense of reverence. His clothing and hair remain consistent with historical representations, and actors portraying him often use only biblical dialogue. Even during his crucifixion, he is not shown screaming or expressing distress, with sound effects used to convey the moment's intensity. Christian filmmakers are expected to maintain Christ's sacred and evangelical image in their portrayals (Lafon, 1977).

Films about Christ have frequently sparked controversy, particularly due to the way directors choose to depict his character. Disputes between filmmakers and religious institutions or censorship bodies arise repeatedly over these portrayals. A notable example is Nicholas Ray's 1961 film *King of Kings*, which was initially withdrawn from theaters following protests by clerics. Critics objected to Christ's depiction as a blond, blue-eyed figure, viewing it as a distortion of his traditional image and a violation of his sanctity. Similarly, Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1964 film *The Gospel According to Matthew* faced opposition from the church. Pasolini, known for his socialist ideology, presented Christ as an advocate for social change, linking his spiritual mission to uplifting the poor and marginalized. This portrayal was considered a deviation from the Christian understanding of Christ as the divine "Savior of mankind" rather than merely a social reformer (Lavon, 1977, p. 89).

Federico Fellini also faced criticism for his 1961 film *La Dolce Vita*. The Vatican protested certain scenes, particularly those featuring fictional characters such as clowns and acrobats, which satirized aspects of real life during that era (Lavon, 1977, p. 88).

Martin Scorsese's 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ* generated even greater controversy due to its departure from the traditional evangelical image. The film explores Christ's internal struggles with the devil and the Roman authorities as he spreads his new religious teachings. Presented as a series of painterly compositions, it emphasizes Christ's triumph over temptation. However, the most contentious scenes depict Christ engaging in a physical relationship with Mary Magdalene, abandoning his divine mission. This portrayal was widely condemned by Christian communities as a profound transgression against the sanctity of Christ's character, sparking strong and violent opposition (Scorsese, 1988, 2s, 50d, 32s).

Films about Christ remain a source of debate, even when they adhere to religious traditions and iconic representations. They often emphasize the immense suffering he endured at the end of his life. Some productions, such as *The Passion of the Christ*, even used Aramaic to enhance historical accuracy. However, despite adhering to Christian customs, such films have also drawn criticism for their portrayal of other religions. For example, *The Passion of the Christ* was seen as offensive to Judaism, as it directly implicated Jewish figures in Christ's crucifixion. This sparked significant objections from Jewish communities, leading major American distribution companies—predominantly Jewish-owned—to refuse its release (Prolongeau, 2004, p. 94).

#### **5- Religious figures in Arab cinema:**

A significant challenge for Arab and Islamic cinema is the strict stance of censorship authorities and religious scholars regarding the portrayal of religious figures. Before discussing specific religious characters depicted in Arab cinema, it is essential to note that prophets and the close companions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) have never been portrayed in films. This restriction is due to legal regulations, censorship policies, and religious decrees. Consequently, Islam's position on representation in general, and the depiction of religious figures in particular, must be clearly understood (Mazkur, 2002).

Egypt, as the leading producer of Arab cinema, faces the same restrictions as other Arab nations. Despite its substantial cinematic output, the industry does not operate with complete freedom. The regulations set by Egyptian censorship authorities concerning religious depictions are particularly significant. Egyptian law, as outlined in Paragraph 525 of Resolution 220 issued in 1976 by the Egyptian Ministry of Information and Culture, explicitly states: "It is prohibited to depict the image of the Prophet (PBUH), whether explicitly or symbolically, as well as the images of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the Prophet's family members, and the ten companions promised paradise. Their voices must not be imitated either. Additionally, depictions of Christ and all

prophets are forbidden. All such portrayals must be referred to the appropriate religious authorities for review" (From Y MYCor, 2002, p. 13).

Under this law, the cinematic treatment of religious themes, particularly character portrayals, is strictly controlled. Several Arab films have been banned in Egypt, including Salah Abu Saif's 1981 film *Qadisiyah*, which featured the companion Saad ibn Abi Waqqas, portrayed by Ezzat Al-Alayli. Similarly, numerous films have faced legal challenges due to their religious content, such as *Al-Mohager* (The Emigrant) by Youssef Chahine, which was accused of depicting the Prophet Yusuf (PBUH). This strict censorship approach is also observed in Syria and most Islamic countries, with Saudi Arabia enforcing the most stringent policies (Al-Sudani, M.S.). The influence of religious authorities and fatwa institutions is considerable, as they shape public opinion and exert pressure on filmmakers dealing with religious subjects.

Cinema, as a modern artistic and media medium, has prompted ongoing religious discourse. From a jurisprudential perspective, it falls under contemporary issues subject to scholarly interpretation. Religious scholars hold two main views regarding the portrayal of religious figures. While there is consensus on its prohibition, the nature of this prohibition varies. Some scholars adopt a rigid stance, asserting that acting is inherently forbidden. Others take a more moderate approach, focusing on the context and intent behind the portrayal.

The first perspective, advocated by strict Salafi scholars, categorically prohibits acting in theater or cinema. This view is supported by religious texts, such as the saying of the Prophet (PBUH): "God has cursed men who imitate women and women who imitate men" (Al-Bukhari, 1987, p. 2207). Additionally, Aisha, the wife of the Prophet (PBUH), once complained about a woman imitating her, to which the Prophet (PBUH) responded, "O Aisha, stop—God forbids us from imitating each other and resembling others" (Mona Mathkour, p. 13). Based on such evidence, many scholars completely reject acting and photography. Ahmed bin Al-Siddiq, in his book *Establishing the Evidence on the Prohibition of Acting*, argues that acting is a heretical practice, a major sin, and a deviation influenced by Jews and Christians (Bahrawi, 2003).

Sheikh Yusuf Al-Badri, a former member of the Islamic Research Academy and the former Mufti of Sharjah, reinforced this position. He stated: "Muslim scholars unanimously prohibit the portrayal of Islamic figures in artistic works. Those who argue that such works provide an image of Islam and help the West understand and embrace it are mistaken" (Mona Mathkour, p. 13).

A more moderate perspective considers permanent representation forbidden but allows temporary portrayals for artistic purposes. Proponents argue that acting is a form of permissible imitation rather than a literal depiction. This stance is supported by Quranic metaphors, such as in Surah Al-Nur: "God is the light of the heavens and the earth; the example of His light is like that of a lamp" (Surah Al-Nur, v. 35, Ruwayyat Warsh). Similarly, Imam Ali (RA) was metaphorically likened to a lion. This interpretation, endorsed by numerous scholars, permits theatrical and cinematic representation while maintaining ethical considerations (Rumahī).

Mustafa Al-Akkad, director of *Al-Risala* (The Message), recalled a conversation with Sheikh Muhammad Metwally Al-Shaarawi: "I was sitting next to Sheikh Al-Shaarawi, and immediately after watching the film, he told me: 'We want more from you'" (Habtah, M.S.). Imam Hassan Shirazi, in *Husseini Rituals*, stated: "There is no objection to the resemblance of men to women and women to men in representation" (Al-Shirazi, 2000, p. 112). This perspective distinguishes between forbidden permanent imitation and permissible temporary resemblance used in acting. Despite this leniency, Muslim scholars unanimously agree on the prohibition of depicting prophets and the Rightly Guided Caliphs to preserve their sacred status and prevent misrepresentation.

A fatwa issued by Sheikh Attia Saqr, former head of the Fatwa Committee at Al-Azhar, reinforces this stance: "Scholars have prohibited the portrayal of revered figures, particularly prophets and messengers, as their depiction is entirely forbidden, including drawings and photographs" (Saqr, www.islamonline.net). This ruling aligns with previous fatwas from Al-Azhar's Fatwa Committee (June 1968), the Islamic Research Complex (February 1972), and Syria's Dar Al-Ifta (August 1986). These rulings are based on the fundamental principle that preventing potential corruption takes precedence over perceived benefits (Saqr, www.islamonline.net).

Arab cinema has traditionally avoided depicting the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, and his companions, except for Saad Ibn Abu Waqqas, who appeared in the film *Al-Qadisiyah*. This historical film portrays a major battle between Muslim forces and the Persians, highlighting the leadership and military strategies of Saad Ibn Abu Waqqas. He is depicted as a heroic figure, leading battles and planning war, embodying courage and heroism during the conquest of Persia. However, the film does not present him as a religious leader (Hassan Al-Sudani).

Several other figures associated with the Prophet and early Islamic scholars have appeared in Arab cinema and television. However, many of these productions, particularly Egyptian ones, do not closely align with Egyptian culture. For example, *Khalid Ibn al-Walid*, directed by Hussein Sidqi, faced criticism for its weak portrayal of the character. Some religious scholars, such as Sheikh Muhammad Suad Jalal, expressed dissatisfaction with the film. He remarked, "I attended the film *Khalid Ibn al-Walid* and found myself constantly comparing the grandeur of that historical era and Khalid Ibn al-Walid's extraordinary military genius with what I saw on screen. It was nothing but a distortion of the biography of this great Islamic hero" (Hassan Soudani, op. cit.). In contrast, the film *Bilal*, directed by Ahmed Al-Toukhi, received praise for its respectful portrayal of Bilal Ibn Rabah. Yahya Shaheen's performance and the depiction of Bilal's perseverance and sacrifices for Islam were well received by both critics and religious scholars (Hassan Soudani, op. cit.).

Although many Arab films explore the early Islamic period, they adhere to censorship laws that prohibit the depiction of certain religious figures. These characters are often integral to the storyline but remain unseen on screen. This is evident in films such as *Fajr al-Islam* by Ahmed Al-Toukhi and *Hijra al-Rasul* (Debray).

The treatment of religious figures in Arab cinema is shaped by religious authorities and censorship laws. Mustafa Al-Akkad's film *The Message*, which narrates the early history of Islam, was banned in Egypt and Syria despite avoiding direct depictions of restricted figures. Produced in 1973 in Libya, the film was approved by Al-Azhar before filming began (Azar, 1987, p. 238). Similarly, *Al-Muhajir*, a joint Arab-French production directed by Youssef Chahine in 1994, was legally challenged and banned in several Arab countries for depicting the Prophet Joseph, peace be upon him (Marques, [www.I.France.com](http://www.I.France.com)).

#### Recommendations:

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions are provided for educators and cultural practitioners:

1. Establish clear guidelines for depicting religious figures in cinema, ensuring a balance between historical accuracy and religious respect.
2. Foster collaboration between religious scholars and filmmakers to produce content that preserves spiritual values without compromising sacred principles.
3. Develop creative approaches to portraying religious figures in compliance with censorship laws, such as using indirect narratives or symbolism.
4. Support high-quality religious film production by providing resources that help transcend commercial and artistic limitations.
5. Conduct comprehensive studies on audience reception of religious films to develop a cinematic approach that aligns with both cultural and religious expectations.

## Conclusion

The depiction of religious figures in cinema remains a complex issue, requiring a delicate balance between religious sensitivities and artistic expression. While filmmakers aim to present compelling religious narratives, they face strict censorship and criticism from religious institutions and conservative audiences. In global cinema, some directors have reimagined religious figures in ways that provoke discussion, whereas Arab cinema remains constrained by rigid regulations that limit direct representation.

Despite these challenges, advancements in digital cinema and modern storytelling techniques may offer new ways to depict religious figures while avoiding traditional controversies. Striking a balance between ideological respect and creative freedom could enrich religious cinema, transforming it into a powerful tool for conveying religious and historical values rather than a source of conflict. Ultimately, fostering a well-balanced religious cinema requires cooperation between religious scholars and filmmakers to produce works that honor religious heritage while maintaining cinematic excellence.

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Received: 09.11.2024

Accepted: 24.03.2025