



Shaykh Muḥammad Rif'at

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Shaykh Muḥammad Rif'at is arguably the greatest voice that has recited the noble verses of the Qur'ān in the 20th century.¹ Through his sweet humble voice, he was able to capture the hearts and beings of his listeners. His voice itself explains the verses and opens up their meanings, and combines both humility and powerful effect, and indeed, his reading style is unique and as of yet, unmatched.

¹ Sample recordings of Shaykh Muḥammad Rif'at can be heard at the following websites:

<http://www.qquran.org/qu.php?goto=artist&arid=25>

<http://audio.islamweb.net/audio/index.php?page=allsoura&qid=501>

<http://www.islamophile.org/spip/article293.html>

Muḥammad Rifʿat was born in the ‘Mugharbaleen’ neighborhood in the vicinity of Sayyida Zaynab in old Cairo, on a Monday May 9th, 1882. His father Mahmūd Rifʿat was a police officer and also worked as a merchant...his son Muḥammad lost his sight at a young age, and there is a story behind that. A woman met him and said about him, “he is the son of kings – his eyes say so.” On the following morning, the young boy woke up screaming from pain in his eyes, and after a short while he lost his sight.

His father Mahmūd gave his son Muḥammad to the service of the Qurʾān, and placed him in the *kuttāb* (Qurʾānic school) of the Masjid of Fādil Bāsha. He completed the memorization and correct pronunciation of the Qurʾān before he reached 10 years of age. His father passed away soon after while he was still young, and he found himself having to support his family. So he turned to the Qurʾān and depended upon it, without seeking material provision through it. He came to recite the Qurʾān every Thursday in the mosque next to the office of Fādil Bāsha, until – when he turned 15 – he was officially assigned to be the Friday reciter. From that point, his fame spread, and the space of the mosque and the surrounding streets were not enough to accommodate the pious worshippers who came to listen to the angelic voice. People were regularly known to faint or experience ecstasy (*wajd*) from the powerful effect of his unique voice. He continued to recite the Qurʾān in this mosque for around 30 years, as a mark of fidelity to the mosque in which he began.

Shaykh Muḥammad Rifʿat did not simply content himself with his vocal gifts and delicate senses in the recitation of the Qurʾān, but deepened his abilities by mastering all of the Qiraʾāt (reading styles/transmissions) and knowledge of *tafsīr*, and busied himself with studying the various musical modes (*maqāmāt*), to which he added the study of the music of Beethoven, Mozart, and Wagner, and used to keep a number of symphonic recordings from around the world in his personal library. In addition to this, he was also one of the leaders of the noble Naqshbandī Tariqa in Egypt.

Muḥammad Rifʿat was unique for his chaste and noble (*ʿafīf*) soul, virtuous purity, and inward detachment (*zuhd*) from the lower world. It was as if he emerged from the womb of the Unseen for the service of the Qurʾān. He was never desirous after wealth nor did he seek after it, but was a man of principle and had a noble soul, and he used to say: “Indeed, the carrier of the Qurʾān can never be bought or abased,” and he took that as a motto for his life. When the local radio station offered to broadcast his recital of the Qurʾān, he refused saying, “The dignity (*waqār*) of the Qurʾān does not go along with the morally depraved songs which your station broadcasts.”

When the national radio of Egypt was founded on 5/31/1934, he was the first to open it with his sweet voice, reciting, “***We have indeed granted you an open victory***”² Before hand, Azhar and the ‘Ulamā of Egypt gave a fatwa that the broadcasting of Qurʾān over the radio was completely permissible, and Shaykh Rifʿat was – previous to that – afraid that the people would listen to the Qurʾān in the nightclubs and discos (and thus not give it the proper respect it deserves).

² Qurʾān 48:1.

The humble delicate voice of Shaykh Rif'at sounded from the national radio, and it was as if it came to quench thirsty ears and hearts with the sound of the verses of the Qur'ān, as if it was recited for the first time. Thereafter, the name of the Shaykh shone bright all over Egypt, and millions came to yearn for his voice. Indeed, some people came to accept Islam simply after hearing him recite. For example, one day he met with 'Alī Khalīl, who was one of the administrators of the radio, and with him was an English air-force officer. 'Alī Khalīl told Shaykh Rif'at that this officer heard his voice in Canada, and came all the way to Egypt just to see Shaykh Rif'at, and right after that he accepted Islam!

During the time of the second world war, the large broadcasting networks of the world, such as the network of Berlin, London, Paris, and others, fought for the opportunity to begin their Arabic programs with the voice of Shaykh Rif'at, so that they could gain a large number of listeners. However, he never gave consideration to wealth and material prosperity, and refused to gain materially from the Qur'ān. During 1935, India invited him to recite, in return for 15,000 Egyptian Pounds, and he refused. So they increased the payment to 45,000 Pounds, and the Shaykh held to his stance, responding angrily, "I do not ever seek after wealth, because this world is temporary and vanishing." And the famous Egyptian musician, Muḥammad Abdul-Wahhāb, requested that he record the entire Qur'ān for him, for any amount he would ask in return...and the Shaykh declined out of fear that the recordings might be touched by a drunk or someone with major impurity (*janāba*).

Along with his being blessed with a delicate sense and overwhelming emotion, he was also a human (in the fullest sense) in the depths of his being, often being greatly moved by certain situations, his spirit finding no outlet except the flow of tears which wash away any sadness in his self. On one occasion, he visited a close friend in his dying moments, and at one point his ailing friend placed his hand on his young daughter and said to him, "who do you think will care for this youth who will become an orphan tomorrow?" and Shaykh Rif'at did not respond. On the following day, he was reciting Sūrat Duhā in a large tent (during one of the Mawlid), and when he came to the verse which says, "***and as for the orphan – do not treat them harshly,***" his voice rose in crying and tears fell from his eyes like rivers...because he remembered the final words of his friend. From that day, he always shared a portion of wealth with the young girl until she grew and got married.

He was well known for his compassion and mercy, and used to regularly sit in the company of the poor and simple, and out of his mercy used to take great care of his horse, and not sleep until he was sure his horse was well fed, and he advised his children to do the same...all this came from a heart filled with compassion and translucency and purity, and his sounds and tones emerged from his depths in harmony with the sounds of the universe around him.

His house was a meeting place of high culture and fine art, and he was a strong friend with the popular Egyptian singer Muḥammad Abdul-Wahhāb, who used to spend most of his nights in the house of Shaykh Rif'at in the neighborhood of Sayyida Zaynab. And many times these sessions would include reputed figures of art and music, and Shaykh Rif'at would entertain them with his beautiful voice, singing various Qasidas, while Abdul-Wahhāb would be sitting in attentive silence and respect.

He was by nature given to crying. He used to recite two times a week on the radio (every Tuesday and Friday), each time for 45 minutes, and the tears would flow from his eyes.

Allah ﷻ willed that Shaykh Rif'at go through various periods of illness in his life, sometimes causing him to be bedridden, and when he would recover he would return to reciting. This, until he came to suffer from hiccups during the final eight years of his life, preventing him from reciting. Also, during the end of his life his vocal cords became swollen, which prevented his pure angelic voice from being heard, and the people from that day were deprived of his voice (except for three final recordings which the national radio obtained before his illness became more severe). Then he came to have hypertension, acute inflammation of the lungs, and he would sometimes suffer bouts of hiccups for hours.

Some of his admirers and friends tried to gather money for payment of treatment for him, and he would not accept the donations gathered on his behalf, which reached close to 20,000 Egyptian pounds. He preferred to pay for his treatment by trying to sell his own house and some land that he owned. At that point, Shaykh Abu'l 'Einein Shu'aysha' (another famous Qur'ānic reciter at the time) got the head of the Awqāf at that time (al-Dasūqī Abadha) to agree to providing Shaykh Rif'at with a monthly allowance.

Allah willed that he pass from this world on Monday, May 9th, 1950, the same day in which he came into it (just as what happened with the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ), after selflessly giving 68 years of his life to the service of the noble Qur'ān.

One admirer said about him: "He was the master of reciters during his time, musical in his very nature, blessing our souls with its highest kind, and most sacred form. By his voice alone he captures us and enchants us without having need of an orchestra." Another said: "Shaykh Rif'at has not ceased to be the most beautiful and exquisite voice, and the secret of the beauty and grandeur of the voice of Shaykh Rif'at is that the core of his being was unique, and that his voice was able to lift you to the level of the Qur'ānic verses and their meanings. Furthermore, his style is truly unlike any other..." Another famous Egyptian author was asked about the reason for Shaykh Rif'at's uniqueness, and he responded, "He was filled with *imān* and belief in what he recited."

His long time friend, the musician Muḥammad Abdul-Wahhāb, said: "His voice was angelic, coming down from the heavens for the first time." 'Alī Khalīl said about him: "He had a serene soul. When you sit with him you would sense that this man...was in the eternal Garden, as if he was an angelic being. You could plainly see in his face purity, serenity, and complete sincere *imān* in his Creator. As if he was not a man of this world..."

May Allah have mercy on his soul!

