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Disruptive Visibilities

Awakening Records and the Marketing of Islamic Media

by Nabil Echchaibi

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In 2012, the London-based record label company, Awakening Records, signed a young American Muslim singer who made his YouTube debut rewriting the lyrics of popular songs. Raef, a high school teacher from Washington D.C. is best known for his “Islamic covers” of Maroon 5, Chris Brown, Bob Marley and Michael Jackson. Raef’s latest covers included a rewrite of Rebecca Black’s 2011 Internet hit “Friday,” which he turned into “Jumuah” to celebrate the Muslim day of prayer. Raef is the latest sensation in a growing wave of Muslim artists who seek to sanitize secular entertainment and provide a higher moral ground for the production and consumption of a religiously committed form of art. In the last decade pious Muslims have increasingly turned to secular symbols of consumer culture to refashion a modern religious identity. New niche markets for “halal” (religiously lawful) music, films, food, tourism and other consumer goods are booming across Muslim majority countries and in Western cities across Europe and the Americas. The stunning growth of the global halal industry (with a market value estimated today at 2.1 trillion dollars) has accelerated thanks to a wave of religious fervor among a social class of young, educated, and cosmopolitan Muslims who wish to embrace an Islamic modern and global lifestyle. Such a modern lifestyle has meant that an emerging market of consumer products, advertising, and commercial media programming is increasingly labeled “Islamic” or halal and slowly contributes to the rise of an alternative marketing and branding culture and an Islamic moral economy.

This article explores emerging branding landscapes in modern Muslim consumer culture through a focus on the Islamic music industry and the marketing of its popular artists. Specifically, I look at the work of Awakening Records and its impact on the cultivation of new entertainment tastes through music video production and digital marketing techniques. I argue that our interest in the marketing of new Muslim consumer lifestyles should move beyond the exotic novelty of branding in Islam and turn to a substantive exploration of how contemporary Muslim actors negotiate their religious sensibilities in a secular global culture and re-imagine the terms of their identities through pious art productions. Modern media practices in this case represent both an ideal tool and stage to act on a world increasingly defined by a neoliberal logic of private enterprise and individual self-improvement. I ask how a burgeoning market of Islamic “clean” music appropriates secular symbols and production values to position the modern Muslim consumer as an agent in a larger piety movement that promotes an active form of religious devotion and cultural participation.

The Halal Market and Islam’s Moral Economy

There is a growing scholarly and market interest in consumption patterns, economic practices and branding of consumer goods among Muslims. But the relationship between Islam and capitalism as a social, economic and political phenomenon is old and deeply anchored in a long history of both anxiety and adaptation. Imperialist incursions into various parts of the Muslim world left many societies tied to global economic structures mimicking social and economic values of their colonizers. Reactions to this growing dependence ranged from calls for a Europeanization of Muslim societies, unconditional retreat to a core Islamic model, to a more measured effort of rethinking Islamic values to repair the moral vacuity of Western capitalism. In his essay, “Refutation of the Materialists,” Nineteenth century thinker Jamal din al Afghani brandished religion as the ultimate moral compass for society, a higher code that shields humans from the excesses of materialist desires and animalistic instincts. Al Afghani exposed the hegemony and universalism of Western thought and advocated for a return to a reformed religious system based on Islamic principles and values. He fought against a stultifying “taqlid” (imitation of) the West and urged Muslims to revisit their sacred texts with a renewed zeal for reason and rationalism [Keddie 1983]. He was not opposed to innovation and modernity, but he insisted on a strong Islamic inflection of modernity, a modern faith that is not inimical to science, technology and innovation. Like his influential disciples Mohammed Abduh and Rashid Rida, Al Afghani led an intellectual campaign to rid Muslim coun-

tries of their cultural slumber and prove his faith's compatibility with science and progress.

In his famous refutation of Ernest Renan's speech on the innate backwardness of Muslims delivered in 1883, Al Afghani vehemently defended his faith against the racist accusation that Arabs and Islam were by nature hostile to reason and innovation. Acknowledging the stifling impact of Islamic fanaticism and despotism on the spirit of "free investigation" of philosophical and scientific truth, Al Afghani underlined the vital importance of free thought even when confronted with the dogmas of religion:

Whenever religion will have the upper hand, it will eliminate philosophy; and the contrary happens when it is philosophy that reigns as sovereign mistress. So long as humanity exists, the struggle will not cease between dogma and free investigation, between religion and philosophy: a desperate struggle in which, I fear, the triumph will not be for free thought, because the masses dislike reason, and its teachings are only understood by some intelligences of the elite, and because, also, science, however beautiful it is, does not completely satisfy humanity, which thirsts for the ideal and which likes to exist in dark and distant regions that the philosophers and scholars can neither perceive nor explore. [Kurzman 2002, 110]

Even in his defense of science, Al Afghani still did not believe in its absolutist claims of truth. This opening for spirituality to still regiment the rhythms of a wholesome life is what he saw as a dangerous elision in secular Western thought.

It might seem a bit misplaced to start a section on Islamic marketing with an account of one of the most prominent Islamic philosophers and his quest to guard Muslims against imperialist encroachment and blind imitation of the West, but it is necessary to establish a link between an earlier effort, albeit quite intellectual, and a growing attempt in contemporary Muslim societies to re-inscribe a religious morality in the heart of their social and political life. Also, the fact that more than a century later, Muslims are still haunted by the same issues of how to chart their own distinctive path given their history and the predominance of the West is quite a notable one. It is important to note here that my evocation of Al Afghani does not suggest these two historical moments are similar, nor does it assume that the motives and outcomes sought behind these efforts are philosophically identical. Afghani's solution to the intellectual and cultural decadence of Muslims was a reformist revivalism of Islam and a new exegesis of the Quran. His prescription included a revised social morality that is based on the need to meet the requirements of modern life. In a somewhat similar vein, and without the intellectual zeal of reformers and perhaps with a lesser political edge, some Muslims today seek a radical intervention in secular life in a quest for authenticity as participants in modern consumer culture.

The proliferation of Islamic banking and financing, for instance, represents an attempt to reshape modern life and chart concrete paths for how a Muslim should act in the world. The debate over Islamic banking reveals both a profound anxiety with the worldly promise and ideological foundations behind capitalism and a deep excitement over the opportunity to rewrite the ethical assumptions of free-market enterprise and elevate the logic and goals of consumer culture [Tripp 2006]. An increased interaction between oil-rich Gulf countries with the world's dominant financial centers and a growing generation of Muslims in Western countries have boosted the need for Muslim financial institutions that operate with a specifically religious ethic. Banks in Muslim majority countries and in Europe have started to offer Islamic mortgages and investment plans based on sharia law, which means free of interest, speculation and market risk. Such an injunction of these dominant principles constitutes the first time pious Muslims could effectively enter the economic market without forsaking their beliefs.

Since the 1970s when banks in the Gulf countries started offering Islamic financing options, the market has grown considerably to reach global assets of more than 2 trillion dollars. In 2012, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia accounted for the bulk of the world's Islamic banking assets, and Western banks in the UK, France, Germany and the US are following suit [The Economist 2014]. This is still small in comparison with the global assets in conventional banking, but the industry is confident their growth will be significant as they tap into large markets in Muslim majority countries. This requires sophisticated and aggressive marketing campaigns which not only reassure clients their investments will be halal, but that educate them on the complexities of the financial services offered under Islamic banking. Many banks use Qur'anic injunctions against *riba* (interest) in their advertising and often revert to the Prophet's trade practices as a simple solution to the dizzying and unprincipled world of conventional banking. Others downplay the religious injunctions and opt for a simple inscription of piety in the name of their institution. In their "Dawn of a New Day" television commercial, the Dubai-based Noor Islamic bank projects an image of a modern Muslim lifestyle unrestricted in its aspirations for family, home, personal achievement (albeit for the male Muslim), investments and risks. The bank is at the center of this dream as it calls on Muslims to be "unlimited" in this new dawn of economic life. In their website, the bank offers a detailed glossary of terms to help clients navigate the world of Islamic banking.

Obviously, Muslim reactions to capitalism have not produced only calls for reform based on Islamic values. It is safe to argue that Islamic banks, for instance, have not challenged free market ideology but only created a narrow market by appealing to those who felt uneasy about the traditional structures of the global financial system.

Critics have also alerted that the promise of equity and prosperity embedded in the narratives of an Islamically ethical economy has not been realized, particularly in poorer areas of the Muslim world. Instead, Islamic banking, they argue, has only accommodated Muslims into the same paradigm of neo-liberal capitalism [Tripp 2006]. Historically, however, the social critique of capitalism has taken other forms ranging from Islamic and secular socialism to a complete rejection of non-Islamic market principles and practices. While this falls outside the purview of this article, it is worth noting that a number of Muslim intellectuals have engaged the problem of disintegrating social solidarity and the moral vacuity associated with capitalism. At the heart of their concern was the emergence of a materialist society driven by an insatiable drive for individualism and acquisition of consumer goods.

For those who imagined solutions based on religion, Islam was posited as the antidote to hedonistic secular market culture. By focusing on frugality and piety in consumption, proponents of this view sought to foreground the economic values of Muslim economic structures and practices. But their dream to build an ideal Muslim community quickly clashed with an appealing market logic buoyed by the globalization of capital and the ubiquity of capitalist market practices and power. Whether we think of Islamic banking and other Islamically inflected economic practices as mere accommodations or significant disruptions, it's impossible to negate these interventions by Muslims to navigate the world based on their own traditions and value systems.

Animated by the same fears of a greedy social and economic system, some Muslims have crafted similar responses in the highly consumerist worlds of fashion, tourism and food. In fact, the global halal marketplace, which was initially limited to food products and then banking, has developed a vast array of products and services from *Fulla* (the Islamic response to Barbie), the *MacHalal* at the Beurger King Muslim,¹ the Colgate halal toothpaste, *Citra Style*, the home of halal Chic,² *halal Booking*, the gateway to halal luxury resorts in Dubai, Istanbul and Cairo,³ to Halalywood,

¹ In 2005, two French entrepreneurs of North African origin opened the first halal burger joint in France. Beurger King Muslim (Beur is the name used in the Parisian slang of Verlan to refer to Arabs born in France) sells burgers, fries and sundaes using Islamic dietary laws. Many of the BKM sandwiches are referred to as "Koul" a play on words which combines both the English word 'Cool' with the Arabic word 'Koul' (to eat in Arabic). Muslim female employees at BKM have the option of wearing a hijab, a strong statement against the French ban of ostentatious religious symbols. BKM also closes on Fridays around the time of prayer [Smith 2005].

² Halal fashion has become the symbol of a modesty movement (Head to Toe Humility) led by Muslim women across the world. Melding faith and dress, these women walk a fine line between dress as modesty and dress as fashion.

³ The Halal tourism industry has been growing steadily in the past few years generating increasing revenues for hotel chains in Muslim majority and Western capitals. Guests in luxurious hotels can

an aspiring group of Muslim actors and producers who make halal films.⁴ The remarkable growth of this marketplace has been accelerated by a wave of religious fervor among a social class of young, educated, urban and affluent Muslims who are increasingly becoming the target of a new line of consumer products, advertising, and commercial media programming labeled “Islamic” or “Halal.” That inscription of piety on these goods and services becomes a powerful branding and marketing strategy as Islamic businesses distinctly situate themselves and their customers in an otherwise ethically vapid consumer culture.

In their analysis of the marketing of *tesettür* (veiling) in magazines and websites in Turkey, Banu Gökariksel and Anna Secor note a sense of ambivalence in the Turkish women they interviewed about the spectacle of magazine fashion veiling and their decisions to wear a veil. They do not reject the glamor of sleek and cosmopolitan visual representations of veiling models, but they challenge the seamless combination of pleasurable consumption, beauty and style. The tension arising from the marketing of veiling, in this case, becomes itself an important mediation of the relationship between modesty and fashion and between piety and expressions of individuality:

While there may be no easy reconciliation between the demands for modesty that underlie *tesettür* and the spectacle of ever-changing fashion, women do not simply reject *tesettür*-fashion. They accept the disjuncture between *tesettür* and fashion and knowingly engage in a constant mediation between the two. This mediation becomes central to their sense of self and their embodied performances of identity. Their complex engagements with piety and fashion in the context of their personal preferences, social environments, class, and age demonstrate that it cannot be assumed, even for the devout, that Islamic injunctions regarding modesty operate in a trans-historical, decontextualized way to determine Muslim women’s dress. [Gökariksel and Secor 2010: 144-145]

It is precisely this ambivalence in the marketing and mediation of this new Muslim lifestyle that effectively pushes the boundaries of what it means to be a modern Muslim today. Here, the women interviewed by Gökariksel and Secor may object to this spectacular display of veiling fashion, but the catalogs of veiled models have been made available to them for the first time to challenge other forms of modeling and fashion. The fact that this distinction exists in this powerful pictorial fashion

expect prayer mats, Korans, Mecca direction indicators for prayer, a variety of halal menu options, and in some cases gender-segregated sport and entertainment facilities. Crescentrating.com, a search website was recently launched to help customers find halal-friendly tourism option worldwide [Byrd 2010].

⁴ Halalywood is a project by a Muslim American Hollywood actor who has raised money on the crowdfunding site, *Kickstarter* to fund his movies. His first movie, *American Shari’a* is dubbed as the first Shari’a compliant film.

makes the intervention on the part of, at the least the fashion designers and veiling companies, quite meaningful. The motives behind the fashion display are undoubtedly also commercial, but the fact that they invoke an ethical alternative from within the logic of the economic marketplace has deep implications for the way we conceive of religiously-inspired social change.

In another instance of the mediation of this kind of ambivalence, Hollywood actor and standup comedian Omar Regan is currently directing the first film in what he promises to be the beginning of Halalywood, a shari'a compliant film culture that melds entertainment with religious values. Regan stars in *American Shari'a*, a comedy film that chronicles the lived experience of Islamophobia in America through the partnership of two goofy cops in Detroit. What is striking about this film is not so much the originality of its plot, but more the strategy of its implicit mission. Regan is not interested in an ascetic observance of his faith by severing his ties to the world of entertainment. Instead, he imagines an alternative way to refashion the film industry to reflect his own values and author Muslim stories. *American Shari'a* is strikingly similar to the Hollywood blockbuster, *Rush Hour* and Regan plays a role strongly reminiscent of Chris Tucker in that movie (Regan actually doubled for Chris Tucker in *Rush Hour 2*). The choice of a Hollywood film as a loose model is not an arbitrary decision since Regan inverts the popularity of this film and deploys it for a decidedly religious goal. Muslim viewers are hailed in this sense to edify their viewing habits and align their entertainment tastes with their faith. *American Shari'a* seems to be also targeting non-Muslims in an attempt to change their perceptions of Muslims, but the film is primarily marketed to a Muslim audience so they can imagine an alternative way of "doing" entertainment.

The proliferation of these expressions of faith through consumer culture might be trifled as alternative cultures without resistance in the sense that they fail to fully challenge the order and practices of capitalism. But their ability to re-assign value and meaning in consumerism from within capitalism, I argue, raises some important questions about how Muslims navigate the challenges of modernity and negotiate the terms of their acceptance of capitalism. It is the ambivalence in this Muslim relationship to consumer culture that I want to turn to now.

Islam and Capitalism: an Ambivalent Marriage

It is predictable to assume from the images of the collapsing Twin Towers in New York on September 11 that Muslims deeply resent capitalism and that Al Qaeda's decision to hit the economic nerve of the West on that fateful day was a

carefully orchestrated attack to undermine Western economic hegemony. Similar perceptions of the incompatibility of Islam are animated by more recent images and narratives of “anachronistic” Muslims beheading hostages in the desert of Iraq and Syria. These militant options are indeed based on confrontation even if Al Qaeda and many groups like them are far from being anti-capitalists.⁵ Their strategy and rationale are solely animated by provocation to recruit Muslims who wish to fight Western dominance from outside. Militant Islam gets a lion’s share of media attention because it employs spectacular methods to secure that stream of news attention, but what evades us in that narrow lens is the scores of Muslims who resort to negotiation and creativity in their interactions with capitalism and its logic of universal values. Similarly, it is also important to go beyond top-down modernity narratives of states and intellectuals and focus on popular accounts of how people imagine their relationship to modernity in everyday culture [Kahn 2001].

The Islamicization of the commercial market is not simply an economic fact, but it is also a sociological phenomenon that reveals fundamental changes in contemporary Muslim life. In his work on the dynamics of social change in Egypt and Iran, Asef Bayat argues that we have entered a post-Islamist era which is both a discursive and performative break from traditional Islamism. By Post-Islamism Bayat [2013, 243] “refers to political and social conditions where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism are exhausted, even among its once-ardent supporters.” As a project, post-Islamism “represents an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. It wants to turn the underlying principles of Islamism on their heads by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritarian voice, historicity rather than fixed scripture, and the future instead of the past” [ibidem].

This flexibility in faith paves the way for a playful relationship with consumer culture and a constructive engagement with the world. Bayat laments the fact that dominant narratives of Islamism narrowly focus on religious revivalism as an expression of “primordial loyalties or irrational group actions” and become solely worthy of our research attention. But Muslim consumer cultures can be an important site to study what Bayat calls “social non-movements.” These are collective actions by ordinary dispersed people who seek social change without the organizational logic of movements. Their actions may seem disparate and disconnected, but they act to make themselves visible in a world that does not always see them or recognize their

⁵ Al Qaeda’s fundraising and planning heavily rely on free markets and global economies. Groups like the Islamic State have also shown a sophisticated use of banking and a deft command of social media networks.

presence. Consumer culture then offers news spaces and narratives of publicness which can have significant implications for social action from within market ideology.

Muslim interaction with capitalism should therefore not be seen in terms of uncritical embrace or uncompromising rejection. The creative mobility of Muslim behavior in capitalism generates a new social imaginary that resists a hierarchical Eurocentric indexing of the experience of modernity. Acting on capitalism from a Muslim perspective is not a didactic practice designed to reify religious dogmas, but it is a dynamic attempt to disrupt the secularization of modern public space and its exclusionary politics. The politicization of Islam and its increasing antagonization in the West have unleashed a highly visible quest for identity among Muslims as they wade through the material benefits and moral quandaries of modernity. In her work on veiling in Turkey and France, sociologist Nilüfer Göle argues that previous generations of veiled women distanced themselves from certain public spaces that kept them invisible and much less confrontational.

But today, when veiled girls cross the borderlines of the private space without assimilating the implicit conventions of the secular public space, being guided by a different bodily discipline and a different personal discipline, this attitude arouses anxiety. Proximity in space, schools, workplaces, and also in parliament or official ceremonies turns into a face-to-face confrontation...as feminine actors and Islamists, they situate themselves in a double logic, enjoy a double cultural capital, to paraphrase Bourdieu, at once religious and also secular and scientific. They have assimilated the disciplines and know how to navigate the schools, and even the political system, which gives them a double legitimacy, or a double illegitimacy, because in a certain way they leave the community and distance themselves from the traditional world of Islam while at the same time manifesting their disagreement, without going so far as to assimilate all the implicit conventions of modernity. [Göle 2011, 135-136]

Göle is right to evoke anxiety and defensive politics as a consequence of this new Muslim publicness precisely because the increasing visibility of Muslims in these “forbidden spaces of modernity” challenges the ideological boundaries of secularism by bringing religious and ethical alterity to the fore of the debate on modernity. Veiled women in this sense blur the lines between modesty, individual freedom, and notions of political agency. It is through this confusing ambivalence, not necessarily orchestrated, that Muslim actors today imagine an alternative form of cosmopolitanism, a different way of dwelling in the world. The same modernity, which had consigned religious actors to antiquity and irrelevance, is increasingly becoming a meaningful semiotic category and a site of action to regain the very agency denied for religious subjects. Invoking the same ideological confrontation Göle writes about, sociologist

Hamid Dabashi is even more defiant in his analysis of what he calls a process of “re/subjection” of the Muslim/Arab subject in the context of the Arab Spring.

The historical process by which we have been systematically de/subjected – become Iranian, Arab, Muslim, Oriental, and so forth; all the mnemonic others of what has coded itself as “the West” – is precisely the process that is not being reversed in the making of a transnational uprising that will leave no “nation” unturned. The discursive, external, and internal modes of de/subjection have all happened within the world called “the West,” the world as described by “the West.” [Dabashi 2012, 87]

Although there are notable differences between the politics and motives of the architects behind the Arab Spring and the kind of “re/subjection” of Muslims through consumer culture, they are both invested in a reconfiguration of the Muslim modern subject. In the case of *Awakening*, the secular entertainment world of the West and its imitation in Muslim cultures is clearly demarcated as a battlefield of values, a place to recast the world in a multivalent fashion and force it to divest itself from long-standing false binaries of Islamism versus secularism, modernism versus traditionalism, and Muslim versus Western cultures. Music in this instance renders legible a desire of a worldly cosmopolitanism Dabashi argues is not obsessed with erecting cultural walls and ideological barricades but is, or at least should be, opposed to essentialist interpretations of Islam. Much like Tahrir Square signified something “beyond” in the imagination of young protesters during the Arab Spring, the kind of spatial intervention *Awakening* affords its targeted Muslims through its branding of this kind of new Muslim subjectivity arguably marks a significant rupture with absolutism and a new opening for dealing with the universalist logic of capitalism and neo-liberal individualism.

Before I turn to a more detailed analysis of how *Awakening* markets this “re/subjection” of Muslim identity, I wish to end this section with a short reflection on how this ongoing interaction of Islam with capitalism and modernity invokes what French philosopher Jacques Rancière [2013] calls in his work on politics and equality the “part of no part.” That is an ultimate form of invisibility whereby some people are denied a place in the social order and are given no opportunity to participate in it. Rancière defines politics as the struggle then to defeat these hierarchies of exclusion and overcome their regimes of policing. For politics to have any impact and become democratic, Rancière insists it must start with the assumption of an equality of intelligence of all. But he understands equality not in the sense of the state providing the individual with rights and an equitable distribution of wealth. Equality for Rancière is an active process of equalizing oneself, an act of subjectivization, not individualization. The distinction here is significant because the Islamization of capitalism is not necessarily imbued with a drive for individualism as

much as it is concerned with restoring balance in an unequal spectrum of ethics and ideas.

While the work of *Awakening* as I will argue does not undermine the world of capitalism per se – in fact some may argue it reinforces its materialist impulses – it effectively participates in a politics of equalization of claims to modernity based on different perspectives. More importantly, *Awakening* is engaged in a spatial and discursive transgression which generates new aesthetics of listening and viewing and an alternative regime of “doing” and experiencing faith.

***Awakening* and the Aesthetics of Visibility**

Awakening Records started in London in 2000 as a book publishing company and a distributor of video sermons, Qur’anic recitation CDs, and comedy shows. With offices in the UK, France, Egypt and the US, *Awakening* has become a major media company that specializes in what it calls “faith-inspired and value-driven entertainment.” In 2003, it signed its first popular artist, Sami Yusuf, a talented British musician of Azeri origins whose slick music videos and lyrics celebrate the compassion of God and his forgiveness. Yusuf’s albums have sold millions of copies worldwide, prompting *Awakening* to seek similar artists who are pious and willing to enhance the Muslim religious experience through the arts. In 2008, the company introduced Maher Zain, a Lebanese-Swedish artist who left a promising career in the US music industry to produce faith-based songs. Zain’s songs have millions of views on YouTube and his albums have sold millions of copies, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia. And in 2012, *Awakening* signed a young American Muslim singer who made his YouTube debut rewriting the lyrics of popular songs. Raef, a high school teacher from Washington D.C. is best known for his ‘Islamic covers’ of Maroon 5, Chris Brown, Bob Marley and Michael Jackson. *Awakening* also produces nasheed/music albums for kids and audio lecture series on spirituality and social change.

As its name suggests, *Awakening* sees itself at the forefront of a spiritual and economic movement that combines faith and entertainment, music and social change, and religious education and the market. Its motto, “Islamic Media Redefined” clearly denotes an effort to elevate Muslim entertainment taste and reinvest it in an aesthetic of piety and devotion. This language of redefining and reeducating Muslims pervades the website of the company as it tries to project an image of a modern cosmopolitan Muslim identity through a highly disciplined and committed consumer behavior. The company organizes concerts, produces slick music videos and promotes its artists

through a website store, iTunes and a very popular YouTube channel. Consistent with its mission of faith-based social change, *Awakening* artists are shown in videos visiting Syrian refugees in Turkey, singing for humanitarian relief, and participating in charitable projects in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

Opting for a more dignified deployment of artistic talent is strongly reflected in the marketing language of the company's artists. Maher Zain, by far the most popular artist on the label, is described this way on his official website: "Maher Zain is a Swedish R&B singer, songwriter & music producer of Lebanese origin. He released 2 albums with Awakening Records, Thank You Allah (2009) & Forgive Me (2012). Maher worked in New York with internationally renowned producer RedOne (Akon, Lady Gaga, Jennifer Lopez) but he chose instead to make music that reflects his roots." The choice here is meaningful because Zain's talent could have easily been routed to fit in the mainstream secular world of entertainment and global stardom. The targeted viewers and listeners of this genre of Islamic music are asked to appreciate the significant change of heart of an artist who deliberately positions his sophisticated art in the service of his faith and the spiritual well being of the larger Muslim community.

As pioneers of an Islamically inflected music culture, *Awakening* has directed its marketing efforts to also rest its case about the need for such a devotional entertainment industry. Since its inception the company has battled fierce criticism about its use of musical instruments in songs which sound more like secular musical hits than traditional Islamic nasheeds. There has always been an intense debate in Islam about the place of music and its impact on the pious edification of the soul. There is a loose consensus among scholars that music is permitted in Islam, but some more radical interpretations have prohibited music as one of the devil's snares. In his first album, Thank You Allah, Maher Zain released two versions of the same song, Awaken, one strictly vocal and the other with music. The YouTube comments on both versions reveal an interesting exchange on whether music hinders or augments pious affect. Some praised Zain's musical talent and the 'clean' lyrics of his songs while others expressed more hardline positions condemning all forms of music, singing and dance as useless activities designed to compete with divine passion and cause believers to stray from proper devotional pursuits. Some were moved by how the lack of music in the vocal version made them concentrate more on the words of the song displayed on the screen. Others thought the music in Zain's songs helped them feel the same sense of humility (*khushu'*) and regret (*nadam*) that prayer or listening to a sermon usually produce in the true believer. Generating thousands of comments, the song (both the music and the lyrics) became the object of a moral project, an attempt by YouTube users to act on what they see as proper or improper religious practice. A

few commenters cited one of the Prophet's hadith (saying) that music in all its forms is prohibited. Others said that the Prophet "would put his fingers on his ears whenever he heard singing" to which many replied that it was a da'eef (not reliable) saying based on the classification of authority of the prophetic tradition. Here again, both the comment section of YouTube and the music of Maher Zain constitute a space for disciplinary practice meant to cultivate a sense of devotional affect that is in line with the standards of Islamic piety, much in the same way Muslims use prayer or Qur'anic recitation for ethical and sensual edification. In fact, Zain's song, *Awaken*, is not just any song. It is a summary of Surat Al Kahf (The Cave) in the Qur'an which warns believers against the temptations of material life and reminds them of the eternal hereafter. Zain's music, video, and lyrics are all meant to bring out the 'realness' of God's injunctions and move his listeners/viewers into heeding the divine call.

In yet another revealing example of how *Awakening* rationalizes its branding of a global cosmopolitan Muslim identity, the YouTube channel of the record label company launched a worldwide talent contest in 2013 to find the next Muslim superstar. According to a company's press release, 750 videos were submitted from Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, the UK, and the US, and the entries varied from contestants reciting the Qur'an, rapping, singing nasheeds without music, to performing covers of songs of Maher Zain, Sami Yusuf, Lady Gaga, and Cristina Aguilera with rewritten lyrics to fit a devout audience. One of the 16 finalists was Moroccan Youssef Edghouch, a talented Qur'anic reciter with a strong following on YouTube. Edghouch decided to title all his entries "No Music," earning him quite a bit of praise from those who deem *Awakening's* artists to be committing an act of bid'a, a blameworthy innovation which runs counter to the teachings of Islam. Edghouch deliberately sang one of Sami Yusuf's most famous songs without music and followed it with a well known nasheed celebrating the Prophet's migration to Madinah. It is not clear whether his decision not to use music undercut his chances of winning (he never made it beyond the 16 finalists stage), but if the number of views are any indication, his entries received a combined 110,000 views. The winner of the contest was Harris J., a 16-year-old performance arts student from London who also submitted strictly vocal entries of nasheeds, but judging from the comments and the reviews he got from the judges, there is no clear evidence that he was voted the winner because he didn't include music. The talent contest quickly became an opportunity to deliberate on Islamic media forms and practices as part of the record label company's bigger project of spiritual reform. The contest, *Awakening* argued, was an exercise in piety because it conforms to its philosophy to correct Muslim behavior by acting on the secular music market. Clearly, the motive is also commercial, but it presents some interesting characteris-

tics about the nature of religious practice and cultural taste in the modern Muslim context.

While *Awakening* is not the site of veneration, it contributes to the re-inscription of the sacred and the re-transmission of the divine. The digital space in this case becomes a unique devotional place that produces alternative forms of pious affect and devotional imagination. The music, the videos, and the comments become a medium that generates the spiritual presence of the divine through a process of seeing and listening, or through the act of disciplining seeing and listening in the religious experience. In his song *Awaken*, for instance, Maher Zain delivers a mordant criticism of an ethically drifting Muslim Ummah narrowly focused on accumulating material things and mindless about the virtues of a devout life:

We were told what to buy and we bought
We went to London, Paris and Costa Del Sol
We made sure we were seen in the most exclusive shops
Yes we felt so very satisfied!
We felt our money gave us infinite power
We forgot to teach our children about history and honor
We didn't have any time to lose
When we were
So busy feeling so satisfied

The song can be read as a critique of an excessively exploitative and vacuous capitalism. You may also hear similar words at a Friday's sermon, but Zain's delivery is arguably far reaching because in mimicking the production values of popular music videos, his message is more likely to reach those Muslims who draw a distinctive line between their faith and their consumer habits in entertainment. *Awakening* is also strategic in its choice of the artists it signs on its label for these same reasons. One of these artists, Irfan Makki, a Pakistani-Canadian singer, is often described by the company and fans as the "Muslim Michael Jackson" because his voice is strikingly similar to the American pop star's. This type of marketing complicates the tension between secular popular culture and Islam, but more significantly it introduces a distinct regime of representation albeit still defined by proximity, not distance from the popular world of entertainment. Following David Morgan's work [1999] on visual piety, it's through specific acts of seeing and listening that the believers engage with the mediated product and eventually regard it as a powerful spiritual source. This re-routing of Islamic practice through the entertainment music of *Awakening* is a testament to the flexibility of an Islamic tradition often described as timeless and ossified and an exemplar of a modern religious movement which views mediation as a core element – and not an ornament – of its tradition.

But perhaps the most important feature of this kind of Islamic entertainment is its transgression of the world of secular music videos and entertainment concert halls. Zain's and other artists' videos propose another use of the genre, previously closed to themes of religious devotion and faith. The expressive culture marketed through the work of *Awakening* should be seen as an interventionist public performance of piety that seeks to reclaim a personal relationship to modernity. As Göle [2011, 46] argues, "Muslim actors are not lagging behind modernity; on the contrary, they make use of modern technologies and tools of communication; they have mastered the language of politics and become familiar with urban life; they invest in the market and adjust consumer products and leisure sectors to conform with the new needs of religious groups."

This visibility and performativity of Islam become even more notable when *Awakening* organizes very well attended concerts in the prestigious Apollo Theatre in London or the Wembley Arena. That is both a measure of success of the *Awakening* brand and a strategy to show its targeted audience that Islam can be a force to improve the world. It is not simply a collective means to edify the Muslim soul, but also an effective tool to assert Islam's presence in public spaces. Here, religion is recalled for the sake of presencing Islam in the modern world. In other words, the Muslims behind the *Awakening* brand are looking to leave their footprints in spaces usually associated with secular culture. Media sociologist Nick Couldry [2012] writes about what he calls the, "hidden injuries of voicelessness," a kind of absence in the media which leads to delegitimation. Media presence then becomes a strategic way for people with no symbolic capital to gain visibility in a world hostile to religion and particularly Islam. *Awakening* provides a platform for Muslims to effectuate this kind of 'presencing' or mediated presence that is designed not to withdraw from public life but to occupy it for their own ethical purposes. Here the company becomes engaged in a larger project of connecting new Muslim imaginaries with real spaces of culture and entertainment.

It is a conscious act of participating in consumer culture in order to change it, modify it and colonize it. It is also a way of reclaiming the role of faith and religion in the process of social change. This Muslim moral economy allows for a redistribution of space and time with a new configuration of visibility and invisibility. This is not simply a way for Muslims to announce their modernity, but also a strategy to define the terms of their entry into modernity and modern spaces. Muslims become then "present" in modernity.

Such a new Islamic publicness through the public significance of Islamic tastes, goods, and aesthetics generates an alternative culture of pious performativity that should be studied as new 'habitations of modernity' to borrow Göle's phrase. *Awak-*

ening, I argue, has been at the vanguard of this movement to imagine the contours and aesthetics of this new expressive culture. There are multiple iterations of this trend of repurposing art to sanitize it from its unethical practices in many other Muslim contexts, including Egypt [Echchaibi 2012; Van Nieuwkerk 2013], Malaysia [Sarkissian 2005; Fischer 2008], and Indonesia [Barendregt 2006]. This market-minded Muslim piety culture is generating new habits of devotion and young Muslims across the world are socialized to sustain social sentiments and community bonds through media rituals like music videos, reality television, gaming, and other aspects of a dynamic religious pop culture. We need more research to understand the full complexity of these religious orientations and their entanglements with the logic of consumer media and ethical capitalism.

Conclusion

This article is not meant to be an exhaustive exploration of Muslim consumerism and the belief system behind it, but it analyzes one facet of this rich and interesting cultural world. I look at the emergence of these marketing cultures of a public Islam as a complex set of interpretive and performative practices designed to help Muslims navigate the tensions and quandaries of their lived experience with modernity. Studying Islam in practice provides a richer template to account for the myriad of ways Muslims understand, perform and deploy their religion for social change. I have tried to argue that the moral economy *Awakening* has pioneered with its faith-based entertainment, should be situated within a larger project of adopting and adapting to complex social and economic norms, but also to dispute the lingering assumption that modernity is the exclusive outcome of the secular social imagination. Through the mediated ritual of producing and listening to/viewing music, Muslims are hailed to use their faith as a moral compass to reframe the terms of their public presence in the world today.

The public visibility of Islam has been informed by a brutal theatre of encounters with the West generating simplistic imagery and sensationalist narratives of perpetual antagonism and cultural anachronism. Islam, we are told, is anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, and anti-modern. Against this backdrop, *Awakening* has identified a critical domain of performativity where Muslims act as cultural intermediaries between two intimately interconnected worlds. This moral deployment of consumer culture is carefully marketed through the symbols of secular modernity to challenge the core values of a universalist – read as Western – track to civilization.

My aim in this article is not to overlook the significant shortcomings in *Awakening's* interpretive culture, which excludes women, limits political dissent, and censor religious difference in Islam. These limitations must be called out in order to expose the company's own practices of exclusion and invisibility. But *Awakening's* intervention as described here is still politically salient because they have thrust themselves in an unpredictable theatre of confrontation, a kind of silent revolt against the monist assumptions of Western modernity and its claims of cultural superiority. In fact, as evidenced in the deliberations in the comments on the videos on its YouTube channel, *Awakening* may have launched a process over which it has no control. The theatrical stage, both literal and metaphorical, it has set up may lead to more improvisations than simple directions in Muslim interaction with capitalism and its value system. The singing contest, for instance, was fraught with tension around the role of women artists in this expressive Muslim culture, a conversation the company was neither capable to host nor control. Going back to Rancière's idea of politics as a stage, the moral economy of *Awakening* constitutes a spectacle with no guarantees, an entertainment sphere where Muslims force themselves onto uncharted territories and invent new languages, aesthetics and possibilities for social change. "Politics," Rancière writes, "is performing or playing, in the theatrical sense of the word, a gap between a place where the demos exists or where it does not [...] Politics consists in playing or acting out this relationship which means first setting it up as a theatre, inventing the argument, in the double logical and dramatic sense of the term, connecting the unconnected" [Cited in Rockhill and Watts 2009, 142].

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Disruptive Visibilities

Awakening Records and the Marketing of Islamic Media

Abstract: This article explores emerging branding landscapes in modern Muslim consumer culture through a focus on the Islamic music industry and the marketing of its popular artists. Specifically, I look at the work of Awakening Records and its impact on the cultivation of new entertainment tastes through music video production and digital marketing techniques. I argue that our interest in the marketing of new Muslim consumer lifestyles should move beyond the novelty of branding in Islam and turn to a substantive exploration of how contemporary Muslim actors negotiate their religious sensibilities in a secular global culture and re-imagine the terms of their identities through pious art productions. I ask how a burgeoning market of Islamic “clean” music creatively appropriates secular symbols and production values to position the modern Muslim consumer as an agent in a larger piety movement that promotes an active form of religious devotion and cultural participation.

Keywords: Muslim Modernities; Halal Marketing; Muslim Consumer Culture; Capitalism; Alternative Modernity Theory.

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