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Common Ground News Service - Partners in Humanity

# Islamic popular culture

**by Marwan M. Kraidy**

11 November 2006

Washington, D.C. - Western popular culture has for decades attracted the ire of Islamic activists who accuse it of subverting values, corrupting youth, destroying families or robbing Muslims of fundamental aspects of their identity.

But hostility towards Western popular culture is not restricted to those who claim to speak in the name of Islam. Activists elsewhere have campaigned against what they perceive to be foreign encroachments on their cultures: whether Hindu activists protesting beauty pageants, Parisian intellectuals criticising the celebration of all-American Halloween in France, or Italian activists launching the “slow food” movement, the fear of a soulless, consumption-driven global culture overwhelming local mores and traditions is widely shared. In the post-September 11 world, however, Islam and the Middle East have been at the centre of this debate.

Though Islam and global, essentially Western, popular culture are often depicted as antagonistic, a fascinating new phenomenon is sweeping the Islamic world, demonstrating the capacity of local tradition not only to adapt, but also to take advantage of global popular culture styles. This is the phenomenon that I call “Islamic pop”. Boy bands in Malaysia, Islamic videos in London, an “Islamically-correct” reality television show in Dubai, and the widespread adaptation of Western game shows for the Arab television-sweeps of the month of Ramadan are all vivid examples of this intriguing trend. These examples occur in different nations, use different languages, employ different media and address different audiences. What they have in common, however, is the promise that Muslim and Western worldviews—taking into account the tremendous internal diversity of each—are not incompatible.

The wave of reality television production that has hit the Arab world in the last few years has triggered strong condemnation for going against traditional Islamic values. In response, some Gulf-based channels have produced reality shows that are actively compatible with Islam. The most interesting is probably Green Light, produced in Dubai for Dubai television, the official broadcaster of the Emirate that is fast-forwarding itself to the gaudy avant-garde of modernity. Unlike other reality television shows focused on competition for fame and personal gain, Green Light highlighted that most Islamic of values: charity. Contestants had to find creative ways to raise money for orphans, Palestinian refugees and poor school students. Understandably, the show eschewed the controversy that befell its predecessors.

In London, a young British Muslim of Azeri origin has created the Islamic music video genre, known in the Middle East as “video clip”. Sami Yusuf’s videos are soothing Islamic nasheeds, or chants, where stunning images from throughout the Muslim world show Islam’s global scope, or where the singer expresses his love for, and gratitude to, his mother. For those who believe that globalisation threatens Islamic values, Yusuf offers an alternative kind of globalisation. His songs and videos articulate a way to be both “modern” and Muslim. That this charismatic and soft-spoken singer can achieve rock-star fame speaks to the resonance that Islamic pop has had among globally dispersed Muslims, especially the young.

In Malaysia, the boy-band Raihan is still widely popular in its second decade of existence. This Malaysian nasheed band is on the cusp of releasing its 12th album. Since the 1996 release of their first album Puji Pujian, the singers have become household names in Malaysia and much of the Muslim world. Their motto “pray hard, work smart” expresses a new, fresh way of being Muslim that has proven to have wide appeal. Raihan is now a globally known band whose tours take it to all continents.

Reality television, music videos and pop bands are all part of global popular culture, a phenomenon that is often seen as a threat to various national and local cultures and religious groups. Green Light, Sami Yusuf, and Raihan are examples of compatibility, rather than hostility, between public expressions of Muslim faith and global popular culture, Islamising global popular culture even as they globalise Islamic beliefs.

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