

PEER REVIEW ARTICLE

The Appeal of Sami Yusuf and the Search for Islamic Authenticity

A quick glance at the top 40 most requested songs on the Web site for the popular Arabic music video channel *Melody Hits TV* reveals the latest and greatest from stars such as Lebanon's Nancy Ajram—infamous for her sexually suggestive videos—as well as others like America's rapper Eminem and Egypt's crooner Tamer Hosny. Next to each song's title and number is also displayed a picture of the artist. At number 32, next to her hit *Megamix*, is a picture of Britney Spears staring at the viewer with the fingers of her right hand resting suggestively on her bottom lip. At number 35, popular rapper 50 Cent is shown in front of an expensive sports car wearing a fur coat, diamond-studded chain and black bandana. Wedged between the two at number 34 is the British Muslim singing phenomenon Sami Yusuf with his latest hit *Hasbi Rabbi*.⁽¹⁾

Well-dressed, sporting a fashionably cut, close-cropped beard and preferring tailored black suits to traditional dress, he is famous for his glitzy religious CDs and music videos. Born in 1980 to Azerbaijani parents, Sami Yusuf grew up in London and first studied music under his father, a composer. From a young age he learned to play various instruments and at the age of 18 was granted a scholarship to study at the Royal

Academy of Music in London.(2) In 2003, Yusuf released his first album entitled *Al Mu'allim* (The Teacher). Along with the *Al Mu'allim* also came the release of the first "Islamic music video" for the album's title track by the same name. Both the video and the album were immensely popular throughout the Muslim world, where even in conservative Saudi Arabia album sales topped 100,000 copies.(3)

Yusuf's message is one of tolerance and integration. In Yusuf's music, talk of infidels and jihad are replaced with appeals to God's love and the beauty of religion. "Islam teaches us to be balanced, to be in the middle," Yusuf says, adding that "Islam is not a religion of extremism, and my message is balance."(4) Yusuf believes that the majority of Muslims hold Islam to be a religion of peace and tolerance(5) and so Muslim youth, especially in the West, should be proud of their religion. "My message (to the youth) is ... to be proud of your religion, be proud of who you are whether you're from Pakistan or from Saudi Arabia or from Algeria or from Morocco or anywhere in the Muslim world ... just be proud of who you are."(6)

Looking at his photo on the Melody Entertainment Web page, those unacquainted with Yusuf's work would probably be hard-pressed to tell the difference between him and other contemporary music stars in the Middle East and Europe. Dressed in a stylish collared shirt with slicked-back hair and close-cropped stubble, Yusuf does not appear much different from other popular singers such as Egypt's Amr Diab or French-Algerian Cheb Khaled. This outward similarity has often led to Yusuf being confused with other "non-Islamic" popular music stars, as recently happened on a trip to Egypt. "I am not a pop singer," said Yusuf in an interview with Turkey's *Zaman* newspaper. "I reminded

people of this many times in Egypt. You know that some youngsters requested my phone number there. You know such things always happen. I told them that I am not a pop singer and don't want to be a pop singer.”(7) Despite the cool, pop star-like image, however, Yusuf remains—at least in his own eyes—a religious singer, and it is primarily in this capacity that he has been able to achieve such popularity.(8)

As a Muslim singer with a specifically religious message, Sami Yusuf must, like all social actors and entertainers for whom religion is a primary identity, be able to legitimate his own interpretation of “what Islam is.” He frequently condemns religious radicals, saying in one interview: “Although they are not as widespread among normal Muslims, the extremists have a very loud voice in spreading their narrow-mindedness and ignorance, bringing confusion to the minds of many Muslims.”(9) But like the messages of those radicals he deplores, Yusuf's message must be perceived as authentically Islamic in order to be accepted. In short, Yusuf's legitimacy as a preferred religious artist for young Muslims is not just tied to his ability to deliver his songs through an entertaining *medium* (although this no doubt plays a part), but also is based on the content of his *message*. For unlike most other video artists whose sole aim is simply fame or money, Sami Yusuf's self-identified aim has always been to “do something for Islam”(10) and to create, in *TBS* contributor Patricia Kubala's words, “Al Fann Al Hadif (art with a purpose).”(11)

Islamic Authenticity, Popular Culture, and the West: A Theoretical Context

In his book *Islam: The View from the Edge*, historian Richard Bulliet argues, “The impetus for change in Islam has more often come from the bottom than from the top,

from the edge than from the center.”(12) Lacking a centralized religious hierarchy, Bulliet contends that the evolution of Islam often has taken place on the geographical and ideological margins of the Muslim *Ummah* when new communities of believers seek ways of melding their newfound religion with the native culture and environment.

In a modern era that is characterized by transnational flows of people, ideas and information, the new edge of Islam lies less in the historical *Dar al-Islam*, and more in the West. Now home to large communities of Muslim immigrants, their progeny, as well as an increasing population of native converts, the Islamic West is becoming an increasingly important location of religious re-interpretation as Muslim diasporas and new converts seek to reconcile Islam with Western culture and the contemporary Western lifestyle.

Much of the new thinking about Islam in the West is not taking place as much within the traditional realms of religious authority, however, but within popular culture. Faced with the realities of secular society and aided by the development of new media such as the Internet, the battle over “who speaks for Islam” in the West (and more and more in the East, for that matter) increasingly is being played out in the modern public sphere and outside the traditional realms of Islamic authority.

Concurrent with this expansion of Islam and Muslim religious interpretation into the realms of popular culture is an escalation of concerns over religious authenticity. With new interpretations of Islam proliferating throughout the realms of Western popular culture accompanied by the rise of a “new breed of religious leader, often only half educated in conventional Islamic teachings, but determined to interpret the faith in ways

that make sense to people with modern educations,”(13) debates abound over “what Islam is, as well as “what Islam is not.”

This growing debate over Islamic authenticity as manifested through the medium of popular culture, moreover, should be of keen interest to scholars of the Middle East and Islam. Mass media in particular, as a vehicle of expression for popular culture, is of great significance “in the contemporary process of constructing the boundaries of social identity.”(14) When we examine the role played by tele-Islamists, Muslim TV talk show hosts, and religious pop singers like Sami Yusuf in the contested locus where the struggle to define Islamic authenticity is taking place, popular culture and its expression through mass media can tell us a great deal about the evolution of Islam in the modern age.

An Awakening: Finding a 'Way of Life' in the Modern World

For Yusuf, the desire to act out for his faith came, as it most likely has for other young “born-again” believers and converts,(15) with an “awakening” at an early age. “Sometimes people’s faith seems to fade away,” he says, “but then they go through an awakening. They find that their faith is back in line, stronger than before. And this is what gives them the desire to do something. This is what happened to me,”(16) For Yusuf, this awakening occurred during his teenage years, and was a result of finding the *hidayet*, or true path, to God. “I am the kind of person who always researches, thinks and tries to learn the truth. This awakening occurred as a result of many things. Elhamduillah, the turning point came when I was about 16 or 17 and I really wanted to do something for Islam.”(17)

In re-discovering the “true path to God,” Yusuf is not alone. Recent research indicates a rise in the number of young Muslims who are eschewing traditional interpretations of religion and choosing for themselves as individuals what being Muslim means.(18) The contemporary search for Muslim religious meaning in the West, however, is occurring in a social environment where the collective memory—the means by which traditional religion is sustained over time—has by and large now ceased to exist.(19) In the traditionally defined Christian West, where dramatic social changes associated with the historical process of secularization having been occurring for some time now, we have already seen the religious “quest for certainty” manifested through the fragmentation of traditional religions, the subsequent spread of religious pluralism as a response to secularization, and the rise of alternative religious expression such as the New Age Movement, itself a response to the decline of traditional religion.(20)

The general spiritual confusion that characterizes post-modern, Western society is also further exacerbated by new means of communication and social organization which “means that everyday life is being shaped, for a growing number of people, as much by events taking place in distant places as by those in the local community. Hence people become exposed to a variety of sources and types of information that they realize are important but cannot always grasp and control.”(21) For religiously minded young people growing up in the secularized West, religion can act as a form of guidance that allows one to navigate the confusing post-modern social environment. For young Muslims, Islam is especially appealing for its perceived ability to offer a “complete way of life” in which modernity is conveniently filtered through the regulations and spiritual guidelines encompassed by the Qur’an, Shari’a, Hadith, Sunna of the Prophet, and various other

sources of religious authority. This is seen in Jacobson's 1998 study of young British Muslims, whose responses indicate that Islam is able to inform all decisions related to navigating daily life. One young man says, for example, "I'd say religion plays the greatest part in my life. I certainly wouldn't do anything at all that would conflict with what my religion says ... *It's a way of life* (italics mine) for me. I eat, breathe and everything the way the religion tells me." (22) Another respondent echoes similar sentiments about Islam's all-encompassing power saying, "It's not religion, is it—*it's a way of life* (italics mine). It's interweaved with what you do every day. Like you can't define it in its own existence—that's how it is for us. Like if you eat pork, that's not religious; if you don't eat pork, that's religious." (23) And still a third informant adds, "It's not religious—it's a way of life (italics mine)—the way you should be. Do certain things. Religion's not just praying and wearing a certain dress – it's the way you act, the way you act towards people. It's just – being human, basically." (24)

The belief that Islam is a "way of life," as it is understood by Sami Yusuf and other young Muslims, necessitates the creation an alternative social sphere in which vulgar products and aspects of modernity are re-constituted and re-shaped into acceptable Islamized forms. Thus we see Sami Yusuf making claims, for example, about creating music and music videos in accordance with the *Shari'a*, or Islamic Holy Law. "I do think it (music) can be used as a means for integration (in Europe), but it must be done according to the Shari'ah," Yusuf has said. "For example, there should not be any indecent or immoral connotations, basic things that go against our fundamental understanding of Islam." (25) For Yusuf, accordance with the *Shari'a* does not imply, however, that Islam is incompatible with modernity because Yusuf also believes that

Islam and modernity are not only reconcilable, but complimentary. “The youths are very open-minded now. They are mostly proud of their religion. Although there are some elements of modernity they like, they have realized that staying aloof from religion and shying away from religion is wrong. Religion goes hand in hand with modernity.”(26)

Islamizing Modernity

Before proceeding, a note should be made about the concept of modernity itself. As Giddens and many others have noted, modernity is neither uniform nor clearly defined. Modernity is in fact an ambiguous project, and varies greatly depending on time and place. Similarly, the same degree of ambiguity surrounds the concept of secularism. Talal Asad points out, for example, that one’s definition of what defines secular space often depends on the type of religious symbols involved. Referring to France, he notes, “What is it that makes the wearing of the veil a violation of secular rules of politics and not the yarmulke? My point is not that there is unfair discrimination here, but that even in a secular society there are differences in the way secular people evaluate the political significance of “religious symbols” in public space.”(27) Thus, we must keep in mind that secularism, along with modernity, are hardly uniform concepts. As we will see below, even in the strain of Islamism that some may describe as “liberal,” definitions of modernity and secularism can and do vary greatly.

In the contemporary age, attempts to define exactly what constitutes “Islamic art” have proven equally elusive. As Ernst rightly suggests, part of this is due to the “absence of a single, monolithic, Islamic culture.”(28) Taking a step back, however, it is possible to place the debate over “Islamic Art” within a wider debate presently taking place in the

West. On the Internet and in Western publics, where religious authority is not controlled by the state, there is now a debate taking place not only over what constitutes “Islamic art” or the “Islamic artist,” but over Islam itself. As Eickelman and Anderson note:

A new sense of public is emerging throughout Muslim-majority states and Muslim communities elsewhere. It is shaped by increasingly open contest over the authoritative use of the symbolic language of Islam. New and increasingly accessible modes of communication have made these contests increasingly global...These increasingly open and accessible forms of communication play a significant role in fragmenting and contesting political and religious authority.(29)

The contemporary wave of Western Islamization—involving fundamentalists and liberal reformers alike—is in part driven by the search for religious autonomy in an already established secular society.(30) Sami Yusuf’s creation of “Islamic” versions of a secular forms such as the music video can thus be seen as part of a larger effort—utilizing everything from television (*www.islamchannel.tv*) to Western stand-up comedy (*www.allahmademefunny.com*)—to Islamize “non-Islamic,” secular spaces. In regards to Islamists and modernity, Göle argues:

In the case of Islam in the public sphere, there is a double movement that causes uneasiness: Islamists seek to enter into spaces of modernity, yet they display their distinctiveness. There is a problem of recognition to the extent that Islamist start sharing the same spaces of modernity, such as the Parliament, university classes, television programs, beaches, opera halls, and coffeehouses, and yet they fashion a counter-Islamic self (italics mine). In contrast with being a Muslim, being an Islamist entails a reflexive performance; it involves collectively constructing, assembling, and restaging the symbolic materials to signify difference. The symbols of Muslim habitus are reworked, selectively processed, and staged in public.(31)

In a way similar to Göle's Islamist archetype, Yusuf also appropriates traditional symbols and spaces of secular Western modernity—i.e. music videos and television—while adding an Islamic tinge. The video for *Al Mu'alim* acts as a “counter-Islamic self” for secular videos that often glorify non-Islamic themes like casual sex and violence. “There is art, and non-art, and nothing else in between” Yusuf has stated. “So as for in the West there is excellent art, and another that is deviant.”(32)

Like political Islamism, the socio-cultural Islamism espoused by Yusuf and others is similarly focused on the creation of an “Islamic society,” however that may be defined. “Political Islam” as expounded by Khomeini, Maududi and others saw this objective best accomplished through the formation of an Islamic state and government, but contemporary socio-cultural Islamism in Europe, faced with the realities of secularization that prohibit Islam's ascendancy into the realm of popular governance, realizes its objective instead through the gradual Islamization of individuals and individually owned commodities. This type of socio-cultural Islamism corresponds to what Göle terms the ‘second wave’ of (post-revolutionary) Islamism” where “actors of Islam blend into modern urban spaces, use global communication networks, engage in public debates, follow consumption patterns, learn market rules, enter into secular time, get acquainted with values of individuation, professionalism, and consumerism, and reflect upon their new practices.”(33) Whereas older fundamentalist arguments called for the avoidance of Westernized modernity and its decadence, socio-cultural Islamism is a realization that for Muslims living in Europe today, this ideology is neither practical nor possible. While younger religious Muslims such as Sami Yusuf may sometimes display a level of ambivalence towards the West and “mainstream” Western culture—alternating between

criticism and praise as Yusuf often does—they are, by geography alone, nevertheless participants in the formation of modern British culture and consumers of modernity like everyone else.

Part of the appeal of Sami Yusuf, therefore, is that he provides an “Islamic” alternative to a common Western commodity (the music video) and commodity experience (listening to popular music) already enjoyed by young people, regardless of faith. If there must be popular music and videos, so the socio-cultural Islamist argument goes, then there must be *Islamic* popular music and *Islamic* videos. Sami Yusuf’s fame is therefore not only related to his considerable talent as a musician, but also to the fact that he is one the first significant European artist to produce popular Islamized adaptations to Western models of musical experience already accepted and enjoyed by young people, both Muslim and non. The fact that this is so is evidenced by Yusuf ‘s own assertions that he has exerted great pains to replicate in form, if not in content, the most appealing aspects of this Western model. Take, for example, the mission statement listed in the album cover notes to his first work, *Al Mu’allim*:

Awakening and Sami Yusuf were greatly motivated to produce this project from the outset, and this motivation stemmed from a shared deep conviction that we have a duty to provide an Islamic alternative for the Muslim youth that is vibrant and enjoyable to listen to and is produced to the highest standards of composition, singing, sound production and engineering, *being in all these aspects a match for any albums produced by the Western music industry* [italics mine], and yet containing the beautiful teachings of Prophet Muhammad (saw). To this end, Sami Yusuf’s many talents, the best studios, sound engineers and equipment were brought together, no costs were spared and no shortcuts were taken, always keeping as our motto the *hadith* of the Prophet (saw): “Verily Allah loves that if one of you does an action that he perfects it.” So, perfection in every aspect was

our aim; thus Sami Yusuf spent many long hours in the studio programming, singing, playing the instruments and singing the main tracks as well as the harmonies and some of the backing vocals, and Barron, one of the best and most experienced sound engineers spent hundreds of hours recording, mixing, editing and mastering, using the best studios and equipment to produce *an album that is equal if not better in sound quality than albums produced by the Western music industry* [italics mine] .(34)

What the above indicates is that Yusuf is *competing with*, rather than *opposing*, Western popular music. Moreover, he is not only competing against the “Western music industry,” but he is using the same means of production and marketing in order to disseminate his message. His claim that his music is superior the “Western music industry” *by its own norms and standards*, therefore, is at least as important to marketing his music and image as is the contention that it provides an “Islamic alternative.” It is also in keeping with demands of many young Muslims in the West, who seek products that “that will also give them pride to be Westernized Muslims in an Islamic and non-polemical way.”(35)

The desire for products that are at once genuinely Islamic yet socially accessible—such as Yusuf’s music videos—is an essential reason for Yusuf’s popularity. Today, young British and European Muslims find themselves in what Andrew Shryock describes as a “double remoteness.” In his study of cultural production in Detroit, Shryock argues that Arab Americans are not only remote from the Arab world, but also to the American social mainstream.(36) This “double remoteness” that Arab Americans find themselves is manifested in the creation of two distinct self-identities identities: the first, which Shryock terms “identity 1,” is often associated with multiculturalism, stresses

similarities between Arab-Americans and the social mainstream, and is that which is presented to “outsiders.” The second, which he terms “identity 2,” is the identity usually expressed inside the Arab American community itself, and is not usually presented to most “outsiders.”(37) Similar to Arab-Americans in Detroit, British and European Muslims also experience a sort of “double remoteness.” On the one hand, they are physically and, for the younger generation, culturally separated from their countries of origin. Their ethnicity ties them to the old country, but their upbringing in Europe forces them to be located somewhere between being British and being, for example, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Egyptian. The increasing movement of young European Muslims towards identification with a global ummah—as suggested by Olivier Roy and evident in the work of Sami Yusuf—is itself the result of this “double remoteness.” Believing that the social mainstream does not accept them, young Muslims in Britain and elsewhere feel a shared sense of suffering with their co-religionists in Palestine, Iraq, Chechnya and other Muslim countries, whom they believe are, like them, victims of Western governments that are as hostile towards Islam and Muslims. This imagining of and identification with the global *ummah* is in a large part a reflection of the inability of European nations to integrate their own Muslim communities.

Although they may be “cool” and “Islamic,” Sami Yusuf’s videos are in many ways no different from any other video produced by Britney Spears or other “Western” artists. The Videos for *Al Mu’allim* and *My Ummah* have been created using the same means of production, are marketed (even juxtaposed) in many of the same public spaces, use some of the same instruments, and are essentially commodities to be purchased just like Spears’ *Baby One More Time* (1999) or the 2000 follow-up *Oops!...I Did It Again*.

Take for example one of Vodafone's newest television advertisements in Egypt featuring clips from Yusuf's latest video, *Hasbi Rabbi*. The commercial opens with a caption of a young Egyptian man surrounded in darkness and staring into his lighted Vodafone mobile while the beginning Arabic chorus—*Ya rabbal 'alamin /Allahu Allah (O Lord of the world / Allahu Allah)*—of Yusuf's latest hit, *Hasbi Rabbi*, plays in the background. The scene then cuts to a group of young men playing soccer. As the chorus continues—*Salli 'ala Taha amin / Allahu Allah (Send peace and blessings on Taha the trustworthy / Allahu Allah)*—the camera focuses on the face of one of the young men as he looks out in another direction, and then cuts to a scene of a few people running across a bridge. Now the chorus is in the third refrain—*Fi kulli waqtin wa hin / Allahu Allah (In every time and at every instant / Allahu Allah)*—and as the music continues to play, a group of four young women approach. Two are dressed in *hijab* and two without, but all are fashionably dressed and flashing big smiles move towards the camera. As the chorus continues in the final refrain—*Imla' qalbi bil yaqin / Allahu Allah / Thabbitni 'ala hadhad din / Allahu Allah (Fill my heart with conviction / Allahu Allah / Make me steadfast on this Religion / Allahu Allah)*—everyone, young people, old people, women and children, are all shown crowding into a circle to take a look at something. This something is revealed as the camera shows the original young man from the first frame voicing the final *Allahu Allah* as he stares into his mobile phone. But what is on his phone that is brings everyone from near and far to come and look? Why it's none other than Sami Yusuf's latest video, now available for downloading on your very own Vodafone mobile. As the camera shows clips from Yusuf's video for *Hasbi Rabbi* on the young man's phone, a voice announces, "Faqat mca 'Vodafone Live' likulihum cumla'

il-khat wi-lkart, istamticu, sharik, ‘ahdis album li Sami Yusuf...Vodafone...mish bas kalam (Only with ‘Vodafone Live’ for all clients with either line or card service, enjoy, participate, the latest album of Sami Yusuf...Vodafone...not just talk.”)(38)

Sami Yusuf’s Vodafone commercial indicates the while his music may be an “Islamic alternative,” it is also, like Western pop music, an extremely useful tool for marketing and selling products. And like Britney Spears, Sami Yusuf’s *image* is an essential part of the marketing appeal. Yet while Sami Yusuf, his music, videos, and the Islamist ideology he espouses are themselves a part of Westernized modernity, what is interesting, is that Yusuf has repeatedly made an effort to draw dichotomies between his music and his company (Awakening) on the one hand, and “Western” music and the “Western music industry” on the other. While doing this may, in light of the previous discussion, appear somewhat contradictory, it is nevertheless a vital element of Sami Yusuf’s appeal. Part of Yusuf’s drawing power is his ability to bring a product to the market that is perceived as “authentic,” but at the same time, modern. By maintaining a distance between himself and his “Islamic” art, on the one hand, and Western artists and their “non-Islamic” art on the other, Yusuf is able to offer a religious product that is “authentically Islamic” even if, like the “Western” products it competes with, it is thoroughly modern in form and expression.

Locating Authenticity

For young Muslims today who see Islam as not merely a set of rituals but as a complete life-system, the reconciliation of religion and modernity often requires a bit of innovative thinking. In Europe and elsewhere, young Muslims today are faced with

questions relating to certain aspects of modern life for which the traditional sources of Islamic authority do not have direct answers. A quick search of the “Fatwa Bank” of Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi’s popular *IslamOnline.net* website will reveal young Muslims asking all sorts of modernity-inspired questions such as the permissibility of watching television,(39) whether one should remove nail polish before prayer,(40) or whether nail polish is permissible at all.(41) Asking these sorts of questions is necessary, however, if one is to create a “way of life” that is still “authentically Islamic” in capitalistic, secularized societies where the religious individual is faced with public displays of questionable morality and an exponentially increasing array of consumer and lifestyle choices

Young Western Muslims’ search for “Islamic authenticity” is also reflected in many of the case interviews undertaken by Jacobson in her 1998 study of British Muslim youth. In talking to young Muslims in northern Britain, she found that for many respondents their attachment to Islam was a manifestation of a personal “quest for certainty.” For these young Muslims, convinced that in Islam are all the answers on how to lead a successful life, questioning religion was not so much an expression of doubt as it was a means to establish correct belief.(42) In the words of one young man, “You question (teachings) not because you think they’re wrong, but to reaffirm your own belief. You work through the issues where the religion says so-and-so—you take the issue and you say, oh, let’s break this issue down into *what does it actually mean* (italics mine)...”(43) For this young man and other young Muslims like him who are searching for spiritual certainty through Islam, the “quest for certainty” or for Islamic authenticity is

in essence a way to “escape the dilemmas of subjectivism, relativism, and meaninglessness that are often linked to postmodern vistas on human affairs.”(44)

The search for authenticity is, however, “a peculiar longing, at once modern and anti-modern. It is oriented toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose recovery is feasible only through the methods and sentiments created in modernity.”(45) In other words, since the very notion of authenticity is a modern construct, creating something that is authentic can only take place in the framework of modernity. This is similar to the development of what Abu-Lughod terms the “‘culturing’ process,” in which one’s notion of culture is not shaped by its actual progenitors (i.e. the “indigenous people”), but by how it is defined in modern constructs and processes such as nationalism and globalization.(46) Like culture when it enters the “culturing process,” authenticity is not established by actual history, but only by the way it is shaped within realms of the systematic framework in which modern communicative expression takes place, such as in music videos.

Moreover, when Sami Yusuf and other young Muslims look towards Islamic history in their quest for authenticity, many are doing so in a completely modern way: as individuals. This is not to imply that the desire for individual religious experience is only a modern phenomenon—Sufism and other forms of mysticism, for example, have a long history. But even in traditional Sufism that emphasizes the individual experience of the divine, there is still a fundamental and well-established relationship between the student and master involving the time-honored tradition of passing Islamic knowledge through a set of chain of authority, or *isnad*. In the modern West, however, where authenticity feeds

our desire for “unmediated genuineness,”(47) what is considered genuine for the religiously-minded individual is often completely open to individual interpretation. When, for example, the widely popular Dr. Jamal Badawi—a professor of management at St. Mary’s University in Canada and a prolific commentator and writer on “what Islam is”—pens an “authentic exposition of the teachings of Islam regarding women,”(48) should this be regarded as an “authentic” interpretation? Does it matter that he has no formal religious certification? Who should decide? If it is completely subjective, then how can it really be authentic?

For advocates of authenticity, be it Sami Yusuf, Jamal Badawi, or even a television therapist such as Dr. Phil, establishing authenticity requires walking a difficult, ideological tightrope. For in order to avoid the dreaded subjectivism and relativism that authenticity seeks to eliminate, the truth that all of these advocates seek “must be recognizable not just as “my own” (for then it might as well be subjectivist) but as something that ties me to other human beings and gives us some ground upon which to build a life together that is anchored in legitimate institutions. To do that we must have some basis for common knowledge.”(49) For socio-cultural Islamists such as Sami Yusuf, becoming popular thus involves the establishment of foundation of authenticity that is both widely recognized and recognizable.

One of the ways in which Yusuf establishes authenticity is through a kind of process that might best be described as “othering”. In her work on African art, primitivism and authenticity, anthropologist Shelley Errington makes reference to a similar phenomenon when discussing past attempts to define “authentic,” “primitive”

African tribal art. Quoting William Rubin, former director of the Museum of Modern Art in the mid 1980s, she writes: “An authentic object is one created by an artist for his own people and used for traditional purposes. Thus, works made by African or Oceanic artists for sale to outsiders such as sailors, colonials or ethnologists would be defined as inauthentic.”(50) As Errington points out, this type of view is predicated on the belief that an authentic object is one untouched by “outsiders” to the “traditional culture.”(51) In other words, for colonialists, sailors, ethnologists and other non-African “cultural outsiders,” authentic African art is only that which is made by and for the “locals.”

In the case of Sami Yusuf, his “otherness” derives from the fact that his immediate heritage lies outside of Europe, in Azerbaijan from where his parents came. Can we imagine that he would be half as popular if he were “just another white guy”? Unlike other mainstream singers, Sami Yusuf is in regards to ethnicity and heritage still very much an “outsider” to the mainstream, Anglo-Saxon, English socio-cultural milieu. Thus we see frequent references in interviews to his ethnic heritage, and to his father’s educating him in “traditional” (i.e. non-European) music and musical theory. As we have seen, Sami Yusuf frequently makes reference to the present need to construct a new model of Islam. “We are facing difficulties collectively as Muslims,” he says, “but the modern youth are educated, open-minded and *they will go back to study their ancestors, their lineage, to know who they really are* and I am confident that *they will renew the message of Islam* (all italics mine).”(52)

As one of the leaders of the current “Islamic reformation,” another part of Yusuf’s authenticity, which allows him to be seen as a legitimate figurehead, lies in his ability to

connect himself to an idealized past. As one of the new interpreters of Islam, he is able, so it is implied, to connect with this past in an authentic way. It is only him and like-minded Muslims that are able to access the “true” meaning of scripture, and the “true” beliefs and actions of the Prophet. An acknowledgement that authenticity lies in the connection with an idealized past, however, is also at the same time a recognition that modernity is now cut off from that past. However, Yusuf’s alternative vision directly challenges those who assert that to be modern, one must necessarily make a clean break from the past. On the contrary, for Yusuf it is only through the connection to the past that an authentic Islamic present can be established. The re-connection with the past is therefore a means of re-establishing the collective religious memory that has largely broken down in Western and Westernized societies where notions of modernity are often predicated on a break from tradition. The idealized past, like the idea of “pristine culture,” is thus a well-spring of authenticity. By connecting themselves with the “real” version of this idealized past, the SamiYusufs of the world become authentic.

Authentic Spirituality

One of the primary ways in which Sami Yusuf appeals to young Western Muslims is by emphasizing spirituality, a characteristic that, along with religious authenticity, accompanies the individualization of religion.(53) In Yusuf’s view, spiritualized music such as his is in great need in the present age. "Spirituality is missing in the vast majority of most songs," Yusuf said in a recent interview. "The art world has been hijacked by the commercial environment. That's why we have a vacuum in producing positive art with positive messages, promoting good values."(54) For many

young British and European Muslims, Islam is increasingly becoming individualized as each believer enters into the process of deciding for him or herself what Islam means. For the young Muslim man or woman looking towards social integration in Europe, and who is more concerned with ethics and values than with rules and regulations, spiritualized commodities such as Sami Yusuf's videos, with their emphasis on values, meanings and ethics, readily appeal to the individual who is searching for the "spirit," rather than the "letter," of religion. By catering to the believer's need to access more esoteric religious meanings associated with the "inner self," spiritualized commodities such as Yusuf's also maintain a certain mass appeal; in that they stress values and ethics over rules and regulations, spiritualized commodities such as Yusuf's generally present a unifying group of non-threatening principles that are easily accessible to a large section of the public, regardless of confession.

Conveniently for producers of value-oriented products such as Yusuf's, "authentic" spirituality is highly marketable. "Consuming spirituality" by purchasing the countless array of "products for the soul"—offered by everyone from right-wing televangelists to New-Age gurus—has become an obsession for many in the West,(55) regardless of religious inclination. In the work of Sami Yusuf, we often see this sort of spiritualism manifested in his emphasis on qualities of love and beauty. Take for example the opening lines to Yusuf's latest hit, *Hasbi Rabbi*: O Allah the Almighty / Protect me and guide me / To your love and mercy / Ya Allah don't deprive me / From beholding your beauty / O my Lord accept this plea.(56) These dual themes are continued in digital form through the video for the same song. In the *Hasbi Rabi* video, Yusuf's emphasis on love is often represented through frequent depictions of happy children and families. In

the video's second episode,(57) Yusuf is shown walking through a public park in Istanbul. As he passes by a young boy sitting with his father on a bench, Yusuf stops to lovingly pat the boy's head. As he continues on his way, the camera cuts to a close up of the boy, who looks in Yusuf's direction, smiling. In the next sequence, filmed at the Taj Mahal, Yusuf plays the part of a Quranic teacher (*faqih* in Arabic) to a group of young Indian boys. Far from the traditional stern-looking, disciplinarian type of religious teacher, however, Yusuf appears more in the mode of someone from a Western-style afternoon talk show. At one point in the sequence of singing and smiling, Yusuf bends down to put his right hand on the face of one of the smiling pupils while crooning in Hindi, "Uskey sab nishan hai (Whatever you see in this world is His sign)."(58)

The Taj Mahal in Yusuf's video is an idealized version, beautified and gleaming white. Similarly, in the last segment filmed in Cairo, the city's urban spaces are portrayed unrealistically. The first part of the sequence, filmed downtown, shows a Midan Tahrir that is striking firstly for the lack of people present, and secondly for its conspicuous cleanliness. For anyone who has actually seen the bustle of Cairo's busiest downtown square, it is readily apparent that this is a completely idealized depiction. Midan Tahrir is chaotic and teeming with people and cars. This is especially true during the day, as steady streams of government employees and citizens move into and out of the central government administration building, or *Mogamma*, located on the square's south side. Also conspicuously absent in Yusuf's video are the noise and air pollution from honking horns and vehicle exhaust that characterize Tahrir and other urban spaces in modern day Cairo.

In the second half of the Cairo sequence, in which Yusuf takes a ride on a public bus to the old quarter of the city, the urban landscape depicted in the video bears little resemblance to the hustle, grit and grime that characterize the overpopulated quarter known as Islamic Cairo. Yusuf walks through a virtually empty, polished old city. Nowhere to be seen are the open sewer lines, large numbers of poor women selling packets of tissues, or the frenetic and ubiquitous *mélange* of voices and street sounds that greet real-life visitors. This is an urban space that has been beautified. Poverty and other unfortunate aspects of modern urban life may be realities, but they're not very entertaining or aesthetic, certainly not beautiful, and probably don't sell CDs very well. Beauty makes people feel good, and the most beautiful spiritualized commodity, the one that makes us feel the best, is the one we will choose when buying products that we feel express a part of "who we are."

Islamic Authenticity & the Mainstream

Sami Yusuf, like most musical artists, is constantly evolving. Looking at the progression of Yusuf's career to date, one notices a clear move away from the classical *nashid* model to a more contemporary Western musical style. Unlike the videos for *Al-Mu'allim*, which contained only minimal instrumentation and the focused more on the artist's voice, with his latest album, *My Ummah*, we see something different. In addition to using a more diverse range of instruments, Yusuf is also starting to incorporate popular Western musical genres, such as rap. In addition, there is also a noticeable change in content between the two albums. Whereas the first album's tracks focused on two primary themes, namely praise of God and His Prophet, *My Ummah's* tracks branch out

into treatments of political issues (*Try Not to Cry*, about the Palestine conflict), social issues (*Free*, about veiled Muslim women facing discrimination in the West), generalized spiritual/religious values (*Mother*, about being good to one's mother) and the current state of Islam (*My Ummah*, about the current "Islamic reformation"). So what does this apparent transition in his music mean?

In an interview conducted last May while on tour in the Arabian Gulf, Yusuf declared, "My five year plan is to be able to play my music in mainstream channels ... as many channels as possible. To become a mainstream singer in ideas as well, to keep my ideologies and beliefs. What's the point of telling people something they already know?"(59) As these words suggest, the transition within Yusuf's music appears to be linked to his desire to become a mainstream artist accessing mainstream markets. Formerly loathe to associate himself with the celebrity status attached to mainstream artists, it now appears that Yusuf is finally starting to accept it, to even celebrate it. "In the West, we don't have enough Islamic celebrities who would make minority Muslims proud," he said, in a recent interview conducted while on his February 2006 tour of Egypt.(60) What exactly constitutes the "mainstream," however is still rather unclear, and surely depends on location. For example, the mainstream in the Middle East (if we can even posit that such a thing exists) is surely different from what constitutes, say, the mainstream in Western Europe or the United States. However, the very fact that Yusuf is attempting to reach a wider audience with his second album demonstrates that, at the very least, he maintains a vision of a targeted, mainstream audience and is desirous of accessing it.

This new attitude towards fame and the desire to access mainstream markets (however those may be defined) demonstrates that Yusuf clearly realizes the power of mass culture and media to impact social definitions. As Garofalo indicates, popular mass culture is, “One arena where ideological struggle—the struggle over the power to define—takes place. While there is no question that in this arena the forces arrayed in support of the existing hegemony are formidable, there are also numerous instances where mass culture—and in particular popular music—issues serious challenges to hegemonic power.”(61) If one’s goal is social, rather than political Islamization, as it is for Sami Yusuf, Tariq Ramadan and other socio-cultural Islamists, then it is absolutely necessary to enter into the mainstream spaces of the public sphere. This is the place where, as Garofalo notes, the power of social definition takes place. But will Yusuf be able to make this transition to the mainstream? And, if he is able to, how might this affect his status as an “authentically Islamic” role model?

As discussed above, part of Sami Yusuf’s drawing power as an “authentic” Muslim artist derives from his being a Muslim “other” to the social mainstream. For Muslims, on the other hand, his attraction is precisely because he is just that, an “other”, i.e. “one of us,” a Muslim living in a globalized, Westernized world. He shares a similar ethnic background located in the historical Dar al-Islam, and he is constantly calling for young Muslims to be proud of their religion. If Yusuf is to move into the mainstream as he has indicated, he will face great challenges from those who do not agree with his definition of Islamic art and the role of the Islamic artist in the public sphere. If he goes completely mainstream, his drawing power as an “authentic other” (“one of us”) will most certainly decrease. If, however, he is to avoid becoming just another “ethnic” world-

beat artist, he will surely need to compromise, to a certain degree, his focus on religion (Will most young people in the mainstream want to buy his music if he continues to sing about the Prophet?). The future of Sami Yusuf, whether he is able to go from margin to mainstream, will thus depend in part upon how his transformation is received by audiences located in both the margins (his current mainstream) and by the social mainstream (his current margins).

Today, Sami Yusuf is only one of a number of important social actors involved in the production of Islam for consumption by the Western general public. In the near future, it can be expected that he will face intense competition, even from among other like-minded “progressive” Islamists. With the Danish cartoon controversy, for example, one could see how the competition to represent Islam in public created cleavages, even between figures that are associated with socio-cultural or “progressive” Islamism. There were reports of popular Muslim televangelist Amr Khaled and media über Shaikh Yusuf Al Qaradawi, both highly esteemed by Sami Yusuf, publicly feuding over how the Muslim world should form a response to the controversy. Naturally both assume they represent popular Muslim opinion. “The deep-rooted solution of this problem is through dialogue to reach an understanding and coexistence between the nations,” said Khaled, adding that, “We have to lay a future base to build our own renaissance.”(62) “Dialogue about what?” Al Qaradawi responded on Al Jazeera. “You have to have a common ground to have a dialogue with your enemy. But after insulting what is sacred to me, they should apologize.”(63) Like his colleagues, Sami Yusuf as an actor and producer of public Islam will also most likely attract controversy for those that do not agree with his message and interpretations.

In the West, the fight over who represents Islam and how it should be represented in the public sphere is just beginning. Even within Western socio-cultural Islamism, there is a large amount of disagreement over exactly what Islam is as well as what it isn't. Both Sami and American Shaikh Hamza Yusuf, for example, while admittedly involved in different forms of communicative expression (Sami being a singer and Hamza a preacher), both acknowledge the necessity of creating an "authentic" Islamic community. However, the two Yusufs have markedly different interpretations of what Islamic authenticity actually entails. For Sami Yusuf, merely Islamizing the content of something that is Western in form, such as the music video, is enough to produce an authentically Islamic object. There is no criticism of modernity's intrinsic value or the Western model as such. Rather, there is only a criticism of its *content*. If we disregard the content of Yusuf's music, however, then it is difficult to see how his means of production, distribution and musical commoditization differ from any other non-religious Western artist. For Hamza Yusuf, on the other hand, it is the intrinsic nature of Western modernity—a modernity based on technology that "dehumanizes by its nature because it is based on massification"(64)—that is at issue. For Hamza Yusuf, an authentic Islamic existence cannot be found until modern Western society *itself* is reformed.

For the two Yusufs, constructing an authentic Islamic existence in the modern world is thus achieved through two related, but very different, methods. For Sami Yusuf, creating an authentic Islamic existence simply involves a process of *Islamizing modernity*. For Yusuf and other proponents of this method, modern Western forms and commodities can easily be appropriated and, once their content are acceptably Islamized, be refashioned as authentically Islamic objects like "Islamic music videos." In contrast,

Hamza Yusuf believes the means of attaining an authentic Islamic existence are not found in the process of *Islamizing modernity*, but in *modernizing Islam*. Yusuf's Zaytuna Institute is the perfect example. Itself a result of Yusuf's deep dislike for the modern Western education model,(65) the Zaytuna Institute offers a mode of learning whose uniqueness lies in the very fact that it offers a model of education—one based on “reviving time-tested methods of educating”(66) —that is thoroughly different from the Western standard. Hamza Yusuf's view of how to create an authentic Islamic existence thus differs from Sami Yusuf's in that it contains an implicit critique of Western modernity. For Hamza, finding an authentic Islamic identity is based on *modernizing Islam*, rather than *Islamizing modernity*.

In regards to Muslim integration into the Western social mainstream, Hamza's model of modernizing Islam appears more problematic Sami's. For if Muslims in the West are to follow the lead of Sami Yusuf and his initiative to Islamize modernity, comparatively fewer ideological or moral roadblocks are encountered because the models and forms needed for establishing Islamic authenticity are already present. They only need to be accepted. Music videos and other mass-produced commodities are already encountered by Western Muslims on a daily basis. If one agrees with Sami Yusuf's interpretation of authenticity, all that is required for its establishment are for everyday commodities to be Islamized in content. But if, on the other hand, one is to follow Hamza Yusuf's understanding of Islamic authenticity, what is required is not merely an Islamization of the commodity, but a fundamental reworking of the form itself. For Hamza Yusuf, education or any other Western form to be truly Islamic requires a reworking from the ground up.

Producing Islam for the Public

Sami Yusuf's notion of an authentic Islamic existence, based on the concept of *Islamizing modernity*, is more easily accessible to a mass audience than Hamza Yusuf's, which requires a fundamental re-working of modernity from the ground up. To fundamentally restructure the framework of Western modernity into an authentically Islamic form, as Hamza Yusuf seeks to do, requires a much higher degree of engagement and participation on the part of a potential audience than does the simple act of watching a music video. In order to access the field of Hamza Yusuf's *restricted production*, one is first required to be learned in religion. It requires knowledge of classical Arabic, as well as traditional Islamic sciences and as Islamic history. To engage with the work of Sami Yusuf, on the other hand requires comparatively little effort. All one must do is turn the television to the right channel and watch. In other words, all that is required to enjoy an authentic Islamic musical experience provided by Sami Yusuf is the money to buy a TV or a CD.

These different interpretations of Islamic authenticity also have an effect on how their respective proponents market and sell their religious goods. As Askew notes, Bourdieu identified two modes of cultural production. In the first, identified as the field of restricted production, cultural producers create products for other cultural producers. In the second, identified as the field of *large-scale production*, cultural producers create products not only for other producers, but for the general public.⁽⁶⁷⁾ For Sami Yusuf, moving into the mainstream necessitates a movement away from the field of restricted production and into the field of large-scale production. For Hamza Yusuf, whose feet are

firmly planted in the field of restricted production (i.e. his products are primarily intended for a Muslim audience), any move into the mainstream would necessitate a fundamental shift in the general public's understanding of what constitutes the mainstream. If Hamza is to appeal to non-Muslims in the capacity of a restricted producer, the general non-Muslim public must agree with Hamza Yusuf's alternative Islamic vision of Western modernity. But for Sami Yusuf, who has located himself within the field of large-scale production, succeeding as an authentic Islamic artist in the mainstream merely requires Muslims accepting an "Islamic" version of an already popular Western form. There is no need to try and fundamentally rework conceptions of Western forms and/or modernity itself.

Yusuf's latest video for the song *Hasbi Rabbi* is an interesting example of the new direction that Yusuf appears to be taking towards producing material of large-scale production for mainstream audiences. Filmed in four locations (London, Istanbul, Agra, India and Cairo) and sung in four languages (English, Turkish, Hindi and Arabic), *Hasbi Rabbi* is in its scale alone a far more ambitious project than any of Yusuf's previous videos. The high degree of cinematic quality and professional production indicate that Yusuf (in keeping with his ethic of *Islamizing modernity*) is not only aiming to compete with the secular pop music industry, but is looking to do one better. *Hasbi Rabbi* also is significant for the fact that it includes for the first time significant numbers of non-Muslims as subject matter. This is in sharp contrast to previous videos such as *Al-Muallim*, *Supplication* and *Mother*, which lack depictions of non-Muslims entirely. This inclusion is most likely deliberate, and in keeping with the artist's desire of entering into large-scale production.

After three successive screen shots—first of the Pyramids, then the Taj Mahal and thirdly Istanbul’s Blue Mosque—the video for *Hasbi Rabbi* opens with a scene in which Yusuf is shown walking through London on his way to work. In keeping with his desire to appeal to a Westernized audience, Yusuf is not dressed in any kind of exotic Middle Eastern garb but rather in black pinstripes and a fashionable pink tie. As he continues to move along, the camera cuts to show Yusuf helping a lost tourist. The tourist, a middle-aged white man in a sweater, leans toward Yusuf while fumbling with his map. As they walk together, Yusuf reassuringly puts his hand on the man’s shoulder as he looks to help the lost stranger. In this role reversal it is thus Sami Yusuf, rather than the white tourist, who is the social “insider.” The fact that the tourist, who could have asked for help from any of the many non-ethnic-looking white Brits walking around, instead asks *Yusuf*, who might still be considered an “outsider” by some Europeans, confirms his insider status. The message here seems to be clear: Being modern and British while retaining a genuine Islamic identity is not only possible, but desirable.

In the second half of the London sequence after his encounter with the tourist, Yusuf makes his way onto a red double-decker bus. As he sits chatting with a Caucasian (and presumably non-Muslim) gentleman, an older woman (also Caucasian and presumably non-Muslim) enters the bus. As the seats are all full, Yusuf stands up and allows the woman to take his seat. She smiles in obvious gratification and Sami smiles along with her. The camera then cuts to a scene of a modern workplace and Yusuf is shown entering through the glass front door as a secretary looks on. After Yusuf makes his way to the back of the office, the camera cuts to a show a conference taking place in the boardroom. Seated around the table are Yusuf, several Caucasian women and men

(the women are not wearing *hijab*), as well as a Muslim woman wearing full hijab. As Yusuf smiles and presents financial diagrams on a poster board, the other members take notes and nod in agreement. Again, as with the scene with the tourist, there appears to be a similar message that there is no contradiction between being a modern British citizen and a Muslim. Islam and Muslims are a part of British “mainstream” society.

The above two London sequences serve to reinforce the message of social integration that Yusuf so often invokes. As demonstrated by the recent controversy over the Danish cartoons depicting Mohammad, there still exists a gap in understanding between a certain portion of the Muslim community and the non-Muslim European public. Many Muslims and non-Muslims alike remain apprehensive about the Muslim community’s ability to integrate into Europe. By portraying Muslims and non-Muslims involved in the normal interactions of daily European life, however, Yusuf presents an appealing picture of what many consider the multi-cultural ideal. For non-Muslim Europeans, it counters many of the stereotypical images of Muslims as anti-modern, anti-Western and/or extremist. By placing himself (Sami Yusuf the authentic Muslim artist) in the narrative of this video, moreover, he appeals to his Muslim fan base by personally demonstrating that social integration does not come at the price of losing one’s religious authenticity. In bringing this issue into his video, Yusuf also accomplishes his goal of appealing to the mainstream. By presenting a subject that is of wide interest to the European public at large, the video for *Hasbi Rabbi* will most likely reach many new non-Muslim viewers who find the heavier religious imagery and content of his past videos less accessible.

Yusuf's decision to sing in a wide array of languages also is interesting in light of his self-identified goal of accessing the mainstream. In keeping with the demands of large-scale production, Yusuf's use of Arabic, Hindi and Turkish does not prohibit English-speaking listeners from enjoying his product. By the simple act of listening, one can still enjoy *Hasbi Rabbi* in the much the same way as, say, listening to Romanian folk ensembles or other groups associated with the genre commonly called "world music." Unlike products of restricted production that might require a high degree of engagement or foreknowledge, one is not required to have any previous cultural understanding or know any exotic languages in order to enjoy its pop-like sound. In contrast to the Qur'an, the *meaning* of the Arabic words in the music video context is not what is important. In order to sell records in the non-Arabic-speaking Western mainstream, the sound of the song, feel of its rhythm, and the attractiveness of the video's images are at least, if not more import, than the meaning of the words. This is not to imply, however, that the content of his newest videos actually are really appealing to a more mainstream and non-Muslim audience. I have yet to see any actual hard evidence, such as audience research, that confirms his appeal to these populations. However, the point that this paper has endeavored to make is that by affirming his goal of reaching the mainstream through interviews and videos, Sami Yusuf has demonstrated his desire to reach a wider audience that includes non-Muslims.

Following the projection of Sami Yusuf and his push to enter the mainstream is key not only for understanding how Sami Yusuf as an Islamic artist is able to negotiate a place in the Western mainstream public sphere, but also because it will serve as a useful index for understanding how Muslims in general envision themselves as participants in

Western modernity. Will they, as encouraged by Sami Yusuf, choose the path of Islamizing modernity? Will they choose the more complicated path of modernizing Islam, as suggested by Hamza Yusuf? Or will they choose something different? Whatever the case may be, those who continue to question whether Islam is compatible with modernity are, in effect, missing more important questions. The experience of Islam as an objectified religion in the West is a highly individualized and personal one. To experience Islam in Europe today is to experience and recognize secularization. Whether the religion's new European interpreters are seeking to Islamize modernity or, alternatively, to create an alternative "Islamic" version of it, the very fact that the battle for religious definition is taking place not in the realms of popular governance, but rather in the public sphere, is recognition of the fact that European Muslims, like their Christian and Jewish counterparts, are today experiencing religion as an individual, rather than social, phenomenon. Thus, Islam in Europe is, as far as modernity goes, as "modern" as any other "modern" Western religion. When someone like Sami Yusuf proclaims that "Religion goes hand-in-hand with modernity,"(68) the question does not become whether Islam is amenable to modernity, but rather, whose modernity do we mean?

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