

**Cosmopolitan Islamism and its Critics:
Ahmed Abu Haiba, 4Shbab TV, and Western Reception**

by Maurice Chammah

4Shbab is an emerging music-television channel based in Cairo, financed by Saudi investors, and directed towards a global Muslim public. Through its programming and the public and private statements of its main producer, Ahmed Abu Haiba, it hopes to articulate a source of entertainment set apart from other music video channels by a religiously motivated practice of selecting material based on moral or ethical criteria.

Abu Haiba was able to solicit funding for the channel, in his explanation, by seeking investors in Saudi Arabia, who historically have spent the most on media and have, by his account, an “Islamic culture” with stronger roots, as opposed to Egypt, where that culture is, in his view, a “political trend”. He explained to these investors, and then to me, that music channels generally take 14 percent of advertising revenue, while religious channels take 5 percent. 4Shbab would thus be able to combine both sources, with profits expected after three years (press conference, 5 March 2009).

As with his earlier success with *Kalam min al-Qalb* (Words from the Heart), a TV show featuring Islamic preacher Amr Khaled, Abu Haiba’s religio-ethical goals are impossible to separate from his commercial goals, and so I try in this article to analyze this phenomenon without the celebratory tone often accorded such hybridity, but more importantly without the critiques of opportunism often woven through discussions of commercial ventures founded on appeals to consumer identity. I think that we would miss a great deal if we were to look at Abu Haiba’s intervention as solely opportunistic and an instrumental use of religious beliefs in the service of personal wealth. Such critiques ignore the complex way Abu Haiba’s goals theoretically work together. How does such a

linkage become possible? The answer involves looking at how Abu Haiba conceives of an artistic repertoire of ethical merit (or without sexualized and impious content) and a pedagogical process of remaking the sensibilities of young Muslims as a marketable product¹. Following the framing of anthropologists Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin, Abu Haiba's venture indicates how "any analysis of subjective and imaginative must be linked to the economic and social" (2002, 17) and in this vein, my treatment will focus less on the reception of the channel, which would follow the "reception ethnography" of Abu-Lughod (2005), and more upon the initiative of Abu Haiba and the content of the channel itself. In this article, I attempt to connect the ethnographic moments in which I encountered the beginnings of 4Shbab with the resulting texts of those moments, which were newspaper and internet media coverage of 4Shbab. My interviews with Abu Haiba, the 4Shbab press conference, its subsequent coverage, and the music videos themselves are attempts to intervene in a cultural and historical moment constructed by Abu Haiba, but no less real for it. I seek to bring together Abu Haiba's words with brief ethnographies of the encounters I had with him and with Western journalists. It is not just the words of his interlocutors I focus upon, but their perceived affective responses, their context, and their frames for speaking when they contested his vision. It is this breadth, which does not collapse 4Shbab into simply a text, or an object to be interpreted hermetically, that will allow me to suggest in the end how to approach future reception of the channel.

Arjun Appadurai's notion of "mediascapes" helps here, because they attach the spatial idea of a landscape to the centralized and non-spatial practice of media, and extend Jurgen Habermas's famous understanding of a public sphere (1989) to a global level. "Mediascapes" function, in Appadurai's view, by providing "large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and 'ethnoscapes' to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of 'news' and politics are profoundly mixed" (1996, 9). 4Shbab attempts to enter the "mediascape" by establishing a field of artistic production (Bourdieu 1993), glossed in 4Shbab's sloganeering as a "new form of art", through which images, sounds, and narratives of an ethical Muslim lifestyle can

resonate with an audience that crosses national boundaries.

Arguments about “cosmopolitanism”, as one way of figuring what Appadurai calls “cultural dimensions of globalization” offer a means of understanding the relationship between Abu Haiba and the Muslim consumers he hopes will watch 4Shbab. Abu Haiba, who has traveled widely and cited experiences outside of Egypt constantly in my interview with him, situates himself as a “citizen of the world” by establishing three ideas about globalization. The first is that it is not new, as the Muslim world has spanned an essentially global space for centuries. The second is that this Muslim world is still set off from the Western world, or, there are still lines between distinct civilizational/cultural wholes of “The Islamic World” and “The West.” Thirdly, he and his Muslim viewers, brought by the various globalizing processes into a global cultural economy, traverse these static civilizational wholes and must negotiate an identity between them, as they are constantly subjected to the “Other’s” terms of discussion, media forms, and “stereotypes”.

One of the most important aspects of my encounter with Abu Haiba’s project is his own theorizing practice, as academic language of the “Other” and the idea of “deconstructing stereotypes” flowed through his account of personal interaction with “the West”, as well as the broader narrative of exchange between the Muslim world and the colonial powers, and later, the United States (interview with author, 19 March 2009).

As a result, talking to Abu Haiba and witnessing him deliver a press conference upon the launch of 4Shbab, I was struck by the immediate tension between his intellectual preservation of civilizational wholes (we vs. them, West vs. East) and his own embodied appearance in between them. At the press conference, he sported a fashionable American-made black suit, with a prominent *zabiba* on his forehead, a public symbol of piety in Egyptian society (as it results from rubbing one’s head on the ground in prayer). Without prior knowledge, one would hardly know that the press conference or the office in which 4Shbab is housed have anything to do with an Islamic, or even religious, commercial venture. 4Shbab’s logo shows a muscular young man’s silhouette, in pants and a t-shirt, approaching the viewer against a cloudy sky background. Many of the music

videos do not reference religious themes directly.

Even so, Abu Haiba's pronouncements did not discuss the channel in terms of trying to "fit in" or "assimilate" to Western cultural values. On the contrary, he made very clear the argument that Islam and the West represent two distinct religious and civilizational wholes. Though this rhetoric would seem to belie the hybridized appearance of the channel's presentations, it is the very idea of difference or incompatibility that makes possible such a venture in the first place. Put simply, Abu Haiba needs to have 4Shbab appear in between two different cultures, and so he must discursively maintain a difference between the West and the Islamic world that is, outside of his own project, unbridgeable. If the West and the Islamic world were growing together culturally as a result of globalization, there would be no need for a "bridge" like 4Shbab, which is an articulation crucial for the commercial value of the channel. 4Shbab, for Abu Haiba, thus manifests as a borrower of cultural vocabulary (images, sounds, music video formats), that does not borrow the underlying values of the vocabulary's source (Western culture). His cultural vision uses the commercial appeal of Western culture without endorsing its values, which in his view objectify women and give license to sexual impropriety.

Such a conception of translation guides how Abu Haiba conceives his mode of cosmopolitanism, wherein the underlying values can be broached only when the cultural vocabulary (of music videos and pop songs) represents a way in. In our interview, Abu Haiba illustrated this narrative of translation with an anecdote he had clearly told many times before of meeting a woman in Germany and with her discussing European modes of romance. His framing question for the anecdote was simple and theoretical: "How can I accept the Other?". He then explained how he "used to be" one of "those Egyptians" who repeated the trope of the "loose West" and Europe and America as a "society of adultery". Upon meeting this German woman, he had asked her if she had a boyfriend, and when she answered positively, he probed further about the details of their relationship's public reception as a sort of archetypal case. The couple was committed to one another and everyone in the community respected this commitment, and so Abu Haiba came to see this couple, for the purposes

of his own religious outlook, as married, and only using a different term to describe it.

So, he concluded, "I came to see the Other in the Other's eyes and now I am asking the Other to do the same for my culture." He added to this story the image of Saudi men wearing flowing, white cotton *gallabiyas* (robes). In the West, he said, they would think this was the clothing of a "crazy, backwards person" until they went to Saudi Arabia and "felt the hot weather there".

Abu Haiba thus came to replace a trope of difference with a trope of "understanding" and translatability, recalling many discourses of multiculturalism, but not identical to them. It is this framework of translatable difference within which he hopes 4Shbab and its programming will be seen. One could read such a tactic as both commercially aimed at such discourses of tolerance and understanding in Europe and the United States, as well as able to appeal to the Muslim youth in a way crucial, as we will see, to Abu Haiba's pedagogical project.

4Shbab and the Muslim Subject

4Shbab has arisen out of a recent genealogy of similar endeavors, many of which Abu Haiba has had a hand in. The "Islamic music video" became a reality in 2003, when the British singer Sami Yusuf, of Azerbaijani origin, released a video for the title track of his first album, *Al Mu'allim* (The Teacher) (Pond 67). Yusuf is usefully situated as a counterpart to Abu Haiba, a more public face of the same approach to religion and entertainment. His aural and visual markers echoed earlier media forms produced by Abu Haiba, such as the *Al-Resalah* (The Message) channel, as well as created a model for 4Shbab's vision of music video content. In both cases, stress is put by both viewers and, in Abu Haiba's case, producers, on how one would be "hard-pressed to tell the difference" between the Islamic media and its non-Islamic counterpart (Pond 68). This split is meant to reflect the distinction between form and content, or medium and message, whereby 4Shbab and the others attempt to place a new, "moral" message in a medium identical to Western models of music videos, that makes it more palatable and appealing to a young audience socialized as much by Western media as by their own "Islamic culture".

There is thus a paradox inherent in the idea of media as both commercial and pedagogical, in which Muslim subjects already exist (why else would they want to watch the channel?) and must be constituted by the media itself. In Abu Haiba's main example of how 4Shbab reflects its Muslim subjects, he invoked his least ahistorical aspect of that subject's beliefs: the realm of politics. He explained how there was "intense debate" among the channel's leaders about how to deal with the timing of the channel's launch, January 1st, 2009, which turned out at the last minute to be only a few days after the start of the Israeli incursion into Gaza. All of the channel's material was, in his words, "joyous" and "optimistic" and hence would not resonate with the "mood" of the Muslim world. Against opinions that the channel should hold off on the launch, Abu Haiba led them to completely revamp the content of the programs in three days, producing ten new clips. They launched the channel on schedule, included pronouncements of solidarity with Gaza, and transitioned over a two-week period from the middle to the end of January back to the original material.

This anecdote was central to his explanations for several reasons. It established Abu Haiba, 4Shbab and "the Muslim world" as of the same political community, locked in communicative and intuitive connection, rather than one-way pedagogy. It also utilized the term "mood", to describe the historical manifestation of an essentially ahistorical paradigm, suggesting the universalist theology of Islamic thought can be brought into a world as contingent as the one in which 4Shbab and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict exist.

To understand how Abu Haiba approaches his pedagogical project within the channel's reflective, and hence, commercial goals is to think through how he actually hopes to connect with his audience, which he simultaneously hopes to constitute while claiming that it has been already constituted. This results in an interesting flip back and forth between considering viewers to be active (in the sense of consumers) and passive (in the sense of the stereotypical image of the tuned-out television viewer). These two views are mediated by the way Abu Haiba connects capitalist "competition" to Muslim piety. Muslims, he is saying, shouldn't watch 4Shbab because it is

demanding by their religious beliefs, but rather they should choose to watch it “freely”, because they “want to”. He sees “bright images” and “fast tempos” as both a method of competition with other channels, as well as a way to put 4Shbab on an equal footing, so that viewers decide based on their self-fashioning as Muslims to tune in based on ethical sensibility, and not due to an aesthetic choice of which channel, religious or secular, is more appealing. If 4Shbab offers equally professional programming to Melody Hits (an “impious” music video channel), so Abu Haiba argues, viewers will not be drawn into the sexual provocations and other immoral dimensions of his competitors. They will freely choose the moral path not out of fear of retribution or anything so theological, but rather because it is a part of the civilizational-cultural identity as Muslims to choose moral entertainment.

Abu Haiba constantly focused upon how the characters in his music videos mirror the subjects who will supposedly watch the channel, serving as an example of Appadurai’s “mediascapes” as “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality”, which “offer to those who experience and transform them...a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places” (Appadurai 1996, 35). This is presented without much embellishment in one video, for the song “Not Afraid to Stand Alone” by American group Native Deen. Abu Haiba focused intently on this video in both the press conference and our conversation not only because it presents pious Muslims in modern settings, but because these settings are, following Native Deen’s background, unambiguously American.

The music video, whose images follow the narratives presented in the lyrics, shows two American Muslims struggling through, and overcoming, various social discriminations arising due to their minority religious affiliation. The first is a woman who is denied a “job that she dreamed of” because she would not “lose the outfit” of the headscarf. She instead becomes a teacher at a public school, where she inspires a young Muslim student who has been “teased” by other students but is able to “get stronger” by the inspiration of “her strength”. In the video (but not the song) the

student uses his Muslim faith to a very practical American end: carrying a football past all of his competitors to become the school's athletic hero. The visual images of the narrative are perfectly cued in terms of race and gender to make the story at once believably American and hence, a hyperbolic reading of discrimination and triumph. The Muslim student is at once able to not assimilate his Muslim ideals as he succeeds in cultivating his body, as a football player, to fulfill the role of a normative American high-school student. Islam, multicultural tolerance and normative American youth lifestyles all win out as the student thanks his own Allah, and not Jesus, as one would expect based on the context, for helping him score the touchdown.

For Abu Haiba, however, this narrative is meant to resonate in contexts outside that for which it was designed, the American Muslim (youth) community. His examination of the video and song focuses on how they will be interpreted by Muslims outside America as more of an abstract notion of struggle than a concrete notion of winning a football game, ideally constituting a sense of connection, centered around personal struggle, between American Muslims and Arab Muslims, argued as unified across a cultural divide by shared values. Abu Haiba and Native Deen hope to help Muslim subjects see themselves as both different in their cultural contexts and the same in their structuring worldviews, or values. The Muslim subject, watching the American cultural context in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Indonesia, imagines him/herself in another culture, articulating what Appadurai explains as transnational "life trajectories" that cannot be lived in these various locations, but can be productively utilized in the erecting of a social imaginary that crosses long spatial distances in the maintenance of a community of belief (perhaps a postmodern *Umma*), and in Abu Haiba's project, the maintenance of a consumer market.

The Role of Critique

Abu Haiba's pedagogical project is not limited to the Arab world alone, and it is produced to work in dialectic with cultures of American media, for which he reserves scathing critiques, specifically regarding the question of gender. If the multiculturalist anecdote about the German

woman's relationship used a sympathetic tone, that tone was gone when he left the specific and commented on the abstraction of "Western culture" generally. Abu Haiba insists that women will not be seen on the channel without Islamic dress, and at the current moment, there are no female singers on the channel. This is in keeping with widely accepted classical Islamic arguments that the woman's voice and immodest image have the ability to excite the sexual desires of men, and therefore is to be silenced and coveredⁱⁱ (Nelson 2001). This also represented the main site of critique for American and European journalists covering the channel.

I want to turn to my own subjective experience of the 4Shbab press conference to show how Abu Haiba's model of cosmopolitanism has been contested by Western interlocutors, who interpret the channel from a very different perspective, making assumptions even as they claim to present the channel with journalistic "objectivity" in Western newspapers. Arjun Appadurai explains "mediascapes" as the result of "deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors" (1996, 33) so a cosmopolitan Islamic mediascape, of which 4Shbab is a part, can be considered from the perspective of the linguistic interlocutions of Westerners, as well as their encountered affective reactions to it.

Abu Haiba ended his initial remarks at the press conference aboard a boat-restaurant on the Nile, and there was a tangible sense of discomfort in the room, which was mostly filled with American, British, and French journalists. They were both compelled and distressed by the channel's aims and their questions focused on how Abu Haiba seeks to challenge the Western notion that Islamic cultures are repressive towards women (which he claims to be doing) when there are no women in leadership positions in the channel and they are seldom represented visually or aurally. A tension slowly developed as the insufficiency of Abu Haiba's answers to the journalists' questions were answered by nonverbal cues of discomfort; the exasperated letting of breath, the rolled eyes, the creaking of chairs, and the whispered comments of antagonism. Abu Haiba responded with surprise and then a calm smile of slight annoyance, maintaining that "you don't have to be a female to

understand the correct image of a woman", and citing the common musical practice of female singers performing songs by male composers. This discursive flip, whereby he suggested that the American music profession involves a similar denial of voice to women, was the ground on which he countered the journalists by implicitly arguing that this interpretation was based on the Western imagination whereby the idea that "women don't have a voice in Muslim world", is maintained without critical reflection on its own contradictions.

The challenge was greeted with a surge of guffaws and an amplification of the aforementioned nonverbal cues, at which point the questions, many of which were barely veiled criticisms, became angrier; why did the logo depict a young man and not a woman? Why had no women applied to compete on "Who Wants to be an Islamic Pop Star?" Why were the women in the music videos only images and never given a voice, both in the literal and loaded figurative senses of this term?

Abu Haiba's answers to these angrily voiced questions invoked notions of idealism and teleology as he explained with composure that in walking the fine line between angering secularists and more doctrinal Islamists, it would not be wise to "smash the roles" of gender within more traditional sectors of Arab society. With rhetorical flourish, he asserted that "we must reconcile Islamists and the West...We must stand in between with provocative language." In order to make such a project successful, "we must prepare the people for a message of righteousness that will not exclude women," but if women's images and voices are shown too early then "we will be attacked" and "the whole venture will suffer" (March 5). Abu Haiba thus envisions 4Shbab, and ethical entertainment broadly, as a "field of cultural production" through which viewers and listeners, ethical subjects, are trained through time to accept images and voices of women without bodily arousal.

Critics such as the journalists referenced above may object to the way such a timeline assumes that it is a male viewer that must be trained, and who is thus the unquestioned dominant audience. Abu Haiba's focus is logically consistent with his prescription of society's ills, however, as it is perceived to be men with agency who are swayed and negatively aroused by the feminine image and voice before being "prepared" by 4Shbab.

Leaving aside this question, which is too large to unpack here, Abu Haiba raises a question of embodiment in his utopian account of “preparing the people” that has been of interest to many anthropologists of Islam in recent years (Asad 2003, Hirschkind 2006). Saba Mahmood, in her study of the women’s piety movement in contemporary Egypt, uses Michel Foucault’s distinction between morals and ethics to highlight how the latter refers to “practices, techniques, and discourses through which a subject transforms herself in order to achieve a particular state of being” (Mahmood 2005, 28). It is this notion, she continues, that allows us to analyze how women in Egypt use their bodies to enact not ritual conventions, but the cultivation of themselves as pious subjects. Charles Hirschkind takes this to the realm of media in his study of cassette sermons, wherein they function as the “acoustic architecture of a distinct moral vision, animating and sustaining the ethical sensibilities that enable ordinary Muslims to live in accord with what they consider to be God’s will” (2006, 8). Abu Haiba, in his project of making Muslims see themselves in his videos’ protagonists, hopes to introduce the images and voices of women temporally, allowing the subjects he is addressing to “animate and sustain”, in Hirschkind’s language, their own pedagogic process of learning how to be entertained by women without embodying this entertainment through arousal.

In response to the criticisms raised by Western interlocutors, Abu Haiba stresses that such a process of initial censorship creates freedoms rather than limiting them. “People in the West,” he generalizes, “constrain themselves” with an obsessive focus in their culture on sex and relationships in the content of video clips. “Islamic limits opened a door for me” to produce a wider range of contents for clips on 4Shbab.

Abu Haiba articulates what he claims that his “Other” (as always, his language and not mine) sees as “limitations” or “restrictions” as simultaneously productive of a more open and creative artistic field. For Abu Haiba, commerce and art are basically inseparable, and hence the Western commercial field produces and is produced by audiences’ demand for sexualized imagery and the politics of relationships in their culture. In stark contrast, he argues that he will actually do better commercially because of what he glosses for the sake of simplicity as “Islamic limitations”. He then

universalized his conception of man to say: "We all have constraints, it's just different in different places, and when Westerners come here, because our constraints are different, they only see ours and not their own." This critique, though coming from a different cultural tradition, echoes strongly the critique leveled by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of the culture industry, which creates a circle of consumer needs and standards of production that result in "the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows even stronger" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 121). I do not mean to suggest that Abu Haiba sees himself breaking this posited loop between needs and standards, but rather that he imagines a utopian future wherein those needs and standards follow an ethical, moral, and hence for him, Islamic field of production and consumption.

Abu Haiba's idealistic goal of educating Western audiences, Westernized youth in the Arab world, and anyone else who watches 4Shbab, out of a moral depravity induced by the culture industry, obviously ignores the ways commercial interests restrain what 4Shbab can accomplish. The need to compete with other channels of course leads the images and sounds of the channel to be hyper-professionalized and therefore part of a system of production and consumption hardly escaping Adorno and Horkheimer's tradition of culture criticism. It is, however, in the belief of escape that we can locate how Abu Haiba constructs the morality of his vision, and one hopes that future ethnography will illuminate how such a vision is received by its target audiences.

Abu Haiba's approach is not novel in the way it extends the repertoire of values available to music videos and their audience, for certainly analogous Christian stations in the United States have done this for years. 4Shbab is rather unusual in how it appropriates and claims difference, explicitly manifesting a pedagogical process through a media capitalism that sees itself as Other to the very forms (music videos) that it mimics. A Christian station in the United States would represent a variation on a norm while 4Shbab seeks a reinvention of the norm itself.

Historical Intervention

This reinvention was already conceptualized by Abu Haiba in our interview, as he provided a surprisingly sprawling account of the recent history of Western culture and the Muslim world. After roughly an hour of discussion focused specifically on 4Shbab, he entered into a teleological narrative of the relationship between the two. Since the period of colonialism in which Western cultural forms found mass appeal in the Middle East, he explained, “people” (meaning Muslims in the Middle East, but perhaps not exclusively) have started to “go away from religion”. Citing the notion of “early forms of globalization”, he explained how “the Western Other began to dominate us” due to the industrial revolution and subsequent technological superiority. “People” started to “question their own values and move away from the true core of Islam”.

The discourse of this historical account, which belied an advanced education and echoed Western modernization theory, worked in conversation with a belief in Muslim primordialism, or cultural essence. The latter was evidenced in phrases from the Qur’an that were meant to translate for me, an assumed “Western Other” subject, the "four quarters" of Islam, put very simply as having to do with relationships, worship, the family, and questions of war, economy, etc.

Abu Haiba claimed that the first two are “spiritual aspects”, the latter two “practical life aspects”. Moving from the ahistorical back to the historical, I was told that with the advent of Western culture, “people tossed away the latter two, because they saw Western values as more useful in these two areas of life”. But (ahistorically) “Islam is an all-encompassing lifestyle, you can’t have only two quarters of the whole,” and (again back to the historical) "the people forgot" this unity.

Completing the narrative, Abu Haiba interpreted how since the 1980s and the Islamic *sahwa* (revival), people have started to look for the other half again in Islamic banks, Islamic schools, and now Islamic popular culture. They no longer see the imported Western lifestyle choices as “useful”. Before, the two halves, imported and originary, were "not in harmony" and so 4Shbab is the latest tool with which the new Muslim youth can become "in harmony with themselves", cleverly invoking a musical metaphor for the social relationship between a real person and, following Appadurai, an “imagined life possibility”.

In this dialectical fashion, Abu Haiba explains 4Shbab as like himself. He and the channel ride the line between a clash-of-civilizations understanding and a historicized moment of “harmony” which makes 4Shbab possible, viewable, and hence, marketable. It is in this way that Abu Haiba, without the slightest bit of detectable high-handedness, describes 4Shbab as “revolutionary”. “I am not stopping anyone’s culture,” he argues, but “just promoting values that are universal” and he went further to say that 4Shbab’s potential popularity is the *same* force that creates mass conversion to Islam among Westerners, making it the fastest growing religion in the world today. Abu Haiba’s project is thus, for him, revolutionary, but made possible by a historical moment in which he is simply the media mogul who must “think about values”, in his words, in the context of the “shape” or the “forms” that “reflect the times”. For Abu Haiba, there is an inevitability to the process of the channel’s coming into being that reflects, or perhaps even constitutes, the theological inevitability of Islam’s universalizable value system.

Abu Haiba's understanding of Islam and its adherents (his viewers) is that of a "discursive tradition", a phrase coined by Talal Asad (1986), which focuses more upon practices, intellectual and corporeal, and their relationship to founding texts, rather than taking those texts as the sole structuring mechanism of religion to be interpreted. Abu Haiba's cosmopolitanism involves then, self-consciously or not, taking a variety of critiques of Western liberal culture that are either self-evident in non-Western cultures or complicatedly arrived at by Western commentators, and using them in a self-conscious practice of remaking society from the top down. One could find his implicit critiques of Western modernity and its pretensions to universality in the work of Theodor Adorno, Edward Said, Charles Taylor, or Talal Asad, but this would ignore just how non-intellectualized, self-evident, even mundane, his critique is designed to be. It is through the everyday morality of the abstract Muslim subject (seen for example in the Native Deen video), the forms of entertainment 4Shbab provides for him/her, and the interpellated relationship between the two that Abu Haiba's critique of Western society is articulated.

To locate Abu Haiba in a broader discussion here, we should notice Christina Pond’s focus on

Sami Yusuf as a proponent of "Islamizing modernity", a notion she claims is operative in its "simplicity". She sets Yusuf's work in opposition to American Sheikh Hamza Yusuf's "authentic Muslim community" within a reformed modernity (84). Hamza's plan "requires a fundamental reworking of modernity from the group up", which "requires a much higher degree of engagement and participation ... than does the simple act of watching a music video" (85). 4Shbab and Abu Haiba, although part of the same cultural trend represented by Sami Yusuf, are between these two conceptions. Pond claims that "Sami Yusuf's drawing power as an 'authentic' Muslim artist" derives from his being a Muslim 'other' to the social mainstream", and Abu Haiba sees 4Shbab as constitutive of a new mainstream, rather than on the margins of an existent one. While he draws on the passive notion of a music-video consumer to show the ease of "Islamizing modernity", he shoots for more than Yusuf, who is fundamentally within a European cultural field. Abu Haiba wants to produce an entirely novel socio-cultural field, as we see in his argument about creating a space for women, rather than to fit within an existent one (Sami Yusuf) or idealize one without the same cosmopolitan pretensions (Hamza Yusuf).

Liberal Critique

Abu Haiba's articulation of a cosmopolitan form for Islamic media is usefully complicated by the alternative liberal normative standards by which it has been initially judged by Western audiences, as seen in my reading of the press conference above. Although 4Shbab has not reached Europe or the United States, its critical coverage by Western journalists suggested some of the ways it will be received when this occurs. The reactions of journalists (mostly French and American) at the initial press conference served as an ethnographically rich space for the friction inevitably caused by an encounter between two different articulations of cosmopolitanism. From the questions these journalists asked of Abu Haiba and the inclusions and exclusions of their subsequent publications, we find one locus of the politics of cosmopolitanism played out as 4Shbab encounters the "Other" that Abu Haiba has defined himself by.

Abu Haiba explained to me that he purposefully chose to hold 4Shbab's first conference in English, so that its publicity in Arabic-language media would first pass through the filter of the "Other" and on first impression the entire event seemed like a small-scale replication of the sterile, brightly lit and overtly professionalized atmosphere of most press conferences. The subjective reactions of journalists, themselves purportedly worldly as Europeans reporting from Egypt, was both played to with this atmosphere and challenged by Abu Haiba's alternative idea of what it means for the West and the Islamic world to enter into dialogue. The idea that values held in distinction from Western ones would be refracted though Western cultural forms played out as what could be described as a clash of interpretations of cosmopolitanism. The articles that arose from the press conference obviously left out the embodied discomfort exhibited by the journalists at the press conference, but they transfigured their discomfort into a journalistic presentation of abstract critiques that have been leveled from nowhere (i.e. with no author of the critique mentioned). In other words, the journalists made their own critiques (clearly evident as their own in the press conference) into the critiques of a third party, in order to preserve common ideas about the journalist's objective relationship to the subject matter. I propose we examine these critiques to see how a Western cosmopolitan understanding of religion as private, and of commercial ventures as public, are unsettled by 4Shbab, leading them to perceive Abu Haiba's presentation as inauthentic, and hence, solely motivated by commercial concerns.

In Liam Stack's article for the Christian Science Monitor, he claims that "*some women* have criticized the network ... for everything from its lack of female performers and presenters to its logo, the silhouette of a muscular young man walking toward the viewer" (2009, emphasis mine). One web version of the article hyperlinked the phrase "some women have criticized the network" to an article on a barely related analysis of democratization in the Middle East. Stack thus brought in the liberal feminist critique of the channel without attributing it to any specific interlocutor, preserving the notion of the press conference as strictly informational and thereby making observations on, for example, Abu Haiba's *zabiba* (prayer mark) part of the information on Abu

Haiba's presentation. His embodied Islamic practice comes to be seen as a performance, rather than an authentic mark of his own piety, connected intimately to 4Shbab.

Further, the article published in *The Guardian* quoted Khalil al-Anani at the Al-Ahram Foundation as saying: "Religion today in Egypt is like a supermarket, you can go and pick what you want, and there is competition for customers between the different discourses ... quite frankly, I think this venture will succeed" (2009). With the supermarket analogy, al-Anani seeks to take away the actual qualitative element of the channel's religious imagery, and suggest that Islam is simply performed by 4Shbab in order to collect advertising revenue. The suggestion is that Abu Haiba's prayer mark, his discourse of pedagogy, and 4Shbab's content are all performed, as in a theater, for the purposes of making money.

These journalists see 4Shbab in the light of a Western liberal tradition wherein religious belief, which should be located in the private sphere, can never mix with the public work of a capitalist entrepreneur. With this discursive background, which normalizes certain ways of looking at commerce, they decouple the ideas of commerce and pedagogy, and cannot make room for the latter in their accounts.

The kinds of assumptions guiding these journalists' inquiries are also evident, although buried, in Christina Pond's discussion of Sami Yusuf, wherein she describes his "message" as one in which "talk of infidels and jihad are replaced with appeals to God's love and the beauty of religion" (68). She quotes Yusuf, who echoes Abu Haiba, as saying: "Islam is not a religion of extremism ... we should be proud of our religion" (68). It is clear Pond wants to show how voices like Yusuf and Abu Haiba are combating Western constructions, but in calling this a "replacement" she inadvertently allows a normative Western conception of a violent, intransigent Islam to be the base from which her subject deviates. Abu Haiba and Yusuf are valorized as alternatives while the norm of Islam is still left in a Western frame of viewing to be at best resistant to change and at worst impervious to it. By their logic, if 4Shbab were truly authentic to its Islamic roots, it would preach intolerance.

Contrary to what one might intuit, some Islamist critiques of 4Shbab have utilized the same

notions of performance and authenticity evident in the Western journalistic discourse. In keeping with my focus on Abu Haiba's Islam as a discursive tradition, below is comment posted to AlArabiya.net in response to an article on 4Shbab. It is interesting to note that its author, "Murad", could be writing from anywhere:

"Everything that is Haram to do in Islam, all you have to do to HALAL-FY it to add the world Islamic to it and voila it is HALAL again. Prophet Mohammed (Saaws) commanded us not to listen to Music, what we do? we create Islamic Music. Allah (SwT) prohibited us not to perform USURY, and what we do? we create Islamic banks where the interest rates become sort of commission and voila RIBA is Halal. What is left? Fornication? it is happening already, from all directions. I won't be surprised that someday in the future a hardcore 24 hour porn TV Station will be created, it will be labeled as Islamic. - Murad" (Awad 2009)

"Murad"'s methods of establishing credibility through a colloquial internet language that invents Arabic-English words like "HALAL-FY" and uses English acronyms for appellations to the names of the Prophet and God of Islam, represent a whole dimension of colloquialized Islam that is noteworthy, but too complex to approach here. Nevertheless, this critique of 4Shbab locates its grievances in the idea that the channel plays with Islamic concepts, rendering them performances rather than authentic aspects of the religion's moral code. The idea that 4Shbab is part of a slippery slope towards the blasphemous notion of Islamic pornography means to imply that Abu Haiba may be well-intentioned, but by using Islam as a malleable discourse, it endangers the "true religion". Thus, "Murad" locates a primordial Islam much like the Western journalists, creating a contested space for the question of performance, authenticity, and primordialism that can only be resolved in a battle between regular Muslims instead of Islamic scholars. It is this contested space from which we must begin to think through and interpret 4Shbab's reception among actual Muslims.

Towards Reception

My arguments about how various discourses have interpreted the project of 4Shbab have relied on the practice of "first impressions". The immediate embodied and verbalized reactions of the Western journalists and anonymous Muslim internet-interlocutor clash with Abu Haiba's long-term analysis of how to participate in the cultural economy as a Muslim subject, creating interesting

tensions that are as fleeting as they are indicative of long-held assumptions about Islam, capitalism, and cosmopolitanism. Although “cosmopolitanism” served as a frame of reference for first impressions, they gave way to a focus on authenticity, which in turn may give way to further foci as 4Shbab’s audience expands.

Thus, the most important dynamics of 4Shbab’s future will necessitate a form of ethnography depicted by George Marcus with the aphorism “Follow the Thing” (1995). We will have to consider not only who consumes 4Shbab, but more crucially where and how they do so. The popularity of “Western-style” programming is partially due to its pervasiveness not only in private homes but in cafes, restaurants, and even metro stations. Abu Haiba has already purchased the rights to screen 4Shbab on campus at Cairo University. Will the consumption of 4Shbab depend on the context of the performance of public identities versus a different viewing preference when viewers are alone? Will Abu Haiba’s “revolutionary” goals be realized? Will the pedagogical project even manifest as proselytizing as well?

Lila Abu-Lughod, in her study of the television serial’s contribution to the social imagination of Egypt as a nation, explains how studying reception “can ...t race both how and why media messages go awry and yet how the television serials that are so central in Egypt do shape lives and may help create a national habitus, recognizing that television is generated out of complex interests and that audiences are neither resistant heroes to be celebrated nor duped victims to be pitied” (26). It is from this liminal place between celebration and pity that we will be able to both critique and try to understand how the successes and failures of 4Shbab are constitutive both within and beyond their imagined public sphere, a global cosmopolitan strand of Islamic self-fashioning, tied but not reducible to one Islamic “discursive tradition”.

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- i Saba Mahmood makes a similar point about feminism, wherein she attempts to theorize the political project of feminism in the West with the intellectual project of understanding agency. In this vein, I want to consider the project of understanding capitalism as it relates to identity politics (or colloquially, how people choose products based on their identities) as separable intellectually from the post-Marxist critique of capitalism itself. This is not to say that bringing the two projects together would not be a useful future task.
- ii This prohibition can be understood in the way music was historically criticized by Islamic scholars, often due to its early associations with *qaynah*, the figure of the slave or freedwoman singing in taverns and private parties in which other forbidden activities (chiefly, alcohol) were present (see Nelson 2001; 37).