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Prayers, Sex, Islam, and Electric Guitars: A Rhetorical Criticism of *The Taqwacores*

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Abstract

Punk rock Islam may not be a common phrase to hear in society, but it is quickly expanding in popularity and in effectiveness. A fiction book entitled *The Taqwacores* tells the story of faithful Muslims practicing punk rock Islam in their own way. The novel utilizes constitutive rhetoric, a concept popularized by Maurice Charland, to create a social movement that is sweeping the world. This paper analyzes the novel using the tenets of constitutive rhetoric and uses social movement theory to understand the implications that a simple book is having upon the world. Punk rock Islam may not be such an uncommon phrase for much longer.

Introduction

Punk rock Islam is not exactly a traditional combination of words one might expect to hear. However, in Michael Muhammad Knight's book *The Taqwacores*, this seeming oxymoron becomes reality. This work of fiction, published in 2004, started a real-world movement among young Muslims. The book tells the story of a group of young Muslims living out the taqwacore culture full of drugs, sex, alcohol, and language. The word taqwacore is a combination of the Arabic word "taqwa" meaning God-fearing and hardcore. Thus the meaning: God-fearing, hardcore Muslims. Knight converted to Islam as a teenager and studied at a mosque in Pakistan but became fed up with Islam after learning about the sectarian battles after the death of Muhammad. His motivation behind the book was to mend the rift between his being an observant Muslim and an angry American youth. His identification of the rift reverberated with others within Islam such as young Muslims who were fed up with the rules of Islam but still loved Allah with passion. They expressed that passion through punk rock, just as Knight's book expressed. According to a *New York Times* article on December 22, 2008, professor of Islamic studies at the University of North Carolina, Carl W. Ernst labeled the novel "The Catcher in the Rye" for young Muslims due to its influence.¹ *The Taqwacores* is highly controversial across the world and is sparking much conversation.

This book is a significant part of culture, because it has shaped an entire movement. This piece of fiction crossed into reality and has greatly affected individuals in a variety of ways. According to *Dissident Voice*, a regional newsletter in Indonesia on December 21, 2011, sixty four individuals were arrested at a Taqwacore concert. Their mohawks were forcibly shaved and punk clothing such as dog collars were confiscated. The detainees were said to be a part of a "social disease" according to the mayor.² This incident demonstrates the need for books such as *The Taqwacores*, because these individuals do not have a place to belong in their society. Other stories such as this can be found across the world. Books such as this create an opportunity for a space of identification for individuals who have been left out of mainstream places of belonging.

1. Christopher Maag, "Young Muslims Build a Subculture on Underground Book," *New York Times*, December 22, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/23/us/23muslim.html>.

2. Alexander Billet, "Punk Is Not a Crime, and Neither is Islam," *dissidentvoice.org*, December 21, 2011, <http://dissidentvoice.org/2011/12/punk-is-not-a-crime-and-neither-is-islam/>.

Young people do not fit into traditional Islamic culture so they are left feeling as if something is wrong with them. The taqwacore subculture creates a space for these so-called “misfits.”

This artifact has crossed into reality, as evidenced by the fact that a real taqwacore movement can be found around the world in which participants choose parts of their religion to follow and live their lives in a manner different than contemporary Muslims. The article “Muslim-Hindu Bands Part of New Movement” in *USA Today* on January 3, 2010 credits the arrival of the taqwacore movement with the popularity of the book. It states that those integrated into the culture are involved because it is an identity with which they can connect.³ According to *CNN* on August 13, 2009, bands such as the Kominas state that their music is a way to rebel against their conservative upbringing and to express their frustrations of growing up of being a young Muslim in the U.S.⁴ Other bands, concerts, and even films have begun to spring up around the world further perpetuating this movement.

Michael Muhammad Knight’s book, *The Taqwacores* works to redefine what is expected of Muslims and how the world views them. Most of the world has a very set image of what Islam looks like. This book forces us to reexamine our perspective and to enlarge it to include this subculture. The narrator states that the “house with its punk posters and vandalized Saudi flag was the closest thing they had to a comfortable Islamic experience in which they could pray and embrace their culture without having to feel inadequate.”⁵ The characters redefined their faith in order for it to become an identity with which they can connect. The narrator in the book states that “the whole point of taqwacore is that Islam can take any shape you want it to.”⁶ Taqwacore strives to create a space for those who do not fit into mainstream Islam. The novel follows the journey of the narrator as he is introduced to a couple of the characters, and then realizes that taqwacore is larger than a few people and is an entire movement that is sweeping the world.

Literature Review

Michael Muhammad Knight’s fiction book *The Taqwacores* is an artifact worthy of analysis because it is continuing to impact the world in a tangible and visual fashion. It is fiction

3. Russell Contreras, “Muslim-Hindu punk rock bands part of new movement,” *usatoday.com*, January 3, 2010, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/topstories/2010-01-02-667696719_x.htm.

4. Azadeh Ansari, “Punk Meets Islam for New Generation in US,” *cnn.com*, August 13, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/08/11/generation.islam.punk.rock/index.html>.

5. Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Taqwacores* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2004), 19.

6. Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Taqwacores*, (Brooklyn: Soft Skull, 2004), 193.

that has crossed into reality and directly influences people. Scholars in a variety of fields are recognizing the importance of this work and how it transcends traditional expectations. Social movement theory is an appropriate lens to use for examining this artifact because the book generated a social movement from the ideas within the text.

Religion and social movements are often intertwined. James Beckford, a prolific author on the sociology of religion and Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Warwick, states that “religious ideas and sentiments, which are often inseparable from people’s innermost sense of selfhood, identity and destiny, tend to be socially patterned.”⁷ Historical patterns illustrate this link between these concepts.

Reform and revolution can be found throughout Islamic history from the very beginning. Revolutions occur in a variety of ways. Five main components contribute to reform according to Arjomand: “1. Integration into the international system . . . ; 2. Development of transport, communication and the mass media; 3. Urbanization; 4. The spread of literacy and education; and 5. The incorporation of the masses into the political society.”⁸ These components have the potential to result in changes in societal structure. History demonstrates how these components come into play with the generation of revolutions. For example, there was an “Islamic revolution in 1978-79 [that] provided a thoroughgoing overthrow of the old political, social, and ideological order.”⁹ This revolution worked to rectify problems set forth by society. The revolution did not only affect political and economic woes, but also doctrinal issues.

When examining religious movements within Islam, Beckford argues that “in the context of national integration, this general increase in religious propensity has been a crucial precondition of the contemporary resurgence and politicization of Islam which has set in motion many movements for the revitalization of Islam.”¹⁰ These movements within religious society have caused resurgence in Islam, but with a variety of results. Some of the movement throughout the years regarded the “alternation of non-Islamic customs and more strict adherence to the

7. James A. Beckford, ed., *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1986), 35.

8 Beckford, *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change*, 42.

9. Nikki R. Keddie, “Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective,” in *Islam, Politics, and Social Movements*, eds. Edmund Burke, III and Ira M. Lapidus (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 298-313.

10. Beckford, *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change*, 67

written tradition of Islam.”¹¹ Yet as seen through the artifact of *The Taqwacores*, movements have also caused an adjustment in what it means to be considered a member of the Muslim faith.

Methodology

Charland uses what he termed constitutive rhetoric to analyze a political movement that began in Quebec in 1967, involving Quebec separating from Canada which was known by the term Quebecois. By simply creating a term, a new reality came forth. Charland detailed this concept through three main tenets: interpellation, the need for action, and the capture of alienated subjects by previous discourse. Interpellation happens “at the moment one enters into a rhetorical situation.”¹² As soon as an individual recognizes and acknowledges being addressed, they are then participating in the discourse that addresses them. This process results in subjects being inscribed into a particular identification through the rhetoric to which they respond. Second, the “tautological logic of constitutive rhetoric must necessitate action in the material world to affirm their subject position.”¹³ By creating a new identity through rhetoric and a new social position, it is essential that the subject take steps to affirm this new position. Actions are needed to “overcome the recalcitrance the world presents by providing the subject with new perspectives and motives.”¹⁴ Third, “constitutive rhetorics can be . . . working upon previous discourses . . . they capture alienated subjects by . . . an act of recognition of the ‘rightness’ of a discourse and of one’s identity with its reconfigured subject position.”¹⁵ By creating new identities the constitutive rhetoric allows for those who fall within the cracks of existing rhetorics to find a way to figure out how they fit in. An individual doesn’t fall into a new subject position through persuasion but rather is converted due to how they identify with the characteristics of the position. Constitutive rhetorics often attract people found on the fringes of other groups who don’t fit in anywhere else. The following analysis focuses on answering the following research question: How does Michael Muhammad Knight create a new social reality using constitutive rhetoric?

11. Beckford, *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change*, 68.

¹² Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Quebecois,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73,2 (1987): 133-150.

¹³ Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 141.

¹⁴ Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 142.

¹⁵ Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 142.

Analysis

Interpellation

Interpellation, the idea of people entering into a collective subject by participating in the rhetoric occurs throughout the book. Taqwacore culture utilizes profanity regularly and integrates it as a part of life. Other rhetoric such as questioning religion, society, and establishments are seen throughout as well. One character named Lynn states:

I'm a spiritual person. I believe in Allah, you know, though I don't always call It "Allah" and I pray the way I want to pray. Sometimes I just look out at the stars and this love-fear thing comes over me, you know? And sometimes I might sit in a Christian church listening to them talk about Isa with a book of Hafiz in my hands instead of the hymnal. Sometimes, every once in a while, I get out my old rug and I pray like Muhammad prayed. I never learned the shit in Arabic and my knees are uncovered, but if Allah has a problem with that then what kind of Allah do we believe in?¹⁶

Through using terms specific to Islam but in a questioning way, Lynn is engaging in the taqwacore culture and identifying herself as a part of it. She embraces the central part of taqwacore culture-questioning establishments.

The same character, Lynn, believes that "religion is supposed to be ours to do with what we want."¹⁷ The characters within the book all shape their personal religious beliefs not around a religion, but rather around their experiences and opinions. Participation in rhetoric of religion based on individualism brings each individual character into a collective subject. They redefine their religious practices based on what each person holds to be true. The action of the redefinition creates the interpellation of a collective subject thus fulfilling the first tenet of Charland's definition of a constitutive rhetoric.

Need for Action

The second tenet was that of the necessity of action so as to affirm subject position. For example, the primary female character named Rebeya censored an entire ayat in her Qur'an which advised men to beat their wives. When questioned as to why she explains:

¹⁶ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 44.

¹⁷ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 84.

If I believe it's wrong for a man to beat his wife and the Qur'an disagrees with me, then fuck that verse. I don't need to stretch and squeeze it for a weak alternative reading, I don't need to excuse it with historical context, and I sure as hell don't need to just accept it and go sign up for a good ol' fashioned bitch-slapping. So I crossed it out. Now I feel a whole lot better about the Qur'an.¹⁸

Rebeya took the action of determining which parts of Islam did not work for her and decided to exclude it. This is one specific example of how the book fits the second tenet of Charland's constitutive rhetoric.

Those involved within a constitutive rhetoric must take action to determine their place in the world. Taqwacore culture aims to make its mark in the world by upsetting people. It takes a stand for what it believes through its actions. Those within the new constitutive rhetoric of taqwacore create their own culture that fits their needs. One of the central characters assured the narrator that "there is a cool Islam out there . . . you just have to find it. You have to sift through all the other stuff, but it's there."¹⁹ They take action to create the Islam they want therefore accomplishing Charland's second tenet of constitutive rhetoric

Capture of Alienated Subjects

The third tenet is that of working upon previous discourses and capturing alienated subjects. These alienated subjects do not fall into other rhetorics and identify with the new constitutive rhetoric. This idea is fulfilled through the book consistently as demonstrated through the characters and the roles they play in society. Each Friday night they would hold prayers at their house welcoming anyone in the community who wants to pray but does not fit in with traditional Islam culture. Their house fills with traditional Muslims, women, crack addicts, and alcoholics. The book continues to create the theme of welcoming those who fall through the cracks because they can identify with the taqwacore culture.

Taqwacore culture embraces people of all walks of life who may not fit into traditional Islam. Alienated subjects are welcome within this new constitutive rhetoric thus fulfilling the third tenet of Charland's idea of constitutive rhetoric.

¹⁸ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 132.

¹⁹ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 136.

Implications

Clearly, *Taqwacores* uses constitutive rhetoric to create a new social reality. Taqwacore is demonstrating hope to others around the world encouraging them to break free of the mold society places upon individuals. Punk rock Islam, also known as Taqwacore, has created implications that are being felt around the world.

Rhetorically, this artifact and the taqwacore social movement have large implications. There is a great need for more space for discussion in the Middle East to make room for the taqwacore culture. It is contrary to traditional Islamic culture which has potential to create conflict. For example, according to *Dissident Voice*, a newsletter, on December 21, 2011, a taqwacore concert taking place in Indonesia was raided resulting in 64% of those in attendance being arrested and detained.²⁰ Their hair was forcibly cut and shaved by the guards and their punk clothing, such as dog collars, was confiscated. The mayor defended the guards' actions by stating, "Detainees were in violation of the region's interpretation of Islamic law" and that they are part of a "social disease" affecting the community.²¹ This incident demonstrates a need for space to be opened up for discussion about a place for those who don't fit into traditional Islamic culture to find a place to identify. In *The Taqwacores* the narrator states, "so there you have it. As a Muslim I dropped the ball. But I'm pretty sure that I'm still a human being."²² Individuals who do not fit into the mainstream culture still deserve a place to belong and to feel accepted. The taqwacore social movement works to create space for individuals who are left out.

Real World Implications

Recent news articles and documentaries demonstrate that the answer is yes. Taqwacore bands have formed in real life and begun tours around the United States and Europe. For example, *The Washington Times* reported on November 9, 2012 that "the poorest of the former Soviet Central Asian states and arguably the most culturally conservative [country of] Tajikistan is home to a small but growing rock-music scene in spite of the social pressures to conform and the difficulties of finding a working guitar."²³ Punk rock music has invaded the socially

20. Alexander Billet, "Punk is not a Crime (and Neither is Islam)," *Dissident Voice*, December 21, 2011, <http://dissidentvoice.org/2011/12/punk-is-not-a-crime-and-neither-is-islam/>.

21. Billet, "Punk is not a Crime."

22. Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 254.

23. Ruth Owen, "Rockin' in Tajikistan," *Washington Times*, November 9, 2012..

conservative country of Tajikistan. The article goes on to explain that the band Red Planet “met at a university and bonded over their love of Western heavy-metal bands such as Linkin Park.”²⁴ The taqwacore influence is spreading around the world, even to the eastern remote corners of the world.

In society, the taqwacore movement has gone beyond a social reality into a reality across the globe. A *CNN* article stated that the birth of the real world taqwacore movement can be “credited to the novel.”²⁵ The ideas within the novel have expanded into our society. On February 21, 2012 a band entitled the Pussy Riot staged a protest outside Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour using a “Punk Prayer” that landed two of the band members in prison.²⁶ The video of the protest has “gone viral and has been viewed on YouTube several million times. Its lyrics appeal to the Virgin Mary to ‘get rid of (President Vladimir) Putin.’”²⁷ The movement is beginning to extend beyond individuals affected by Islam to those who feel constrained by society’s expectations. The Pussy Riot demonstrates that moves toward social unrest are starting to take place around the world. *CBCNews* labeled the punk rock group as one of the “12 Most Influential People of the Year.”²⁸ The actions by a single punk group stirred up protests around the world and created a chain of events. There is no direct social unrest occurring continually around the world as a result of taqwacore culture. However, it all began with a simple fiction novel.

The examples of the Pussy Riot girls demonstrate that taqwacore ideas are generating other movements. Taqwacore bands in the U.S directly credit their motivation behind their music to being able to reconcile the dissonance of being a Muslim in the U.S.²⁹ Protests using punk methods and ideas are spreading beyond the Muslim world to protest political statements as well as religious stances. Punk is proving to be more than a genre of music. It is a way of life and

24. Owen, “Rockin’ in Tajikistan.”

25. Contreras, “Muslim-Hindu punk rock bands part of new movement.”

26. Maria Antonova, “Russia Bans ‘Extremist’ Pussy Riot Videos,” *AFP*, November 29, 2012, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ilvUwNM1dAdxPB1SOwUAassN9bwBg?docId=CNG.83accd45c5ebd79f106e462b99530ed5.30>.

27. Antonova, “Russia Bans ‘Extremist’ Pussy Riot Videos.”

28. “The 12 Most Influential People of 2012,” *CBCNews*, accessed December 12, 2012, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2012/12/07/year-ender-influential-people.html>.

29. Contreras, “Muslim-Hindu Punk Rock Bands Part of New Movement.”

protest. The novel *The Taqwacores* describes punk rock as “deliberately bad music, deliberately bad clothing, deliberately bad language and deliberately bad behavior. Means shooting yourself in the foot when it comes to every expectation society will ever have for you but still standing tall about it, loving who you are and somehow forging a shared community with all the other fuck-ups.”³⁰ Punk rock offers a community of support for individuals who want to communicate their disagreement regarding a social topic-whether political or religious.

Conclusion

Even though punk rock Islam may not be a traditional combination of words, the concepts are becoming more entwined in today’s society. Taqwacore, punk rock Islam, is a movement that is spreading throughout the world suggesting freedom and a chance to speak out to individuals who feel constrained by their society. Using social movement theory, it is evident that the taqwacore social movement is in the genesis stage but pushing toward social unrest. Perhaps, someday prayers around the world will be offered forth with the help of an electric guitar and a guy with a Mohawk.

30. Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 212