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Halal Cool

by Leyla Arslan

How to live one's Muslim faith in a context of growing Islamophobia? John O'Brien explores the multiple ways in which young American Muslims manage to reconcile their beliefs with their national belonging.

Reviewed: John O'Brien, *Keeping It Halal: The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 216 p.

In a context saturated with issues of "radicalization," where Islam has been presented in public discourse for many years as a threatening social fact, John O'Brien of New York University Abu Dhabi has chosen to focus on "invisible" Muslims living in the United States, and in particular on American Muslim youth. According to the author, while the obsession with a supposed clash of civilizations has occupied many minds since 2001, these young people, with their attitudes and behaviors as much as with the representations they have of themselves and of the society around them, belie all assertions that Islam is irreconcilable with Western lifestyle.

Not only do they believe in this possibility, but they seek to make it a reality in their daily lives—with all the challenges this implies—by striving to be a good Muslim and a normal American teenager all at once. Rather than viewing this situation as a dilemma that forces them to shift completely to one side or the other, these young people share the same expectations as their schoolmates, engaging in cultural practices and discourses associated with the lifestyle of a modern urban teenager, including hip-hop, fashion, encounters with girls, autonomy, but also discreet presentation of one's ethnic and religious identities. At the same time, they meet the expectations of their parents and of adults in their communities, and they fulfill their social and religious

obligations as practicing Muslims (praying five times a day, attending mosques, fasting during Ramadan, abstaining from sex outside marriage, not using alcohol and drugs). More than experiences of discrimination, it is the desire to be all these things, but not necessarily in all places and at all times, that concerns these young people.

This book revisits the complex and evolving construction of self in the contemporary United States: For the author, cultural identities take shape in interaction with the peer group and the majority society, generating mixed, hybrid, and dynamic practices, and giving the individual a central role in his or her self-definition. The other interest of this study is the importance it gives to religiosity in the construction of self, in contrast to French sociological analyses, often centered on class, gender, ethnicization, and racialization, which pay less attention to it.

An Ethnographer Converted to Islam

Through six chapters, J. O'Brien discusses, in particular, the relation to individualism, peer groups, self-presentation in public, and relationships with women. Using an anthropological approach, the author analyzes both the interactions between his respondents—a group of young male friends known as the Legendz—within the Islamic community center of a multi-ethnic mosque in a large American city, and the interactions between them and their Muslim and non-Muslim environment. To do this, he first gained the trust of the group members by relying on his own conversion to Islam, a shared love of music, and the fact that he lived in Africa for a short time; he then reproduced his exchanges with respondents in short scenes.

The author focuses mainly on male youth because of the strong gender segregation within the center he studied: While the center was sufficiently liberal to allow a gender-mixed environment, the ties he forged with young women were insufficient for him to maintain the same proximity as with the Legendz. The group was composed of descendants of Jordanian, Southeast Asian, Sudanese, or Somali immigrants: sons of the working class and lower middle class, who attend public schools, and who are daily and widely exposed to U.S. mainstream pop culture and media.

Being Cool and Muslim

The book opens with the main dilemma facing these young teenagers: How to be a Muslim who respects his religious obligations without losing the "coolness" valued by every urban adolescent in the United States. Given that the expectations of each of their circles of belonging—their schoolmates on the one side and their religious group on the other—can be contradictory at first, the members of the Legendz devote much of their time and energy to reconciling these differences, at least temporarily, rather than to displaying a coherent and unique social identity at all times and places. Like most adolescents, these young men, as genuine masters of nuance, build a more complicated identity and view themselves in a social in-between.

The relationship to hip-hop illustrates how these adolescents appropriate a widely recognized and desirable identity, which can momentarily prevail over that of a religious Muslim in the interaction with a non-Muslim youth: The shared practices of hip-hop help to build a common reference and universe that transcends divisions by race, ethnicity, or religion.

At the same time, in order not to offend their practicing Muslim peers, they practice "Islamic listening" (p. 31), which favors conscious hip-hop over one that glorifies drugs, violence, and sex. Their engagement with hip-hop brings them into contact with non-Muslim youth, ensuring their broader social assimilation in the city, beyond their families and the community center. Their pursuit of "coolness" entails the willingness to display their knowledge of a non-Islamic repertoire, yet by reappropriating it in a halal way. Thus, they appreciate when a mainstream song refers to Islam or to African-American identity, as this allows them to recognize their religious identity in mainstream hip-hop. On the other hand, they have paradoxically little liking for musicians who give their music a deliberate and assertive religious tone.

They have a different relationship to individualism and to autonomy in their Islamic practice than do their elders, engaging in what Erving Goffman calls "role distancing" (quoted p. 58): For instance, they refuse to begin prayer at the same time as the adult authority who manages the place, letting things drag on when they are asked to quickly join the rest of the group. This does not mean, however, that they keep religion at a distance. In order to control one another without too directly offending each one's sense of autonomy, they deploy the figure of the "extreme Muslim" (p. 62) with humor and benevolent jokes, caricaturing and exaggerating the

old conservative generations' way of speaking and making remarks; they then comment on the potentially non-Islamic behavior of another youth, making sure that their remarks are not perceived as too directive. These different behaviors illustrate their capacity to play with identity markers, to propose new interpretations of them, and to question roles diplomatically vis-à-vis both their co-religionists and the majority society.

Halal Dating

Concerning romantic relationships, the author identifies two dating models. The first aims to keep the relationship within an Islamically proper framework ("keeping it halal"): It sets explicit limits to physical intimacy, and echoes romantic emotions and religious devotions in an intense form of platonic love, sexual relations outside marriage being indeed considered illicit. However, this type of relationship is rarely long lasting. In the second model, the young men do not relinquish their self-presentation and behavior as Muslims, but neither do they seek to anchor their emotional relationship within a religious framework, which often makes for more lasting and less stressful relationships.

O'Brien rightly believes that what sociologists of religions call "religious individualism" is developing. This phenomenon, which has been studied mainly in the Christian majority, is characterized by the privatization of religious practice more than by community participation. The notion is reminiscent of Danielle Hervieu-Léger's work on the religious individualism of modernity.[1] Religious commitment thus becomes a deliberate choice rather than an inherited obligation.

The Stigma of Religion

The author also examines how the group presents itself publicly as Muslim in a climate of potential harassment. To be socially accepted in public, the members of the Legendz strive to make their inherited and chosen identity more discreet. They are reluctant to display a public Muslim identity through language or clothing, in order to

[1] Danièle Hervieu Léger, *Le Pèlerin et le converti, la religion en mouvement*, Paris, Flammarion, 1999.

avoid remarks and harassment, especially from strangers. In this they adopt attitudes shared by other groups who are minoritized or dominated due to their "race" or social belonging (Latinos, Mexican, Vietnamese, or Indian immigrants, poor whites in a middle-class environment). They consequently make strategic adjustments in the way they present themselves in the school environment to be more in tune with the dominant culture, while also seeking to maintain connections with their families and ethnic communities. Thus, for the author, the individualism mentioned above does not result in the loss of belief or of collective commitment; on the contrary, it enables actors in this case to maintain legitimate membership in local cultural communities.

Another solution is to publicly show one's ability to excel in the typical activities of the mainstream American teenager: playing basketball well or being a king of skateboarding. By presenting themselves in this light, teenagers hope to be judged on their own merit rather than to be seen, even stigmatized, through the prism of their cultural difference. However, when stigma persists, in cases of harassment, some members of the group find protection in a practice that is far less valued by their school environment: self-defense.

O'Brien concludes that young American Muslims seek to be ordinary American youths, and that they share the concerns of the rest of their generation: listening to music, staying cool, engaging in romantic relationships, asserting their desire for independence and autonomy vis-à-vis adults. They are able to modulate their public self-presentation, to play with both the culture of the country where they grew up and that of their parents, to shift from religious activities to non-religious ones, to reinvent the former in new contexts while remaining faithful to what their kin define as the norm of the religious group. They seek to do all of this at once, developing a lifestyle different from both that of their parents and that of their non-Muslim peers, yet making sure that this difference is accepted and acceptable to each of these groups.

Authoring Oneself

It is no doubt regrettable that in this study, the author examines the members of the Legendz strictly in the context of the Islamic center. Considering that the book focuses on a small group, one would have liked to accompany the members of this group in their families and at school, and to know how they relate to different institutions, their past and their future prospects, those of their relatives, etc., because

from this there emerge particular social trajectories that play a central role in the construction of both ethnicity and religion.[2] How did the—primary or secondary—socialization of individuals unfold? These are the questions that come to mind on reading this study. However, because O'Brien chooses to focus on individuals as the almost sole authors of their identities, and because he succinctly presents the various actors with whom these individuals interact, it is difficult to understand how the interactions take place, and, more broadly, how the different forms of socialization unfold. Moreover, by not being placed in a broader historical and political context, the study takes on a somewhat timeless aspect. Lastly, this study focused on the "Muslim and/or American" dilemma fails to address either the uses of religion as ethnicity or ethnicity beyond religion, whether within or outside the group. Similarly, the young people studied are either "Muslims," "youths," or "Americans": The way their working-class identity shapes their relationship to mainstream society is not discussed, or barely so.

Despite these few remarks, O'Brien identifies a central dynamic that affects the descendants of Muslim immigrants not only in the United States, but also in Europe. The described quest for normality, which is not a desire to assimilate, these ways of solving dilemmas that seem irreconcilable at first, are also central to sociological studies on the descendants of immigrants in Europe and France. Thus, in her study *The Daily Lives of Muslims*, Nilüfer Göle seeks to understand how "ordinary Muslims" in Europe cope with the multiple polemics surrounding their presence in the society in which they live and in which they were often born; she shows that they have favored the emergence of an "alternative public space," which, from Islamic hip-hop to halal ham, contributes to an "Islamic styling of trends in modern life" that in no way contradicts European cultural values.[3] Overall, in Europe as in the United States, what characterizes these Muslim and more generally immigrant populations, is the desire to be the sole authors of their different social, ethnic, and religious identities.

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[2] See Leyla Arslan, *Enfants d'Islam et de Marianne : des banlieues à l'université*, Paris, PUF, 2010.

[3] Nilüfer Göle, *The Daily Lives of Muslims: Islam and Public Confrontation in Contemporary Europe*, London, Zed Books, 2017.

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