



Culture as Contestation: Planting Good Seeds in the Nation's Soil

ZARA KHAN

YAQEEN™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Dr. Zara Khan studied Political Science and Social Justice at the City University of New York, specializing in comparative political theory. Her main hope is to contribute to the Islamization of profane knowledge, particularly in education, politics, culture, and economics. Areas of interest include Islamic teaching philosophy, materialist epistemology, secularization, critical race, capitalism and neocolonialism, human rights and cosmopolitanism, ethical agriculture, and the metaphysics of technology. She is an educator and researcher, currently leading Yaqeen's Task Force on Liberalism and Philosophy.

***Disclaimer:** The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in these papers and articles are strictly those of the authors. Furthermore, Yaqeen does not endorse any of the personal views of the authors on any platform. Our team is diverse on all fronts, allowing for constant, enriching dialogue that helps us produce high-quality research.*

Copyright © 2020. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

Introduction

In 1999, the historic Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York City (one of the oldest and largest art museums in the United States) hosted *Sensation*, a collection of works by young British artists. The museum described the exhibit as “an attempt to define a generation of artists and their diverse artistic visions” with themes to be found in the works including “contemporary and pop culture, identity politics, feminism, cultural diversity and racism, mortality, memory, class, and social criticism.”¹ The Museum’s Art Director at the time, Arnold Lehman, said of *Sensation*: “Reflective of the contemporary artistic energy and creativity in Great Britain, the exhibition contains important work that provokes, challenges, and rewards the viewer.”²

Two years prior, several of the exhibit’s works had generated substantial controversy in London. These include Marcus Harvey’s *Myra*, a mosaic replication of the police photo of convicted child-murderer Myra Hindley; Damien Hirst’s *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, which featured a shark suspended in formaldehyde; Marc Quinn’s self-portrait, a frozen head made with pints of his own blood; and Sarah Lucas’ sexually explicit images and sculptures. At the Brooklyn Museum, however, *Sensation* harbored controversy on account of another work: *The Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Ofili, a work made of paper collaged pornographic images, oil paint, glitter, polyester resin, map pins, and elephant dung on linen. Then New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, offended as a Catholic, threatened to shut down funding for the Museum, stating that government subsidies cannot be used to desecrate religion.³ The city’s Catholic and Jewish leadership issued public statements of a similar sentiment, while Hillary Clinton (who would soon announce her candidacy for New York Senator), the New York Civil Liberties Union, *The New York Times*’ editorial board and numerous

¹ “Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection,” Brooklyn Museum, April 1999, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/683>.

² “Sensation: Young British Artists.”

³ “Sensation Sparks New York Storm,” BBC News, September 23, 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/455902.stm>.

celebrity personalities articulated defenses of the artwork on account of the cherished civil freedom of speech.⁴

What this incident at the intersection of race (the Madonna was represented as Black), religion, and representation unveils are several tensions that democracy in the United States must reckon with in its *iconomy of power*. According to political philosopher Susan Buck-Morss, iconomy is to be understood as the economy of image.⁵ In this rendering, economy is a metaphor, such that meaning (value) is relational and dependent on context. The icon provides direct, experiential access to enigmatic relationships of sovereign power. The concept of iconomy draws on the Aristotelian conception of economy as ‘household law,’ in which social cohesion is the precondition of political life (“implying relational orders of reciprocity and exchange”), wherein property and social inequality are prefigured.⁶

Buck-Morss’ definition of the iconomy of power is useful for our approach to the Brooklyn Museum’s *Sensation* controversy. Through the iconomy of Ofili’s *The Virgin Holy Mary*, we can directly and experientially discern the (at times) enigmatic relationships of sovereign power. In this case, the sovereign power’s protection of free speech in artistic depictions superseded its obligations to prevent and redress the offense and outrage of New York City’s Catholic and Jewish faith-based sensibilities. Social cohesion and reciprocity, the preconditions of political life, were divided into dissenting factions: those who believed religious iconography ought to be spared from subversive and disrespectful rendering, and those who believed an abstract freedom of expression (no matter how distastefully articulated) ought to outweigh the claims of religious groups in defense of their tradition. Social inequality favored the secular parties over the religious ones.

In *The Sunnah as Primordality*, Shaykh Abdalhakim Murad contends that Muslims today living amidst chaotic confusion far removed from nature, beauty,

⁴ Wikipedia, s.v. “Sensation (art exhibition),” last modified May 14, 2019, 13:13, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sensation_\(art_exhibition\)#New_York_City](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sensation_(art_exhibition)#New_York_City).

⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, “Visual Empire,” the website of Susan Buck-Morss, April 9, 2013, <http://susanbuckmorss.info/text/visual-empire/>.

⁶ Buck-Morss.

and saintly examples can nonetheless adhere to the prophetic *sunnah* in its outward and inward dimensions. Speaking of Western art in its present form, Murad states:

Perhaps this is why we Muslims find modern Western art particularly disagreeable and resistant to our contemplation: if art is the crystallisation of a civilisation, then to amble along the corridors of the Tate Gallery is to be confronted with a disturbing realisation. Christianity, when it was taken seriously by the cultural elite, produced significant works, which Muslims can recognise as beautiful, despite the inherent dangers of its love of the graven image. Christianity was sapped by the so-called enlightenment; and now that the enlightenment itself has run its course, the Western soul, as articulated by its most intelligent and most respected artistic representatives, has shifted its concerns to the human entrails. From the spirit, to the mind, to the body—and now to its waste products: a depressing trajectory, and one from which we avert our gaze.⁷

The Brooklyn Museum's *Sensation* exhibit provides a paradigmatic example of the most recent station in Western aesthetic descent from spirit, to mind, to body, to waste products. The picture is as dismal (if not more) when we survey the poetic arts, which today find their most prevalent and normative expression in the lyrics of popular music. The themes of today's pop culture poetry pertain only to lower *nafsi* or egotistical/appetitive desires. The most prominent of these are love of wealth, untethered sexuality and fornication, tyrannical power (i.e., power to seize and compel unjustly), and abuse of pleasure-maximizing intoxicants. Today's popular movies and television series promote a similar hierarchy of values. Our question becomes: what is the cultural imperative for American Muslims, given such a milieu?

The good word and the good tree

Allah the Exalted says in Surat Ibrahim: “Art thou not aware how God sets forth the parable of a good word? [It is] like a good tree, firmly rooted, with its branches towards the sky, yielding its fruit at all times by its Sustainer's leave. And [thus it is

⁷ Abdal Hakim Murad, “The Sunna as Primordality,” Masud.co.uk, April 1999, <http://masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/sunnah.htm>.

that] God propounds parables unto men so that they might bethink themselves [of the truth].”⁸ The good word is the message of the faith; it is the glad tiding, the promise to believers of Allah’s pleasure.

The good word is a life of faith itself. The believer herself *is* like a good tree, whose roots are firmly planted—in Allah and His Messenger (peace be upon him)—and whose good speech and good actions, good intentions and good works, good knowledge and good manners, emanate throughout family and society—branches spreading wide and reaching for the sky. After the essential element of ritual worship, good works are the extra deeds by which a servant draws near to Allah and receives Allah’s love. As relayed in the prophetic saying:

On the authority of Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him), who said that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him, said: “Allah (the Exalted) said: Whosoever shows enmity to someone devoted to Me, I shall be at war with him. My servant draws not near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have enjoined upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask [something] of Me, I would surely give it to him, and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant him it. I do not hesitate about anything as much as I hesitate about [seizing] the soul of My faithful servant: he hates death and I hate hurting him.”⁹

Our actions are the outer, visible portion of our tree of life: its branches and sweet, nourishing fruits. And our faith is what *grounds* us (gives us roots), providing our sustenance and determining our health and strength. Actions stem from faith. Belief determines and guides practice.

As the verses from Surat Ibrahim show, the good word, like a good tree, is firmly rooted with branches reaching the sky and yielding fruit all year long by Allah’s permission. However, just as good belief leads to good practice, so too does

⁸ Qur’an, 14:24–25, trans. Muhammad Asad.

⁹ Sahih al-Bukhari: 6502.

corrupt belief lead to corrupt practice. In the very next verse, Allah the Exalted says: “And the parable of a corrupt word is that of a corrupt tree, torn up [from its roots] onto the face of the earth, wholly unable to endure.”¹⁰ What lesson can these three verses from Surat Ibrahim teach us as we navigate culture in increasingly ungodly environs?

What is culture?

All human societies produce and enjoy distinct cultures. If we think of a culture as a tree, it is identifiable by its outermost manifestations—its customs, mores, aesthetics, and products. These are the habits, traditions, values, beauty standards, and sciences and arts of every type, including agriculture, animal husbandry, economy, politics, education, family life, cuisine, dress, music, dance, theatre, literature, poetry, etc. For Plato, artwork being mimetic, or imitative, of real-life objects, occupied a lower metaphysical stratum of life. The objects imitated are themselves lower than the ultimate realities, or *forms*, they depict. Forms can only be grasped through contemplation, and artworks pertaining to the lower soul, ought to be subjected to moral realities. Art, for Plato, was not the default realm of beauty.¹¹ Just like a tree, the outermost artistic extensions of a culture represent its firmness and health—in this case, its values. What are a society’s highest-ranking values? They will be reflected in the culture that is produced. And these cultural products and values are further rooted in and guided by the philosophy of that civilization (the tree’s roots). A society’s philosophy answers the most basic and universal human questions, including: What is life? What is the human being’s purpose? What ought we to aim at? What are the most important values that will help us achieve that aim? In this paper, I focus on factors and values to consider for American Muslim artistic cultural production within the broader American cultural arts.

Because a tree from root to fruit is a single organism, examining and tasting the culture reveals a great deal about the nature and foundations of that philosophical

¹⁰ Qur’an, 14:26.

¹¹ Plato, *Republic*, bks. 3, 4, and 10.

ground, and guides us to understand what nourishment—or *harm*, as the case may be—that culture is providing.

While “culture” is a modern behavioral concept,¹² classical Islamic jurists spoke about *‘urf* and *‘aada*: custom and usage. Dr. ‘Umar Faruq ‘Abd-Allah in “Islam and the Cultural Imperative” argues that Islamic civilization—a civilization that spanned from China to the Indian subcontinent, Somalia, Senegambia, Italy, Spain, and as historical evidence suggests, reached the Americas centuries prior to Columbus¹³—traditionally related to its sprawling variety of cultures in a distinctly healthy and productive way.¹⁴

‘Abd-Allah states: “In history, Islam showed itself to be culturally friendly and, in that regard, has been likened to a crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet, and life-giving but—having no color of their own—reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow. In China, Islam looked Chinese; in Mali, it looked African.”¹⁵ Culture for Muslims has always been understood as second nature. As such, Islamic law has always been known to implicitly endorse local cultures in their positive aspects. *‘Urf* as a legal category indicates that cultural forms have the weight of law: if it is *sound* culture that is neither prohibited nor explicitly harmful, then it enjoys the weight of law. The jurists were careful not to abuse or criminalize the sound aspects of local culture, for “to reject sound custom and usage was not only counterproductive, it brought...difficulty and...harm to people.”¹⁶ And this is because what people generally consider proper

¹² Pioneers in the early iterations of the modern concept of “culture” include Franz Boas, in his study of the relationship between man and land among the Inuit (see Ludger Müller-Wille, “Franz Boas [1858-1942],” *Arctic* 36, no. 2 [Jun. 1983]: 212–13); Margaret Mead in her Pacific ethnography that integrated Freudian analysis with cultural studies (see Lenora Foerstel and Angela Gilliam, *Confronting Margaret Mead: Scholarship, Empire, and the South Pacific* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992]); A. L. Kroeber in his study of *Style and Civilizations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963); and Ruth Benedict’s theoretical elaboration in *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934).

¹³ See Ivan Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* (New York: Random House, 1976); Abdullah Hakim Quick, *Deeper Roots: Muslims in the Americas and the Caribbean Before Columbus* (Nassau, Bahamas: AICCLA, 1990); and Clyde-Ahmad Winters, “Islam in Early North and South America,” *Al-Ittihad* 14, nos. 3–4 (Jul.–Oct. 1977).

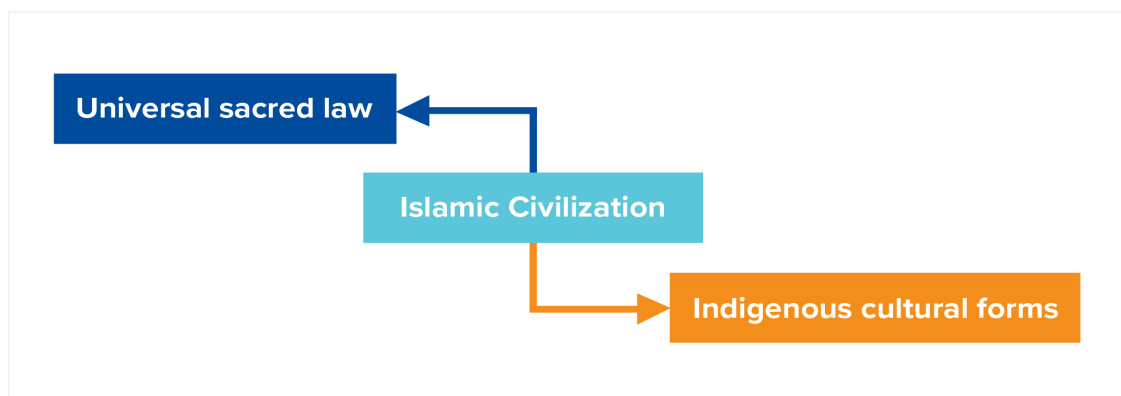
¹⁴ Umar Faruq ‘Abd-Allah, “Islam and the Cultural Imperative” (Nawawi Foundation, 2004).

¹⁵ ‘Abd-Allah.

¹⁶ ‘Abd-Allah, “Islam and the Cultural Imperative,” 6. “Sound” culture refers to that which is neither forbidden nor harmful.

“tends to be compatible with their nature and environment, serving essential needs and valid aspirations.”¹⁷

Indeed it is from the *sunnah* of our Prophet, may God’s peace and blessings be upon him, to acknowledge the emotional needs, tastes, and cultural inclinations of all who embrace his teachings. Islam as a civilization, historically, was the perfect balancing point between the universal sacred law (the crystal clear river) and the indigenous cultural forms of a people (the distinctive and colorful bedrock over which that river flows).



Culture is so powerful it not only represents the underlying foundations of a people, but it can also *change* those underlying foundations over time. Culture “governs everything about us and even molds our instinctive actions and natural inclinations.”¹⁸ The roots determine the outer manifestation, but the environment outside can also affect the deeper values. Our instincts, inclinations, desires, and values can be molded and influenced over time by actions and opinions that are culturally normative and prevalent.

Perhaps most importantly for developing responsible practice vis-à-vis culture today, we must understand the ways in which culture is rooted in expression, language, and symbol.¹⁹

¹⁷ ‘Abd-Allah, “Islam and the Cultural Imperative,” 4.

¹⁸ ‘Abd-Allah, “Islam and the Cultural Imperative.”

¹⁹ ‘Abd-Allah, “Islam and the Cultural Imperative.”

Popular culture today

If culture is rooted in expression, language, and symbol, what do the expressions, language, and symbols of popular culture today reveal about our deeper values? Examining today's American cultural production, it becomes apparent that the media of choice—the language and expressions most performed and consumed—include videos, poetry (found in song lyrics), movies, television series, and normative socialization habits. Some of the most potent and prevalent symbols of pop culture include money, cars, beautiful and hypersexualized women, romantic love, sex, specifically sex *without/outside* marriage (adultery and fornication), the idea to 'be yourself,' the idea 'Yolo,' meaning *you only live once*, socially unrestrained freedom, family as regressive to individual freedom and social progress, and religion as antiquated, among others. Further elaboration of these themes reveals some of our values in action as a society:

- We live in a products economy and all our products are dispensable. Nothing is to be reused, and reusable things are only to last for a very short time before being thrown away and replaced. These include coffee cups, water bottles, clothes based on ephemeral clothing trends, cosmetics, and electronics.
- More and more of our communities are virtual, as we slowly convert more of our communications to online and social media platforms. One of the gravest dangers of this—and this is not to advocate pulling the plug on technology or social media, but rather to promote responsible, moral, and intelligent use of technology—is that we spend more time on our appearances (i.e., profiles, selfies, check-ins, etc.) than on reflecting on souls for the purpose of self-improvement. A gaze that is turned outwards cannot simultaneously see inward. The latter is something that can only be done in quietude, away from the popular gaze, in intimate *dua* with Allah and/or with the guidance of a spiritual teacher. Virtual communities also don't have mechanisms by which we can hold one another accountable—something that families, *masaajid* and churches, and neighborhoods *can* do.

- Sexual relations, according to pop culture, are completely unfettered. There is no restriction on sexuality other than mutual consent, and this has become the absolute norm. Various other forms of cultural expression, habit, and symbol enforce this. Anyone with a smartphone and the inclination can engage in fornication or adultery. This ‘freedom’ is actually the removal of our mutual *responsibility* to enjoin the keeping of truth and patience in adversity.²⁰ Popular poetry, found in song lyrics, promotes a dismal relationship cycle (or worse, a hookup cycle) in which: a romantic or sexual attraction is sparked → a felicitous coupling occurs → heartbreak (or recycling of partner without heartbreak) ensues, due to infidelity (or some other power to exercise preference) → a new partner helps to soothe the distaste and suffering of the previous cycle/a romantic or sexual attraction is sparked → the cycle perpetuates *ad infinitum*.
- All cultural notions of power are material; that is, they involve power over something tangible—like people, money, objects, territory, markets, etc. It is the power of conquest, specifically the conquest to fulfill and maximize pleasure, whether that pleasure be buying beautiful clothes, trying a new makeup trend, smoking or drinking, or being in yet *another* romantic relationship. Or, at the level of socioeconomic priorities, the power to achieve upward economic mobility, financially take over a competing company, or invade and occupy a foreign sovereign country.
- There is no concept in our popular culture that *true* power is spiritual power. That power lies not in *fulfilling* pleasures, but in *transcending* being ruled by them. There is no concept in pop culture that true power is power *over* the lower self; only power (*of* the *nafs*) over others is considered impressive. Religion is considered the opposite of freedom because it can hold you back from what is seen as being your “true” self in one way or another. Increasingly, the only occasion in which pop culture affords value to religious experience is when its expression is somehow being turned on its head. Examples include a gay church, or “finding God” in places and experiences that are inimical to what God commands.

²⁰ Qur’an, 103:3.

But these are only the negative aspects of pop culture. Above all, pop culture is a *field of contestation*. Culture can be a battleground of competing values. While we live in a largely throw-away society, at the same time there are movements to reduce waste, to cultivate urban farms, and to recycle and end the use of plastic bags. While many people have switched to virtual communities and social media communication, so too are there community associations, food co-ops, and other initiatives to restore more traditional forms of community. Just as sexuality has become an appetite completely swollen out of proportion, as well as anonymous and completely untethered from the familial obligations that Allah the Exalted intends, so too do people continue to get married, aim at monogamy, and uphold the sanctity of new life. Poetically, while scores of recording artists extol fornication, sexual violence, sensationalized alcoholism, and crass individualism, Damien Marley counters the current by promoting a godly life, marriage, and raising babies; Kanaan defines life's struggle as taking care of your family, neighbors, and nation; and Sevin raps about "being in love" with God "unrepentantly" and how the only enemy that needs to be defeated is his inner (i.e., lower) self. Culture is a contest, so both sets of competing values in these examples constitute it. However, certain values are more normalized than others; i.e., one finds majority and minority positions. We find that an overwhelming quantity, and increasingly invasive in its forms (i.e., internet-based), of cultural production is secular and promotes *nafsi* excess. But this same cultural landscape *can* and *ought* to become more spiritualized and upright. In this land of good trees and bad trees, we ought to be planting far more good seeds.

Planting good seeds in the battleground of values

In order to map a course of action for planting good cultural seeds, it is first crucial to survey the values and underlying philosophies of life that nourish the cultural products all around us.

Pop Culture Product	Value / Philosophy
Cash/money Never-ending acquisition of products for consumption	Greed for more and more Lack of charity (global supply chain) Fear of death → No belief in afterlife
Power = material	Justice as law of the strong (political realism) Earthly kingdom > Afterlife
Virtual communities	No accountability to others → Self-invention (vs. co-constitution) The self as Sovereign (all rights; no responsibilities)
Pleasure-driven YOLO	I ought → I want No consequential belief in afterlife
Religion ≠ Freedom	Freedom <i>from</i> submission, not freedom <i>through</i> submission; indifference to God
Unfettered sexuality	All of the above + Reign of the <i>nafs</i>

The above chart indicates some of the roots of popular culture today. Our societal drive to acquire maximal monetary wealth, coupled with our never-ending acquisition of products for temporary consumption, indicates that we have become a people of insufferable greed. Our habits are an example of the divine description in Surat At Takathur of those obsessed with greed for more and more.²¹ Our runaway materialism is also associated with a lack of charity within the human family. A cursory study of the global supply chain (extraction, production,

²¹ Qur'an, 102:1.

distribution, consumption, and disposal)²² shows how nations of people must be made peripheral to the human civilizational story and suffer unlivable poverty so that others in the metropolises of the world may become central actors, living affluently and consuming conspicuously. On the level of spiritual psychology, rampant consumerism and love of wealth reveal a fear of death.²³ As the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him, said: "If the son of Adam had a valley full of gold, he would like to have two valleys, for nothing fills his mouth except dust. And Allah forgives whoever repents to Him."²⁴ For it is only when we think we will live forever (or that what follows earthly life is inconsequential) that we mistakenly resort to building earthly kingdoms that we believe might preserve us after death.²⁵

The cultural norm that all power is material has deep roots in Western political thought (though this strand has always been contested). In Plato's *Republic*, the character of Thrasymachus answers Socrates' main question (*What is justice?*) with the idea that justice is the interest of the powerful. In *Gorgias*, the character of Callicles similarly maintains that it is natural law for the strong to dominate the weak. Later political philosophers in the Western tradition who continued the *political realism* of this position include Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke. Political realism's underlying philosophy of life privileges the earthly life over the afterlife. However, as Muslims, we know that all earthly power (no matter how sprawling or impressive) is only conferred by the Most Powerful, and is, ultimately, a spiritual test.

We find in virtual communities many opportunities to spread good words and provoke good works. But the sordid side of this young phenomenon is the lack of accountability. Virtual communities (activated through smart technology, social media, and the internet) provide a cloak of anonymity for those whose whisperings

²² See "The Story of Stuff," The Story of Stuff Project, written by Annie Leonard, Louis Fox, and Jonah Sachs, directed by Louis Fox (Free Range Studios, December 2007), <https://storyofstuff.org/movies/story-of-stuff/>.

²³ For further elaboration of this point, see Zara Khan, "Personhood and Tech: Moral Accountability in the Smartphone Era," *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research* (forthcoming).

²⁴ *Sahih al-Bukhari*: 6439.

²⁵ Qur'an, 104:1–3.

require it. They feed the mammoth delusion that we invent ourselves: filtering faces; editing speech acts; adding and subtracting people from our social circles at will; etc. Rather, human beings constitute one another in a way that cannot nor ought be detangled. Virtual communities can easily eclipse the fullness of our social nature for those who are not vigilant.

The broader context that nurtures these cultural products and processes is the riotous rank that pleasure enjoys. It is no hyperbole to claim that much of our popular culture celebrates decadence and hedonism. Ethics philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that, over the course of philosophical and moral permutations, the syllogism for practical actions transformed from the traditional *I ought* to the materialist *I want*.²⁶ Whereas practical action previously had to stem from some moral imperative, lower desires and personal preferences alone now provide sufficient justifications for the decisions we take, without regard to the (or *any*) moral law. This philosophy of life helps to explain the popular mantra *yolo*! Signifying that *you only live once*, the phrase is uttered in contexts where caution will be thrown to the wind, and living a full life means liberating oneself from traditional restraints. Such motivation bypasses not only a belief in an afterlife (ultimate accountability), but also descends another level to disregard immediate consequences.

In popular cultural expressions, we find that religion, religious leaders and practitioners, and even prophets are often caricatured or reviled. When these archetypes are presented as subverting traditional religious norms, they are celebrated for being forward-thinking. To provide a commonplace example, the Abrahamic faiths all prohibit fornication, adultery, and homosexual acts—and these prohibitions violate the unfolding liberal sexual freedoms of our age. Rather than problematize, think through, and reformulate what tolerance and pluralism mean in a shared and contested terrain of *adyaan* (plural of *din*), religion is made to bend to prevailing sexual mores. Good religion will evolve with the river of time in its conception of human sexuality; bad religion will remain recalcitrant, antiquated,

²⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 277.

and unfree. At its roots, this debate makes clear that popular culture is indifferent to the Creator, and will be determined by *human qua human* deliberations alone.

The cultural norm of unfettered sexuality contains within it many of the motivations and values elucidated above, and resolutely affirms the reign of the *nafs*, or lower appetites. As Shaykh Mokhtar Maghroui succinctly stated, freedom in a secular sense is the freedom of the *nafs* from the *khalq* (creation); but freedom for us (Muslims) is freedom of the *qalb* (the intuitive substance that can know Allah or become corrupt) from the *nafs*.²⁷ A political guess as to why public regulations on sexuality have been relinquished over time is that increasing unfreedom, specifically tyrannies and juridifications of market and state, risk massive revolt and overthrow—to which unhinged sexual freedom provides a palliative sedation.

If these are some of the roots of harmful popular culture fruits, what is the implication? What *ought* we do?

Our cultural imperative

Before the advent of Islam, poetry was the dominant mode of cultural expression of the Arabs of Mecca. With the advent of Islam, Allah the Exalted sent down a book from Himself in superior poetic form that responded directly to the existent culture of the time. In that way, the Prophet, may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him, enabled the first Muslims to refine the existing culture, speaking the truth as opposed to boasting, emphasizing prophetic lineage as opposed to tribal lineage, celebrating acts of good deeds as opposed to celebrating carnal escapades. For example, let us consider the distinction between the pre-Islamic *Jahiliy* and Qur'anic conceptions of time. The characteristic philosophy of life of *Jahiliy* Arabs was a pessimistic nihilism, with no notion of a Hereafter. Human existence on earth was in the hands of the "tyrannical sway" of a "powerful master": *dahr*, or time. Allah the Exalted says of them: "They say: there is nothing but this present

²⁷ Mokhtar Maghraoui, "*Dhunoob* and Freedom of the *Qalb*," in "Purification of the Hearts," vol. 1 (Zawiyah Productions, 2004), CD.

life of ours; we die and we live, and it is only ‘Time’ that destroys us.”²⁸ *Dahr* had various other names: *zaman* (time), *‘asr* (age), *ayyam* (days), *‘awd* (time), but the underlying idea was always that an abstract *fate* (what Machiavelli referred to as the Roman goddess *Fortuna* and what today’s culture calls “the universe”) decides all human fortune and suffering. As Toshihiko Isuztsu shows in his semantic study of the Qur’anic worldview, “no one, not even the most valiant warrior, the wisest sage, can escape from the blind and capricious tyranny of *dahr*...a dark conception of human destiny.”²⁹ The *Jahiliy* Arabs subscribed to a dismal determinism. As opposed to this, of course, the Qur’anic worldview places all of human life under God’s will and control (see Figures 1 and 2 below). Death is *not* the terminal point of all existence, but *khulud* is the eternal life:

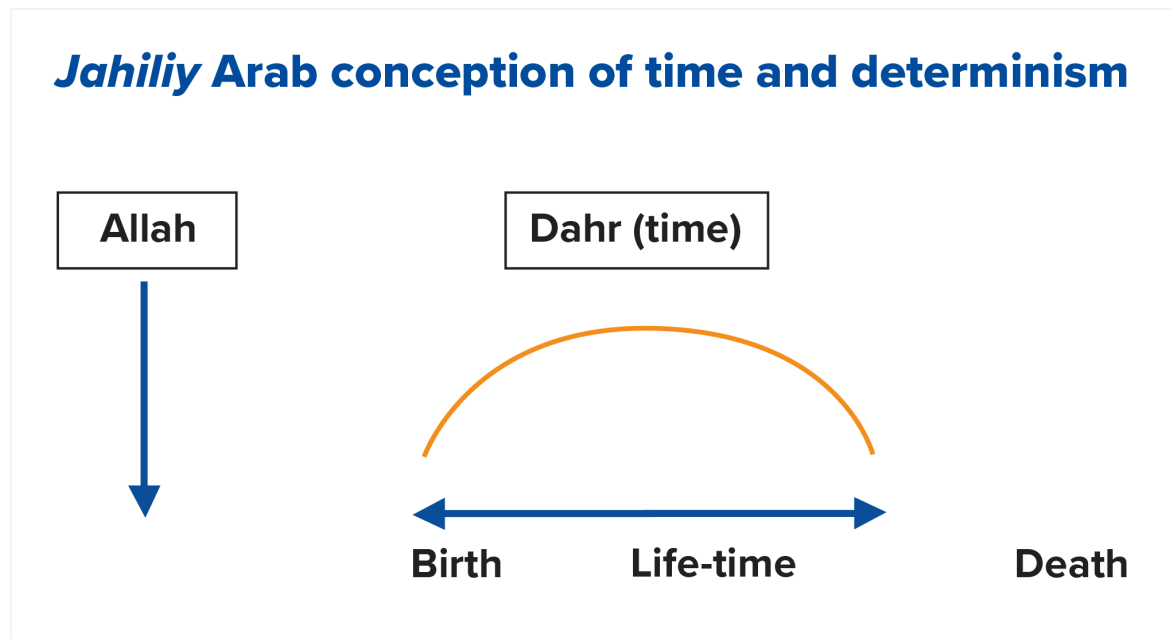


Figure 1: *Jahiliy* Arab conception of time and determinism

²⁸ Qur’an, 45:23.

²⁹ Toshihiko Izutsu, “Ontological Relation Between God and Man,” in *God and Man in the Qur’an: Semantics of the Qur’anic Weltanschauung* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2002), 133–139.

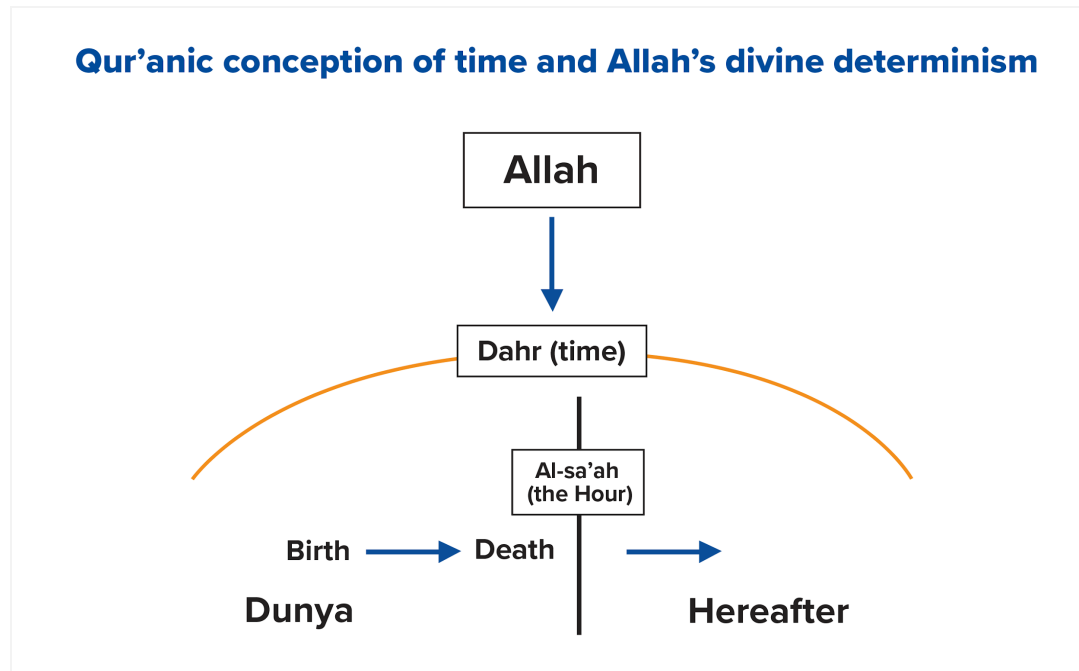


Figure 2: Qur'anic conception of time and Allah's divine determinism. Notice that *dahr* is subservient to Allah³⁰

The Prophet, may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him, his companions and subsequent generations of Muslims in other lands created new value-based versions of various cultures. Giovanni Herran, in reviewing Muhsin al-Musawi's *The Islamic Republic of Letters*, argues that Islamic civilization produced "a centuries-long process of intellectual life spanning multiple geographic, political, and ethnic domains...[in which] cultural productions represent not only a continuation of a long-standing tradition...but also the emergence of a self-fueling and dynamic 'literary-republic' independent of emerging, decaying, or shifting political centers."³¹ Islamic scholarly texts, assemblies, networks, and extensive travels infused lexicography and literature with the consequences of an expansively open economy of ideas.

³⁰ Adapted from Izutsu, 138.

³¹ See Giovanni Herran, "Reviewed Work: The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction by Muhsin J. al-Musawi," *Comparative Literature Studies* 55, no. 1 (2018), 237–241. See also Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2015).

The imperative, therefore, is that Muslims have to produce culture today as we did in ages past. We have the obligation to plant good seeds in our land but also to be good trees—firmly rooted in faith, unaffected by seasonal changes in our steadfast postures and fruitful in benefitting all (Muslims and non-Muslims alike). For example, Al-Busirir’s famous *Burda* praise-poem for the Prophet, may Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him, not only sparked dozens of subsequent imitations but also blasted the prevailing discourse and practices of poetic devices—while praising Allah’s beloved Messenger.³² To this end, one can’t help but wonder: where are our poets creating 21st-century renditions of the *burda*? Where are our filmmakers, playwrights, and artists who produce culture in a way that is culturally *relevant*; i.e., as American as it is Muslim. Works like *The Honest Struggle* by Director Justin Mashouf (2017) and the calligraffiti of Gabril Garay (see Figure * below) provide fruitful models of what American Muslim art can and ought to do. Our Muslim inheritance must employ beautiful cultural production in forms legible to American culture if we are to fulfill our obligation to transfer faith and knowledge to future generations.

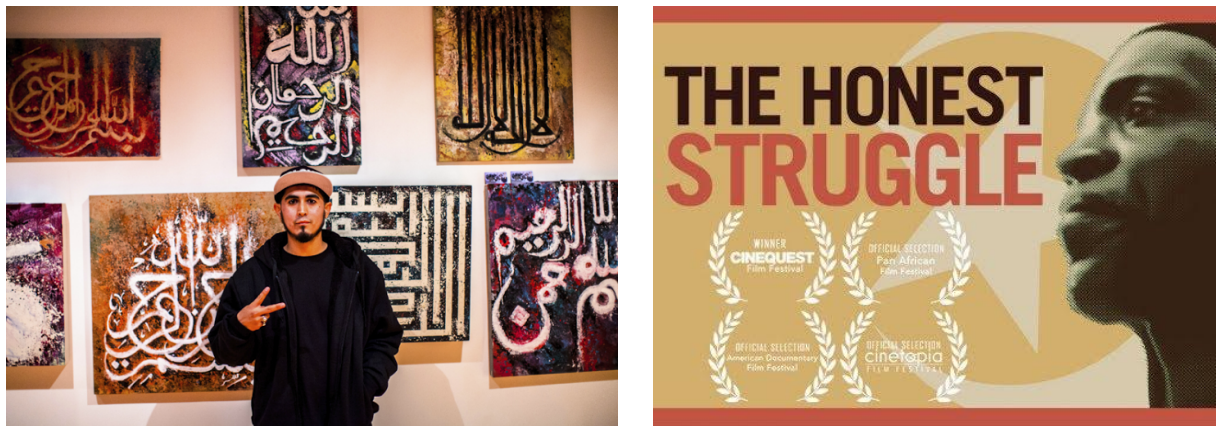


Figure 3: Gabril Garay (left), mixed media artist, pictured with his blended urban and Islamic calligraphic pieces.³³ *The Honest Struggle* (right) 2017 documentary.

³² al-Musawi.

³³ See Umm Issa, “Gabril’s Art (Mixed Media Artist),” Islamic Art Expo, March 23, 2013, <https://www.islamicartexpo.com/gabrils-art-mixed-media-artist/archives/03-2014> and “Calligraffiti: How Artist Gabriel Garay Blends Graffiti and Calligraphy,” Scripts ’n’ Scribes, March 2, 2018, <https://www.scriptsnscribes.com/blogs/2018/3/21/calligraffiti-how-artist-gabriel-garay-blends-graffiti-and-calligraphy>.

The United States has a very rich literary-cultural tradition. At least some Muslims today have to produce brilliant novels and novellas, comic books, and series. At least some Muslims have to produce great blends of Eastern and Western, Native and Settler architectural forms in order to enrich the American landscape with structural pronouncements of *tawhidi* beauty. The United States has an incredibly deep and luxuriant culture of performance poetry, another site for Muslims to infuse the shared American cultural landscape with beautiful Qur'anic values.

When Prophet Moses, upon him be peace, faced the Pharaoh and his magicians, they threw down their staffs, which then turned into snakes. Moses was afraid, but Allah the Exalted told him to throw down his staff as well. When he did, his staff turned into an even more powerful snake that consumed them and was victorious. Through the Prophet Moses' pronouncement of Allah's Oneness *in the cultural language of the Pharaoh*, truth was established and their falsehood abolished.³⁴ If today's magicians are creating illusions that venerate so many false gods—the false god of the Self, of money, of pleasure, etc.—there *ought* and must be an active practical effort by Muslims to normalize the values and truth of Islam in society. It is a *fard kifayah*, or communal obligation, on our part to produce culture in a way that enjoins good and forbids evil (*amr bil-maruf wa nahy anil munkar*).

In so doing, we have to produce culture in a way that avoids both cultural predation and cultural apostasy. Cultural predation means to burn and obliterate what is distinctive about a culture. Many famous classical Muslim jurists—‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Baghdadi, Al-Sarakhsi, Al-Shatibi, Al-Tusili—all declared it unjust to forbid the unique characteristics of culture, provided they were not harmful.³⁵ Cultural apostasy is also not a viable option for our dignified participation in social life.³⁶ Cultural apostasy, an expectation that is unfortunately often heaped upon reverts and converts to Islam, is the idea that you have to disavow, abandon, and

³⁴ Qur'an, 7:104–118.

³⁵ ‘Abd-Allah, “Islam and the Cultural Imperative.”

³⁶ See Muhammad Khalifa, Omar Suleiman, James Wright, and Nimo M. Abdi, “Ancestral Knowledge and American Muslims: Rooting Cultural Resistance in Islam,” *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, February 21, 2019, https://yaqeeninstitute.org/muhammad-khalifa/ancestral-knowledge-and-american-muslims-rooting-cultural-resistance-in-islam/#.XkGJ_yNOIPY.

disassociate from aspects of your culture because you are Muslim. All praise and thanks be to Allah who guided us to Islam. But our *cultures* are unmistakably surviving on American soil. The only way the tree of our faith can take root in this *our* land is if we fully acknowledge *this* soil.

Our community ought to make a concerted effort to manage our expectations and goal-setting with regard to career choices. Professionals in medicine, engineering, and Information Technology are healthy to the life of any community but in surplus, they may become carcinogenic. What we need to ensure, however, is that we look favorably upon those whose life's work involves graphic design, production, animation, literature and other writing, poetry, criticism, business, and philanthropy, as well as education that can think outside the normative circuit. How else can we hope to demonstrate an alternative to the harm that reaches further and deeper each day through cultural media?

Today we find many free clinics established by Muslims in America. These highlight the Islamic value of *ihsaan*, or benevolence, and are a good example of an attempt to create culture through specialized knowledge and charitable endowments. Let us turn with the same spirit toward artistic cultural production. 'Abd-Allah states that the "intelligent use of indigenous language has been an aspect of Muslim culture wherever it flourished."³⁷ Poetry is an indigenous language in this land. Where are the Muslim poets today, who like Hassan ibn Thabit, can sling rhymes fiercer than the arrows of our enemies? And did his poetry not *please* the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him, tremendously? Would *our* poetry today speaking about Allah, His Messenger, the correct philosophy and goodly values of life not also please him and stake a claim in his legacy? If we produce good words today to enjoin the good and forbid the evil in our *shared* cultural space, wouldn't Allah bless us with branches that reach the sky and fruit that grows in every season?

And Allah knows best.

³⁷ 'Abd-Allah, "Islam and the Cultural Imperative," 8.