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Ruth Illman

Anmeldelse

Jonas Otterbeck: The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music. In the series Music and Performance in Muslim Contexts. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. 220 pages.

Something has happened to the Islamic music scene since the turn of the twenty-first century. A gradual change towards increased diversity seems to be underway: new forms of musical expressions, including instruments and popular musical tropes, and new kinds of musicians who are stylish and savvy perform their music to enthusiastic audiences, who dig their idols and share their concert experiences in social media as fans all over the world do, but with an added, faith-based flavour. This music is not merely intended to entertain and sell, even if it is orchestrated by the commercial laws of the global music industry – it also has “the goal of being perceived and accepted as Islamic” (p. 4). By experimenting with sounds, formats and styles of performance, the agents of *Islamic pop* or *pop-nashid* (nashid being an old, Arabic term for Islamic song) challenge conceptions of legitimate Islamic art, pushing the limits of what can be regarded as purposeful, ethical and authentic ways of expressing Islam in music.

In his recent book, Jonas Otterbeck explores this dynamic musical context based on rich ethnographic data (interviews, participant fieldwork) and multi-media analyses, placed in dia-

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logue with central concepts and analytical frameworks from classical Islamic theology and philosophy, ethnomusicology and various strands of the study of contemporary religion and culture. Otterbeck aims to shed light on how the making, marketing and performance of this new music genre challenges and changes Islamic discourses in the plural. He studies how Islamic beliefs are represented in songs and music videos, paying special attention to “the importance of performed masculinity to the Islamic pop persona” and how the commercial company at the heart of his investigation, Awakening, and the artists attached to it engage with Islamic discourse in practice – in short, the “contemporary development of possible Islamic expressions” in music (p. 6).

Awakening started some twenty years ago in London as an Islamic media company, focusing on music production and publishing that would be both entertaining and educating, inspiring social change and committed to a vision of fusing “creative flair with Islamic values.” (p. 23). During the first years, the company struggled to find its place, its voice, and its way of making Islamic pop. Over the years, through trials and errors, Awakening has grown into an influential multinational corporation that is taken seriously as an ethically informed Islamic music actor, a sought-after partner for charity events and concerts worldwide with Islamic superstars such as Maher Zain, Raef, and Harris J in their cadre.

Otterbeck describes the general turn in emphasis from jurisprudence to ethics in contemporary Islamic discourses, that is, the wish to seek out practices that are ethically purposeful and negotiated in contemporary contexts rather than merely following rules as of old. This is an active relationship with tradition, being inspired and engaged by Islam but also actively innovating its various expressions and welcoming ambiguities. As in many other religious traditions today (I see clear parallels to my own research on Judaism), music seems to be at the forefront of change, offering empowerment that is not necessarily radical. By analysing the viewpoints and actions of the Awakening people, Otterbeck gives a compelling example of what this turn amounts to in practice in the music industry. The artists and managers take their relationship to Islam seriously, but equally so their wish to break new ground musically and find new ways of promoting Islamic lifestyles. This results in a constant balancing act where every step is taken with great care so as not to lose re-

spectability – or money – in creating an alluring aesthetics. How do you come across as faith-driven and value-based in the consumer-culture market? The first recordings of pop-nashid were safely (male) vocals-only, but gradually the soundscapes have expanded to include drums and (later) other instruments and sophisticated recording technology. Female voices, however, are still rare in this genre.

At times, the lyrics come confusingly close to secular love songs, albeit always addressed at Allah, the Prophet, a mother, wife or child, brothers and sisters in faith, and positive values such as generosity, helpfulness, thankfulness and participation. No sex, drugs or self-pity allowed! Music videos and a social media presence is quintessential for any music business today, and so *Awakening* relies on competitive marketing strategies to find just the right way of presenting their artists and their personae to the public: modestly but trendily dressed, handsome men, who bring joy and comfort to the needy, spread love and hope with their broad smiles (but not dancing or posing).

This brings Otterbeck to the most intriguing and ground-breaking theme of the book: “Performing an Ethical Islamic Masculinity.” The *Awakening* artists have become role models for a new kind of soft Islamic masculinity, promoting religiously motivated ethical selves in videos, lyrics, and social media. The modern, mild-mannered and tidy manliness promoted is formed as a contrast both to “traditional” and to Western normative assumptions of Islamic masculinity. These men are not just handsome and gallant, they are also loving fathers, sons and husbands who do house chores; they are professionals on all walks of life in modern societies, they embrace ethnic diversity and care for the environment, show their sensitivity and affection openly, but within carefully demarcated boundaries. No inter-gender touching, no evocative movements so as not to sexualise the bodies of these men, whose relation to the fandom that inevitable grows around them is strained.

The theoretical framework applied in Otterbeck’s analysis include many central theoretical frames, such as Christopher Partridge’s studies of religion and popular culture, Tia DeNora’s field-defining research on the power of music in everyday life, the active concept of musicking introduced by Christopher Small etc. While these conceptualisations bring relevant illumination to the analysis, one could have wished for a more coherent and cohesive use of theories throughout the book, to bring

out its implications for the broader research field of religion and music more fully. This is a minor remark, however, as the study is an excellent example of how popular culture can be taken seriously in the study of contemporary religion, not merely dismissed as shallow and commercial in a world where an increasing numbers of people find words for the religious sentiments, hope, identification, and guidance – in short: existential soundtracks – in pop music.

Otterbeck knows the Islamic theology of music in-depth. He shows that music, song and especially the use of instruments have always been a contested issue in Islamic discourses and thus, there is far more flexibility and openness to interpretation than one could assume. The analysis of traditional Islamic discourse is combined with an explorative and engaging methodology. Following Graham Harvey, he defines himself as a guest in the field, who was visiting the Awakening people for quite some time, bringing something of himself to the encounter. Thus, Otterbeck sails free from the unconstructive dichotomy of insider/outsider that seems unable to meaningfully describe his interaction with a field, where he was insider and outsider, in the field and out of it all at once. As a scholar of Islam and an amateur musician, Otterbeck was quite at home in the tour bus, backstage and in the concert audiences but also during the serious discussions of Islamic practice, jurisprudence and ethics initiated with the Awakening people, many of whom were academically trained and knowledgeable in classical Islamic sources.

Throughout the book, Otterbeck navigates the vast and variegated field without resorting to simplifying arguments about what Islam is, what Islamic legal discourse has to say about music or how Islamic pop is expressed and understood in London, Cairo, Istanbul or Kuala Lumpur. Overarching analytical categories are understood as parts of lived realities and organic relationships between persons, places, and practices through which they come to life. This anti-essentialist and performative approach to Islam is vital for the design of the study. It opens a rich understanding of a diverse field without diminishing the actors and arguments by forcing them into neat categories easily labelled as liberal or traditional, *halal* or *haram* – letting different apprehensions come to the fore without succumbing to the temptation of proposing divisions that are not supported by the research participants themselves.

Otterbeck suggests that the reader listens to the music while reading, to make it all more real. I spent a lot of time listening to the songs via my streaming service, but only when I looked at the music videos as well did the Islamic pop scene materialise for me. Engaging with music today is so much more than listening, as Otterbeck points out (p. 114); it is looking, experiencing, sensing, and engaging. I warmly recommend this well-written, analytically deep, engaged, and timely book to everyone interested in religion and the arts in general, music and Islam in particular, as well as religion and change more broadly.