

**Selflessness and Self-Promotion in Muslim Civil Society:**

**Questions of Identity in a Community Under Stress.**

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**“Abu Hureira reported that the Prophet (may Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him) said that one of the seven types of people who are given shade on the Day of Judgment are those who give charity so secretly that their left hand does not know what his right hand has given.”**

**(Bukhari. 24:11)**

**Abu Hureira reported that the Prophet said: Each and every day every bone of the fingers must engage in charity: to help a man in riding his beast or in lifting his provisions to the back of the animal, this is charity; a good word and every step which one takes in walking over to prayer is charity; and guiding someone on the way is charity.”**

**(Bukhari: 56:72)**

**Really are important the communication skills for individual, especially Muslim...We should use the modern methodology in communication with Qur’anic sources ...I hope to find an institute concerning of this matter like the Dale Carnegie Institute but from Qur’anic sources...**

**Thank you....**

**Jamal D February 13th, 2009**

## **Introduction**

With resources increasingly scarce, and often in the place of monetary support, consultants and foundations offer management training and marketing advice (often called “Best Practices”) to help US civil society organizations to compete for dollars and other forms of support. In order to survive in an increasingly media-saturated environment, community groups are advised to employ marketing techniques such as “branding” and “story telling,” to increase “market share.” In this way, despite the importance of partnership building and collaboration, grassroots charities and faith-based nonprofits are soon forced into competition with community partners as they increase marketing and other forms of self-promotion. As a result, marketing and internet-based discourse may also serve to standardize, desacralize and decontextualize faith-based charitable services for the consuming public.

R L Moore, in “Selling God” (1999) illustrates how market logic may both propel and sustain effective faith-based advocacy campaigns but also hollow out the transformative character of religious understanding through a secularization of religion. Such critical studies of Christian practice in a consumer culture are also relevant to other religious communities facing the same social forces internally and externally.

Studies of Internet based Islam (Bunt, 1999 etc) have also explored the negative impact of new technologies on religious authority, though discussion of this authority is mostly narrowly confined to the ‘Ulama scholars, without including faith-based, civil society leadership such as Muslim charitable and social service providers. But it cannot be denied that the increasing role of Virtual Islam and Market-Islam shapes and supports a “customer-driven” religious culture that impacts both religious authority and faith-based leadership in complex ways.

As internet-based “ijtihad” interpretation becomes a participatory process, competing and disparate narratives create a myriad of disconnected local subcultures in hybrid, public/private spaces that Jon Anderson (2003, p. 57) frames as a creative, “in-between” social space between elite and folk -- functioning as “intermediating step for civil society.” In addition to supporting a great range of diverse voices and viewpoints, this intermediate “safe” space seems to engage Muslim women at a new level and may promise a newly prominent platform for African American Muslims (Starrett 2003). However the internet has also

infamously and alarmingly served extremists as well as the recent wave of “moderate” or nesting Muslim Americans. Further study should examine how this virtual space may strengthen or supplant local associations, promote contention or consensus, affect the formation of social capital, and how drastically this technology will impact the direction of Muslim community development as it has for example the business of print media. Suffice it to say that, though quiet, these accelerating changes are an unprecedented “radicalization of modernity” as Ulrich Beck calls it, “bypassing political debates and decisions in parliaments and governments.”

### **New York City Muslim Public Space—Field and Fortress**

New York City is home to more than 600,000-800,000 Muslims, including sizeable populations of South Asians, African Americans (approximately 25% of each); other immigrant communities include Africans, Turks, Bosnians, Albanians and European Americans. This Muslim community is one of the largest in the nation with over 250 mosques in New York City alone; yet it is strikingly resource poor, with struggling institutions and few faith-based social services of its own.

In general, public participation in Muslim civil society has been fragmented, occasional, local, and often ethnic-based. This finding seems to mirror wider trends of civic disengagement throughout the US as explored by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone in America* (2000). Moreover, though Muslim rates of volunteerism are roughly parallel to or slightly above wider US trends, overall rates of volunteer service in New York State rank last of all states with 18 percent in 2008. (<http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/rankings.cfm>)

At the same time, rates of support for Islamic charities are also significantly reduced, largely in consequence of ongoing attacks on Muslim leadership by media and self-appointed “experts” operating as vigilantes, along with the legally vague designation of hundreds of leading Islamic groups and Muslim individuals as “Co-Conspirators” in ongoing investigations. Both the overlapping religious and the faith-based civil society sectors have been struggling for survival.

Even before 9/11, studies (CAIR 2001) estimated that less than 30 percent of US Muslims were regular mosque attendees, and more recent studies (CAIR 2006) indicate that less than 22 percent of women attend regularly. These studies tend to be overly optimistic (Gallup 2009). Neither women nor youth are well accommodated by these civil society institutions.

In contrast, the Muslim public sphere has developed a strong mirror image (or alternative self image) on the internet-- with facebook, blogs and other new media both supplanting and supporting face to face relationships. And at the same time, mosques have not been “written off” by the Muslim public. Even for infrequent attendees, imams provide important counseling and arbitration services (NAIF Conference 2010) as well as marriages and funeral services. Moreover, a recent community survey we conducted (Sayeed, Carroll, 2010) indicated that 89 percent of 408 diverse NYC Muslim respondents interviewed at community events, student group meetings as well as at mosques, would like to see increased mosque-based social services, and young Muslims agreed with this expectation despite their relative disenfranchisement.

Based in New York City, our organization Muslim Consultative Network (MCN) comprises over 200 Muslim activists, health and social service professionals, researchers and university students working to advance the interests of the diverse Muslim community. With a very small staff and a network of volunteers, MCN works to strengthen community, promote mutual support, bridge mosque and professional sectors and provide community education to a local community bearing the brunt of an anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant backlash of the post 9/11 era. Post 9/11 fear and intimidation have become deeply entrenched.

With many members active in social services, health and education, MCN works to build partnerships for civic engagement, meeting with officials, supporting large public Ramadan events or the Muslim Day Parade, to expand services such as our health education programs and enhance existing advocacy efforts on issues ranging from domestic violence to promoting Muslim holidays in the public schools, or defending the reputations of local Muslims smeared in the media. Somewhat symbolic of this community role, in 2009 MCN put together the first-ever NYC Muslim community directory with 60 pages and over 600 entries.

However as a faith-based organization with limited financial support, MCN is a loose structure that overlaps many other leadership and community groups with diverse ethnic and professional focus, and members of these groups may work to advance their own group interests as well as that of MCN. In some cases partnerships are with local mosques and Islamic schools; in other cases they are with chapters of national organizations such as CAIR, MPAC, and ICNA. In part for this reason, civil liberties and interfaith

dialogue partnerships we have helped organize are not always strongly identified with MCN but with the full range of co-sponsors, especially those individuals who are most charismatic or politically influential.

Returning to our main theme: MCN stakeholders now include funders and potential funders; as well as an increasingly active board of local leaders and nonprofit managers. To increase the potential for funding, this board is now prioritizing more “effective marketing” for MCN-led community and mosque events; more effective use of websites, self-promotion on Facebook pages, Twitter, and blogs; and enhanced outreach to such sectors as youth and media.

Few NYC mosques have active internet sites, and many have no full time staff and are difficult to reach by phone. Younger Muslims have often called for mosques to adopt more sophisticated techniques in order to appeal to the younger demographic. Responding to this perceived need, MCN members have called for mosque leadership to make use of the skills of the younger congregants in developing these resources. Similarly, as a civil society leader, MCN is also supporting the ongoing “Women Friendly Mosque” campaign organized by Women in Islam ([www.womeninislaminc.org](http://www.womeninislaminc.org)) as well as the “Best Practices” training for Muslim nonprofits and mosques as framed by Muslim Advocates (March 2010) and has also supported proposals for standardizing the credentialing of imams.

And yet, the perceived “lack of development” or “inefficiencies” of such religious spaces as mosques may also reflect and reproduce insulation from market forces, as institutions respond to a limited group of local stakeholders instead of government grantors or foundations. In this more traditional and personal context the main religious “commodity” may be the charismatic preacher, and many of these preachers work long hours rotating between scores of mosques, in effect undermining any emerging competition between individual masajid. Though specific ideological networks may influence its direction, this collectivity may be viewed as a form of resistance to mainstream market society.

Unlike mosques, NYC Muslim nonprofits are increasingly more exposed to marketplace competition and must rely on funding outside the Muslim community to sustain their services, and adapt to business plans, evaluation and asset mapping and other objectifying management tools. Marketing and “Messaging” are seen as essential. Some groups (NYU Islamic Center, CAIR NY, MPAC NY) keep up an aggressive daily barrage of press releases celebrating not only accomplishments but any activities they may

participate in, vastly accelerating the competition between what Armando Salvatore terms, “specialists charged with mediating between grassroots production of communicative order and the moulding, fixation and articulation of the very concept of order.” (Salvatore 2000 p.11). Several local leadership coalitions have recently broken up as the more corporatist organizations became determined to take the lead in packaging and determining religious product. In place of these collaborative activities, consultation serves merely as an enhancement to decisions already made, as window dressing.

At this present moment of crisis (2010) Muslim Marketing organizations such as “Qubestone” and “Muxlims” have made their appearance to sell marketing services with vocabulary drawn from Islamic tradition. Muxlims, for example, provides “Muslim lifestyle media solutions to help brands engage with global marketing and to aggregate Muslim lifestyle information.” While the company promotes services that are related to shariah “be it finances, ingredients in manufacturing, zakat, marketing techniques, marketing types and so on” it also serves to gather data on Muslim spending to sell to international companies, promising them access to what they promote as a 170 billion dollar market. As in the Islamic Finance industry, many differences between standard capitalistic practices are merely cosmetic. Featuring four photos of young Muslim women, and one young man, and no older Muslims, the site clearly is targeting younger consumers much as a cigarette company or any other US industry might do. Muslim partners listed on the site include a high percentage of life style sites that appeal to the female market: HijabTrendz, HijabsHigh, HijabulousTV, Salam café, American Muslim Mom, Elan, Azzizah, Muslim Girl, Fit Muslimah, as well as Muslim Media Watch and Islamic Games and al Jazeera.

The objectification and commodification of Muslim women is nothing new. However these sites contain a trove of information about class distinctions and codes of self-empowerment which do look essentially “modern.” Indeed, within these sites, online conversations among women (especially about hijab as self actualization strategy) reflect a highly developed, almost ideological privileging of personal agency and choice. It would be interesting to compare this enactment of “Identity Islam” with the “Life Planning” and “Self-Help” discourse discussed by Anthony Giddens In “Modernity and Self Identity” (1991).

Per Skala (et al) observe that, “Mainstream marketing research holds that marketing is a positivistic and fundamentalistic science able to produce truths about how organizations can be managed.”

(2008). The “legitimization of customeristic rationality inherent in managerial marketing itself”, to quote Skala again, presents itself as an ethical project, despite its clear service to global capitalism with all the accompanying social justice implications. Similarly, Muslim marketing enthusiastically claims a moral high ground in promoting value-based approaches such as access to honest information free from coercion. Writing for the Pakistani community, Nisar Ahmad claims that, “Western approaches are *totally* based on the concept that how we can make our profit maximum, so the element of materialism is *always* there in the minds of west. Whereas Islam is giving us a message that we are in this world but not forever so you have to obey the orders of Allah and to serve the human being on this earth according to the Sunnah of Holy Prophet (PBUH). So the trading rules and a rule of value maximization of Islam is *far better* than the rule of profit maximization by western executives. Value maximization is giving benefit *to all* the parties whether the buyer, seller or any other intermediary.” However the implementation of this clearly ideal system in a consumer economy should be examined critically for many flaws as new needs are promoted “categorized by demographic, psychographic and behavioral segmentations.” (Shikoh) along with the many other psychological manipulations of emotional and authority-based branding.

From barely visible Sufi groups to the enormous Tablighi Jamaat, a number of Muslim organizations have so far avoided modern advertising techniques. Others (like Islamic Circle of North America) have used them primarily for dawa purposes, in eye-catching broadcast media—even attracting right wing attacks for their tastefully understated but unusually public dawa campaign on subway cars and city buses throughout the USA. These promotions serve both maintenance of distinct religious communities and assimilation into a larger, pluralistic public.

And as marketing becomes the norm, limits of language and approach are being and will continue to be debated. Recently on the alMaghrib religious studies website a dialogue was posted following discussion about claims made for this heavily promoted group. A Mr. Abdur Rahman was quoted asserting, “I don't find it arrogant in saying that AlMaghrib offers the best way to deliver Islam to the peoples. Why? Because it's the truth. No arrogance about it. Was the Gillette company seen as arrogant when their whole spin was, "Gillette, the best a man can get?" In response, the imam urged an adab that would soften the competitive approach. However, the view expressed that religion is something to be sold remains strikingly

clear, and these subjective and reductive “assertions of the Truth” are all the more provocative in a religious community as diverse as the Muslim American community.

Is competition the issue? In Islamic tradition, passionate competition such as between the Companions of the Prophet (especially Abu Bakr and Umar) is celebrated and the Quran enjoins Muslims to compete with one another in good works, and even with other faith communities (Q 5:48). However, with the entry of new media, this “positive” struggle itself is mediated and takes a step back from competition between right actions. Though quickly becoming the norm, competition through images comes to resemble more the materialistic forms of competition decried by the religion, like the snakes of Pharaoh’s magicians.

Is there a source of engaged resistance to this trend? Can the media itself be “spiritualized”, instead of the spirit “mediatized”? In bringing to a close this brief consideration of Muslim American individualization, self-promotion and self-branding, it may be appropriate to pay attention to the “self” in both its socially constructed forms and its “inner” reality. Islamically speaking, the hungry self that the marketer appeals to is a partial self (nafs), or in Christian terms a “fallen self” (Ankerberg) and deeper self unity (tawheed) is not attained by the techniques of self esteem, self-satisfaction and self construction promoted in consumer culture. As Giddens notes, religious ritual and regimes are traditionally paths to dissolve the ego, not to construct a differentiated, consuming self (p. 77 ) that imagines life as a series of rational choices. Looked at dispassionately, most human decisions are in fact no different from reactions, however rational or rationalized they may seem to be.

Numerous religious traditions point towards ways of being that are grounded in a non reactive mind. In Islam, Sufism may provide a doorway into an inner presence that is freer, less bounded or self-identified, deepening one’s relationship to “pure” being through mystical exercises of mind and body, a technology that may offer more dimensions than the internet can offer the human spirit. As Paulo Pinto notes, “Control of the self (nafs) & the devaluation of the external or manifest (zahiri) truth in opposition to the esoteric, or hidden (batini) one in the path towards the divine reality (haqiqa) are powerful mechanisms for subjectification, meaning the production of a morally and socially bounded individual self through a process of inwards reflexivity.” However this new self is not limited to self-conscious “identity” and

cannot be fully articulated, defined or objectified – as the Sufi Hallaj famously tried to do, declaring “I am the truth” --words misunderstood as personal promotion—the Saint was misunderstood and put to death.

“All that dwells upon the earth is perishing (faāen), yet still abides (yabqā) the Face of thy Lord, majestic, splendid” --the Quran reminds us of the relationship between fana (absence, self-transcendence/ and passing away) and Baqa, pure being and consciousness of God (55:26-27). Through prayer and reflection, an awareness of nothingness and awareness of our imperfect presence may combine into a new wholeness-- and holiness enters in, God willing. And by being in the world but not of it, the civic self, the nonprofit self, engaged in community service for the sake of God, may be give a tiny taste of this self-transcendence. And to grow, this transforming understanding requires community. As Pinto observes, “The difference between the individualization of the Sufi Self and the forms of individualization present in modern european traditions are based on the fact that the former ... can *only* be expressed through Community.” (p.200) And yet-- problematically, many Muslims only find community online.

Must we choose between facebook and the face of God? Is the esoetric level the only path out of the marketplace? Or can our human hands transform these transforming tools though charitable intentions in all we do, always and everywhere? I would like to say that depends on us, though that may mark me as a believer in the Dale Carnegie school of Islam. But there may be an esoteric level of the marketrplace that does not depend on derivatives. There may be a marketplace of virtue, if one just keeps on imagining it.

In the post 9/11 environment, Muslim community leaders in the USA are faced with frequent defamation in the media and it is understandable that they—we-- wish to exert image control in order to maintain self image of individual and institutional egos. It is understandable, though disappointing, that Muslim groups would hesitate to put themselves in jeopardy, with Muslim physicians for example, afraid to condemn medical professionals complicit in torture for fear of losing non-profit status. Of course, many Muslims speak truth to power, albeit politely. But stimulated and intoxicated by the media cycle, we forget to look within. Instead, alas, we remain fixated on the media and the internet, frozen as by medusa’s lifeless glare. Fascinated by restless dreams, by intrigue and rumor and polemic, attracted by the wish to be different, to be better, to create utopia, and by countless other human desires, we assert we know the Truth but forget ourselves, without which there is no truth, as our thoughts pass ever on and on.



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