

Chapter Title: HI AND WELCOME TO THE FIELD

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HI AND WELCOME TO THE FIELD

Slough, UK, 29 October 2014, at an Islamic charity concert arranged by Human Appeal. The American comedian Preacher Moss, once in the Muslim stand-up comedy group ‘Allah made me funny’, has for a short while entertained the young, mostly female, seated crowd. He is smartly dressed in a beige blazer, a beige cap of a slightly darker shade, black trousers, a gleaming white shirt and a turquoise and white striped bow tie, clearly a connoisseur of the trendy Muslim dandy fashion (Khabeer 2016: chapter 4). The audience has already heard a couple of warm-up acts; now it is time for the star. The band starts playing a tight, seventies soul-flavoured intro like those of James Brown. Preacher Moss’s soft voice changes, becoming more intense, as he intentionally mimics introductions of the American funk star. ‘All right! Star time! Are you ready? Are you guys ready? You? You? You?’ He rushes towards the crowd. ‘I think we are ready! But I can’t hear you!’ The crowd screams. Preacher Moss turns around and walks back to the band. ‘Ladies and Gentlemen. This is star time! He is ready to come to the stage! You’ve been waiting all night; he’s here; he’s in the building. But he can’t hear you though. Can I hear some noise?’ Again, the crowd willingly screams. ‘This gentleman is a multi-platinum recording artist. You know his songs: Thank You Allah, Forgive Me, You are Number One, without further ado, welcome to the stage – My man! Your brother! Maher Zain!!!!’ The crowd roars. A smartly dressed young woman in the first row screams at the top of her voice, ‘I love him!’ as

Maher Zain enters; her male friend films her self-conscious fan-girl scream with his mobile phone, while I shoot them with mine.

Maher Zain takes the stage, leisurely clad in dark trousers, white sweater, black baseball cap and plaid neck scarf, and starts to sing one of his popular songs, 'Radhitsu Billahi Rabba' (I've accepted Allah as my Lord), from his second album *Forgive Me* (2012). It is rhythmic, but the enthusiastic audience remains seated and will do so throughout the concert, apart from the children who run back and forth in front of the crowd or sit on the floor singing the lyrics to some of Maher Zain's most accessible songs. Few men show the same fervour as the female majority – a few sing or clap hands at times and a foot might tap the rhythm. The women are much more active. Some even practice what, for lack of better words, I call seat dancing. As standing to dance is not considered morally acceptable, they simply remain seated and move the upper part of their bodies. The day before, in Bristol, the crowd is different, with more female students and not so many families, and some young women grasp the opportunity and stand: swaying at least, although not really dancing, if I may draw a line. At the Bristol concert, I also see cases of self-consciously ironic fan-girl behaviour, my personal favourite being a young woman who pretends to faint when Maher starts to play 'Insha Allah' (Allah willing) and incidentally waves in her direction. She holds her hand to her forehead and falls back in her chair while her two standing girlfriends laugh at her pose, crying out 'Oh, come on'. Mild mannered and handsome, Maher Zain is a regular poster boy for these Muslim women, have no doubt about that.

Something has happened to Islamic charity gatherings and conferences in the last two or three decades. Music performances have become part of what is expected, or even what is most anticipated; they appeal to youth, who will do voluntary work to get a free ticket: having an evening of fun and doing good at the same time. A fair deal.

While on tour with *Awakening* in the UK, I have met many star-struck and smiling fans. Some can afford the meet-and-greet tickets giving them a chance to chat with the stars before the show, maybe get a compact disc (CD) signed and take the obligatory selfies. However, most experience the singers on stage when being larger than life, amplified and elevated. Even when arranged as charity events, these concerts are also part of a consumer culture logic surrounding staged performances by recording artists.

The old taboo against music – certainly popular music and bands playing all kinds of instruments – in Islamic movements has been partly eroded by the emergence of a new genre of popular music often marketed as nashid or Islamic music, one legitimated by Islamic scholars calling for purposeful rather than immoral art. It has opened the way for a variety of acts covering several different styles including, especially, hip-hop (Khabeer 2016).

Awakening is one out of many Islamic media companies that has sought to meet the challenge of modern popular culture by appropriating it and transforming the content. Over the years, Awakening has emerged as one of the most important global corporations in terms of pop music inspired by Islam. The following are some figures built on Awakening's own estimates: as of autumn 2018, the nineteenth year of its existence, Awakening had produced more than 400 songs and some sixty music videos which, by 2016, had been viewed more than 1 billion times on Awakening's official YouTube channel, and in early 2019 Awakening reached 3 billion views¹ and in July 2021, 4.4 billion; it has sold more than 5 million albums and received forty platinum records, raised more than £21 million in charity concerts and arranged more than 1,500 concerts all told.² In short, Awakening has been busy. And music is not Awakening's only trade.

The halal market is a growing economic sector. With an expanding Muslim middle class worldwide, Islamic consumption increases (Janmohamed 2016). The *State of Global Islamic Economy Report 2019/20* estimates the Islamic consumption market at 2.2 trillion dollars (for 2018) with an expected yearly growth of 5.2 per cent (p. 2). Regardless if these figures are entirely true or too optimistic, it is significant that Islamic market stakeholders (and there are several) present the field in such ways. The message is clear. The Muslim consumers are here, ready to spend: provide them with opportunities.

Many consider singer-songwriter Sami Yusuf one of the first global Islamic pop stars – starting his career in 2003 when he signed to Awakening – while,

¹ When counting user-generated content (UGC) viewing, using a technique allowing the tracking of views of items you have produced, Sharif Banna claims Awakening videos have been viewed almost 7 billion times. Adding to this, Awakening songs were streamed online roughly 100 million times during 2018 alone.

² Information from <https://www.awakening.org/> (last accessed 29 October 2020).

at the time of writing, Maher Zain is the company's biggest star. One of his popular songs, 'Ya Nabi Salam Alayka' (Oh Prophet, peace be upon you), passed 200 million views on Awakening's official channel on Christmas Eve 2018, and 400 million by May 2021. Awakening have found more than 300 cover versions of the song on social media. Maher Zain is followed by more than 29 million users on Facebook and by 5 million on Instagram (2021). This can, for example, be compared to Justin Timberlake (both born in 1981) who is followed by 42 million on Facebook. When Maher Zain launched the song 'Antassalam' (You [Allah] are the peace) on 2 May 2020 (during Ramadan), it reached 100,000 views in two and a half hours, 200,000 in seven hours and just less than 500,000 in twenty-four hours. A year later, the video had 12 million views.

The concepts used above to describe the music need defining. What is Islamic pop? What is popular music? In this context, Islamic pop is shorthand for music made with the goal of being perceived and accepted as Islamic, often with the specific intention of celebrating Allah, Muhammad, Islam or Islamic values and lifestyles in lyrics, images and, at times, sounds. Not all music that carries references to Islam fits such a description, something which has been pointed out by Ackfeldt (2019) in his study of US hip-hop and its use of semiotic resources perceived as Islamic in hip-hop culture. Instead, some artists signal political resistance, African American political awareness or simply drop references to Islam because it is considered cool or provocative (Ackfeldt 2019; Aidi 2014; Khabeer 2016). In this case, however, as we shall see below, Awakening is explicitly claiming to produce music that is 'inspired by faith' (Awakening 2014: 2, hereafter '*the Awakening book*') and thus, in my theoretical understanding, has 'the goal of being perceived and accepted' as Islamic.

Popular music is a widely debated, notoriously slippery concept, but once again, in the context in which I am writing, not very problematic. In the first eight chapters of the book, the term 'popular music' refers to music that is composed, recorded, marketed and likely to be consumed in ways enabled by technological developments since the first sound recording in 1878. Contemporary recorded popular music has a regular form in terms of length (often 3–5 minutes) and elements (intros, verses, refrains, bridges, etc.); it is produced with an 'even' volume in the sense that it does not fluctuate much and with a steady tempo without losing the rhythm, and is marketed

as singles and albums with accompanying videos, photos, launches, posters and other advertising tools and channels. The artists perform, amplified, on stage to an audience according to a certain protocol that includes concert length, identifiable songs, clapping and applause, the artists' communications with the audience between songs and the overall staged situation. To simplify, I refer to this as Islamic pop or pop-nashid, nashid being a term I examine more extensively in Chapter 2. Here, it suffices to say that it is commonly used in relation to a type of traditional, devotional, Islamic song genre that is now used as an overall genre label for a wave of new Islamic popular music, at times abiding by the form of older nashids, but often not. Nashid is also a general Arabic word for song, for example also applicable to secular songs. I develop my sketchy description of the popular music elements of Awakening in greater detail in the course of discussion.

Since I concentrate on Islamic pop and pop-nashid, I leave aside other genres and trends in contemporary Islamic music (for these areas, see Aidi 2014). Only when there is a clear relation to the music I am writing about will I make references to hip-hop, qawwali and other Sufi music. Gnawa is not even mentioned, even though it is popular as both Islamic music and as world music (Aidi 2014: chapter 7; Kapchan 2007).

Indeed, this book tells the story of Islamic popular music, centred on Awakening. It is divided into nine chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the study and the third chapter Awakening and its artists. The fourth deals with the growth of the new pop-nashid and the development of Islamic pop. Chapters 5–8 look into the music and artistry of Awakening. The final chapter consists of a discussion of Islamic discourses on popular music over time, a fairly neglected topic as much discussion, both by Islamic intellectuals and researchers, has centred on the legality of instruments as such or on *sama'* (listening) as a ritual in Sufism.

As this book is written by a scholar of Islamic studies, one of the key issues throughout is how the making, marketing and performance of a particular new Islamic music genre relate to Islamic discourse (in its diversity). This should not be understood as a claim that Islamic discourse simply sets up limits for Islamic pop and pop-nashid; my interest is rather to research how Islamic discourse and the music in question challenge and change each other. It is not a relationship isolated from everything else but, rather, one that takes place in

several different contexts of socio-economic and political change. Both music and Islamic discourse are diverse and processual, and must be understood in relation to the actual people envisioning them. In order to express this organic relationship, I have focused on how Islamic beliefs are represented in songs and music videos; I have also paid special attention to the importance of performed masculinity to the Islamic pop star persona. A third topic of study is the actual engagement with Islamic discourse by a commercial company. Discussion of these three elements makes up the major part of Chapters 5–8. *Awakening* and its artists are thus situated in context but with retained agency. Due to their popularity, *Awakening's* artists potentially assert influence over a wide range of people, more than most Muslims, making an examination of Islamic pop and pop-nashid urgent and important.

When reading this book, I strongly recommend listening to the songs I discuss and taking breaks to watch concert clips. It will make everything I write about more real. When trying to describe sound, one may instigate a certain level of understanding with the reader but there 'ain't nothing like the real thing' to quote Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell. Titled as the book, there is a Spotify playlist of more than 100 songs, almost all mentioned songs in the order they appear in this book (<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6ay5kGjZAgpA1aX1YzvbDX?si=RpFvVzJJOQlC9Cl9v3zHuQA>). Further, I recommend *Awakening's* official YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/user/awakeningrecords), which, by the way, has more than 11 million subscribers (July 2021).

My approach and analysis draw from anthropology, ethnomusicology, religious studies, Islamic studies, visual studies, musicology and culture studies to name a few fields. There is consequently an overwhelming risk that the rich abundance of overlapping concepts deployed in these different traditions might flood the text instead of helping the reader to understand. Because of this, I have chosen to discipline the prose, keeping it communicative. Regardless, quite a few theoretical concepts and models are exercised, have no fear.

Finally, this book is not a study of the reception, use and appropriation of this music by its consumers, fans and hecklers. I hope to find an opportunity to make more of this aspect in the near future. In this book, the focus is somewhat different; I aim to analyse the contemporary development of possible Islamic expressions.