

BOOK REVIEW Growing up Muslim in America

Author John O'Brien spent four years following a group of rap music-loving American Muslims to find out how they manage lead a balanced life

Arab News · 5 Jan 2018 · LISA KAAKI

WHENEVER an act of terror occurs anywhere in the world, many Muslims follow the news hoping that the perpetrator is not a coreligionist. According to the FBI statistics cited in this book, however, 94 percent of the attacks that have taken place in the US from 1988 to 2005 have been carried out by non-Muslims. However, author John O'Brien reveals that a recent nationally-representative survey shows that almost half of the American public still believe that violence is inherent to Islam.

In "Keeping it Halal: The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys," O'Brien plunges us into the daily life of a group of Muslim-American youth in the early 21st century. It feels like a reality show where ordinary Muslim teenage boys are being monitored. The result is a real-life experience that offers a fresh and insightful look into the lives of young American Muslims. We witness how these young Muslim men manage "the competing cultural demands of religious Islam on the one hand and American teen life on the other, but having almost nothing to do with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Daesh) and Al-Qaeda."

There are some Muslims in the US who are influenced by such extremist causes, but such individuals represent an infinitely small fraction of Muslim Americans. In 2015, just 39 Muslim Americans out of an estimated population of three million were linked to plots to attack American civilians in the country.

O'Brien focuses his attention on an ordinary social group of Muslim Americans who have become invisible, so to speak, because they do not conform to the expected stereotypes. These average and benevolent young people are doing their utmost to achieve what many believe cannot be done — that is "to bring about reconciliations and workable compromises between the cultural expectations of religious Islam and those of American culture. While some people on various sides of the issue argue that the culture of Islam and the West cannot, and should not, exist in tandem, the young men in this book give lie to that assertion," writes O'Brien.

In other words, these young people show us how it is possible to be a practicing Muslim and to love American culture with all its challenges, complexities and rewards.

This group of young male friends, which O'Brien followed for nearly four years, are known as the "Legendz." They form a hip-hop group and love rap music, including the albums, artists and songs of the 1990s. They reflect the ethnical and racial diversity of American Muslims. The members, urban American teenagers and secondgeneration immigrants, include two Jordanians, two Sudanese members, two South Asians and one Somali.

On one hand, they go to public schools and have been exposed to modern urban American teenage life and, on the other hand, they are practicing Muslims, part of a tight-knit religious community.

They are expected by their parents to pray regularly, go to the mosque, fast in Ramadan, abstain from pre-marital dating and avoid the consumption of alcohol and drugs.

This book shows how the Legendz innovate and apply creative solutions to the cultural dilemmas they encounter when they are expected to participate in American urban teen culture, which includes hip-hop concerts, videos, dating, parties and it also assumes that an adolescent should gain independence from his parents and become autonomous.

In order to defuse the tensions between the content of hip-hop music and the moral requirement of Islam, the Legendz invented "Islamic listening," that is ways of interacting with hip-hop while respecting guidelines for appropriate Islamic behavior.

The most obvious form of Islamic listening consists of changing the words of songs that are originally "unIslamic." O'Brien witnessed a so-called Islamic hip hop session.

"The tune seems familiar, but I can't figure out what it is. After a while, I realize that they're singing something to the tune of the new Snoop Dogg song "Sensual Seduction," but changing the words to "Spiritual Connection."

By conforming their hip-hop listening to their Islamic religious practices, the Legendz were constantly in touch with their faith. For them, "the musical practice of Islamic listening was a local means of producing a dynamic religious identity and a way of experiencing Islam that was creative, fun and compatible with urban American youth culture.

Regarding prayer, O'Brien noticed that the Legendz boys were always reminded by adults to prepare for prayer because they were in the habit of never responding to the call to prayer right away, but they almost always made it to the prayer eventually. The chapter on prayer suggests the Legendz and their peers were developing what American sociologists have called "religious individualism," but in spite of their allegiance to American expectations of individualism, the Legendz maintain their participation in their local cultural communities.

The Legendz present a low-key Islamic identity in school, in their neighborhoods and in other public spaces, which means that they answer questions about Islam whenever they are asked, but they do not willingly assert their Islamic identity. In other words, "the Legendz defend their Muslim identity in a way that simultaneously acknowledged their own urban American teenage cultural credentials and refused to deny or hide their religion.

"My observations of the Legendz in high school, as well as my later, visits strongly suggest this outcome — that the powerful lessons that they learned from their time spent together as adolescents, reinforced by their continuing social connections to Muslim friends and family, will sustain in these young men a lasting sense of Muslim American identity," O'Brien writes.