

FORMATIONS OF ANTIDOOXY: MICHAEL MUHAMMAD KNIGHT, PROGRESSIVE
MULSIMS, AND THE ISLAM OF THE SELF

by

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Formations of Antidoxo: Michael Muhammad Knight, Progressive Muslims, and the Islam of the Self

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Abstract

Michael Muhammad Knight is known primarily as a provocative author concerned with the North American Islamic community. Knight gained attention with his 2004 novel, *The Taqwacores*, in which he detailed the lives of Islamic punk rockers, the eponymous taqwacores, as they navigated issues pertaining to religion, punk rock, youth, and life in Western modernity. Much of Knight's other writing is concerned with his own life, religion, and religious struggles, all of which are likewise represented in his fiction as well. Implicit throughout the totality of Knight's body of work is his desire to change the Islamic tradition so that it is able to better benefit individual practitioners. In a noteworthy 2003 essay, Knight argued that we should "forget what is and is not Islam," suggesting that it should be up to individual practitioners to determine what Islam is and is not. In this thesis, I argue that this statement is part of a larger program of reform, advanced by Knight and a group of progressive Muslims in the academy, that takes as its goal, the remaking of the Islamic tradition such that individual religious practitioners cannot be held responsible for any adherence to notions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy outside of their own personal preferences. Knight's reformation ideas would put an end to the meaningful use of authoritative models apart from the selves of individual Muslims. Thus, Islam would be completely divested of meaningful authority, and would become an Islam of the Self, founded on what I have termed an antidoxo. I argue this through close readings and discursive analyses of Knight's body of work, and through careful examination of the relationships between Knight, the progressive Muslims movement, and their approaches to understanding Islam as a part of the multicultural milieu of secular Western societies. I also provide a detailed analysis of the similarities and intersections between Knight's work and the literature of the progressive Muslims, and I consider the relationships between punk rock, authority, and freedom. I further supplement my argument with insights culled from the work of Talal Asad, and investigations into the construction of Arabic verbs.

In Memoriam:

John Julius Guthrie, Jr.

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Introductory Considerations: Thinking About Michael Muhammad Knight

“I found Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* and read a line that changed my life:
‘Forget what is and is not Islam.’”

Michael Muhammad Knight¹

Originally self-published in 2003, Michael Muhammad Knight’s first novel, *The Taqwacores*, was championed as a “manifesto for the Islamic punk movement.”² The novel’s title is a portmanteau of the Arabic word *taqwa* meaning piety, God consciousness, or the quality of being God-fearing, and the name of an American subgenre of punk rock music called hardcore, which is defined as a more aggressive, faster, and heavier version of American punk rock music.

Knight, born Michael Unger to an Irish Catholic family in New York, experienced a rapid rise to pseudo-academic fame after the expansion of popular interest in Islam following the events of 9/11/2001. Knight originally converted to Islam after being exposed to Alex Haley’s *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and the militant resistance rap music of Public Enemy, and these early exposures defined Knight’s relationship to Islam as one strongly influenced by resistance to dominant culture and authority.³ His work has been “censored, boycotted, confiscated, and threatened with legal action.”⁴ He is a well published and well-read author whose personality, comprised equally by a rebellious attitude and a predilection for hipster aesthetics, makes his work approachable, fashionable, and interesting to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. His work has been covered and discussed across all media, and his narratives have been imagined

¹Michael Muhammad Knight, “Forget What Is and Is Not Islam” in *Leaving Islam*, ed. Ibn Warraq. (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2003), 362.

² This is one of the most prominently featured quotations used by the media for the book. It is featured on its own rear cover.

³ Knight identifies Malcolm X and the emcee, Chuck D, of Public Enemy as some of the first Muslim thinkers that he was exposed to in his childhood.

⁴ These claims are featured as parts of the promotional material featured on the book jacket of *The Taqwacores*. The same language is featured on most of Knight’s other publications as well.

popularly as a series of coming of age stories for the Islamic youth of North America. Contributing to his fame, *The Taqwacores* was produced as a feature film in 2010, and the phenomena of the novel and film helped inspire an actual *taqwacore* community of Islamic punk rockers in North America. Knight is also noteworthy for authoring the first monograph on the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths, a splinter organization that formed following a schism with the Nation of Islam in 1964. Most recently, Knight completed his master's degree in Islamic Studies at Harvard in 2011. Knight is currently continuing his work in the field in the well-known Ph.D. program in Islamic Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. There, he has access to prominent scholars in the field such as Carl W. Ernst, Omid Safi, and Bruce B. Lawrence (commonly serving as an adjunct from Duke). Access to these scholars affords Knight a prime opportunity to position himself well in the field. His already far-reaching influence may yet grow and expand even more, as he only *now* begins his academic career proper.

In his writing, Knight eschews precise attempts at defining terms like Islam, punk rock, and indeed, *taqwacore*. However, the term is generally understood to refer to a music genre and lifestyle strongly influenced by a reading and understanding of the Islamic tradition through the lens of a punk rock mentality resulting in the overt rejection of so-called traditional understandings of the Islamic tradition. Also resulting, quite prominently, is the privileging of individual lifestyle choices, which may or may not fall within the bounds of the tradition itself. In the text, the *taqwacore* lifestyle seems to be inextricable from brusque and intentionally controversial treatments of Islam, its prophet, and its sacred text. *Taqwacore* began as a fictional movement in Knight's eponymous novel, but has since developed into a real-world phenomenon following the major publication and success of his work.

Carl W. Ernst, Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill notably referred to the text as “The Catcher in the Rye for young Muslims”⁵ because of the common themes of identity discovery and individual belonging investigated by both texts, as well as the presentation of controversial language and themes found throughout each. However, the connection between the two texts may warrant more thought than a mere quotation on the reverse flap of a book jacket.⁶

Often sounding like J.D. Salinger’s contrarian protagonist in his own writing, Knight has made a career (in part) of sharing the detailed exploits of his strained relationships with well-known members of the Islamic community in the United States. When Knight writes of his attendance at an Islamic Society of North America convention in *Blue Eyed Devil: A Road Odyssey Through Islamic America*, giving lewd handshakes to prominent leaders, and otherwise exhibiting intentionally vulgar behavior, one can easily imagine him channeling Salinger’s now-classic character, Holden Caulfield. Instead of an angst-ridden teenage rebel in the spirit of Caulfield, Knight presents versions of himself as both the main character and the narrator, wandering the halls of the conference, criticizing groups of Islamo-phonies for all of their pretension, stuffiness, and hypocrisy.⁷

⁵ Christopher Maag, “Young Muslims Build a Subculture on an Underground Book,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 2008, A16.

⁶ Controversial language is an inextricable part of Knight’s writing and nearly all of his work in some way references the fact that he has been censored, boycotted, and threatened with legal action.

⁷ It is worth noting that in his memoir, *Impossible Man* (2009), Knight describes his pre-teen and teenage years in a way that cements the Holden Caulfield comparison. His initial attraction to Islam is as a viable mode for expressing his own disaffected countercultural tendencies, which he manifests in hopes of upsetting his family, friends, peers, and anyone else who is willing to pay attention. For Knight, Malcolm X, Islam, and the *mujahedeen*, function as concepts around which he can organize his resistance behaviors. Adopting the culture of both hip-hop and Islam as a young man afforded him a unique way of rebelling against his Irish Catholic family, and the cultural norms of the community in which he was raised.

All of this is to say that Michael Muhammad Knight has a very particular way of thinking and writing about the Islamic tradition. His textual project is not particular considered with engaging in the discursive tradition of Islam along traditional lines, by which I mean that Knight is largely disinterested in the typical form and function of the traditional authorizing processes of the tradition. There exists a program of reform, deeply embedded in Knight's thinking, that is colored by progressive Muslim thinking, the ideas and concerns of the punk rock movement, and an emphasis on the importance of individuals derived from the liberal politics of secular humanism. The problems that Knight identifies within the tradition, and his various remedies for solving those problems would effectively decapitate the will of God within the Islamic tradition. Knight seeks to invalidate and replace the effective deployment of authority and orthodoxy in Islam, completely stripping the text, prophet, and god of Islam of all authority. Knight would instead propose that Islam is only what individual Muslims think it is. Knight argues that Islam and Muslims should exclusively recognize that individual authority of each individual Islamic practitioner; that each Muslim should decide what is correct for their own Islam alone. Knight's Islam would be one characterized by radical individualism, and a lack of community cohesion. Knight would only be interested in submitting to the "Muhammad of me."⁸

Knight's ways of thinking about Islam, and his general attitudes in interacting with other Muslims, place him at odds with prominent Muslim leaders in the United States. He self-identifies his system of thought as being influenced by the "liberation theology of the Nation of Islam and Five Percenters, as well as the arguments of progressive Muslim thinkers for feminism and reform,"⁹ even though his relationship with the movement of progressive Muslims is

⁸ Michael Muhammad Knight, *Journey to the End of Islam* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2009), 377.

⁹ From the rear cover of *Journey to the End of Islam* (2009). Though he identifies with and sympathizes with the plights of progressive Muslims, this does not mean that progressive Muslims are spared criticism in Knight's work.

depicted as noticeably strained across several of his books. Knight frequently writes critically of figures (often conservative, or hateful by his account) such as Imam Siraj Wahhaj of New York City, and considers the members of bands like The Kominas, who recorded the song “Rumi Was a Homo (Wahhaj You’re A Fag)” to be his like-minded collaborators and peers. Asma Gull Hasan, a prominent Republican, Muslim media pundit, and author of *Red, White, and Muslim*, filed a lawsuit against Knight and The Kominas in 2007. She alleged that, “Knight wrote an unflattering portrayal of her in his book *Blue Eyed Devil*, and influenced The Kominas to write defamatory lyrics describing her performance of a sex act.” The lawsuit was dismissed in 2008. Knight’s relationship with Hasan, and other conservative, moderate, and liberal Muslim leaders alike remains strained.

Aside from intentionally sophomoric sentiments and pranks directed at and performed against prominent American Muslims, all of Knight’s books feature extensive writing about the tradition of Islam itself. Often enough, the tradition fares little better than do its representatives whom Knight has targeted throughout his professional and paraprofessional writing career. Generally, his writing on the subject is characterized by two interrelated themes: the role of tradition in contemporary Islam and the remaking of that tradition for the benefit of individual practitioners. In general, Knight conceives of contemporary Islam as being too preoccupied with rules and regulations, such that it limits the individual religions of Islamic practitioners. It is precisely this purportedly stifling climate that he would seek to change.¹¹ He would seek to do so employing a maximalist methodology intent on remaking Islam such that it is forced to conform to the secular milieu of the West, Knight’s own liberal political concerns, and the

¹⁰ Arthur Kane, “Local author says Muslim writer, band defamed her,” *The Denver Post*, October 24, 2007, accessed June 10, 2011, http://www.denverpost.com/newsheadlines/ci_7262553

¹¹ Knight in Warraq, “Forget What Is and Is Not Islam,” 362.

whims and particularities of each and every individual Islamic practitioner, completely transforming the tradition into a sort of Islam of the self.

To be clear, when making reference to the idea of tradition throughout this work, I will be employing the concept as Talal Asad explicates it and its relationship to Islam in his often discussed article, “The Idea of An Anthropology of Islam,” which I will quote at length for clarity. Asad’s detailed explanation of the term, and framing of the concept, has proven useful for me when thinking about Michael Muhammad Knight, the discursive tradition of Islam, and Knight’s relationship to that tradition.

About tradition, Asad writes: “A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to *instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history.*”¹² Asad goes on to clarify that though Islamic traditions are not “necessarily imitative” of the past, this does not change the fact that “all instituted practices are oriented to a conception of the past,” and, as such, a practice becomes Islamic when “it is authorized by the discursive traditions of Islam, and is taught to Muslims – whether by an *ʿālim*, a *khatib*, a Sufi *shaykh*, or an untutored parent.”¹³ Put another way, Asad essentially argues that though the Islamic tradition need not necessarily be continuously interested in imitating past conceptions of Islam, there exists nonetheless an internal logic with reference to established Islamic history and precedent, which assists in shaping correct forms, methods, and purposes with regard to Islamic activities.

Knight, in his writing and in the words and deeds of the characters he has created, questions the practices and traditions of Islam *without* reference to that discursive tradition, and

¹² Talal Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” *Occasional Papers, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies* (1986): 14. Italics mine.

¹³ Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” 14-15.

without regard to its history and establishment. His project (functionally) aims not to create a multiplicity of orthodoxies, as some progressive Muslim scholars might claim,¹⁴ but to annihilate Islam's deployment of orthodoxy in toto – for as Asad reminds us, “orthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship – a relationship of power. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace *incorrect* ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy.”¹⁵ In attempting to circumvent or ignore traditional conceptions of Islamic power, Knight essentially argues for the investment of power into a sort of Islamic antidoxy, wherein power is only exercised insofar as it undermines traditional conceptions of Islamic power, or helps shape the unique structure of Islam for any given practitioner. I refer to it as an antidoxy because it functions to nullify existing power relationships in an Islamic context through the reinvestment of power exclusively into individual Islamic practitioners, thus restructuring the tradition as an Islam of the self. These actors primarily exert their newfound power through the questioning and disregarding of so-called outdated and anachronistic traditional conceptions of Islam.

In his conceptualization and theorization of power, Asad has clearly been influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, the much-lauded French social theorist and professor of the History of Systems of Thought. References to Foucault and Asad's own development of Foucauldian

¹⁴ Heterodoxy has been a popular topic in recent Islamic studies scholarship, particularly as it has been concerned with correcting contemporary Islamic practices. These sorts of arguments typically assume that because there have always been myriad opinions in Islamic discourse, that each of these arguments has been afforded equal authoritative weight within the tradition. If Knight's ideas were to be included within the multiplicity of orthodoxies model, it would need to be qualified as a multiplicity of orthodoxies along an *ad absurdum* line of argumentation, as his thinking would take the models of some progressive Muslims who do not wish for a complete end to orthodoxy and multiply them infinitely such that an endless expansion of the domain of orthodoxy and my notion of antidoxy functionally become one in the same. For examples of this sort of progressive Muslim work on the multiplicity of Islamic orthodoxies see: Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, 2005, and Martin and Barzegar, “Formations of Orthodoxy” in *Rethinking Islamic Studies*, eds. Ernst and Martin, 2010.

¹⁵ Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” 15.

ideas are plentiful across both *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular*. Asad demonstrates a clear indebtedness to Foucault through his understanding of the highly complex and multifaceted nature of power, which functions as a major theme in his work, especially where power is seen to function as both “a discursive and a nondiscursive practice” affecting conceptions of selfhood and other, cultural translation, the constitution of morality, and a variety of other related ideas.¹⁶ It is appropriate then, that Asad would seem to defer to Foucault’s well-known definition of power, which is notable, first, for its extensive cataloging of what power is not in a *via negativa* definitional approach:

By power, I do not mean “Power” as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state. By power, I do not mean, either, a mode of subjugation which, in contrast to violence, has the form of the rule. Finally, I do not have in mind a general system of domination exerted by one group over another, a system whose effects, through successive derivations, pervade the entire social body. The analysis, made in terms of power, must not assume that the sovereignty of the state, the form of the law, or the over-all unity of a domination are given at the outset; rather, these are only the terminal forms power takes.¹⁷

Continuing in the positive, Foucault suggests a number of propositions towards an understanding of power:

...it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere... It is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society... Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations... relations of power are not in superstructural positions, with merely a role of prohibition or accompaniment; they have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play... there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives.¹⁸

It is this, Foucault’s definitional foundation, upon which Asad constructs his complexification of power and power relations with an eye towards discursive practices. This is not to suggest that

¹⁶ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 198.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979, 1990), 92.

¹⁸ Foucault, 93-95.

Foucault was not also interested in discourse, for surely it is an essential concept in his work. Foucault recognized discourse as the location wherein “power and knowledge are joined together,” and that, as such, “We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power.”¹⁹ For both Foucault and Asad, discourse represents the site wherein knowledge and truth interact and result in new productions of knowledge and truth. By emphasizing, in the same manner as Foucault, that power cannot be understood in a unidirectional or static fashion, Asad expands the possibilities for contemporary discursive analyses vis-à-vis power relations and teleological orientations by rightfully acknowledging Foucault’s complex analysis of the relationship between discourse and power. Knight’s folly is that he fails to recognize his own participation in the production of new knowledge and truth insofar as he participates in and attempts to amend particular aspects of the discursive tradition of Islam. At times Knight seems oblivious to the fact that he is involved in a power struggle, that this struggle has very real stakes, and that he has chosen a humanist agenda and its concomitant values as a means of correcting or displacing authorized Islamic practices with authorized practice and belief emerging from the secular humanist tradition.

If we take Knight’s suggestion seriously, that we should “forget what is and is not Islam,” then we must surely recognize this as an attempt to make use of discursive power for the production of new types of knowledge concerning Islam, which will ultimately enable the production of new subjectivities. As such, we must recognize it as a call to drastically change the shape of the Islamic tradition from without, as it makes no attempt to engage the internal discursive logic of the tradition. It is, in truth, a call to compel and dragoon Muslims to sacrifice and forget particular elements of the lived Islamic tradition, and to do so for the alleged benefit

¹⁹ Foucault, 100-101.

of participation in liberal multicultural society for all Muslims, regardless of whether or not this is of any interest to the Islamic community.

Knight openly recognized his desire to change the tradition in an apostatic essay from 2003, “My ultimate goal, I think, is to break down some of the walls Islam puts around itself. Islam in modern practice can be very rigid, very strict.”²⁰ In this essay, Knight’s authorial voice is in part, colored by the pangs of betrayal. He feels betrayed by the strict version of the tradition that he encountered during his youth, first in Hammudah Abd Al-Ati’s *Islam in Focus*,²¹ and later in the very conservative Islamic education he received while attending the *Daw’ah* Academy for new Muslims at the International Islamic University housed in Pakistan’s Faisal Mosque.²² When he indicates that he would tear down “some” of the walls that Islam puts around itself, he is suggesting that he would do away with those strictures that alienate Muslims and potential Muslims from the tradition. Thus, his is a call for the destruction of power relationships that would attempt to enforce notions of a rigid, “correct model”²³ and it likewise constitutes a fundamental reconfiguring of the tradition into an Islam of the self, wherein one’s “own personal religion” is derived from Islam, but in a way that defers to the individual rather than the tradition, the prophet, or the community.²⁴ Knight’s ideal Islamic reality is one in which there is no right or wrong with reference to Islam. It is an Islam without submission, and since it is only interested in religion insofar as it works for the individual practitioner, it is thusly an Islam of the self. Knight’s Muslims would submit only to the idea that their individual self is the highest concern in their own sphere of existence.

²⁰ Knight in Warraq, “Forget What Is and Is Not Islam,” 362.

²¹ Michael Muhammad Knight, *Impossible Man* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2009), 69. *Knight indicates in his youthful memoirs that the conservative text, Islam in Focus, was one of the first sources from which he learned about the Islamic tradition.*

²² Knight, *Impossible Man*, 165, 181.

²³ Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*,” 15.

²⁴ Knight in Warraq, “Forget What Is and Is Not Islam,” 362.

It is not my intention to criticize Michael Muhammad Knight's understanding of tradition, nor is it my goal to criticize those who agree with Knight, his arguments, or the political thrust of his arguments. Rather, my goal is solely to delineate, illustrate, and investigate the implications of the apparent demands that Knight and those situated in his intellectual, political, and religious camp make with respect to Islam and with respect to the future of the tradition in the United States. This sort of call for politico-religious reformation (inspired by progressive Muslim thinking) actively seeks to allow a variety of practices such that Islam and Muslims are better capable of dealing with and integrating into an environment laden with pre-established concepts of acceptable modes of life, which are unproblematically assumed to positively influence and change individual subjectivities in particular ways. Knight's program would allow for any modification of or addition to the Islamic tradition as long as it provides perceived benefits for an individual practitioner and their individual conception of the religion, regardless of that potential change's relationship to and situation within the Islamic tradition itself. The program would likewise unconditionally disallow the further constriction of the Islamic tradition for Islamic practitioners. The tradition would of course still be afforded the opportunity to change, but only by way of expansion, never by way of contraction, or through the implementation of new rules. The only remaining rule would assert the exceptional status of individual religious liberties, and the inapplicability of external religious authority (scripture, prophetic example, or community opinion) with regard to individual practitioners.

In this way, Knight's program, in effect, would be the final disallowance in Islamic history. It would constitute the complete disallowance of all future Islamic bans and prohibitions such that the governance of any individual Islamic practitioner could not be exercised outside of that individual subject thereafter. There could be no future Islamic adjudication pertaining to matters

of proper religious comportment, belief, or behavior with respect to an individual practitioner. These prohibitions against imposing external governance upon individual Islamic practitioners would expand even to include the prohibition of the use of the prophetic example, one of the main sources of authority in the Islamic tradition, to set precedent for individual Islamic practice.

Given that a sizeable portion of the discursive tradition of Islam is directly connected with the history of the prophet Muhammad, Michael Muhammad Knight's handling of the tradition in general and the Prophet in particular may seem surprising given that he emerges as an author from an Islamic background, and still claims some version of Islamic identity today. In *Journey to the End of Islam*, making use of a quote from his time working as a blogger for MuslimWakeUp.org, Knight expressed the following about prayers led by women: "If the Prophet wouldn't have liked it, then in 2005 the Prophet is wrong, shit on him. *La ilaha illa Allah*."²⁵ In response to Knight's writing, the Progressive Muslim Union, the organization affiliated with the website, denounced his writing and called for a ban on his future participation with the website. Though Knight dismisses his detractors in this case as "progressive types" acting like "wimps with good intentions but no spirit,"²⁶ his critics were undoubtedly reacting to Knight's disrespectful treatment of the tradition of the Prophet, or *sunna*, which is second only to the moral law encoded within the Qur'ān in terms of authority for Muslims,²⁷ such that the very consciousness of the Prophet, on occasion within the discourse of the tradition "becomes identical with the moral law itself."²⁸ All of this represents a problem for Knight, as challenging

²⁵ Knight, *Journey to the End of Islam*, 16. Knight's blog post was functionally responding to the idea that the prophet Muhammad would not have been in favor of prayers led by women. His reaction, coupled with the Arabic enunciation that "there is no god but God," is indicative of the author's, by now well-known, challenging of the prophet's elevated status within the tradition.

²⁶ Knight, *Journey to the End of Islam*, 16.

²⁷ Frederick M. Denny, *Islam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 133.

²⁸ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam, Second Ed.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 1979), 32. I have chosen to make use of Rahman's text because of the mutual importance ascribed to it by thinkers in my

traditional conceptions of authority in Islam is part and parcel of his overall textual project, and these sorts of rigid and external sites of orthodoxy cannot comply with his vision for the tradition.

One of the overriding themes of *Journey to the End of Islam* is an exploration of a concept similar to the idea of heterodox orthodoxies explored by Richard C. Martin and Abbas Barzegar in their essay “Formations of Orthodoxy,” found in Martin’s volume, co-edited with Carl W. Ernst, *Rethinking Islamic Studies*. The ideas presented in Martin’s essay, that there are multiple sites of orthodoxy within the Islamic tradition, and that popular folk practices have helped shape those orthodoxies,²⁹ bear influence on the ideas informing Knight’s investigation into so-called heretical folk traditions of Islam throughout the narrative presented in *Journey to the End of Islam*. Indeed, the first half of *Journey to the End of Islam* is dedicated to a romantic, globetrotting adventure detailing the popular traditions of Islamic and pseudo-Islamic movements such as the Alawis, the Ahmadiyyas, and the Druze. In this portion of the text, Knight’s reveals that his attention and interests are primarily focused on charismatic leaders, and possessors of dissenting opinion such as Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, founder of the Ahmadiyyas, the torchbearer of “Pakistan’s native heresy,”³⁰ who, in this case, is demonstrative of the author’s interest in heresy and the constitution of heterodoxies.

Knight’s interest in multiple sites of authority, and particularly those elements which question normative Islamic tradition is supplemented in his writing through the presentation of his own hajj experience in the second half of *Journey to the End of Islam*. In this latter section,

own thought tradition (Frederick M. Denny), and by those with whom I disagree on a variety of points, whose work is important to Michael Muhammad Knight and in the community of progressive Muslimisms (Ebrahim Moosa). It is my hope that appealing to this text when required for basic exposition of some central Islamic concepts that it will represent a mutually recognized source worthy of use.

²⁹ Richard C. Martin and Abbas Barzegar, “Formations of Orthodoxy” in *Rethinking Islamic Studies*, eds. Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 186-187.

³⁰ Knight, *Journey to the End of Islam*, 116.

readers are introduced to a foil character, one of Knight's roommates during his hajj experience, a traditional Pakistani Muslim that does not share the author's interest in alternative Islams, causing Knight to refer to him as "Hater Uncle" because he simply "hates on everything."³¹ This is to say, Hater Uncle's ideas are dismissed categorically because they do not align with Knight's perspective on the Islamic tradition. Hater Uncle has clear ideas about what Islam is and is not, and in forming these ideas he has violated Knight's idea that Islam is essentially nothing other than what any Muslim wants it to be.

Additionally, Knight's hajj experience is framed through repeat and expansive criticisms of Islam as it is practiced and experienced in Saudi Arabia, as well as his own application of completely foreign practices that emerge from the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths, a community that, though Knight frequently includes them in his discussions of contemporary Islam, make no claims to the Islamic tradition. This habit in his writing generates a series of asymmetrical comparison in which like terms are not used and mostly improper comparisons are exercised. Thus, it is generally unsurprising when Knight, on the one hand, sharply critiques the government of Saudi Arabia for soiling the Islamic tradition by allowing for the construction of a Burger King in Mecca, and also, on the other hand, proposes solutions to entirely different problems by making use of the logic and teachings of the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths, a post-black-nationalist, non-religious organization emerging from Harlem, New York in the 1960s. What is right for Saudi Arabia is not right for Knight. Only what is right for Knight can be right for Knight in his conception of the tradition, and consequently what Saudi Arabia believes to be right, can be true for no one, insofar as it violates Knight's rule about constricting individual religious liberties and imposing external religious governance.

³¹ Knight, *Journey to the End of Islam*, 255.

The framing device employed by Knight at the start of *Journey to the End of Islam* is one of comparison. Knight likens the concept of religious pilgrimage to the 1966 film, *The Fantastic Voyage*, wherein a team of scientists shrink themselves to microscopic size and travel through a human circulatory system in order to stop a brain tumor. Knight envisions pilgrimage as similar to the film's narrative insofar as religious pilgrims are "not only the microscopic explorers; [but] also the body being explored," which is to say that Knight believes that the religious journey is actually a "journey to the center of *you* [the self]."³² This detail is interesting insofar as it reveals a theme relevant to the totality of Knight's written work, that of the importance of the individual in religious practice and the notion that religious tradition should remain flexible and capable of being remade in order to accommodate *all individuals*. Thus, in this thematic introduction to the way his text concerned with heterodoxies will proceed, Knight demonstrates a sort of self-imposed *ad absurdum* style of framing and argumentation. His argument then, appears to be in favor of extending Martin and Barzegar's own arguments about the multiplicity of orthodoxies throughout Islamic history to the extremely far-reaching conclusion of multiplying these sites of orthodoxy *ad infinitum* such that orthodoxy as a concept is divested of any and all meaning, and that a new so-called orthodoxy can now only be located within the individual practitioner, thus enacting the formation of the Islam of the self.

Knight's privileged conception of the individual, and his notion of what I have identified as an Islam of the self, is expressed most clearly in the character of Rabeya who is of central importance in the narrative of *The Taqwacores*. Rabeya is the *burqa*-clad "riot grrrl"³³ of the novel, and about her religion the narrator, Yusef, states, "While Rabeya was as staunch a Muslim

³² Knight, *Journey to the End of Islam*, 3.

³³ A particular punk rock idiom associated with third-wave feminism used to describe Rabeya in the novel.

as anyone there, it remained *her own* Islam as she saw fit to live it.”³⁴ Rabeya (among other characters) expresses her Islam throughout *The Taqwacores* in ways that initially offend the traditional sensibilities of Yusef and his understanding of the tradition. In one passage, Rabeya and Yusef have a lengthy exchange about *her Islam* when Yusef discovers that Rabeya regularly edits the *Qur’ān* to suit her own epistemological concerns. During the conversation Rabeya expresses that she searched for reasonable translations of difficult material like the “progressives” had attempted, but that she felt she had done enough “gymnastic tap dancing” for a “weak alternative reading.” She then concludes: “Finally I said, fuck it. If I believe it’s wrong for a man to beat his wife and the *Qur’ān* disagrees with me, then fuck that verse.”³⁵ Yusef is notably shocked by Rabeya’s statement and her further admission that she has made other redactions from the text, because as has already been established by this point in the novel, Yusef has been raised in a traditionally observant Muslim household, and would likely agree with Fazlur Rahman that “For the *Qur’ān* itself, and consequently for the Muslims, the *Qur’ān* is the word of God (*Kalām Allāh*).”³⁶ Later, in the sequel to *The Taqwacores* titled *Osama Van Halen*, Knight enters the story as a fictionalized version of himself, and indicates that Rabeya is “probably the true hero of *The Taqwacores*,” due to her heroic actions and attitudes, such as those detailed in the preceding writing.³⁸ This scene between Rabeya and Yusef is noteworthy because it demonstrates exactly how Knight longs for the tradition to function, and how he hopes practitioners will remake the tradition aligning with secular liberal norms despite what consequences for the community such changes may bring about as a result.

³⁴ Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Taqwacores* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2004), 9. (Italics mine).

³⁵ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 132.

³⁶ Rahman, 30.

³⁷ In Eyad Zahra’s film *The Taqwacores* (filmed using a screenplay written by Knight), Yusef protests Rabeya’s editing of the *Qur’ān* on the basis that it is the word of God.

³⁸ Michael Muhammad Knight, *Osama Van Halen* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2009), 30.

One issue with Rabeya's character is that the valorization of her as such assumes a great deal about what it means to lead a meaningful religious life. In constructing Rabeya as she is presented in *The Taqwacores* and *Osama Van Halen*, Knight demonstrates his own assumptions about ways of properly being a religious human that are dependent on the assumed benefits of particular conceptions of freedom, choice, progressivism, and tolerant cosmopolitanism. For example, Rabeya seems not to have found any value in the process of having actively struggled with the portion of the *Qur'an* with which she was having difficulty. Moreover, Rabeya does not contemplate the possibility that it is important for the *Qur'an* to be a consistent document across the Islamic world. Instead, Knight demonstrates, by way of Rabeya's attitudes, that what is most important in this issue is the idea that Rabeya is comfortable with all aspects of her chosen religious text. These pre-assumptions are more important than textual and religious consistency (or any other issue) for Knight, who has taken it for granted that a tolerant cosmopolitan world wherein each individual is able to fashion their own version of Islam is obviously and unquestionably superior to many present-day Islamic realities.

All of the characters in *The Taqwacores*, with the exception of the traditionalist characters Yusef and Umar, are constructed romantically in their opposition to a broadly understood normative, or traditional Islam. Jehangir Tabari, who serves as Yusef's role model during his indoctrination into the *taqwacore* mentality, similarly dismisses tradition in favor of his own Islam when he ignores charges of *bid'ah* (unnecessary innovation) against him for performing the *adhan* (call to prayer) on an electric guitar.³⁹ He rejects other traditionally compulsory elements of the Islamic tradition during an impassioned speech in support of the *taqwacore* lifestyle: "You got all these poor kids who think they're inferior because they don't get their two

³⁹ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 14.

Fajr in, their four *Zuhr*, four *Asr*... their fuckin' *Sunna*... they don't have beards... they had to pretend like they were doing everything right...well I say fuck that and this whole house says fuck that.”⁴⁰ The implicit and explicit idea operating in this passage is that Islam is owned by Jehangir, and those like him, and that they embrace the idea of progress insofar as it allows them (like Rabeya) to live the tradition as they see fit. Thus, charges of *bid'ah* are of little concern. The oppressive, traditional version of Islam (as understood by the characters) is only truly considered in the text when it fails to work as a personal religious system for the punks of the *taqwacore* house, otherwise it is merely an obstacle to be overcome in the process of fashioning each of their Islams of their selves.

Islam, as it is discussed in *The Taqwacores* and throughout Knight's writing is afflicted by an implicit need for change. In the novel, Yusef comments that “If Islam is to be saved, it would be saved by the crazy ones: Jehangir and Rabeya” et al.⁴¹ It is not clear, at first, what the narrator or author believe Islam needs to be saved from, but contextual clues and plot developments provided by disaffected fictional religious insiders created by the author point to an implicit need for change such that Islam needs to be saved from itself, and *taqwacore* (though fictional at the time of the novel's writing) is the only solution.

Most of the principal characters of *The Taqwacores* seem to embrace the idea presented by Attar, and so cherished by Knight, by way of their words, deeds, and attitudes. The only real exception to this trend is the character Umar, who seems to practice a traditional sort of Sunni Islam coupled with a version of the punk rock lifestyle called straightedge. As a straightedge punk, Umar does not drink or otherwise ingest harmful substances into his body, nor does he flagrantly try to change the tradition or otherwise offend traditional Muslim sensibilities. Umar's

⁴⁰ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 41.

⁴¹ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 38.

character demonstrates that it is in fact possible to live a life defined equally by the Islamic tradition and the punk tradition without unmanageable tensions. However, it remains unclear what the actual purpose of Umar's character is in the overall narrative of *The Taqwacores*. This is due to the fact that in his writing, Knight depicts Umar as generally unpleasant, mean, violent, and oppressive. In a scene involving Jehangir's previously mentioned performance of the *adhan* on an electric guitar, Umar is the one who levels the charges of *bid'ah* against Jehangir. The purpose of this scene is apparently to further characterize Umar as a dismissive, disapproving, traditional Muslim who only wants to enforce his own oppressive version of Islam in the communal home. Jehangir, in turn, faults individuals like Umar. He alleges that many like Umar are so afraid of dying because of Islamic promises regarding an unpleasant afterlife spent in hell that they never get around to living. Thus, even though Umar's character demonstrates the possibility of traditional Muslim practice coupled with a particular type of punk rock lifestyle, this mode of embodying a particular identity is hardly recommended (or even liked on an interpersonal level) by the characters in the text or the author of the text.

It is likely that the real world *taqwacores* who have emerged, following the publication of the novel, would agree with criticism of Umar. Writing for the *The New York Times* in 2008, Christopher Maag uncovered many individuals have found that Knight's work has aided them in the construction and justification of their own identities. Some contemporary *taqwacore* Muslims have identified *The Taqwacores* as a "lifeline" by which their individual faiths have been saved.⁴² Fans of Knight's work express a common frustration with Islam⁴³ that is at the core of their identity crises in the United States. Following the events of September 11th many Muslims were victimized by vicious and violent acts of discrimination, and in the aftermath of

⁴² Maag, A16

⁴³ Maag, A16.

the terrorist attacks, and the cultural backlash, some have placed their faith in the “liberating” qualities of Knight’s work and appreciate the “totally American,” nature of the fusion of Islam and punk rock.⁴⁴ These individuals are some of the first to have converted to Knight’s ideas regarding the construction of Islams of the self in the United States.

Michael Muhammad Knight’s work, then, could hardly ever be classified as *mere fiction*, or even the disgruntled musings of a single disaffected Muslim pseudo-apostate. Both Muslims and non-Muslims have embraced his work and political outlook, and he has received high praise from academics in Islamic studies. His books are laced with criticisms of the Islamic tradition and proposed methods for rectifying problems, both of which he identifies. However his solutions rarely if ever invoke the discursive tradition of Islam itself. As such, I would like to suggest that Michael Muhammad Knight, despite his misgivings towards the attitudes of progressive Muslims scholars, has a great deal in common with them in terms of the political and reform-minded nature of his work. His project is a maximalist version of the progressive project. Knight admits to maintaining liberal political affinities and he is scarcely concerned with keeping his desire to affect liberal sociopolitical change on Islam a secret. In using Attar’s poetry as a modern religious corrective, Knight effectively calls for the formation of an antidoxy, by which I mean he wishes to formally abolish any notion of what is correct or incorrect in the Islamic tradition, through the infinite expansion of sites of orthodoxy to the extent that orthodoxy is stripped of any meaning altogether. He does so in order to radically change the tradition from without such that Islam can be made to occupy a particular space among myriad other traditions in the socio-religious milieu of modern, secular, multicultural societies. He seeks all of this for

⁴⁴ Maag, A16.

the benefit of individual practitioners in their ability to construct and fashion (lacking any orthodoxy) Islams of the self, without regard to any notion of the Islamic community.

Reform from Without: Punk Rock and Freedom

From what position does Michael Muhammad Knight propose his reformation ideas? Where does he draw his ideas from, how does he deploy them, and based on what notion of authority does he make his arguments? In his 2011 book, *Why I Am A Five-Percenter*, Knight self identifies as a member of the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths while still maintaining some form of a traditional Islamic identity, despite the fact that Five Percenters broadly “reject association with the religion of Islam,” and similarly deny that the Nation of Gods and Earths is even a religion at all.⁴⁵⁴⁶ In the same text, Knight relates his encounter with a little known sect of the Nation of Islam (NOI) called the Nation of Tu’lam. Making use of a story that, to him, seems thematically consistent with NOI cosmology, Knight refers to a mythological scientist known by devotees of the Nation of Tu’lam as Liyyum Lijab Muhammad. In the story, Knight relates that Liyyum Lijab Muhammad is believed to have discovered a chemical in the brains of black men called “Carogen,” that purportedly was the cause of the sun’s creation.⁴⁷ Relating this story to the mythico-historical founder of the Nation of Islam, W.D. Fard, and his teachings about the divinity of black men, and the potential of disciplined black Muslim minds, Knight extrapolates that the sum point of these teachings across the tradition is that “the ultimate power in existence rests within one’s own head.”⁴⁸ This idea, Knight’s attraction to the teaching, and his ability to arrive at such a conclusion, point to Knight’s radical privileging of the individual which is a significant part of his platform for contemporary Islamic reformation. Knight’s

⁴⁵ Members of The Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths claim to live I-S-L-A-M (an acronym for: “I Self Lord and Master”) as a science or a way of life, not as a religion.

⁴⁶ Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip Hop, and The Gods of New York* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), xiv, 10.

⁴⁷ Michael Muhammad Knight, *Why I Am A Five-Percenter* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 63.

⁴⁸ Knight, *Why I Am A Five-Percenter*, 63.

preference of thinking about religion solely in terms of the individual is a theme that runs throughout *Journey to the End of Islam* as well. Some of that text's closing words demonstrate the ways in which Knight attempts to frame his radically individualist notion of religion in general, using an Islamic lens. Knight writes:

Umar trying to follow Muhammad didn't turn him into Muhammad, only Umar-imitating Muhammad. Then Umar taught his son how to do as the Prophet had done, which turned the boy into Umar's-son-imitating-Umar-imitating Muhammad. And so on down the line, putting me at the end of a game of Telephone that has been going on for fourteen hundred years. After all of that, who makes your religion? Master Fard and Bulleh Shah said that you'd never find Allah outside yourself, even if you searched for trillions of years; but I could also say that of the Prophet, since I went to the man's tomb and couldn't find him there. I'm still a Muslim, so I must be the imam of me, the *alim* of me, the *skaykh* of me, the *caliph* of me, the Master Fard of me. The Mothership is my mother's hip, I'm the *Mahdi* of me. My own gate to the city of knowledge, I'm the Ali of me. Bear witness to yourself. I'm the Muhammad of me.⁴⁹

Knight spends the first half of this passage undermining a basic tenet of the discursive tradition of Islam. In mocking the authorizing process by which Muslims have traditionally constructed knowledge, and differentiated between truth and falsehood, a process that Asad maintains is a fundamental part of religion,⁵⁰ Knight is actively “forgetting what is and is not Islam” insofar as he is willfully ignoring the tradition of the Prophetic *sunna*. In choosing not to heed the authorizing authority afforded to the exemplary conduct of the Prophet, second only to Qur'anic revelation,⁵¹ Knight defers instead to external processes of authorization that, in turn, place the authorizing power firmly in his own hands, or in his own mind.⁵² In doing so, he is operating outside of the pale of the tradition. The ideas and teachings of W.D. Fard, nor the notion that a

⁴⁹ Knight, *Journey to the End of Islam*, 377. Italics mine.

⁵⁰ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 39.

⁵¹ Rahman, 50-51.

⁵² These authorizing sources are external because Master Fard Muhammad is not traditionally regarded as an authoritative source of knowledge within the discursive tradition of Islam. Bulleh Shah fares a bit better in this regard, but is still found to be lacking as scholars possess little certainty as to the specifics of his life, and what *is* known is hardly representative of the authorized practice or authorizing doctrine of his own time, which is believed to have been during the late 17th / early 18th century.

Muslim can be held accountable by the self alone, are not authorized sources or forms of knowledge within the confines of the discursive traditions of Islam.⁵³

Knight's privileging of the individual and the concomitant privileging of the rights and freedoms of individuals are largely supported by and derived from his interest in counter cultural punk rock resistance ideologies (of which the Five Percenters could be considered a rap or hip-hop variant). Mark Levine, author of *Heavy Metal Islam*, argues that the desire among Muslim punk, metal, and rap fans in the Middle East and North Africa for "autonomy, if not freedom, within which they can imagine alternatives to the status quo" is related to the "loss of community and hope for a better future" that emerged in England following deindustrialization, and leading to the rise of bands like Black Sabbath.⁵⁴ Levine understands the function of the punk rock or metal ideology and aesthetic to be centrally concerned with the formation by punks of "some kind of resistance to a society from which they feel increasingly estranged."⁵⁵ As such, he seems to perfectly describe the attitudes and motivations of the characters found in *The Taqwacores*, and this is precisely how the characters and their author should be understood – rebelling against a traditional culture that they still claim some sort of affinity to, with an eye towards making use of an increase in autonomy, if not freedom to their advantage, and for the "benefit" of the tradition itself.

Arabic Language Considerations

In forgetting what is and is not Islam, Michael Muhammad Knight is actively resisting a tradition from which he feels increasingly estranged, and he does so even as he claims to rebel with potential benefits for the tradition and its followers in mind. Likewise, in deploying his favorite verse of Attar's poetry without meaningful reflection on the history of poetry in the

⁵³ Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 14,15.

⁵⁴ Mark Levine, *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), 11.

⁵⁵ Levine, 11.

Islam tradition, or even the particular history of the singularly considered work by Attar, Knight is performing the same sort of dubious trans-historical academic moves that have become so familiar among many progressive Muslim scholars. Furthermore, in effectively calling for an end to the concept of correct belief and correct practice in Islam, Knight fundamentally challenges the definition of the word that became the religion altogether.

In Arabic, the word *Islam* is a verbal noun. It is the Arabic equivalent of an English infinitive verb, called a *masdar*. Words in Arabic are formed from a three-letter root called a *jidhr* (p. *jidhoor*), and in the case of *Islam*, the three-letter root is constituted by the consonants *siin* (س), *laam* (ل), and *miim* (م). In order to make meaningful verbs from these three letter roots, the letters of the *jidhr* are arranged into one of ten grammatical patterns for verb construction. These patterns are called the *awzaan* (s. *wuzn*). Each of the ten *awzaan* modifies any given three-letter *jidhr* in a particular way, depending on which *wuzn* is being used, and how the word functions in a given context. For example if the *siin*, *laam*, *miim* root is combined into the *faʿil-a / yu-faʿil-u* pattern, making a Form II triliteral verb, the meaning, depending on context and usage, can be any of the following: to preserve, to keep from injury, to protect from harm (s.o.), to save (s.o. from), or to hand over.⁵⁶ If the same root is used in a form III triliteral verb in the *faaʿil-a / yu-faaʿil-u* pattern the resulting word can carry any of the following meanings: to keep the peace, to make one's peace, or to make up (with s.o.).⁵⁷

The word *Islam* is the *masdar* of a form IV triliteral Arabic verb using the *afʿal-a / yu-fʿil-u* pattern. Form IV verbs tend to carry an additional shade of meaning that suggests and emphasizes the causation or forcing of action. Thus, form IV verbs are sometimes called

⁵⁶ J.M. Cowan, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 4th ed., s.v. *salima*, *salāma*, *salām*, 495.

⁵⁷ Cowan, 495.

causative verbs insofar as they cause the meaning or action associated with the same root arranged as a form I verb in the *faʿāl-a* / *ya-fʿāl-u* pattern.⁵⁸ The following example illustrates the causative relationship between the form I and form IV verbs *kharaja* and *ikhraaj*.

Rendered as a form I verb, *kharaja*, constituted by the trilateral root *khaa* (خ), *raa* (ر), and *jiim* (ج), means to go out, depart, leave, retire, or to leave (s.th.) or to drop out (from a competition).⁵⁹ When the same root is arranged as a form IV verb, it forms the word *ikhraaj*, meaning: to dismiss (s.o.), to remove (s.o.), to evict (s.o.); to expel, to exile, to move out, to take out, to send out.⁶⁰ Thus is the causative relationship, whereas *kharaja* means simply to go out, *ikhraaj* carries meanings more colored by causation and force such as dismissal, eviction, and expulsion.

Rendered in the form I verb pattern, *siin*, *laam*, and *miim* form *salm*, meaning to be safe and sound, to be unharmed, to be unimpaired, and to be secure.⁶¹ A form IV verb, *islam* means to hand over (to s.o.), to turn over (to s.o.), to give up (to s.o.), to deliver up, to surrender, to expose (to s.o.), to commit (o.s.), or to resign (o.s.).⁶² In this case, safety and security are achieved by way of commitment, resignation, surrender and deliverance of the self. The verbal noun of the same *jidhr* in the same pattern then is “submission, resignation, reconciliation (to the will of God),” or, *Islam*.⁶³ The best English definition for the meaning of the word in this particular formation, that which becomes the namesake of the religion, is submission or resignation to God

⁵⁸ Karin C. Ryding, *A Reference Grammar of Modern Standard Arabic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 515.

⁵⁹ Cowan, s.v. *karaja*, *kuruj* 269.

⁶⁰ Cowan, 270.

⁶¹ Cowan, 495.

⁶² Cowan, 495.

⁶³ Cowan, s.v. *islām* 497.

and his will. Additionally, this is essentially the same definition of *Islam* offered by Omid Safi in *Progressive Muslims* in its “most ordinary sense” as “submission to the Divine.”⁶⁴

Michael Muhammad Knight’s treatment of the idea of Islam (perhaps influenced by his own admittedly poor Arabic language skills) suggests that he no longer believes submission to be necessary. If *Islam* means submission and resignation, and Knight’s wishes for the current generation of Muslims to disregard concerns over what is and is not *Islam* are proposed in earnest, what then is Knight left with when he invokes the term? What does Islam mean to him? Given this outlook and his suggestion, can Islam mean anything at all? I would like to suggest that implicit in Knight’s intended program of reform is the notion that Islam does not need to carry meaning, and that it should be understood simply as a symbol pointing to something else, something personal. That something else is any set of ideas held by any individual practitioner for the benefit of their own religious system. Knight expresses this quite clearly in *The Taqwacores*: “Islam is itself a flag, an open symbol representing not *things*, but *ideas*. You cannot hold Punk or Islam in your hands. So what could they mean besides what you want them to?”⁶⁵

Knight and the Progressive Muslims

Michael Muhammad Knight’s contempt for contemporary Islamic thinkers is not limited to conservative figures like Siraj Wahhaj and Ibrahim Hooper in the North American *ummah*, or the conservative theology that these individuals teach and propagate throughout the North American Islamic community. In fact, Knight makes strange affiliations with individuals who are still actively trying to figure out what is and is not Islam in their everyday work, contrary to the goals of his own project. Knight’s novel, *Osama Van Halen*, the de-facto sequel to *The*

⁶⁴ Omid Safi ed., *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 18.

⁶⁵ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 7 (italics mine).

Taqwacores contains writing that is demonstrative of his antipathy towards the progressive Muslim movement, which apparently represents ideas that he alternately supports and abhors in varying cycles. At various points in the narrative, Knight, in a series of decidedly post-modern passages, enters the story and acts as a broadly drawn caricatured version of himself, interacting and commiserating with his own literary creations, Amazing Ayyub and Rabeya, the principal characters of *Osama Van Halen* who were also main characters in *The Taqwacores*.

Early in the narrative, the fictional version of Knight (also an author) receives an e-mail regarding his recent fictional novel, *Muhammad Entering from the Rear*, which is meant to represent its real life counterpart *The Taqwacores*, and its attendant real-life controversy.⁶⁶ The sender of the e-mail writes Knight with concern, confused as to how a book such as *Muhammad Entering from the Rear* could possibly benefit the community. The fictional Knight responds, angrily stating that “the community [has] enough writers pooping out their uplifting new visions of Islam, their twenty first-century Islam, their American Islam. Their back cover blurbs always [promising] a *refreshing* and *courageous* and *tolerant* and *modern* take on *the world’s fastest growing religion*.”⁶⁷ The fictional Knight then concludes his rant “adding that he’d rip out Farid Esack’s liver and eat it.”^{68,69}

⁶⁶ A great deal of Knight’s involvement as a character in *Osama Van Halen* functions as a type of post-modern intrusion by Knight into the fictional universe he constructed in *The Taqwacores*. This fictionalized version of the author performs many actions similar to those recounted by Knight in *Blue Eyed Devil*, which is an autobiographical travelogue detailing Knight’s pursuit in finding the source of the real American essence of Islam. Chronologically, the main narrative of *Blue Eyed Devil* intersects with the period of Knight’s life during which he was actively speaking about and promoting *The Taqwacores*. As such, many of the events of *Osama Van Halen* concerning Knight are embellished accounts of similar events from his life that he has previously reported in works such as *Blue Eyed Devil*, lending to the overall inter-textual and meta-textual nature of these portions of his work

⁶⁷ Knight, *Osama Van Halen*, 21.

⁶⁸ Knight, *Osama Van Halen*, 21.

⁶⁹ This is not the only instance of Knight threatening or criticizing progressive by name in his fiction. In *The Taqwacores*, when struggling through a reading of *Sura 4:34*, Rabeya finds the progressive interpretations of Asma Barlas to be lacking.

Farid Esack, currently a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, is a notable thinker participating in the progressive Muslim movement especially as it is concerned with issues pertaining to human rights justice and apartheid. Esack is also especially focused on issues related to gender and equality, and was appointed by former South African President Nelson Mandela to the position of National Commissioner on Gender Equality.⁷⁰ One might assume that Knight would support someone like Farid Esack were he not one of the “wimps with good intentions but no spirit,” that he casually insults in a number of his works.⁷¹ Issues of gender equality are likewise important to Knight, as evidenced through his own socio-political support for Amina Wadud, the scholar who hosted and facilitated a female led Friday prayer service (*jum'ah*) for which Knight and a band of real-life *taqwacores* provided security services.⁷²

Though he eschews being lumped into the camp of so-called progressive Muslims, Knight's own authorial history indicates that the reform minded thinking of the progressive movement has exercised considerable influence on his own thinking.⁷³ The central thematic focuses of justice, gender, and pluralism issues outlined in Omid Safi's *Progressive Muslims* are clearly reflected in Knight's body of work, particularly as these themes relate to the individual concerns of disaffected Muslims in his fiction and to the attitudes of like-minded Muslims he has encountered in the United States and abroad. Clearly, Knight is politically oriented such that his

⁷⁰ “Prof Farid Esack – University of Johannesburg,” 2011, <http://www.uj.ac.za/EN/Faculties/humanities/researchcentres/cod/aboutus/Staff/Associates/Pages/ProfFaridEsack.aspx>.

⁷¹ Knight, *Journey to the End of Islam*, 16.

⁷² Omar Sacirbey, “The Challenges and Growth of Progressive Muslims,” *The Alicia Patterson Foundation Reporter* 22 (2005): <http://web.archive.org/web/20060105110705/http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF2202/Sacirbey/Sacirbey.html>

⁷³ Clearly, these themes relate both to the fictional characters of *The Taqwacores*, and their real world corollaries that have created actual *taqwacore* communities. *Journey to the End of Islam* and *Blue Eyed Devil* also feature Knight's interactions with Muslims who, like him, question normative concepts in Islam, but do so according to their own concerns and methodologies without regard for established Islamic practices and histories.

set of long-term goals, or overall vision for the American *ummah*, is at the very least, superficially similar to that envisioned by progressive Muslim thinkers. This political affinity, however, does not prevent Knight from writing unfavorably about progressive thinkers. In the same narrative that finds a version of Knight fictionally threatening Farid Esack, the authorial Knight also further expresses a dislike of progressives by way of comparing progressive Muslims to the mindless zombies of George Romero's horror films,⁷⁴ as well as engaging in a sustained mockery of progressive discourses that seeks to "Defy stereotypes in a productive way, foster understanding, and build bridges."⁷⁵ The second half of the book also features a chapter titled "Taqwacores vs. The Islamic Society of North America," in which the author and character alike sneer at discourses concerned with American Muslims and various tapestries of diversity, beautiful mosaics of cultures, "and so on and bullshit forever."⁷⁶

The primary difference then, between Knight and the progressive Muslims, seems to be one of attitude and tone. Whereas Knight is comfortable with completely defying the prophetic tradition, suggesting he would defecate on the prophet Muhammad himself; the members of the progressive camp, given a communal voice in Omid Safi's introduction to *Progressive Muslims*, are allegedly not interested in a "significant break with the past," or "an epistemological rupture," with the tradition, but rather with "a fine-tuning, a polishing, a grooming, an editing, a re-emphasizing of this and a correction of that."⁷⁷ What Knight and the progressives (by way of Safi) share in common is their implicit belief that there is something amiss in the contemporary Islamic situation; that there is something *wrong* with Islam. Knight identifies this belief by way of his presentation of the idea that Islam needs saving in *The Taqwacores*. In that text he

⁷⁴ Knight, *Osama Van Halen*, 57.

⁷⁵ Knight, *Osama Van Halen*, 114.

⁷⁶ Knight, *Osama Van Halen*, 131.

⁷⁷ Safi, 16.

suggests that legendary fictional Islamic punks, like his own Jehangir Tabari, may represent the only viable chance through which the tradition might be saved.⁷⁸ In language almost exactly mirroring that of Knight, Safi figures the progressive movement as the socio-political messianic organization for contemporary Islam when he writes: “It is time to start swimming in these turbulent waters, *to save both ourselves and the variety and vibrancy of the Islamic tradition.*”⁷⁹ Implicitly and explicitly, what both of these positions share in common is the notion that Islam and the Islamic community *should* be, or *need* to be healed.⁸⁰

Michael Muhammad Knight would prefer to heal the community using over-the-top tactics, in-your-face behavior, and intentionally offensive content and messages, with an eye towards shocking individuals into paying attention to his authorial and reformation projects, and perhaps even convincing passers by to work with him. Omid Safi, with his progressive Muslims project, seems to prefer direct engagement with the tradition and with (perhaps) more so-called mainstream Muslims. As a result, the underlying transformative nature of the latter reformation project seems less threatening at first glance, but this is primarily a superficial difference that boils down to presentation style. Generally speaking, Safi and Knight are in agreement that there is something about Islam that must change, and each of them would change the tradition in ways that would result in the closer conformity of the Islamic tradition with Western secular norms, primarily for the benefit of the individual religious sovereignties of each individual Islamic practitioner.

Also agreeing with the idea that the Islamic tradition is in need of modification, Safi identifies Ebrahim Moosa, Zohara Simmons, Sa’diyya Shaikh, Farish Noor, and others including Kecia Ali, Amina Wadud, and Farid Esack as fellow progressive Muslims who are alarmed that

⁷⁸ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 38.

⁷⁹ Safi, 2. Italics mine.

⁸⁰ Safi, 15,16.

“it may take decades, if not centuries, for the Muslim world to ‘catch up’” to Western liberal norms and values.⁸¹ An endorsement of the idea of the Muslim need to “catch up” is reflected by Knight when he challenges the prophetic *sunna* on the basis that Muhammad’s opinions are wrong about women lead prayer simply because “in 2005 the Prophet is wrong, shit on him.”⁸²

Regarded as a de-facto leader of the progressive Muslim movement due to his role as editor of the *Progressive Muslims* volume and his founding of the Progressive Muslim Union (PMU),⁸³ Safi declares that in regards to catching up, the Islamic community “simply cannot wait.”⁸⁴ Concerned that he and his cohort may be misunderstood as champions of Western modernity, Safi goes out of his way to assure readers that the progressive critique is directed “just as much to the West as to Muslim societies.”⁸⁵ Safi’s so-called “double-critique” primarily focuses on policies that seem to challenge or undermine his largely assumed beliefs about the “essential components” of Western modernity, namely: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise. He then cites a litany of by-now popular examples of Western missteps in the Islamic world that have resulted in the compromising of those values of the West. In this passage, Safi faults the United States for its support of the Afghan Mujahidin in the 1980s, the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq prior to the first Persian Gulf War, Parvez Musharraf’s government in Pakistan, and most recently Hosni Mubarak’s nearly thirty-year reign in Egypt.⁸⁶ The problem for Safi is

⁸¹ Safi, 16. This is problematic in part, and most obviously, because the text and the authors never question the concept of the necessity of the Islamic world’s need to “catch up” with the West. It is a forgone conclusion that Western liberal norms are to be accepted at face value as superior to so-called “problematic” aspects of the Islamic tradition.

⁸² Knight, *Journey to the End of Islam*, 16.

⁸³ The Progressive Muslim Union was one of the first official organizations characterized by progressive Muslim thinking. Established in 2004, the PMU has since disbanded, though a number of similar, liberally minded Muslim organizations were founded after its failure.

⁸⁴ Safi, 16.

⁸⁵ Safi, 4.

⁸⁶ Safi, 4.

that the West at times seems not to live by the very values that (he seems to believe) make the West great in the first place.

Progressive Muslim thinkers like those found in Safi's edited volume have received a great deal of support from many prominent scholars in the field of Islamic studies. Notably, Carl W. Ernst, the same highly regarded scholar who championed *The Taqwacores*, provided a glowing press statement for *Progressive Muslims*:

A brilliant demonstration of intellectual courage. The authors face with unflinching honesty the critical issues that confront Muslims. Islam today is a hotly disputed term, denounced by Christian extremists, rejected by Eurocentric neocolonialists, and abused by Islamic ideologues. Where will its future lie? Read this volume to find out.⁸⁷

One of the operational ideas at work in Ernst's writing then, is the notion that the progressive camp of Muslim intellectuals are one of the few, if not the only, groups seemingly practicing correct thinking about the Islamic tradition. Thus Ernst also implicitly endorses Safi's reformation project premised on the same ideas. Ernst's endorsement of the progressive Muslims project mirrors Knight's endorsement of the "crazy ones" in the *taqwacore* community, whom he identifies as the best hope (if not only) for the future of Islam due to their representation of his endlessly multiplied model of correct thinking about Islam.⁸⁸

After providing such praise for Safi's 2003 volume, Ernst went on to co-edit his own volume with Richard C. Martin of Emory University. *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, published in 2010, is thematically related to *Progressive Muslims* in that it takes for granted many of the liberal assumptions of Safi's volume, including the idea of progressive history built into Ernst and Martin's subtitle, but it also differs insofar as it purports to focus on the study of Islam, rather than the practice of the religion or the religious

⁸⁷ From Ernst's press statement on the back cover of the 2003 edition of *Progressive Muslims*.

⁸⁸ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 38.

Islamic itself. Ernst and Martin's volume also features essays by Omid Safi, Ebrahim Moosa, and Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle,⁸⁹ whose essays were likewise featured in *Progressive Muslims*.

Ernst and Martin provide the introduction to the volume in which they situate the work therein as indebted to thinkers from a variety of fields such as Edward Said, Marshall G.S. Hodgson, Peter Brown, Talal Asad, Michel Foucault, Charles Taylor, and Pierre Bourdieu, among others.⁹⁰ Their writing proceeds from the present, post-Saidian reality in which they assume, perhaps correctly (in general), that the problems of Orientalist scholarship are openly acknowledged, problematized, and have already been thought through at length. Their solution to the problem of Orientalism, a sort of next generation for the study of Islam in the field of religious studies, is presented in the form of the titular concept of cosmopolitanism.⁹¹ Ernst, Martin, and the scholars in the volume who "lean more toward cosmopolitanism," such as Katherine Pratt Ewing, Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr, and Bruce Lawrence, indicate that cosmopolitanism seems the most appropriate contemporary methodological framing device for the study of Islam in religious studies, not only because it provides "an orientation toward cultural diversity" thought to be lacking in the now troubled term, "multiculturalism,"⁹² but also as Bruce Lawrence suggests, cosmopolitanism functions to benefit and improve the study of Islam in new ways.

In his conclusion to *Rethinking Islamic Studies*, Lawrence recapitulates the material of the text with added emphasis on the appearances of cosmopolitanism throughout. Apart from a brief rumination on Fazlur Rahman's plea that Western, Judeo-Christian values and concepts not

⁸⁹ Though Scott al-Haqq Kugle is identified as an American Muslim sometimes known only as Siraj al-Haqq in *Progressive Muslims*, he is exclusively referred to as Scott Kugle in *Rethinking Islamic Studies*.

⁹⁰ Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin, "Introduction: Toward A Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies," in *Rethinking Islamic Studies*, eds. Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 8.

⁹¹ Ernst and Martin, 11.

⁹² Ernst and Martin, 11.

be utilized to the detriment of the study of Islam, Lawrence single-mindedly focuses on justifying cosmopolitanism as a useful academic frame.⁹³

In order to demonstrate the value of *cosmopolitanism*, Lawrence traces the term back to its Greek roots, in the term *oikoumene*.⁹⁴ He does so in order to invoke the language of universalism, which will eventually assist him in demonstrating how “Religion qua cosmopolitanism confers a special benefit for the study of Islam,” insofar as it “provides an alternative methodology that parts ways with the “privileging or deriding [of] one religious tradition vis-à-vis others.”⁹⁵

Proceeding, Lawrence introduces a series of scholarly works within the discipline that have drawn on sources demonstrative of the spirit of cosmopolitanism, “universal citizenship, the rights of all,” and “the fundamental ethos of the great Mediterranean city.”⁹⁶ Lawrence subsequently addresses the work of Vincent Cornell, which he praises for the author’s demonstration of the value of cosmopolitanism:

Implicit in Cornell’s comparison/contrast is both an affirmation of Islamic precedence and a preference for political liberalism, itself the carrier of cosmopolitan values. While traditional Islamic political theory could only tolerate difference[,] it could not incorporate a theory of difference into its conception of justice and rights.’ *In other words it could not be fully and persuasively cosmopolitan.*⁹⁷

Here, I am concerned with the move from Orientalism to cosmopolitanism insofar as Lawrence claims that it represents a definitive break from maligned scholarly traditions of the past. However, ultimately, by way of the methods in which the concept is developed and deployed in *Rethinking Islamic Studies*, cosmopolitanism is instead rendered as something that has always

⁹³ Bruce B. Lawrence, “Afterword: Competing Genealogies of Muslim Cosmopolitanism,” in *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, eds. Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press), 302-303.

⁹⁴ Lawrence in Ernst and Martin, 304.

⁹⁵ Lawrence in Ernst and Martin, 304.

⁹⁶ Lawrence in Ernst and Martin, 305.

⁹⁷ Lawrence in Ernst and Martin, 307, italics mine.

been a part of the Islamic tradition due to historically variant sources of orthodoxy, and the notion that Muslims long ago left behind the concept of the nation-state in favor of an idea of “cosmopolitan global citizenship.”⁹⁸ In this move, Lawrence has shifted his focus from the study of Islam to the practitioners of Islam. By reading vague notions of cosmopolitanism backwards into Islamic history, and subsequently deploying Vincent Cornell to demonstrate the failure of cosmopolitan ideals within an Islamic political framework, Lawrence ultimately finds fault with Islam from without, and holds it up to a standard outside of the tradition. This move, while not exactly constitutive of an Orientalist argument, can hardly be said to move beyond that oft-criticized academic tradition, either.

The implication then is that contemporary Muslims must properly adopt the tradition of cosmopolitanism that has apparently long been a part of the Islamic tradition, though with only limited success. This sort of suggestion recurs throughout contemporary academic writing on Islam, particularly as that writing concerns itself with contemporary Islamic political issues, so-called confrontations with modernity, and the hope for Muslim individuals to “inherit, then expand, premodern ideals for their generation.”⁹⁹

Lawrence suggests that the idea of cosmopolitanism became important to the study of religion in the mid-1990s with the 1994 publication of “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism” by Martha Nussbaum, and the 1995 publication of *Postethnic America* by David A. Hollinger. It is noteworthy that Lawrence first begins referring to cosmopolitanism in italics as a worthwhile and academically valuable concept after briefly discussing the impact of Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion* on the field of religious studies. In juxtaposition to Asad, who is known for his criticism of the practice of overtly privileging Western liberal concepts and ideas in scholarship

⁹⁸ Lawrence in Ernst and Martin, 315.

⁹⁹ Lawrence in Ernst and Martin, 315.

and politics, Lawrence likely thinks Cosmopolitanism safer than the loaded language of modernity, secularism, and progressivism. However, in discussing the work of Vincent Cornell, Lawrence demonstrates the coherence between cosmopolitanism and liberal politics, and establishes, by way of his discussion, that cosmopolitanism is a worthwhile political goal. The object of inquiry then shifts to that of the political theories of Islam, which as has been demonstrated, were found to be lacking the cosmopolitan spirit. In rethinking the field of Islamic studies, the concluding remarks concerning the project have found it necessary to rethink Islamic political theory. The stakes of the argument have changed as the focus has shifted from improving the discipline to adapting the Islamic tradition to contemporary modern political realities.¹⁰⁰¹⁰¹

Other than his aforementioned opposition to the *courageous* and *refreshing* scholars and scholarship found in texts like *Progressive Muslims* and *Rethinking Islamic Studies*, how does Michael Muhammad Knight actually differ from those situated within this particular contemporary academic phenomenon? Knight and his thinking represent the extreme, maximalist, and even fringe in terms of the overall spectrum of social, religious, and political thinking within the Islamic tradition. His style and content are characterized by intentional crassness, a predilection for controversial material, and a habit of seeking out and desiring overt shock-value. However, despite this noticeable difference, he is also closely tied to the

¹⁰⁰ The subtitle of the book *From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* seems to suggest that progress is being made in moving from the former to the latter. The problem with this model, and what makes it particularly deceptive is that the former object refers to a problematic orientation towards the Islamic world, and the latter, which in part does propose a new paradigm of study, but also refers to a call for Muslims to become universally cosmopolitan. The subtitle lacks parallel structure, the structure does not employ like terms, and as a result, cosmopolitanism merely ends up replacing Western, modern, secular, and other criticized terms as simply an as-yet uncontested term itself.

¹⁰¹ Lawrence's essay is not the only example of concepts being deployed and then reinscribed transhistorically in order to make political points or otherwise imply the necessity of political change. For further examples of this phenomenon see essays by Karim, Martin, and Barzegar in *Rethinking Islamic Studies*.

movement. Just as I have suggested that the position of progressive Muslim scholars is to heal Islam based on wounds that they identify, making it an easier fit for unification with a larger society within the modern progressive milieu, so too is Knight's project ultimately concerned with changing the tradition from without, albeit in a maximalist way, such that the tradition is remade on an individual basis, to serve individual needs.

In Omid Safi's *Progressive Muslims*, many of the authors take it for granted that pluralism should be a monumentally important topic for the contemporary Islamic community. Throughout the third of the text concerned with pluralism, Amir Hussain, Amina Wadud, and others bemoan the fact that some Muslims have little to no interest in pluralism.¹⁰² What the authors of these essays frequently ignore is that there have been a variety of Islamic responses to scenarios involving pluralism throughout history and that some have been more acceptable in the opinions of modern Western thinkers than others, but the idea that Islam *must* find a space within a pluralistic, multicultural society is never questioned.

The progressive Muslim agenda then, seems to be one interested in remaking Islam first, and Muslims second. Knight, in contradistinction to this, would have individual Muslims remake their own Islams in a way that suits them, thus simultaneously solving the problems of individual practitioners vis-à-vis their so-called harsh religious tradition, and also actively altering and modifying the subjectivities of contemporary Muslims for inclusion in secular progressive societies as individuals freed from religious tyranny.

As recently as March 2012, Knight has even shared the page with some of the same progressive wimps that he has criticized in publications past, in an edited volume celebrating the

¹⁰² *Progressive Muslims*, 260.

modern political, social, and religious work of Amina Wadud.¹⁰³ In his contribution to the volume, Knight fondly remembers his experience of working with the security team at Amina Wadud's controversial 2005 gender-inclusive prayer service, and praises Wadud for her attempts in "saving progressive Islam from its own neoliberal stink."¹⁰⁴ To Knight, Wadud is more responsible, academically and religiously, than his former "exclusivist" colleagues in the "propaganda wing" of Omid Safi's PMU.¹⁰⁵ Knight believes that Wadud emerged from the rubble of the PMU respectable and virtually unscathed as a scholar and as a Muslim, due to the "Islamic foundation for her ethics," which are oriented around a particular understanding of *tawhid*,¹⁰⁶ rather than on any modern liberal framework.¹⁰⁷ However, Wadud's particular understanding of *tawhid*, and Knight's support for the idea, is actually influenced by modern secular humanism rather than anything Islamic. Rather than emphasizing the unity of God, Wadud's *tawhid* emphasizes the essential oneness of Muslims as human beings under God.¹⁰⁸ The unity of the human family, important though it most certainly is, does not substitute here for a traditional understanding of the divine unity of God, a core religious idea in Islam, and an idea that Frederick Denny identifies as "Islam's central doctrine."¹⁰⁹ Knight offers no additional commentary, explanation, or interpretive clues as to how readers should make sense of this understanding of *tawhid*; he simply embraces it after finding that it is a notion to be met with his

¹⁰³ The language of courageousness, wimpiness, and modernity are meant to recall Knight's judgments, not my own.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Muhammad Knight, "Building and Destroying," in *A Jihad for Justice: Honoring the Work and Life of Amina Wadud*, eds. Ali, Julianne Hammer, and Laury Sanders (Boston: 48HourBooks.com / Boston University Press, 2012), 35, E-Book, <http://www.bu.edu/religion/files/2010/03/A-Jihad-for-Justice-for-Amina-Wadud-2012-1.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ Knight in Ali, Hammer, and Laury, "Building and Destroying," 34.

¹⁰⁶ *Tawhid* is the basic Islamic doctrine asserting the absolute oneness and unity of God, in contradistinction to the triune God of some Christian traditions.

¹⁰⁷ Knight in Ali, Hammer, and Laury, "Building and Destroying," 35.

¹⁰⁸ Knight in Ali, Hammer, and Laury, "Building and Destroying," 33, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Denny, 133.

approval. He does so because he, in the same way as the progressive Muslim scholars I have written about in this section, takes for granted liberal, pluralistic assumptions about the value of omitting a potentially divisive issue such as the absolute unity of the divine in favor of allowing for a definitional move that grants further opportunity for the endless multiplication of opinions about the term such that each and every individual can have their own idea about what this central doctrine of Islam actually constitutes.

As such, he plays fast and loose with the details of the Islamic tradition, and he makes no attempt to check, as Asad would have it, on the historical context or validity of these new ideas within the Islamic tradition. In supporting Wadud, in her theology and her political projects, Knight makes it clear that he finds it necessary for Islam to create a space for multiple sites of correct belief even as they relate to one of the most central and foundational concepts within the religious tradition, and he does so in order to make individual religious practitioners normative within a larger secular multicultural milieu even if not more so within the tradition itself.

On Knight and Multiculturalism

Seen together, what elements constitute the major theoretical concerns latent in the discourses of Michael Muhammad Knight with regard to the overall Islamic tradition? Certainly the notion that the tradition is in crisis and needs to be saved has played a significant discursive role in their framing of contemporary Muslim dispositions and practices. Knight's framing of the story in *The Taqwacores* is dependent (at least in part) on the idea that his readers accept that the characters in the story are each involved in a crisis with their own personal religion, and that this is the case in part because Islam itself is in the throes of a crisis.¹¹⁰ What strikes me as significant in this regard is the invocation of the language of crisis and trouble as a contemporary feature of the global Islamic community. This language of crisis in Islam and the need for

¹¹⁰ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 38.

change makes possible the concern over the reformation, rehabilitation, and salvation of Islam itself.

Similarly, both Knight and the progressives seem to possess a reasonable awareness of the potential issues surrounding the discourses of modernization, consensus, and indeed, even progressivism itself.¹¹¹ However, they also seem to overlook such concerns with regard to other previously assumed, universalizing, normative concepts, believing that some terms are wholly superior to others, when in fact they suffer from the same (or similar) drawbacks (ie: cosmopolitanism over and against multiculturalism).¹¹² It is altogether unclear after reading the works of Michael Muhammad Knight, Omid Safi, Richard C. Martin, and Carl W. Ernst how *any* of their proposed methods for understanding and thinking about Islam are *any* better than any of the methods which have been faulted or found lacking in the past as each of these authors and their proposed ideas are problematically related to the idea of multiculturalism (overall) in a way that quickly evokes that very idea recently and powerfully problematized by Talal Asad.

The largest problem for Knight and his progressive camp is that they urge Muslim communities in the United States to do as John Patten, former British Minister of State at the Home Office responsible for race relations, did with regard to England's Muslims during the Rushdie affair: to aspire to a norm.¹¹³ This is of course, not problematic in and of itself, but rather it becomes problematic insofar as Knight and the progressives make their sort of urging pleas without reference to the contexts in which these norms have been set, and without reference to the specific positions that these norms might (or might not) carry within the Islamic tradition.

¹¹¹ Safi, 17.

¹¹² Ernst and Martin, 11.

¹¹³ Asad, *Genealogies*, 243.

Patten's July 1989 essay directed at immigrant Muslim communities in England, titled "On Being British," implies that "Britishness is more than a matter of paying taxes, voting, using state welfare services and in general being subject to the laws of the country," and it is in this implication of something greater than state subjectivity that the connection between Patten's arguments and the arguments of Knight and the progressives becomes clear.¹¹⁴ At the center of Patten's idea of Britishness is a complex of English commonalities across its population including: democracy, laws, the English language, and the history that has shaped Britain. Apparently, "at the center of this history is the idea of 'freedom' – 'freedom to choose one's faith, to choose one's political allegiance' to speak and write freely, to meet, argue and demonstrate, and to play a part in shaping events.'"¹¹⁵ In his analysis of Patten's essay, Asad suggests that the idea of freedom, as Patten uses it, seems to depend on two interconnected ideas, those of tolerance and obligation:

Tolerance requires acceptance of diversity ('There is, as I have said, plenty of room for diversity, precisely because our traditions are those of tolerance'), a diversity based on the individual's right to believe, act, and speak as he or she chooses. But rights create 'obligations,' above all the obligation to respect the rights of others - 'respect for the safety of their property,' no less than for their right to speak and write 'freely.'¹¹⁶

Insofar as Patten's essay and Asad's analysis of it are preoccupied with the freedoms of individuals living in a tolerant and multicultural society à la Britain or the United States, it is clearly related to Michael Muhammad Knight's predisposition for Muslim youths to exercise their rights to write, speak, act, and be religious freely in any way that they see fit. Even if Knight were to reject that his was the most recent in a line of new and refreshing American Islams, certainly he could not question the idea that his celebrates the individual's right to believe, act, and speak as he or she wishes, and that it does so as a stipulation of the American

¹¹⁴ Asad, *Genealogies*, 243.

¹¹⁵ Asad, *Genealogies*, 244.

¹¹⁶ Asad, *Genealogies*, 244.

setting, not as a traditional thread historically located as an authorized practice within the tradition.

As Asad points out in his analysis of Patten's work, this tendency seen in Knight's thinking (and Patten's language in the essay), has far more to do with the "essential sentiments and loyalties" of modern nation states than it does with the moods and motivations of Muslims in Islamic communities.¹¹⁷ Knight and the progressives miss the fact that these freedom-oriented, multicultural societies still exercise considerable power over these fundamentally different immigrant populations insofar as they allow or disallow particular elements of foreign cultures to contribute to Americanness or Britishness overall.

What Knight and the progressives also miss is that so called traditional cultures existing in an interconnected and interdependent modern world identified by way of what are thought to be their contrastingly rigid, inflexible, and sometimes anachronistic rules and characteristics, "do not spontaneously grow or develop into so-called modern cultures," as if by the grace of some multicultural influence. Rather, "people are pushed, seduced, coerced, or persuaded into trying to change themselves into something else, something that allows them to be redeemed," or in Knight's language, saved.¹¹⁸ Of course, Knight also misses that this process works in both directions with regard to Islam, that his own project may be just as guilty of coercion and force as any strict interpretation of Islam abroad. In emphasizing the idea that today all share an existence defined at least in part by a particular conception of the human, and that the tradition of Islam needs to be humanized, modernized, updated, saved, cosmopolitanized, or indeed, forgotten; Knight and the progressive Muslim scholars are, in fact, relying on an exercise of

¹¹⁷ Asad, *Genealogies*, 243.

¹¹⁸ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 154. To employ language that is perhaps more neutral than Asad's in this regard, we might also say that individuals and people affiliated with "traditional cultures" are *influenced* rather than seduced, coerced, etc.

political power that “often presents itself as a force for redeeming ‘humanity from ‘traditional cultures.’”¹¹⁹ Here, it is not my intention to suggest that “traditional cultures” are somehow more pure than “modern cultures.” Nor do I wish to turn a blind eye to the contemporary realities of globalization or cultural interdependence. I simply mean to suggest that, as Asad argues:

Cultures are also *unequally displaced practices*. Whether cultural displacement is a means of ensuring political domination or merely its effect, whether it is a necessary stage in the growth of universal humanity or an instance of cultural takeover, is not the point here. What I want to stress is that cultures may be conceived not only in *visual* terms (‘clearly bounded,’ ‘interlaced,’ ‘fragmented,’ and so forth) but also in terms of the temporalities of power by which – rightly or wrongly – *practices* constituting particular forms of life are displaced, outlawed, and penalized, and by which conditions are created for the cultivation of different kinds of humans.¹²⁰

As such, it would be foolhardy to assume that the synthesis or combination of an immigrant Islamic population with a local, norm enforcing, and governing population with the necessary sovereignty to decide what contradicts and diverges from the acceptable norms of life, would occur in a vacuum isolated from the realities of relationships of power, and that the resulting multicultural milieu would somehow be a power-neutral result.

In criticizing traditionally derived and authorized (by way of the *Qur’an*, *sunna*, or *ijmā*)¹²¹ practices and beliefs of the contemporary Islamic *ummah*, Knight and the progressives are in effect advocating for displacing, outlawing, penalizing, or otherwise proscribing various modes of practice which create and cultivate different types of human subjects. Knight in particular makes use of this tactic throughout his work as he perpetually undermines and criticizes the very processes and governing bodies that are capable of constituting and establishing human subjects insofar as they produce subjects outside of his acceptable ideal, and

¹¹⁹ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 154.

¹²⁰ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 153-154.

¹²¹ The *ijmā* is yet another site of authority in the Islamic tradition – that of the consensus of the Islamic community. Sometimes used interchangeably with *al-‘amal*, the agreed practice, the *ijmā* was formulated and deployed against arbitrary individual and sectarian opinions.

the very practices which function in their constitution. He cuts down the traditional Islamic models in favor of non-Islamic models based on secular, and punk rock ideologies, as his way of attempting to “save” the tradition.¹²²

Concluding Considerations

I cannot overstate that this writing is not intended as a critique of any particular individual religious practitioners, or the way in which any individual practitioners may choose to live their religion. What I have argued is that Michael Muhammad Knight actively wishes to pursue and enact real sociopolitical changes upon the Islamic tradition, and in effect he asks Islam to sacrifice parts of itself such that it can fit into the Western conceptualization of a multicultural society. The suggestion that Islam should catch up or change in order to fit into these modern western categories occurs by way of the normative assumption that these are natural categories; that they are good or desirable based on a priori assumptions alone, and that they are taken entirely as granted. Knight and many of the progressive Muslim thinkers maintain assumptions that freedom (as it is understood in the West), multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism are universally understood as positive concepts. They are taken as the norm, and anything that is not the norm must be modified and brought into the fold. Their tendency to view Islam as compromised or in need of salvation can, at times, make it seem as though the religion itself is as a ship at sea, sinking irretrievably to the bottom of the ocean. Michael Muhammad Knight and the progressives are offering life preservers to the survivors of the shipwreck, but they are not doing so unconditionally.

Knight has given up on the project of figuring out what Islam is, and his stipulation to potential converts to the *taqwacore* movement, or the Five Percent Nation, or even to his Islamic antidoxy would be that they do the same. The Islam of the self is Knight’s formulation of the

¹²² Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 38.

religion for the 21st century *ummah* in North America, but it is an *ummah* made up of individuals. Scarcely a community concerned with a tradition, Knight's antidox *ummah* would be Islamic in name only, perhaps privately Islamic in their religion, or somewhat Islamically spiritual in their personal lives, but hardly comprised by what might be recognizable to Fazlur Rahman or Frederick Denny as religious Muslims.

Knight originally identified Islam as a means for resisting authority in the New York community where he was raised. His project of redefining and reinterpreting Islam is very real, even if it is not entirely cohesive and without contradiction. Knight deploys Islam as a signifier of resistance and rebellion, but he fails to recognize that his own schema for the future of the tradition contains within it the same elements that allow for the harsh external governance of religious selves within more conservative understandings of the Islamic tradition. If the self is to be the only force worthy of defining and applying Islam, how then can Wahhabi or Salafi views of Islam be understood as incorrect? Are Wahhabists and Salafists using any less of their individual selves to arrive at a more conservative Islamic truth? Would Knight's program not also be guilty of preventing *some* Muslims from living their Islam as they see fit? It would seem that Knight has simply substituted one tradition capable of producing power and knowledge for another, which as of yet, he is not currently engaged in resisting.

Knight wants to save Muslims from Islam, and if they prefer to still talk about Islam afterwards, that is acceptable in his view, just so long as they are never asked to submit to anything outside of themselves.

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