

Development for a Wired, Urban Generation

Shaykh Faraz Rabbani and Rami Nashashibi

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[Opening du'ā]

Al-Salām 'alaykum

Good evening everybody. Welcome to tonight's special session on 'Reaching Muslim 2.0'. My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik, I'm a journalist and editor for Q-News and these days I'm wearing my hat as a project manager with the Radical Middle Way initiative. Tonight is on conjunction with and hosted by the City Circle, with support from us, we've brought together two fascinating personalities and two fascinating projects that these personalities represent, to discuss what we've called tonight, 'Reaching Muslim 2.0: Community Development for a Wired, Urban Generation'.



I think we can safely say through our own experience in this room, as activists who work in and with our community. We understand that the generation we're working with, whether it's in North America and certainly here in the United Kingdom, is a generation that is decidedly urban with experience of life, culture, the arts, social and political institutions, is shaped by the fact that the vast majority of them have grown up in heavily urbanised spaces, areas of a high population density, and that are of the city and from the city. I think we also realise that the generation we are working with now in our various capacities is also a generation that is wired up and that is the very demographic of what has come to be known as 'Web 2.0' otherwise Faraz mentioned earlier today that we'll be at 3.0 or 4.0 very soon. In some ways we Muslims are playing catch up.

So when we talk about Muslim 2.0 for the purpose of tonight's discussion, really we are looking at this urban demographic, for whom the internet and for whom access to access to information online, and the online experience of community is actually central to their experience, both as citizens, individuals and the argument I think I'll make tonight, is as

Muslims. And so we often hear about civic activism, whether it's online civic activism done in communities, but very quickly our activism now has to evolve into new realities. And tonight we're, in a way, going to be having a conversation through the lens of two particular projects; a broader conversation about how we reach this demographic, what are the issues that are important for this demographic, and how do we tie in the whole broader notion of community development with our urbanity and the fact that we are now an internet generation.



Tonight we're going to be hearing from Rami Nashashibi and from Faraz Rabbani, and I'll introduce them in turn. I think the way we'll work tonight's programme- because both speakers want to keep it as brief as possible and that's certainly my intent – is that we'll each give a short presentation on the topic, based on their experiences and then we can hopefully kick off and open to the floor with some of the critical questions. What we're hoping to do today is to bring out some of the issues that were stated on the blurb for tonight and hopefully relying on your own experiences and how they mesh with the experiences of Shaykh Faraz and Rami.

So I will start by introducing Rami, and in a way tonight's presentation is divided into activist and scholar, and those aren't hard and fast qualifications. Tonight the activist gets to speak first, which I think is the reverse of the usual, isn't it Rami?

[Rami says] It sounds like a set up actually

[Audience laugh]

[Abdul-Rehman] So the fatwa will come post-presentation

[Shaykh Faraz says] But he's older right?

[Audience laugh]

[Abdul-Rehman says] Fair enough.

[Shaykh Faraz] For me he's like 'amoo Rami, right?

[Audience laugh]

[Abdul-Rehman continues]

So not only is he running the youth, but he's an old man now? You've given him Shaykh status, so here we have two Shaykhs and two activists.

Rami Nasashibi is the executive director of the Inner City Muslim Action Network in Chicago. I met Rami many many years ago when we were running in the same sort of North American activists circuits. Founded formally in 1997 but beginning its work a little earlier than that. IMAN – the Inner City Muslim Action Network was an organisation committed to literally organising advocacy and has grown now to meet a variety of social services, medical services, and is actively involved in promoting cultural production in inner city Chicago.

Rami's background is as a Palestinian, raised in America, graduated from Dipole University IN 1995, he's currently a PhD candidate at the University of Chicago. Amongst his PhD work is always directly meshed with his activism work – the work of IMAN very much informs his PhD work; the other night we had a really magnificent round table with Rami and some of the leading Urban Music Hip-Hop promoters here in London, and it was interesting to see how he had reflected on his work with IMAN in a very sophisticated way, on where this generation is going and the work that IMAN does.

He's been profiled in many publications and Islāmic Magazine recently called him one of the ten visionaries who are going to shape the future of Muslim America. So I'm really excited, and it's been great to get reacquainted with an old friend this week and I hope all of you will benefit from his presentation. So I will now hand over the floor to him.

[Rami begins with an opening du'a]

I want to begin first and foremost by thanking brother Abdul-Rehman and the Radical Middle Way for their visionary work and helping to facilitate some of the meetings I've been able to have over the last several days; and of course our hosts here and the Muslim City Circle.

I've been meeting a whole range of organisations and individuals with various acronyms and names over the last couple of days and I'm actually really inspired by the opportunities for work here and inspired by what has already been taking place in terms of some of the community voices.

Let me start by saying, yes, I also wasn't joking about the setup; it's always very intimidating having to speak before a Shaykh he said he's going to thoroughly deconstruct and debacle all the falsities of any of my statements afterwards so at least I can be assured in having some form of correction. I should also state as some kind of disclaimer, I'm certainly coming from my perspectives based on the activism and the work I've been doing over the last decade and

some years, and certainly almost alongside that, I have been working in some capacity or another in academia, but I'm still very much an activist scholar in the sense of my sociological angles.

But I should state that when we talk about urban frameworks it's interesting coming from Chicago because Chicago as an urban city has really shaped and had a phenomenal influence on the direction of Islām in North America and also Islām across the globe – and we'll talk about that in a second – but also Chicago and the study of Chicago has had a phenomenal influence in the way we even understand our urban condition in an intellectual language. In other words Chicago was the social laboratory of the social sciences in the early 20th Century.

It was the University of Chicago that helped birth sociology and so sociology gives birth around studying the human condition in the urban centre cities of Chicago. So the great Robert Parks, Lewis Worth and all the sociologists of that era not only helped to inform how we understand the city, but then posit a whole range of theories about the human condition in itself. So it's important to note that this issue in itself of thinking through our urbanity – particularly at that moment because it was post-industrial – how the world would get reconfigured in a post industrial era, is the highlight of a moment when people begin to live in cities in a disproportionate number to those in rural areas. And so understanding the way they live in cities, the way they respond to immigration, respond to crime, respond to the notions of high densities in the urban areas, was absolutely and utterly critical for the social sciences of that time. Likewise, and I would suggest (and many urban scholars have suggested) that understanding our urban context in today's day and age is yet again, an absolutely critical moment to understand not only various, local sociological dynamics, but how the world is going to look; and I would I would suggest that the Muslims are at the cutting edge of that. Understanding what's happening in Muslim Communities in Urban centres and places like London, New York, Chicago, is something that people across the globe are interested in.

Two years ago when I was in the Al-Aqsa compound and there was a young kid who was listening to his MP3 Player outside, I was joking around with him about it, and grabbed it to see what he was listening to – and he's listening to 50 Cent and during the first week that track dropped in the United States. Now, he could tell me about the beef between them, and what happened with Rockafella and so on. This is a young Palestinian kid living within a pebbles-throw of Al-Aqsa. He probably can't tell you anything about the Khutba's of the last few months, but he can tell me what's happening in Urban centres in America and the dynamics.

That certainly has some negative connotations, but there's also a flip side to how urban centres within the United States or Europe are influential spaces that are beginning to shape the way in which people begin to think about themselves in their cultural identity across the globe. So that's a framework I just want to put out there and certainly from both an activist and scholarly perspective urban space is something that you know, I'm slightly interested/obsessed with. And the students I have to teach at University have to suffer through that with me.

The second issue is understanding the phenomenal influence to urban space as a Muslim, particularly in Chicago. What do we inherit? We inherit a space that is highly infused with a Muslim sensibility. Not only in places like Chicago, but in many urban spaces across America. I was recently in Philadelphia, and within an hour of being in Phili, I confronted no less than a dozen Muslims on the street and Al-salām ‘alaykum was a pervasive greeting – not unlike Chicago where I could grab one out of five people on the street and say Al-salām ‘alaykum to people who aren’t Muslim and know how to respond with wa ‘alaykum Al-salām. Not only do they know how to respond, but it’s seen as an extension of the broader, urban identity. In Philadelphia it was so poignant that I was walking with a brother from Chicago and we wanted to get something to eat. There was a woman, she was not Muslim, not wearing hijāb, didn’t even say Al-salām ‘alaykum to us, but she was a security guard at a building, and we stopped to ask her. It was around 12.45 and we were very hungry, we had just landed from Chicago, the conference was starting. We said ‘we want to get something to eat, is there anything around here?’ she looked at me and said ‘baby, you want something to eat? It’s fifteen minutes before salāt Al-juma’a, you’re going to miss your salāt’. And we looked at her and were like ‘....thank you.’ [Audience laugh]

This was a reminder. And it was the same all through Philadelphia. Because of some hip hop artists – Benny Single, Freeway, literally, the pervasive look of ‘this is a hipster look in Philadelphia’ [Audience laugh]. I’m not joking – I’m not joking. People walk around with the bushy beards, the miswāk in their mouths, the timberlands, the Sunnah jeans – which are above the ankles- in Philli these have become part of the urban aesthetic and style. And you can see that.

So, how did it happen in urban America? There are certainly things that led up to that; undoubtedly the nation of Islām, undoubtedly laying the foundation for an Islām that was absolutely indigenised within a broader indigenous context. So you could do interviews with jazz artists from the 50’s and 60’s and they could tell you about going to Juma’a at night and seeing half the guys on band stands – some of the greatest jazz artists praying Juma’a in the Masjid. There was a cultural synthesis infusion that was very natural between the Muslims. So the people who were shaping opinion and were also the people grounded in a very strong Islāmic sensibility. Islam was adopted as transformative and you have to understand this about the urban framework; you have to remember African Americans move into urban centres after the emancipation, after Jim Crow, move on mass to places like Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, and they’re looking for a new spiritual identity that they knew they had some historical connection to; something that would speak to a besieged people and would also help to transform identity and space and quite brilliantly usurp what they could remember of any notion of Islām and brilliantly invert the dominant paradigm.

I mean, whatever you think of the Nation of Islām, it’s undoubtedly brilliant in terms of what they were able to do. People sometimes, and I hope I’m not in a crowd here who would misconstrue that and say that I endorse the theology of the Nation of Islām, but just from a sociological, cultural perspective, let’s understand what they did. Here were blacks coming up from only a decade removed of chattel-slavery in the United States; only a decade removed from when the President would publically talk about these people as heathens, as children, as savages, and are then able to move into urban centres and adopt and invert notions of white civility – everything from the bow tie to the dress to the mannerisms – and

literally kind of erect a complete alternative identity that appropriated norms and notions of mainstream society, and again, put its own cultural, Muslim twist on things.

That history, alongside the history of the Moore Science Temple in the earlier part of the 20th Century led to characters that we all know, characters such as Malcolm X. I want to share with you something some of you may or may not know. A week before Malcolm was assassinated, so on the night of February 13th 1965, he was coming back from a hectic trip in New York I believe and he was responding to a letter – the thing about Malcolm was that he never stopped, he was going for 24 hrs a day – the letter was an interview from a Muslim Magazine in Europe. It was an immigrant-owned magazine, and it had a question for Malcolm because they heard that he had ‘become Sunni and gone to Mecca’ and had now been exposed to Universal Islām. They were bothered by the fact that Malcolm, was still coming back to Harlem and talking about black people, talking about the issues in Harlem’s community – and to them, they construed that as still being Nationalistic; as not adopting or articulating the right type of Islām.

They had a question for Malcolm, they said ‘Brother Malcolm, we thought you were more intelligent, more enlightened, why aren’t you highlighting the right ‘aqīda of Islām? Why aren’t you articulating this right version of Islām and I really encourage everyone here to read the response of Malcolm. He’s responding on the night that his house is fire bombed. You all remember that scene in the movie and remember it in the autobiography where you’ve read it; the letter gets interrupted and in fact he gets back to the letter and he says ‘excuse me for the brief and abrupt train of my thought, my house was just firebombed.’ As soon as he gets back to the hotel he’s writing, he’s in Michigan giving one of his speeches and in total Malcolm style, he apologises for his appearance because of what he’d been through the night before.

But in his response, in this brilliant part of this response, he’s saying to the brothers, he’s saying, look, this is on the eve of immigrant migration to the United States right, it’s just beginning to happen. It’s the third wave of migration in the United States and for people like my grandparents and desi immigrants and Arab immigrants are coming to the United States on mass now. And Malcolm’s saying in the most polite fashion possible, ‘look, first of all, everything that I’ve read of Islam I understand, but I’m still black, I’m still from America, and everything that I’ve understood from Islam has not necessitated that I forget the particular locality that I’m from in engaging the world. As far as I’m concerned, that’s what I read when I read the stories of Sahaba, people who in tune to these sensitivities. He said secondly, your very critique of me is ironic because I find it difficult to take that critique.’ (I’m paraphrasing) ‘But coming from a group of people who are obsessed with whiteness, who are coming to my country, I beg you to come to Harlem. Come to reside in Harlem. You’ll come to reside in proximity to these white, affluent suburbs and you’re doing whatever you can to be distant from the very people who would embrace you.’ And he gives this beautiful analogy about planting a seed in a fertile soil as opposed to a barren soil. So he says what are you doing to allow a Muslim identity to flourish over the next several decades? Come to Harlem and see what could come from your work.

Now, sadly the immigrant community never took up the challenge of Malcolm’s, but there’s

a decree for everything, but it would have been interesting to see how Islām would have looked on September 11th 2001 if people had heeded the vision of Malcolm and created those hybrid types of communities and settled in those urban areas, as opposed to some of the clusters that they have because what became part and parcel of the urban landscape was this sense that Islām was part of the transformation of the human identity, and in doing so, inspiring people to be transformative. Islām became part and parcel of a sense of being that allowed people to see themselves as transforming, as radically improving upon and addressing the inequities of society and helping to build something that was meaningful and substantial.

And so it's no coincidence that from 1965 up until the current era – whether through hip hop or street organisations that would run urban areas – that Islām becomes infused with their sensibilities. So on the south side of Chicago partly what I work with and what I write about is some of the oldest street gangs of the city of the United States; the Black Peace Stone Nation – I mean you could walk into the toughest neighbourhoods and if you have a hijāb, there's a sensibility that no pork will be sold in front of you by these guys, no weed or crack will be sold in front of you by these guys. It's not to say that they have their own imperfections or contradictions, but it's only to say that what happens in these urban frameworks, particularly in inner city urban frameworks in America, is that it ends up emerging as a place that's phenomenally hospitable.

Now, I would suggest, as I said earlier, that globalisation in today's day and age has certainly helped to make this phenomena that we currently enjoy in some urban centres across America – something that is partially accessible to us across the globe. So when kids in Philasteen or kids in London are adopting some aspects of hip hop culture, and they have to be discerning about what they adopt, they also so because they see in that, I believe, the same type of potency as a framework to develop a dynamic indigenous identity which speaks to the local issues whilst still being unapologetically grounded in who they are as Muslims.

For me, when we speak about that in relation to what I've seen and heard and read, and I know that with the short time I've been in London, my observations are very limited obviously, but you hear a lot about this 'concern' that permeates a lot of the discourse we've had about the so-called 'disaffected youth' in London and across England. The extremist and again to quote, 'radical discourse' has found appealing. The other thing I find interesting about that is that first of all, even when hearing the discourse, I can't lie and say that in my Islāmic evolution I didn't find some of that even attractive, but when we look at the time framework of our Prophet (saw), we look at the most marginalised segments of that society, whether it was Bilāl Al-Habashī or Salmān Al-Fārasī – those who were literally subjected to the worst status possible- I think that emerging is the type of models that many in the African American Urban Community that helped to shape that dynamic, tap into. In other words, the models of the most disaffected, the most marginalised, the most oppressed segments of the society, emerging as beacons of hope and light and transformation for the broader society, even those who were oppressing them. And you see that's the phenomenal backdrop to that story, that Bilāl Al-Habishī becomes a phenomenal light for the entire Qureysh and helps to put them on the map by the extraordinary contribution he makes to the uplift-ment of humanity, and that they're inspired and of course inculcated with this gift the beloved

Prophet (saw) who instils with them the very essence that even Allah instils into the Prophet; the ability to discern and amplify and uplift the dignity of human life, and to bring that out.

And that's what they were so successful doing in urban streets in Chicago. That's the same guy who was the throwaway. These are the same people I learnt my Islām from, these are the people who inspired me to even think about myself as a Muslim; there were people doing fifteen years for first degree murder but were then inspired by others and who came to them and took the verse 'la qad karamna bani Ādam' and seriously saw karāma in them and saw dignity in them, and were able to lift that dignity up and allow them to become beacons of light for that society. And I think it's that formula that is missing here. I think we all hold responsibility for why it is missing, here or missing in the United States. The fact that people fill that void that is created when that formula is missing, should not be simply something that we bemoan, not something that we are beside ourselves with, but something that we need to address collectively. In other words, if these young, disaffected members of our community, whether they're young or whether they're marginalised, are not being reached out to in the most affective, dynamic, creative fashion possible by other segments in society that are a little more privileged, a little more affluent, a little more accessible – and then we have ourselves to blame.

For me - and may I have your permission to be a little controversial for a minute here?

[Abdul-Rehman says] Be controversial!

[Rami continues] I don't usually raise up names, but if any of you here belong to those groups, I'll be happy to talk to you afterwards. But see, for me, the fact that Hizb Al-Tahrir of Muhajirūn can get away with distributing the kind of literature that they do, and get accessibility and get traction – and I'm not saying I'm concerned about it from any governmental source – I'm talking about it because I think it's just philosophically bankrupt, in the sense that it does not produce anything. In the United States when I get a guy who's been distributing literature for the past fifteen years, and I've got people on the streets who are hungry, who are doing time in jail, I want to know what he's done in that very society that he sat in. I want to see the alternative model that he's been able to develop before I take any stock in what his view of what a khalāfa can look like, because if it looks like anything with him running it, that's the last place that I would want to be! And if we're honest with ourselves, most of those people who are in those organisations would not want to live under those types of conditions.

And again, I know that's contentious, but that's what I've been exposed to and that's what I've seen, and I believe that in the United States it hasn't got traction because we've been able to challenge it, not from some academic, elitist or governmental perspective, but from the ground up. Where is it?! Where is this kind of model that you're talking about here?! You're here to tell me that all you've got is pamphlets for the next fifteen years, while you're living on some salary in some university, comfortably living in this kind of diametrically opposed, this kind of schizophrenic Muslim mentality where you can hyper-insulate yourself from the criticism that you lash onto others because of some absurd Fiqh that says I can take

the money here and not be subject to the same policies because of some weird, absurd rationale? I mean the fact that people get away with that kind of philosophical argument and are able to attract people to them, for me is – and forgive me – and indictment on all of us. It's an indictment on the more, sound, rational minded Muslims who are in the community, who sometimes get a little more elitist about engaging this stuff.

Because it's up to us then to provide the models that work, especially when there are models on the ground that work, that provide jobs for the disaffected, that provide hope for the marginalised, and then at other stuff begins to fall by the wayside. And we can't simply wait for those models to come from on high we have to be part of constructing them on the ground. We have to be indigenous, organic models.

I said this, and I don't ever meant to say this in front of a scholar that Islām in any way shape or form, has to be re-envisioned. But I do believe that the practices of Islam in our societies in the West need to be radically reconfigured, to refit the realities of our urban conditions and our lives, so that we don't want to feel like schizophrenic Muslims, living in one sense in the mosque, and then living out in society and seeing all those other aspects. And I believe that until we do that, we're going to continue to contribute to this environment that breeds disaffection and quite rightly so, because if the Muslims are looking towards those who are doing better in society, and don't have anything to get from them, then of course I'm going to go to wherever I get it from, wherever gives me some kind of inspiration to think myself as more important than others have made me feel.

So I'll end on that semi-controversial note and to turn over to my Shaykh to do the cleanup in shā' Allah.

[Abdul-Rehman says] Thank you very much. As I said, be controversial, because the forum here has always been open and it's based on dialogue, so I'm glad you said what was in your heart. Since its founding, the Sunnipath.com – the sort of flip side of this – has become one of the leading English language sites for online Islāmic learning, and it's been specifically designed for this wired generation in mind. It runs online course, long distance learning programmes, and at the very heart of the Sunnipath.com website experience is a very dynamic question-answer section which has now answered over 70,000 queries from ordinary, largely young Muslims living in the West. One of the key individuals behind the formation of sunnipath.com used to be the director of the answer service – Shaykh Faraz Rabbani, who is not my brother actually...throughout this whole week, wherever we've gone we've been compared because we do look very, very similar. It's probably because we've been friends for a very, very long time.

Shaykh Faraz was born in Karachi but considers himself a global nomad. He's lived in Egypt, in Abu Dhabi, London, Cairo and Madrid, and eventually ended up in Toronto where he ended up in the University of Toronto. At the University of Toronto he founded what became one of the leading continental Muslim publications called the Muslim Voice, which ran successfully for many, many years. After his graduation Faraz when to Damascus, Syria,

where he studied Arabic Language, Theology, Hanafī Fiqh, Shafī'ī Fiqh, Jurisprudence, Hadīth Methodology with a number of leading scholars of the traditional and classical traditions in Damascus. In 2000 he moved to Amman, Jordan, and continued his studies there and at that time moved into the online activist work, particularly with Sunnipath.com. Faraz earlier this year completed a stint at Dar Al-Ifta in Karachi, before moving back to Toronto with his wife and three kids. Now he continues to work for Sunni path because it being an online portal, you can run it from anywhere! He teaches extensively in the United States and Canada. And so it's my pleasure to introduce Faraz to you, to give us from the street to the screen.

[Shaykh Faraz Rabbani speaks]

Al-salam 'alaykum wa rahmat Allah.

Unfortunately I'm unable to refute Sidi Rami, and as much as I was looking forward to doing that, instead I'll just say wow, Sidi Rami that was amazing. The thing that Sidi Rami closed on reminded me of something that we've heard very often right, but it's very important. Allah subhāna huwa ta'āla tells our Prophet (saw) why the Prophet was sent. Allah doesn't tell the Prophet that you were sent for such and such. If he had been told that he was sent for 'x-reason' he could also say that he was sent for other reasons, but rather it's framed in a very particular manner, 'wa mā arsalnāka illa li rahmatan lil 'ālimīn' that we have not sent you, except as a mercy to all creation. The sending of the Prophet (saw) was not only for one reason. It was as a mercy to creation. The Prophet (saw) said, 'I am but a gift of mercy' and the Prophet (saw) told us that it is only the merciful who are shown mercy by the all merciful. The merciful to those on Earth and the Lord of the Heavens will have mercy on you.

We read these things, but the simple thing escapes us. What is mercy? What mercy is, is central to what Sidi Rami said because we misconceive of mercy as being something warm and fuzzy right? That mercy is this nice thing, and this is unfortunate, because we have lost sense of meaning in our lives when we hear about mercy we don't understand what mercy is. And this is mercy. What is mercy? Sidi Rami gave wonderful examples of it, but mercy is 'concern' – mercy is a sense of concern that one has, that causes one to seek the good for others, and to grant good. The Prophet (saw) is told by Allah subhana wa ta'ala that 'We have not sent you except as a mercy' – not just for believers and not just for humans, but as a former friend of the Earth and I hope no one finds me an enemy now because I used to be part of Friends of the Earth – but for all of creation.

It's also interesting, although I have no idea what it means right, it says 'lil 'ālimīn' – for all the worlds. There are things called parallel universes which I have no idea about but it's for all of creation. And what does this mean? It means that our understanding of religion and practice of religion is contingent on exemplifying that mercy, and if we don't, we are lacking. We are not believers who are pleasing to Allah subhan wa ta'ala (swt) when we are worshiping Allah well, when we are seeking knowledge of religion, when we are doing this or that, and when we are activists, we are believers and we are pleasing to Allah (swt), when we are embodiments of mercy. It's the merciful who are shown mercy by the All Merciful.

Be merciful to those on Earth and the Lord of the Heavens will have mercy on you. And 'be merciful' doesn't just mean have warm fuzzy feelings towards them, it means have sincere concern for them and do good. And this why the Prophet (saw) said – and it all fits together – that Al-dīn nasīha – this dīn is nasīha. The definition of nasīha is sincere concern, sincere concern. It's talab Al-khayr lil ghayr – seeking good for others. Others have translated it and it has become famous – it is translated as 'sincere council' but that doesn't really work; it's 'sincere concern' because how can you have sincere council for Allah. One aspect of this is giving council to another through sincere concern. it's only affective to give council to another if it comes out of sincere concern. it can also be translated as 'being true' ; this religion is about being true to others. And it returns to this sense of mercy.

What we find with Muslim 2.0 is that it goes online and seeks the religion from other than their own religious structures in their communities because they don't find mercy. They may perceive that they don't find mercy or they subconsciously shy away from engaging in their community but they're looking for Allah in their lives. They're looking for religion, so they turn elsewhere.

A lot of questions people ask are very sensitive right, so we have a standard answer that people when they ask nuanced questions, they require a lot of council and further information when it comes to religious matters, for example, divorce cases; that given the consideration in such places, please consult a local scholar directly about the specifics of your situation. And when I give a standard response, and it's a reasonable response, 'given this case, go and ask a scholar directly', I fear pressing send because at least in 10-15 or at least 20% of the cases, I get an angry response back saying 'do you think that if I really knew a reliable local scholar, or a local scholar I would be comfortable going to or trust, I would come and ask you?' Sometimes they're very hostile about it and I apologise, and I realise this happens.

People don't feel comfortable and sometimes the people submitting these questions are people I know; they're my friends, wives of my friends, friends of my wife, you know I know a lot of people. And it's through things like Facebook connections, they submit questions right. But when I went back to America after 10 years overseas and went back to our local communities and looked at how our local institutions are set up, I asked, are they manifestations of mercy? They're not. I mean, if it weren't a religious obligation to go to the mosque, I'd rather be in the cafe right?! They're not welcoming places, or at least many mosques are not welcoming places. You come as an outsider and you step in, and you don't feel that people have genuine concern for you. That people care, that they want good for you; you go the Imam and you say Al-salām 'alaykum, and you know I've got all the religious gear on and I'm smiling etc, and you don't get a sense of him saying 'OK, who are you, Al-salām 'alaykum...' all you get is [muffled] 'wa 'alaykum Al-salām', and you're like 'Get lost!' [Audience laugh] – that's the subconscious message you get, and you disconnect. It's worrying.

And I'll go anyway because it's a religious duty, and as someone who teaches and so on, I need to engage because it's part of my responsibility. Others go there and they feel really

alienated and they disconnect. A lot of people seek Islām online, because of this; they don't feel they fit.

It's very interesting because the most active demographic online are Muslim women. I was talking to the director of Sunnipath, and I said 'Imran, I'm not good with numbers (and neither is Abdul-Rehman) and the way I sense the breakdown of the male-female students in our classes are like 55:45' Imran said 'are you crazy? It's not 55:45, it's at least 60:40 or perhaps even 65:35 – 65 women and 35 men. In some courses it's even 70:30.' And there are reasons for that because there are certain sections of our society that feel particularly alienated, and when you deal with them –like the vast majority of our teaching assistants are female- and they talk, they say they feel just fed up – and sometimes they shouldn't feel fed up and they should try to engage in the community, but this is a problem. A lot of people don't feel like they have access in their communities, they disconnect, they don't feel comfortable. And this is a lack of mercy.

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few things, and some would say that it's brutal, without the practical. And of course, when the rahma is taken out, it is sometimes brutal.

There's a few things – one for us as individuals we all, or most of us, are part of this online existence; we connect online and so on, but there's nothing like the real thing. You say 'how is so and so doing?' and they say 'oh I haven't met them for months because I'm too busy.' But I know you're on MSN for like hours and you're fooling around on Facebook and you're poking everyone etc. One of the busiest friends I have, a real activist, has given me 28 invitations to some kind of Facebook fight [Audience laugh] and I've refused 28 times. I didn't want to be involved in some kind of fight, right? So people spend a lot of time doing absurd things online, but when you ask them 'how's your neighbour doing?' they don't know. 'What's your neighbour's name?' 'I don't know.' This is the first thing.

You can have your online existence and it's wonderful – you can reconnect with all kinds of people. I have an old friend from high school and we were really close together, and we just re-connected through facebook. And there are announcements about different events in London, he saw them and said 'Faraz you're in London, I'm in London and I'm having a big club party (he works for an environmentalist group) I'll give you a free back stage pass for this and that,' and I said, 'I'm kind of busy you know' – [Audience laugh] it's true, I had an event at the same time, Al-hamd lillah. We tried to reconnect but he travelled to Spain for another party over there [Audience laugh]. You can re-connect with all kinds of people and this is an opportunity but this is not a replacement for real life. Connect with people. Your religion is not complete until you are an embodiment of mercy, and mercy is something that is not warm and fuzzy, but is something that is very real. It is having concern for others, having concern, seeking the good for others and doing something about it by granting them the good. And it returns to how you act with people and deal with the society around you. The Prophet (saw) told us that 'Jibril continued to council me about my neighbour until I thought that my neighbour would inherit.' Now when we read the hadith of the Prophet (saw) we say 'wow, that's cool' but all we understand from it is that the neighbour does not inherit [Audience laugh]. No, the whole point is not for the wow or hmm factor, but rather a very practical reason- that your neighbour has tremendous rights over you, as many other ahādīth affirm. Now, what are you doing about it? Do you know your neighbour? And who is your neighbour? I'm sorry, it's bad to make people think like this on a Friday night, but who is your neighbour? What's the definition of a neighbour? Can someone tell me? [Two audience members offer an answer] One was a very narrow definition, and Yahya, I fear that you think the whole world is your neighbour [Audience laugh] .

There are three levels of neighbours – there's a person who's right next to you, and the people who are immediately around you, but the area that you live in, what is it called? It's your neighbourhood right? It's not that they ran out of words in English and randomly called it neighbourhood; it's not some kind of majāz like some figurative usage or something- the people who live in your neighbourhood are considered your neighbours. There is so much in the ahādīth that talk about neighbours and we don't need to go into that. They apply not only to the person next to you, although it does apply most emphatically to them, but also the people immediately around you. And then the people in your neighbourhood and none of you believe until they honour their neighbours. It's a serious matter.

So we should try to be embodiments of mercy and then see how our communities can become embodiments of mercy in that because people are turning to online replacements for communities because our communities are failing and they don't reflect mercy. The attributes of mercy that the Prophet (saw) emphasised, of gentleness of caring, of avoiding anything that could be perceived as being harsh and we have to work on that as individuals or communities otherwise people just continue disengaging from our communities and stay away. Only some will go online and others will drift away. So this is the grave danger.

We ask Allah (swt) to make us of those who are embodiments of mercy so that we be of those who are granted mercy by the All Merciful.

[Closing du'a]

Question and Answer Session

[Abdul-Rehman speaks]

Thank you Faraz. I'm going to do is take three or five comments of questions at one go and we'll make note of them and ask Rami or Faraz to respond to them, so we hear as much as we can from you and we go back and forth. Go ahead.

[Audience Member 1]

How do you resolve any conflict between say, your Islāmic upbringing and the things you face day to day in American life? Because I think that quite a lot of what both of you are talking about is different approaches to more or less the same thing. One is about observing social-political conservations and the other is trying to use the architecture of the modern world. But in both cases you're talking about communities and communities you're trying to connect to, and ones that have very, very different values to yourselves and are often sources of conflict. What I'm asking is how do you resolve this?

[Audience Member 2]

My question is mainly for brother Rami. I live here in London but grew up in Copen Hagen, and there I see a lot synthesis going on between Islāmic youth culture and urban street youth culture and a lot of the Muslim youth are influenced by hip hop culture and a lot of the identity seems like a replica of Black and Latino culture. One thing I've noticed very much is

reverse secularism taking place. So instead of people praying and fasting and not believing that Islām has a role to play in politics, we have people who are very loud and angry when it comes to identity, but when it comes to prayer or fasting or the finer details of fiqh, that's kind of by the by. But if you ask them they're very proud of being Muslim, they'll say Al-salām 'alaykum, very anti-this and anti-that, they listen to hip hop and very street in their way of acting. But when it comes to fiqh issues that are not there I don't know if that's something which you also see in America or not.

[Audience Member 3]

One was a comment and one was a question. I was listening to what you said about young Muslims finding it hard to connect with the community and feeling alienated in some places. I work for the Muslim Youth Helpline and that's one of the reasons we were set up and one of the reasons we have success with our clients, because they don't feel they have anywhere else to go, or the door has been closed in their face, or they're scared of being judged.

Secondly, Rami, when you spoke about Harlem or Philadelphia, something that stuck in my head about Brixton or South London, where a lot of young Africa Americans are converting to Islām and where this is this sort of ghetto mentality. It sort of divides into two – those who become very pious and those who use it as a means of getting street cred by using Islāmic phrases to justify what are un-Islamic actions. I wonder if this mirrors anything you've seen in Harlem or anywhere else.

[Audience Member 4]

I wonder that with people like Brother Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali when they left the Nation of Islām and entered true Islām did the black Muslims in America follow them and if so, where does that leave the Nation of Islām today?

Responses from Rami and Shaykh Faraz

[Rami] I think it's good to start with brother Jawad's question which I think the others were getting at right after you, which is a tension that comes between the mediums and cultural dynamics of some urban culture and certainly some of the more normative aspects of what we associate with Muslim practice that emerges from who we are as people who have a sense of ourselves in relation to our creator. And I think those tensions and contradictions are there; they're hard to navigate and aren't always easily navigated as you were mentioning in Copan Hagen and I think someone else was talking about Brixton – I haven't been there yet, but hopefully I'll get a chance tomorrow – but the dynamics are very similar, meaning that yeah, there is a lot about urban culture that is destructive, that is about being hyper consumer and package exploited and circulated across the world. There have always been folk that have attempted to resist that hyper commercialisation of the culture, particularly within the Black

Community, and how that spread out within hip hop, and sometimes that's represented by underground hip hop voices or ones that are now making their way across the globe, like Lupey Fiasco or others who have really tried to retain a strong sensibility about who they are, while certainly they have some of the street cred, but at the same time, it's a tension and I think it's a tension worth tackling because it's a tension that reflects a larger sense of symbolic tensions that all Muslims have in this society. The fact that urban America creates a space that appreciates Muslim identity, does not mean that everybody within that space is acting like the grand mufti. And they may have a ghetto-cosmopolitan ability to say Al-salām 'alaykum' but I never worry about what I have to drop what I'm doing to pray salāt in urban America. I've never thought twice about it because there's recognition of that, in some cases there's an appreciation, in some cases there's also an appropriation of it alongside some very negative practices. And that for me is the importance of connecting community activists, dollars and artists and that's what we try to do with IMAN so that people who do get inspired by that and see that we have something to offer.

I don't think the tension is easily reconciled, but I think that in reconciling it you are dealing with the very issues that we're talking about as Western people who are Muslims living in the West. I think on a more macro level those tensions are with us all, even the corporate Muslim who is downtown.

In our case, and going back to hip hop, what we've tried to do is be very aggressive about the outreach to those segments of the community. So we know for instance, an event that we have every year is called 'Taking it to the Streets' and last year we had over 10,000 people attend in the Park. We know that 60% of them aren't Muslim and that crowd is coming to see some of its favourite artists who have mainstream success, for example Jurassic 5, people who we've been able to network with but when we bring them we bring them in an environment that is really framed and grounded with Muslims. We have scholars there – Imām Zayd Shakir, Shaykh Hamza, Imām Saraj and others have been there. So the environment is something that when people come they immediately detect and there was an article written about it by someone who asked the artists 'was it hip hop?' and he said 'absolutely' but was it something else too? And he said 'yes' that there was some spiritual foundation that they felt there. So when you get in the thick of it you bring your best out – the scholars in the community – you can help to inform and shape the way in which those practices get manifested.

Now about the Nation of Islām; there's Dr. Jackson who I think some of you know who wrote the book 'Islām and the Black American towards the Third Ressurrection' and first of all, yes, there was a major shift, and a person in the United States who is phenomenally under appreciated and globally is a man by the name of Imām Mauratin Muhammad. In some places he was ridiculed because he was far ahead of his time, and he's the one who really took the mentor after his father – the honourable Elijah Muhammad as they call him- died. And before Louis Farracon took over, and his first business of order was to take that community into more universal and broadly accepted version of Islām and today, they are the largest number of African American Muslims and there are certainly many outside of Imām Muhammad's leadership, and you know, and to be honest, I met Louis Farracon two months ago and I can say quite honestly that Farracon and many of the people within the Nation are going through some profound transformation to try and get them to see this and align

themselves. There are some people who will never trust Mr. Farracon, but I know first hand that the Nation of Islām has also grown, has also matured, and I think we're at the point when we talk about American Islām, it's not to divide it with these artificial terms but it's to look at our evolution and appreciate how we have evolved. As opposed to the semi arrogant distinction about the 'real Islām' because in some ways they practice real Islām more than we did; they were more loving and inspiring, and when 'real Islām' hit the shores of America, all the dynamics that you're talking about begin to emerge and somewhere out there there's some fiqh that says you can't smile as a Muslim. When you walk into some of the Nation of Islām areas you feel loved, you feel embraced and you see the discipline that they used to be able to carry on the very same urban streets, and you're inspired by their model. So I think they are developing and emerging and I'm very hopeful that its synthesis and intersection that is taking place now in broader American Islām.

[Faraz speaks]

There's three points that come out – one is about positively formulating our religious practice. The Prophet (saw) defined what he was sent to do in society, he did not frame it in a negative way. We refer to the pre-Islāmic age as jāhiliya – the age of ignorance. What did the Prophet say he was sent to do? He said 'innamā bu'ethu li utem'ima makārim Al-akhlāq' that 'I was sent to perfect noble character.' Now this has many implications. But one that is very interesting is that the Prophet (saw) did not say that he was sent only to take people out of jāhiliyah and into good character. Rather the Prophet (saw) affirms that makārim Al-akhlāq is what? It's noble character. 'I was only sent to perfect the highest of virtue.' So despite all that was wrong in the age of jāhiliyah and we know that so much of it was so ugly he did not see his message in a negative light for example, 'I have been sent to correct people and do this and reform society...' and yes he was sent to do those things and he framed it positively 'I was only sent to perfect noble character and virtue'. And this is very important because it gives that sense of mercy, that sense of sincere concern for humanity, and only then can people listen and benefit from society around you as well; to see the good in society.

As someone who lived for ten years in the Middle East and then spent six short months in Karachi there's much that we have going here in the West that we don't have going in the Muslim World – it's much more complicated there. We have to see things positively; everyone talks about the corruption, the fitnah and fassād etc of society, but there is also so much good around us all the time not just in society but in people, right? If you're walking one way and the other person is walking another, typically they'll shove you over right? But here typically, they'll let you go first. So there's a lot of good around us and we should appreciate both the small good in our relationships and dealings with others, and the greater good in society. Only then can we begin to be merciful to others and have positive sense. This is number one.

The second in keeping with this is that you see the Prophet (saw) letting people be and not hastening to judge them. There's a hadith which some of the hadith scholars were shocked by; they said that this can not be sound and they tried to critique it in all kinds of ways but

they failed. One of the Companions of the Prophet (saw) he loved his woman dearly, and apparently she was beautiful, but I guess others loved her dearly as well and she loved others rather...too dearly [Audience laugh] so this man came to the Prophet (saw) and said, ‘yā rasul Allah my wife does not turn away seeking hands.’ The Prophet didn’t say ‘astaghfir Allah, who is she and what’s she doing...’ The Prophet (saw) was a mercy to humanity and realised that this man loves her dearly. So what does he ask him? ‘ātuhibuhā? Do you love her?’ and the man said ‘yes I do.’ Then he said ‘enjoy her company.’ He didn’t say ‘lock her at home and do this and do this’ because he realised that the man was struggling with his wife and that there must be some deep problems in the relationship, there’s a lot you can imagine from the story right? But this is what happens in our masjids. You have people saying ‘lock your wives at home, do this, do that, tell her your rights on her etc’ – all these things. But look at how the Prophet (saw) dealt with it. There are so many famous examples.

The way that the Prophet (saw) dealt with the Bedouins; someone came to the Masjid and urinated in the corner of the Masjid then someone came and tugged him by his collar. And how did the Prophet deal with him? Did the Prophet give him a sermon that urine is najis and this is the House of Allah and fear Allah etc? No, he just took some water and poured it over it. And this is very important not judging others. This isn’t a question of differences of opinion – this is about people doing things that are absolutely outrageous. But of course, in no way did the Prophet (saw) say that’s all fine. No. The right is right and the wrong is wrong but how do you deal with it. This is the second important thing.

And the third which builds on that is to stand by the Prophetic example, to uphold the Prophetic examples ourselves and in our societies. We’ve divorced our communities from a sense of purpose which is what? The Prophet (saw) – that everything of beauty and excellence and meaning in existence is embodied by the Prophet (saw) and we don’t think about that; we don’t try to set up our organisations, our communities or our own life conduct around the Prophetic example. Our relationships – if a husband and wife had troubles if only they thought about how the Prophet and his family would have dealt with it and the Prophet (saw) had troubles with his wife. And some really cool trouble [Audience laugh]. This is very important and we fail to do that. If we did, things would be very different. So these are the three points related to the questions that came up.

Questions from Audience

[Audience member 5]

Al-salām ‘alaykum. I think the discussion today has been mostly about young people and we’re kind of ignoring this whole other generation – the older generation. I find that the

youth have a great deal of energy but not much wisdom, but it's the opposite with the older generation, in that they have the years of experience and wisdom, they've lived here longer, they know the environment better than we do, but they might not have as much energy because they've got more commitments. So with the activist crowd all being 20 year-olds, 30 year-olds, how do we bridge this gap? We've got the older generations which for us are mostly immigrants and we've already got that cultural divide there, as well as the age divide between the young and the old. So how do we make use of the older generation? They obviously have a lot to offer but there seems to be elitism on both sides – the older ones think they're better than you and the younger ones think they know more than you. So how do we make the most of everybody in society rather than just the youth?

[Audience member 6]

Having embraced Islām about 17 years ago I came out of DJ playing and all this stuff I saw the 'lā ilāha illā lā' on an album cover and 'Allah Akbar' was another album cover, yet I didn't bother with that. Now we're hearing that we should turn back to this and get our children to get into Islam with this. And for 17 years we've been telling our children, 'daddy used to do this and that' and now, it's 'forget what daddy used to do, and do what your street friends are doing.' I know there are differences of opinion on Music Islām, right? When we started this we were going to do just the beats and the rap, but we asked the scholars and they said 'harām'. Even the people who brought us to Islām in a way, they were taking drugs, and even they said it's harām. Now we're being told forget that argument – use hip hop to invite people to Allah. Ok, use hip hop as the magnet to invite people to Islām but I don't think we should give up what we gave up, that is the hip hop, and now be told we're going to get close to Allah.

Another issue, I'm half Irish, all I hear in the Masjids is Urdu. My children hear Urdu. My wife is an English convert – she was my bird- that's the slang for girlfriend – and she came to Islām 17 years ago. She only hears Urdu. We are born in the West, yet we are hearing that we should use African rhythms, Asian language and Arab culture to understand Islām, which is believing in Allah (swt). [Audience laugh]. How is that possible for us to keep doing that when we envisage that some of the Masājid around us, who tell us to come and sit in the khutbah and listen in Urdu, how do we tell our children 'your children are going to sit and listen to Urdu as well.' [Audience laugh]. And how do we invite our mothers who are white, who think they've got a suntan, but the milk bottle is whiter [Audience laugh] – how do we invite them to a belief in Allah, when people are telling us to invite them more to Arab culture, African culture, Asian culture, not to the belief in the One God. They used to take us to Sunday school, Saturday school confession, communion, confirmation and for us to say 'I'm becoming a Muslim mum' 'Like Cat Stevens?' &a

People don't feel comfortable and sometimes the people submitting these questions are people I know; they're my friends, wives of my friends, friends of my wife, you know I know a lot of people. And it's through things like Facebook connections, they submit questions right. But when I went back to America after 10 years overseas and went back to our local

communities and looked at how our local institutions are set up, I asked, are they manifestations of mercy? They're not. I mean, if it weren't a religious obligation to go to the mosque, I'd rather be in the cafe right?! They're not welcoming places, or at least many mosques are not welcoming places. You come as an outsider and you step in, and you don't feel that people have genuine concern for you. That people care, that they want good for you; you go the Imam and you say Al-salām 'alaykum, and you know I've got all the religious gear on and I'm smiling etc, and you don't get a sense of him saying 'OK, who are you, Al-salām 'alaykum...' all you get is [muffled] 'wa 'alaykum Al-salām', and you're like 'Get lost!' [Audience laugh] – that's the subconscious message you get, and you disconnect. It's worrying.

And I'll go anyway because it's a religious duty, and as someone who teaches and so on, I need to engage because it's part of my responsibility. Others go there and they feel really alienated and they disconnect. A lot of people seek Islām online, because of this; they don't feel they fit.

It's very interesting because the most active demographic online are Muslim women. I was talking to the director of Sunnipath, and I said 'Imran, I'm not good with numbers (and neither is Abdul-Rehman) and the way I sense the breakdown of the male-female students in our classes are like 55:45' Imran said 'are you crazy? It's not 55:45, it's at least 60:40 or perhaps even 65:35 – 65 women and 35 men. In some courses it's even 70:30.' And there are reasons for that because there are certain sections of our society that feel particularly alienated, and when you deal with them –like the vast majority of our teaching assistants are female- and they talk, they say they feel just fed up – and sometimes they shouldn't feel fed up and they should try to engage in the community, but this is a problem. A lot of people don't feel like they have access in their communities, they disconnect, they don't feel comfortable. And this is a lack of mercy.

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