

SBIA MEDIA COMMITTEE

MEDIA AND ISLAM

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COMEDY, CULTURE, AND RELIGION

BY AZLEENA SALLEH AZHAR

Humans are the only living creatures (with a few exceptions), that are capable of laughing at themselves. It is intriguing to reflect on why God has given man the blessing of humor. Why were we given the ability to laugh and be humorous?

Dave Chappelle of *Chappelle's Show* said in the May 23rd issue of *Time* magazine that he doesn't often mention publicly that he is Muslim because he doesn't want people to associate his flaws with "this beautiful thing" (i.e. Islam). What an honorable thing to say by one of the hottest comedians in America. And yet, isn't comedy just that? It is the ability to lay out our flaws for the world to scrutinize.

It is through humor, perhaps, that we may be able to find our voice and humbly admit that although God has perfected our religion, we, average American Muslims, are still very much imperfect. That's something that every other citizen of this country can relate to.

In these difficult times, comedy has also started to play a function other than just as a source of amusement. Most recently, post-9/11, comedy has played the role of healer and therapist. After the shock wore off, the American people turned to comedy in an unprecedented moment, to help them cope and grieve. In an era where sitcoms and late night talk shows are a staple of American daily

life, *Saturday Night Live* featured Rudolph Guliani along with the NYFD and NYPD as a tribute to New York's resilience after being attacked. In the cold opening of this episode, Lorne Michaels asks Guliani, "Can we be funny?" To which Guliani replies, "Why start now?" Indeed, the American sense of humor had persevered.

Comedy for me has been an opportunity for insight into other cultures and religious ideologies, or idiosyncrasies, depending how you look at it. It is through many a *Seinfeld* episode, for example, that I got the only exposure I had ever had in my younger days to Jewish culture and habits, albeit in a very superficial and often

distorted way. Nevertheless, I heard about fascinating traditions like the 'Bar Mitzvah' and laughed at curious phrases like 'Yada, yada, yada', among other things. I'm sure many Americans outside of New York and other big cities got their first real look at Jewish-Americans by watching *Seinfeld* episodes, and in the process learned to respect their ability as a culture to laugh at themselves. Before long, the whole country and the world was laughing along.

It's through the peek into

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MERCURY NEWS REACHES OUT TO MUSLIMS

BY STAFF WRITERS

In an attempt to hear from the diverse groups that represent their readership, *The San Jose Mercury News* made an effort to reach out to the Bay Area's diverse population by inviting a group of panelists from different ethnic communities for a

chance to speak their mind. The group met on May 24th in the *Mercury's* central office in San Jose.

Recognizing that the Bay is becoming more diverse, *The Mercury News* is jumping ahead of the game by reaching out to the community to

ask, "What is right and what is wrong?" in *The Mercury News's* portrayal of each ethnic group, said Assisting Managing Editor Pamela Moreland. By soliciting feedback from these groups, *The Mercury News* hopes to increase its readership and subscriber list among these-

UPCOMING EVENTS:

- 07/11—Next Media Committee Meeting—11AM at SBIA
- 08/20 - SBIA Summer Picnic at Lake Elizabeth
- 09/25—Muslim Unity Day at Great America

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THE SCIMITAR AND THE VEIL: EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN OF ISLAM

BY S. RESHMA YUNUS

I admit, I was reluctant to read any book containing the word “veil”. However, I had been sent *The Scimitar and the Veil: Extraordinary Women of Islam* by Jennifer Heath as a gift from my youngest sister who I believe to have general good sense in reading material. So, with some hesitation, I dived in.

The book, true to its subtitle, provides brief, yet deep and often poignant glimpses into the lives of fifty “extraordinary” Muslim women, from the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) to many others later in history and the impact these women had on the development of the Muslim community and Islamic history. The inside jacket cover makes an intriguing claim that, “It is often said that two-thirds of the religion of Islam was handed down by women and one-third was shaped by women”. This claim itself seems extraordinary as history books and popular lore often neglect the contributions of women. The cover introduction continues (referring to the Prophet (peace be upon him)), “Throughout his life, women

were among his closest friends and companions, and they fought by his side for Islam”.

Despite the post 9/11 information blitz on Islam and Muslims, books in English on Muslim women and their contributions have been few and far between or not readily accessible to lay people. Information that is available is often presented in a very dry, uninteresting, or one-sided manner. For example, stories regarding the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) have often been displayed as being superhumanly pious with their other public contributions, participation in wars for example, downplayed.

Jennifer Heath has attempted in *The Scimitar and the Veil*, to imbue the human element within each portrayal. She uses literary license and a readable style to involve the reader directly in the lives of the subjects. For example, she depicts that exact moment when Khadijah bint Khuwaylid (RAA) takes shahada, “smiling before her husband (pg. 58)”. The reader is right there listening to Aisha bint Abu Bakr (RAA) talking to Hafsa,

Umar ibn al-Khattab’s daughter and laughing at a joke about a prank they had played on Sawdah (RAA) another older wife of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

The Scimitar and the Veil also discusses women who were saints, mystics, warriors, rebels, concubines, musicians, dancers, rulers, regents, businesswomen and learned ladies, and poets. One reads with fascination and awe of women such as Rabi’a al-Adawiyaa who rises from a slave to being one of the most revered Sufi saints (pgs. 171-177). One is enthralled reading about Umm Omara who fought alongside the Prophet and protected his life even when the men deserted him (pg. 209-214). One is amazed reading of the lives of the concubines during the Ottoman empire and the powerful roles they played from within the harem walls. The reader learns that a woman, Umm al-Khayr Amat al-Khaliq who lived for nearly 100 years and according to the book, is regarded as the last truly distinguished Hadith scholar, female or male, from the Hijaz (pg.

139).

The book, although clearly well researched, and literary license aside, makes some comments that do not always make sense. For example, Heath states that “The only woman actually named in the Qur’an is Mary (Miriam), a true handmaiden of God and the mother of Jesus (Isa) (pg. 17)”. This assertion does disservice to the extraordinary women discussed in the Qur’an such as the Queen of Sheba who has been exemplified as a leader in the Qur’an (Chapter 27, Quran).

Still, the book provides much valuable information in a succinct form about some of the contributions of women in Islamic history. It is especially recommended reading for our youth who are in dire need of role models with an Islamic perspective.

If you have any questions or comments about this book or would like something reviewed, please e-mail sbiamic@yahoo.com

MERCURY NEWS REACHES OUT TO MUSLIMS

diverse groups within the Bay.

The panelist included representatives from the Muslim, Hispanic, Vietnamese/South-east Asian and Indian communities. Each panelist made an effort to tell the audience, which consisted of 28 writers, editors and staff, of how they felt their group was or was not being depicted by the paper.

Representing the Muslim community was journalist Aman Mehrzai of the South Bay Islamic Association's (SBIA) Media Committee. Mehrzai, who was given one week's supply of *The Mercury News* for analysis, gave a detailed account of what he felt

was a proper portrayal of the Muslim community and what could be "tuned-up." Criticism raised by Mehrzai was focused towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iraq war and the domestic portrayal of Muslims in the West.

"Many times, Israeli accounts of the conflict are covered in detail, while the Palestinian version is rarely touched on," said Mehrzai. "In one article, a rare criticism of Israel was written which was about Israeli spies in the Pentagon. However, Israel too often gets away with illegal activities on U.S. soil. The media has no scruples going after Muslims doing illegal activities, in which they should, but

illegal Israeli interference within the U.S. is far greater and more organized than any Muslim group and the media ought to do some investigative journalism regarding this." When asked to give some examples, Mehrzai responded; "The Illegal campaign funding of American politicians is one example. American Jews sending money to build on stolen Palestinian lands is another. The illegal funding and training of extremist Jewish terrorists, who in some cases train right here in the U.S., then go overseas to actually fight against Palestinians would make a great investigative piece. Why the media turns the other cheek is a mystery."

Regarding Iraq, Mehrzai accused the media of being

divisive and counterproductive by the constant labeling of the Sunni, Shia and Kurdish groups. "It is true that there are differences amongst these groups," said Mehrzai, "but the media often creates an illusion of Sunni versus Shia. I noticed the statement, '*the rebellious Sunni minority*' is used a lot in the articles I was given to read. But if you actually combine the Kurds and Central Arab Sunnis with the southern Najdi Iraqis, you will get a more than 50% Sunni population for the entire country. This dispels the portrayal of the Sunnis fighting because they are a 'sore losing minority.' It's not only the Sunnis who rebel in Iraq, and being Sunni has nothing to do with these people's grievances.

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another culture that we first notice major differences, but then quickly come away from the TV set with an understanding that, beyond our cultural and religious differences, we are still at heart very much alike. We all work hard to earn a decent living. We all have a desire to please our parents and yet struggle for independence from them. We worry constantly about our children's future, and pray they make the right choices. We all endeavor constantly to hide our weaknesses from others, yet often scoff at other peoples' flaws. If you think about it, how many people would watch a drama about a Jewish man going about his daily routine? Yet comedy brings out the drama, suspense and humor in Seinfeld's onscreen life with an uncanny ability to reel in a rapt audience episode after episode through the common thread of humor.

Most minority groups in America have made some journey of comedic awakening. First, the African-Americans, and then the Jews, and now Latinos have done it; and someday the Asian-Americans will have their day to take centre-stage in American living rooms. All of them are minority communities trying desperately to seek acceptance in mainstream America. In the same way, I dream of the day when perhaps a Muslim comedian like Azhar Usman or Preacher Moss becomes a household name. Perhaps then, after Muslims learn to laugh at ourselves, will we appreciate the potential power that comedy has in this country to bridge divides and bring its diverse communities together through humor.

SCIENCE OF THE LANGUAGE OF PSYCHOLOGY

BY IMAM BILAL IBN MUHAMMAD

Bism-e-Allah Ar-Rahman Ar-Raheem

As-Salaamu-Alaekum

In the Science of the Language of Psychology the Shaitan uses what he calls the Language of Rules (Man-made Rules and Laws). This Science of the Language of the rules is designed to rule-in freedom of creative thought and liberated intelligence.

To be on guard and recognize such language, watch out for words such as "Must", "Must not", "Should", "Should not", "Can't", or "Cannot", etc. Linguistically these word-types are designed to limit your thinking; block your outside awareness; and restrict progressive behavior. The psychology of Shaitan is "My rules govern your behavior".

Also in the Science of Linguistics and Psychology, be on the lookout for mass generalizations. Be aware of such words as "All", "Every", "Always", "Never", "Everybody", "Everyone", "They-say", etc. These word-types are called "catch-alls", and are very effective for the purpose of lying.

Finally, become conscious and aware of the Angel of Relativity. If the Shaitan says "Democracy is better, easier"- the question is "better than what"; easier than what? If he says "Worse" ask "worse than what?". These are a few introductions and pointers. If we begin to gradually get a grasp of how Shaitan has used and does use language— from his suggestion to Aadam (A.S.) to his suggestions to our present-day Islamic Governing Councils, we will gradually become stronger Muslims.

As-Salaamu-Alaekum

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The rebels often rant against the United States occupation and treatment as being their motif. Rarely, do the complaints lodged by the rebels ever mention Sunni or Shia, yet the media often explains it as such."

Mehrzai pointed out that a couple of articles focused on the image of extremist Muslims pressuring women to cover according to Islamic Sharia in the Middle East.

"Although this may be true in some cases overseas, Muslim youth actually have to fight to practice Islam in the U.S. and I feel that the media should focus on this fact." Reporter Lisa Fernandez expressed interest in writing an article on Muslim youth who had to struggle with their parents to wear their Hijab or to grow their beard.

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