

Muhammad Was a Punk Rocker: The Depiction of Islam in *The Taqwacores* by Michael Muhammad Knight

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to portray Islam as practiced by the members of the taqwacore movement that unites Muslim punk rock musicians. Contrary to the usual practice, in which actual events give rise to the creation of fiction, the taqwacore movement was initiated in the early 2000s as a result of the publication of Michael Muhammad Knight's repeatedly censored and boycotted novel The Taqwacores (2003). This seems to be just the first instance of a reversed order that will be outlined. Various interpretations of the term "taqwacore" (a combination of the words "taqwa" and "hardcore") serve as a point of departure to a discussion of other controversial juxtapositions present in the text in which is highlighted in an analysis of (pseudo)religious practices of the members of the movement. Two characters, Yusef and Jehangir, who represent two different attitudes towards Islam are the main point of focus. The former is an embodiment of orthodox Islam who temporarily changes his views during the course of the novel, whilst the latter is the leader of the taqwacore movement for whom freedom (understood in various ways) often prevails over principles of orthodox Islam. The presentation of different views on many important (not only religious) issues makes us reflect on whether the taqwacores are "Muslim[s]-gone-wrong" or "Islam-done-[them]-wrong".

KEYWORDS

taqwacore, *The Taqwacores*, Islam, Muslim American literature, punk rock, Michael Muhammad Knight

While selling in 2002 photocopied versions of his third novel entitled *The Taqwacores* from the trunk of his car, and even after publishing this work in 2003, Michael Muhammad Knight could not have predicted the consequences of his actions. His depiction of the controversial fictional Muslim punk music scene in the United States has become the foundation for the creation of a real movement which is characterized by its specific way of practicing Islam and adapting its tenets. The aim of this essay is to portray Islam in America as practiced by the members of the taqwacore movement as shown by Michael Muhammad Knight in his novel *The Taqwacores* (2003).

Contrary to usual literature-reality relations, when the latter becomes the basis for the creation of the former, the fictional novel by Knight initiated the formation of a real American Muslim music movement. Kourosh Poursalehi, a teenager of Persian origin, read the work and thought that the characters in the novel were authentic. He set the poem that appears at the beginning of *The Taqwacores* into music and made it a real anthem for the taqwacore movement. The title of this poem, the same as the song, is "Muhammad was a Punk Rocker". Poursalehi sent this musical version of the poem to Knight who in turn informed Shahjehan Khan, a young Bostonian musician already familiar with Knight's novel. For Khan the story of the taqwacore movement also seemed real and he even identified himself with it.

I had a lot of guilt growing up about not doing the right thing or not being a good Muslim or a good Pakistani kid, and it was reading the book that was kind of an assurance that this confusion and maybe disenchantment was normal, and that other people went through it and there was nothing wrong with it.¹

Apart from the afore-mentioned disappointment with orthodoxies, another reason which made the fictional taqwacore a reality was Khan's and many Muslims' frustration with accusations of terrorism. For many non-Muslims, a believer in Islam equaled a terrorist. This unfair treatment of Muslims in America was clearly visible just after 9/11 attacks. Khan remembers the day after when he was asked by his schoolmate "What did your people do?" It was both this disenchantment and frustration that led Khan to form a music band with his friend Basim Usmani. This band, named The Kominas after the fictional band in Knight's novel, was created to shout out all the rebellion, disappointments, confusions, disagreements, doubts, frustrations they felt as Muslims. The Kominas became one of the first purely taqwacore bands. Obviously, these bands are not tolerated by conservative Muslims and neither is Michael Muhammad Knight whose views on Islam presented in *The Taqwacores* resulted in censoring this novel by Telegram Books, a British publisher, which feared that the content of the novel might spark another Rushdie Affair.

Before analyzing those passages from the book that made Knight a persona non grata in orthodox Muslim circles, let us concentrate for a moment upon the term *taqwacore*. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* does not include the whole term, but does present an idea of what it means by defining the term *taqwa*, which is "God-consciousness or God-fearing piety."² The term, however, has many other interpretations such as "self-restraint" found in *Islamic Dictionary*.³ In the same source we can also read that

having Taqwa allows a person to be constantly aware of both God's presence and attributes and a reminder of their relationship and responsibility to God as His creation and servant. The scholars explain that the way to taqwa is through obedience of God, avoiding disobedience, and striving to stay away from doubtful matters.

In Knight's novel, the narrator Yusef describes Jehangir, one of the leading characters, using the expression: "my eyes were frozen on him. There's no word for me but *taqwa* to call what beamed from his empyreal profile: the hair reaching for heaven, black leather vest crowded with spikes reflecting the sun, guitar dangling freely on its strap as he let go. I just looked at him, my body charged with a kind of holy nervousness."⁴ In calling him "empyrean" it can be seen that Yusef looks up to Jehangir. But is Jehangir also the embodiment of piousness and self-restraint that *taqwa* signifies?

The word "core", on the other hand, is not specific to the Muslim world and means, as *Oxford Dictionary of English* has it, "the heart, the centre, the essence."⁵ Combining "taqwa" and "core", could result in "the essence of love for Allah" or "the essence of self-restraint". Especially the last translation, however, does not suit the practices of the members of this subculture. Therefore, investigating the meaning of "taqwacore"

1 Lydia Crafts, "Taqwacore: The Muslim Punk Underground," *NPR Music*. Accessed March 18, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=107010536&from=mobile> (March 18, 2014).

2 John L. Esposito, "taqwa," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 314.

3 "Taqwa," in *Islamic Dictionary*, <http://www.islamic-dictionary.com>.

4 Knight, *The Taqwacores* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2003), 13.

5 Angus Stevenson, "core," in *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 387.

another amalgamation of terms is possible – “taqwa” and “hardcore”. This combination is more justified since “hardcore” is an early sub-genre of punk rock music. According to Ross Haenfler, “old school hardcore emerged in the early days of punk rock at the beginning of the 1980s, before the two scenes separated.”⁶ Hardcore was, as Haenfler puts it, a “more aggressive brand of punk rock.”⁷ The way hardcore punkers looked was prototypical: “short hair or shaved heads with the occasional Mohawk, jeans and band t-shirts, bandanas, and spiked belts and wristbands.”⁸ This description fits well the appearance of Jehangir from Knight’s *The Taqwacores*. Another characteristic feature of hardcore punk is the fact the singers shout more than sing and the bands devote their songs to such themes as “friendship, standing out of society, and voicing opinions and concerns about the world.”⁹ Muslim punks seem to have chosen hardcore due to the way they stood apart from the larger American society and wanted to shout out their concerns about the Muslim world. By using the neologism “taqwacore” they wanted to show that they are Muslims and Hardcore punks at the same time. For many Muslims such a combination is unacceptable.

Since owing to his novel Michael Muhammad Knight became the founding father of taqwacore movement, we must take into consideration the definitions of taqwacore he presented in his work and try to juxtapose them with our hitherto explanations of this term. Jehangir does not equate taqwacores with other anti-orthodoxy Muslim music bands:

Taqwacore bands ran the gamut in attitude and ideology; there were groups like the Bin Qarmats and the Zaqqums whose lyrics and behavior lurked somewhere between social protest and juvenile disesteem, but also bands such as Bilal’s Boulder that wouldn’t even allow girls into their shows. Some bands had high political content and others veered more toward the aloof Sufi end of the spectrum.¹⁰

For the needs of this article we are going to focus on those taqwacore bands that, by their actions, protests, sometimes blasphemies, wanted to change the way Islam is practiced. The majority of bands described in Knight’s novel thought of these rules as unnecessary limitations to the freedom of the individual. At one point this orthodox Islam is called an “immovable object”¹¹ against which there is this “irresistible force” that taqwacore represents. The metaphor suggests that conservative Islam does not change and is not capable of any changes (“immovable”). It is an object: passive and hard to move. Taqwacore, on the other hand, also called in Knight’s book “progressive Islam”, is “irresistible” – it cannot be successfully opposed. Contrary to an object-like orthodox Islam, taqwacore is shown as a force which suggests dynamism and power. This metaphor helps Jehangir to express his views on progressive Islam. According to him, it will surely overcome the conservative and currently prevailing version of the religious culture. Jehangir is, however, aware of the dangers this irresistible force may cause. When talking to Yusef, an orthodox Muslim (at least at the beginning of the novel), Jehangir compares taqwacore to a NASCAR racing “driver going three hundred miles

6 Ross Haenfler, *Straight Edge: Hardcore Punk, Clean Living Youth, and Social Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 11.

7 Haenfler, *Straight Edge*, 11.

8 Haenfler, *Straight Edge*, 11.

9 Haenfler, *Straight Edge*, 11.

10 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 26.

11 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 57.

per hour and crashing head-on into the Ka'ba,"¹² a cuboid-shaped building in the centre of Mecca which is the most sacred site in Islam. These two comparisons show that although taqwacore is powerful and hard to stop, it may be at the same time careless and may destroy what is holy for Islam (Mecca is also a holy place for taqwacores). At the end of the novel the narrator and orthodox Muslim, who has spent some time with taqwacores, Yusef, summarizes very aptly what taqwacore is:

Taqwacore is [being] surrounded by deliberately bad Muslims but they loved Allah with a gonzo kind of passion that escaped sleepy brainless ritualism and the dumb fantasy-camp Islams claiming that our deen had some inherent moral superiority making the world rightfully ours. [...] There is no room for taqwacore for half-assed Muslims playing off as though they never miss a prayer. The ones who live pseudo-cool and then come to the masjid wearing masks. They're weak and have no real personality and taqwacores would eat them alive. If you don't pray, don't pretend. Don't build a complex thinking you're beneath all the Super Mumins of the world because you went to the prom and think you have to hide it from everyone. Be Muslim on your own terms. Tell the world to eat a dick.¹³

The conservative Muslim changed, but at the end of the story when he moved out from this taqwacore house where he stayed during his studies, he went back to his orthodox Muslim family. In time he started to treat the taqwacores in a different manner. It was, as Yusef says, like an ex-girlfriend to him: "I'm glad it's still out there and I hope it's doing well, but to check up on it would just hurt me all over again."¹⁴

According to the narrator of the novel, taqwacore is about "deliberately bad" Muslims who practiced their faith in their own way, the same way punkers make and listen to their "deliberately bad" music. Yusef also adds that the lifestyle also includes "deliberately bad clothing, deliberately bad language and deliberately bad behavior."¹⁵ Although this comparison can be seen as relevant, we have to remember that this point of view is expressed by a non-punk who takes into consideration only the visible elements of punk culture. Before we move to Jehangir's view on punk rock, let us quote the words of Colette, a punk editor of Cape Cod fanzine *Looks Yellow Tastes Red*:

If punk means truth and dedication to ideals and saying "fuck you" to the backwards attitudes and customs that hold us back, if punk means kid power and energy and music and sense of community, I would sell my soul for it. If punk means wearing "punk" clothes, having the most body piercings, the oddest hair or the best record collection, if it means competing to be the coolest and the most noticeable or doing the most illegal "fuck society" things, I would rather not have anything to do with it.¹⁶

In defining "real" punk, the author only uses the word "music" at the end of the description. In his definition of taqwacore, Yusef does not use the term at all. Rather ideals and escape from attitudes and customs that limit people are foregrounded in the explanations. Jehangir indicates how today it is not easy to give an exact definition of punk rock. For many, punk is an ideology that includes "never selling out"¹⁷ and

12 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 57.

13 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 212.

14 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 245.

15 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 212.

16 Roger Sabin, *Punk Rock: So What?: The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (London: Routledge, 2010), 121.

17 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 55.

"disseminating your own culture"¹⁸ but he is aware of the fact that for some (like for Yusef in the definition given before) it is "just wearing a wallet-chain", or "loud, aggressive music"¹⁹. Jehangir knows that originally punk was about "destroying social mores and manners and taboos,"²⁰ but now it is more and more difficult to find bands which follow this credo. Finally, Jehangir, dissatisfied with the present state of punk rock, comes to the conclusion that appears to be surprisingly similar to what Yusef said: "I think it's just about being ugly."²¹ That is why Yusef, a handsome engineer-to-be, according to Jehangir, could not be a punk and Jehangir himself, as Yusef saw it, deliberately made himself ugly with the Mohawk and gear and his unfixed teeth.

As we can see, Jehangir often expresses his dissatisfaction with the current state of punk rock, but he still wants to believe that punk rock actually represents ideas, not things. Therefore, he makes the most controversial comparison between punk rock and Islam. The latter one, however, is perceived in a very special, as for Muslims, manner. First of all, for taqwacores both punk and Islam are connotations, which may imply arbitrariness. The narrator in Knight's novel says at one point that he "stopped trying to define Punk around the same time [he] stopped trying to define Islam."²² Regarding similarities between punk and Islam, the narrator goes even further, calling these two "open symbols" or "flags". Both symbol and flag represent a kind of emblem or token, a banner under which its believers march. Connotations or symbols, as mentioned above, suggest arbitrariness, thus it is no surprise that the narrator asks the following question: "So what could [Punk and Islam] mean besides what you want them to?"²³ In another part of the novel Jehangir totally agrees with this when he says that "the whole point of taqwacore is that Islam can take any shape you want it to."²⁴

This arbitrariness or freedom in practicing Islam among the taqwacores can be seen throughout the whole novel. They choose elements from Islam they find suitable to their lives and which, in their views, do not limit their freedom. A good example of this way of perceiving Islam is Lynn, a former Catholic who converted to Islam. At one point she says: "I *wanted* to be Muslim."²⁵ Her doubts concerning Islam appear in a dialogue with Yusef when she says: "I believe we were created, or came from, Something... and that Something has a compassion for us that we are nowhere near comprehending."²⁶ She believes in the existence of some Supreme Force, the Creator, but she cannot tolerate the existence of *hadiths*, a reference to "that which is attributed to the Prophet as regards words, actions or approvals, physical features and characteristics."²⁷ As an example of for Lynn a pointless hadith which she does not follow is the belief that eating with one's left hand is imitating the devil. In her limited faith in Islam she cannot combine the love for Allah and hadiths whose existence she cannot understand: "It's hard [...] It's like there's some things in Islam that sound so beautiful and make you

18 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 55.

19 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 55.

20 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 55-56.

21 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 56.

22 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 7.

23 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 7.

24 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 193.

25 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 44. Emphasis in original.

26 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 42.

27 "Hadith," in *Islamic Dictionary*, <http://www.islamic-dictionary.com>.

just... feel it and love Allah so much... and then, then there's the stupid shit, you know?"²⁸ Another thing Lynn cannot comprehend is the importance of the belief in Muhammad. As a former Catholic, she compares the vitality of Muhammad in Islam to the role of Christ in Christianity. Lynn claims that in Islam Muhammad is not a Muslim Christ, so his role should not be so significant.

Introducing her to the story, the narrator presents her as "Lynn, the Muslimah-gone-wrong", but just a moment later he wonders if she is perhaps "Islam-done-her-wrong"²⁹. Yusef is not certain who or what is to blame for Lynn's current state of not only doubt about but even discouragement from Islam. When she heard in order to convert to Islam that she had to break up with her boyfriend, that she must not have adog, that she is obliged to cover all her body except her face and hands, that she must have an Arabic name, she must stop listening to her favorite music, that she must perform *dawah* (proselytization of Islam) for her family (otherwise their brains would burn and boil), she gave up Islam, though she kept some elements of it that she liked (for example greetings). Yusef's first thought was that she got temporarily attracted by some elements of Islam such as that you have to recall your Creator five times a day and that there are no priests. Lynn also became fascinated with the figure of American Muslim leader Malcolm X and his ideas of racial unity expressed in his last years. Another thought that appears in Yusef's mind is that perhaps it is Islam that is to blame. "I wanted to be a Muslim"³⁰, Lynn said earlier, but all the guidelines and procedures made her renounce the religion. Yusef takes two perspectives when judging Lynn: in one he treats her as an immature and childish girl who does not understand what Islam actually is; in the other he tries to find the faults of Islam, something an orthodox Muslim would not do. Such a way of thinking, forced by the taqwacore company, suggests changes in the perception of Islam in Yusef's mind.

Now we shall concentrate on the main setting of the story, the Buffalo, NY punk house that attracted punks and other unconventional individuals. Knight opens his novel with the description of this location, which is crucial to the whole story. It seems to be a place of great contrasts: on one hand there is a special room for prayers with a niche in the wall which shows the direction of Mecca (a hole smashed in the plaster with a baseball bat), but on the other it is difficult to find something *halal* (permissible, lawful) to drink there since there is only alcohol in the fridge in this house. The residents of the house pray a few times a day (not always five times) and at night they organize parties where many things that are *haram* (prohibited, illegal) are present (alcohol, drugs, sex). All residents of the house perform *wudhu* (Eng. "ablution"), a ceremonial act of washing and wiping the hands, face, arms, head and feet before praying or touching the Quran, but it may happen that the water runs over empty beer cans in the sink. Another haram attitude is shown by the fact that girls are allowed in this house. The female Rabeya lives with the group of men, and Lynn and other girls often visit the residents of the house. So many rules of Islam are broken in this place that the narrator is often ironical when he describes it: "It seemed like there was always at least one person awake in that punk house every hour of the day, as though it needed someone on alert at all times."³¹ However strange it may sound for a conservative Muslim, party time and

28 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 43.

29 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 20.

30 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 44.

31 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 5.

prayer time are to some extent similar for taqwacores since they each imply gatherings of individuals. This esoteric mixture of people was present there especially on Fridays:

rude Dawud's pork-pie hat poking up here, a jalab-and-turban type there, Jehangir's big Mohawk rising from a sea of kufis, Amazing Ayyub still with no shirt, girls scattered throughout – some in hejab, some not and Rabeya in punk-patched burqa doing her thing. But in its randomness it was gorgeous, reflecting an Islam I felt could not happen anywhere else.³²

As is shown above, in the taqwacore's view not only is punk rock characterized by randomness but Islam can be also. For them punk rock, which is a music genre, does not require to be able to sing.³³ Similar to the characters' view of Islam – taqwacore Islam does not demand its followers to adhere to all the rules that are written down in Quran or in Sunnah (the collection of hadiths). As stated before, the taqwacores seem to select the particular elements from Islam that do not disturb the life of a punk rocker. In this manner they (un?)consciously create a new definition of Islam, a religion open to randomness.

Knight highlights the differences between a progressive and orthodox Islam. On the progressive side there is the whole group of taqwacores with the leading role of Jehangir Tabari, whilst in the conservative role, apart from Yusef there is Mustafa, an orthodox Muslim who used to live in the same room that Yusef later took. Mustafa does not speak in the novel: his story is told by Umar, the only resident of the taqwacore house who seems to truly miss practicing conservative Islam. From what Umar says it is clear that in the times of Mustafa they were much more orthodox. Then they did not even want to live with a woman and, consequently, Rabeya had her room downstairs. Men were not allowed to go in her bathroom and there was even a curtain hanging over the doorway to the kitchen. If the males wanted something, they had to knock, and even if she was not there they had to announce themselves in case Rabeya was on her way to the kitchen. For Umar this was the way things should be. As he puts it, "That was when we really had it."³⁴ He is aware of the fact that for him things changed for worse: "Back then we prayed together, and we did it right. Right times, right ways. That was before Rabeya started demanding to lead salat, and before all these haram influences came in – khamr [a drink containing alcohol, usually beer], zina [the act of committing adultery or fornication], before all these parties."³⁵ When telling the story of how it used to be when Mustafa lived with them, Umar frequently uses the phrase "back then". It is clear that he divides the time he spent in this house into two eras: the era of Mustafa and the era of Jehangir Tabari. Umar is in a similar situation to Yusef because they both lived in these two periods (Yusef did not know Mustafa personally but before he moved to the taqwacore house he lived with his orthodox Muslim family). They differ, however, in that when living with the taqwacores Umar did not lose his orthodoxy. There are many examples of his fight against the taqwacore understanding of Islam and against the breaking of orthodox rules, for example. One of them is Umar's aggressive reaction to the situation when Amazing Ayyub was having sex with a random girl in Umar's bed. Another outburst of his aggression took place when he found that some taqwacores

32 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 37. Emphasis mine.

33 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 27.

34 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 17.

35 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 17.

were taking drugs in his truck. What is common in these two situations is that Umar does not even try to change the taqwacores, he just does not want to be one of them.

Those fuckin' kids! [...] You know what they are doing up there? [...] They're smoking up! [...] But you know, whatever they want to do, fine. If they want to poison their bodies and their minds and destroy themselves, *alhamdulillah* [praise be to Allah], let 'em at it. That's not what it is. What it is, is... fuckin' Rude Dawud, man... he had that shit in *my* truck. Him or his man, whichever, one of them had that shit in *my* truck. When Rude Dawud called for a ride, he knew they would be bringing that shit in *my* truck, over here to *my* home, to smoke with Fasiq. That's just disrespect, man. That is total fucking lack of respect. All of them, man. [...] I am sorry for cursing right now, but I am heated. I am real mad, y'akhi [my brother]. They just completely disrespected me man, and I'm pissed.³⁶

Umar, despite the fact that he is living with the taqwacores, wants to keep his orthodox Muslim world around him. This is very difficult because they engage in haram activities everywhere (in his room, in his truck). Umar's stance may symbolize the battle against progressive Islam embodied by the taqwacores. He is conscious of the fact that this is a powerful force which he is trying to prevent from entering his personal religious life. He is defending himself against this "irresistible force" in different ways: one of them is reminding everyone around him that he follows the rules of Islam. He has the numbers 2:219 carved on his neck which refer to the passage from Quran devoted to, among other vices, to alcohol: "They ask you about intoxicants and gambling: say, 'In them there is a gross sin, and some benefits for the people. But their sinfulness far outweighs their benefit.'³⁷ When meeting with people who drink alcohol or take drugs, Umar frequently recites one more passage from Quran: "O you who believe, intoxicants, and gambling, and the altars of idols, and the games of chance are abominations of the devil; you shall avoid them, that you may succeed."³⁸ Umar does everything to separate himself from the taqwacore ideology. As he lives with them, however, the taqwacores treat him as one of their own.

There is a kind of struggle throughout the whole novel between Umar and Jehangir who represent two opposite views on Islam. As indicated before, Umar does not want to make the taqwacores conservative Muslims whereas Jehangir is trying to force his way of perceiving and practicing Islam on others, including Umar: "I say fuck that and this whole house says fuck that".³⁹ By this Jehangir shows his leading role among the residents of this house. According to Jehangir, Umar is still a taqwacore because he could not enter the mosque with his tattooed neck: "even Umar, you think can go in a regular masjid [mosque] with all his stupid tattoos [...]? Even Umar, bro, as much as he tries to Wahabbi-hard-ass his way around here, he's still one of us. He's still fuckin' taqwacore."⁴⁰

The rivalry between these two characters continues. Jehangir accuses Muslims of rejecting progress: "It's only Muslims who use innovation to use the term 'innovation' to mean something bad."⁴¹ Umar replied "Don't forget that you're Muslim, too. [...]"

36 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 23-24. Emphasis in original

37 Rashad Kalifa, ed. & trans., *Quran: The Final Testament: Authorized English Version of the Original*, (Submission. ws., 2001), 22.

38 Kalifa, *Quran*, 72.

39 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 41.

40 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 41.

41 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 41.

Aren't you? La Ilaha illa Allah [there is no other God except Allah]."⁴² For Umar, who seems not to see his tattoos as something against Islam, it is clear: if you are a Muslim, you agree with everything your faith proposes, recommends, commands and forbids. Jehangir's reply ensures that for him Allah is the greatest, but, as has been shown, the rules the taqwacores follow are chosen to fit their needs.

Although, as has been stated above, Yusef in this novel is a member of the conservative faction of Islam, the juxtaposition of this character and Jehangir is not as spectacular as it is in case of Umar and Jehangir. In contrast to Umar, Yusef appears to be a round character that changes throughout the novel. Despite the fact that Yusef was raised in a Muslim family, he seems to be fascinated with the taqwacores. For Yusef these totally different people attracted him with their energy and a special atmosphere that, in his view, surrounded them:

One thing I have faithfully observed and noted about punks: they're all legends, each and every last one of them, in one circle or another. Even if you never see them in the elements of their renown, even in a mere courtesy-handshake between friends of friends in a parking lot, you cannot help but feel an immortal vibrancy, a comic-book kind of costumed exuberance like that parking lot is host to a historic summit or a scene in ten thousand movies we're living right now. At least that's what I felt.⁴³

In these words a kind of childish fascination can be observed. Yusef is not a child: he is a student of engineering who was raised in a Muslim environment. One of possible reasons for his fascination is the fact that during his studies he was exposed to other cultures including sub-cultures such as taqwacore. Yusef wants to make a difference; he badly needs heroes, idols, or models to follow. The fact that the taqwacores became idols for him can be explained twofold: on one hand it may be the result of his young age, immaturity and consequently being prone to "bad" influences. On the other hand, however, knowing the anti-orthodox character of Knight's novel, this may suggest a criticism of the Muslim way of raising children. Yusef finds models to follow in the taqwacore house and Jehangir becomes the embodiment of the taqwacore way of life for him. At the beginning of the story Yusef meets his "legends"; throughout the novel he assumes their style and seems to be gradually losing his conservative Muslim values (e.g. he dates a girl, masturbates). At some points he feels bad about his change, but this does not change his view on the man who seems to have ruined his religious Muslim life. After Jehangir's death, Yusef praises him as if he was praising God in a prayer or a hymn:

Jehangir king of the shaheed stage dive. Jehangir who gave tafsirs to the drunken streets. Jehangir who's up there with the houris in a hollowed pearl sixty miles wide. Jehangir the eccentric-guitar muezzin drunk and calling us all to stupor-prayer. Jehangir who took my Islam to its perihelion climax. [...] Jehangir the champ who left us championless like Husain did on those blood-clumped Karbala sands. Jehangir whose heroes were Malcolm X and Johnny Cash. Jehangir the street-punk anarchist who pissed all over his deen but then went and died for it anyway. Jehangir who spoke Urdu, Pashtu, Punjabi, a little Farsi and six dialects of English. Jehangir the new punk laureate after Patti Smith and Jim Carroll. Jehangir the Walt Whitman Iqbal. [...] Jehangir the walking peak of eloquence. [...] Jehangir with the scowling James Dean look, James Deen, James Deen Jihad though I'm not sure if the struggle was ever Holy or even a War. Jehangir [...] who practiced Islam like

⁴² Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 41.

⁴³ Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 6.

a newborn baby would. [...] Jehangir Oi, Jehangir Roots n' Boots or Shoes n' Booze, Jehangir American Muslim.⁴⁴

The prayer- or hymn-like character of this passage lies, most of all, in its structure. Every sentence begins with the word "Jehangir" after which the description of the leader of the taqwacores comes. Despite the fact that poetry does not seem to be the highest form of art for the orthodox Yusef ("Rasullullah said it was better for your body to be filled with pus than poetry,"⁴⁵ he uses poetic devices such as anaphora and homophones (Dean – deen) when he speaks about Jehangir. One of the most striking sentences in this passage clearly refers to Jehangir's influence on Yusef: "Jehangir who took my Islam to its perihelion climax"⁴⁶. Perihelion means the point in the orbit of a planet where it is nearest to the sun. However, this happens only once a year (between 3 and 5 January) and throughout the year the distance between the Earth and the Sun changes. The time that Yusef spent with Jehangir could not have lasted long since it would have been too dangerous for his faith (we know that after Jehangir's death, Yusef returned to his orthodox family). Knight used the word "perihelion" very aptly to describe the kind of experience Yusef was feeling when he was living with Jehangir. It may be assumed that it was Jehangir who made Yusef the closest to the "perihelion climax" of Islam. This is a very controversial conclusion since our analysis has attempted to show that Islam as practiced by Jehangir and other taqwacores is totally opposite to what conservative Islam is. The taqwacores introduced numerous changes to Yusef's Muslim life which he, unlike Umar, at least partly accepted. The metaphor of Islam represented by Jehangir shown as the Sun or perihelion also refers to the potential danger of being too close to the Sun. Therefore, the time that Yusef spent with Jehangir could not have lasted long since it would be too dangerous. Yusef treats Jehangir like a martyr, likening him to Husain ibn Ali, who lost the battle against the army of Yazid I, the Umayyad Caliph, in Karbala in 680. Husain is regarded as a martyr by Muslims. Another prominent figure for Muslims to whom Yusef compares Jehangir is Malcolm X, a personification of freedom, usually associated with fighting for the rights of blacks. In 1964, as a result of his dissatisfaction with the racist views of the members of Nation of Islam, he established Muslim Mosque, Inc. Yusef might have thought of Malcolm X as another martyr who died fighting for true Islam, just like Jehangir. Praising Jehangir in this passage, Yusef speaks not only of great fighters for freedom, but also of the music behind the taqwacore movement. Hence, he calls Jehangir another "punk laureate" following the likes of Jim Carroll⁴⁷ and Patti Smith. According to Andrew Masterson, "Patti Smith never really fitted into the punk ethic of the '70s being rather too diverse in her reference points."⁴⁸ (sic!) Jehangir was like her in such a way that for him taqwacore meant diversity. He accepted both straightedge punks (a subgenre of hardcore punk characterized by refraining from using drugs, alcohol and cigarettes) and hardcore ones. This made him special because he did not identify himself with just one specific group. He was "outside

44 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 244-245.

45 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 250.

46 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 250.

47 James Dennis "Jim" Carroll (1949-2009) was an American author, poet, but also a punk musician. He was best known for the adaptation of his "Basketball Diaries" into an independent film. As a musician, he formed a punk rock group called The Jim Carroll Band. He collaborated with such musicians and bands as, for example, Patti Smith, Ray Manzarek of The Doors and Pearl Jam.

48 The interview with Andrew Masterson, *The Age*, January 24, 1997, <http://www.oceanstar.com/patti/intervus/9701age.htm>.

society" in the sense that he did not want to see people divided into groups who fight against one another. This position let him see and accept them all. He was like a black person from the song "Rock 'n' Roll Nigger" by Patti Smith:

Outside of society, they're waitin' for me.
 Outside of society, that's where I want to be.
 [...]
 Jimi Hendrix was a nigger.
 Jesus Christ and Grandma, too.
 Jackson Pollock was a nigger.
 Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger,
 nigger, nigger, nigger.⁴⁹

Yusef would surely add Jehangir Tabari to this list.

Another interesting comparison that Yusef made was to liken Jehangir to Walt Whitman and Muhammad Iqbal. By recalling these two poets Knight wanted to emphasize the combination of American and Muslim features of Jehangir, who is at the end of the quoted passage called "American Muslim". This way Jehangir is praised again since both Whitman and Iqbal are highly admired figures in both America and the Muslim world. Walt Whitman (1819-92) is remembered as America's first "poet of democracy", and as has been said before, according to Yusef, Jehangir is associated with fighting for freedom. His life, as the leader of the Muslim punk movement, was often full of paradoxes since it was not possible to successfully combine the rules of Islam and the taqwacore way of life. Walt Whitman, in his famous "Song of Myself" (first publication in 1855), asks "Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then I contradict myself, / I am large, I contain multitudes."⁵⁰ Contradiction, in Whitman's words, becomes an advantage, turning the poet into a godlike figure. In another part of the story Yusef, already fascinated with the figure of Jehangir, translates his friend's name:

"Your name means 'World Conqueror,' doesn't it?"
 "Something like that. I'm named after a fuckin' Mughal king."
 "I know."
 "His son built the Taj Mahal."
 "Yep."⁵¹

Jehangir, as a great man (at least according to Yusef), does not pay as much attention as Yusef to the meaning of his name, an appellation which seems to predestine him to become a significant person in the history of the world.

Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) is not an accidental figure in this prayer, either. Like Whitman he was an eminent poet who used many spiritual and other metaphysical figures. As Whitman is associated with America, Iqbal is regarded as "the most serious Muslim philosophical thinker of modern times"⁵². He is one Islamic philosopher who is known for engaging with the problems of modern Western philosophy within an Islamic context. In this way he is similar to the character of Jehangir whose Western (American) liberal lifestyle was juxtaposed with Islam. Similarly to Whitman, Iqbal's

49 Patti Smith Group, "Rock'n'Roll Nigger," *Easter*, Arista Records, 1978. CD.

50 Paul Negri, ed., *Walt Whitman: Song of Myself* (NY: Dover Thrift Editions, 2001), 53.

51 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 65-66.

52 Rahman Fazlur, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 225.

poetry was in close relation to his philosophy. For Yusef, most probably, their poems were less important (since “it is better to be filled with pus than poetry”) than their roots (American and Muslim) and philosophies that in both cases focused on the individual.

In the list of sentences above praising Jehangir there is one more which requires our careful examination. Yusef says that Jehangir “practiced Islam like a newborn baby”. A newborn baby is usually perceived as clean and innocent, and so is his practicing of Islam. Taqwacore had little in common with pure Islam, but this may suggest treating it in a completely new, fresh manner. Not violated by any previous experience, Jehangir’s way of practicing Islam is shown by Yusef as innovative, but not necessarily wrong.

Yusef finishes his hymn to Jehangir with the words that Jehangir was an “American Muslim.” Analyzing this phrase we should go back to previous descriptions of Jehangir. Among all the figures that appeared in this passage, the adjective “American” may apply to six of them: Malcolm X, Patti Smith, John Carroll, James Dean, Walt Whitman and the one to whom Jehangir pays the most attention throughout the story – Johnny Cash (1932-2003), one of the most prominent and influential country musicians of the 20th century. There are at least two features of Cash that might have attracted Jehangir: the fact that he was a rebel and that he performed free concerts in prisons^{53, 54} to entertain the inmates. Rebellion was rooted in Jehangir and performing concerts in jails could be treated as a metaphor for Jehangir’s activity: by his taqwacore lifestyle he wanted to offer more “freedom” to orthodox Muslims who were seen by him as slaves to their faith. As we know from the story, the main goal of Jehangir was to organize a concert in which various American Muslim punk bands could participate: straight edge, homocore (gay punk), liwaticore (queercore) and taqwacore bands. All these subcultures and subgenres reflected the diversity of Islam and, as such, very seldom meet in one place. The concert which took part in the taqwacore house in Buffalo where all the main characters of the story lived finished with the death of Jehangir, who was trampled by the crowd he was attempting to control. The catharsis which the death of Jehangir brings can be interpreted symbolically as a partial victory in his fight for freedom in Islam (according to Yusef) or as a failure in the attempt to change the religion’s traditional values (as purely orthodox Muslims might think).

Another use of the word “American” in the novel refers to a special role that American Muslims were given:

“The United States can save Islam.”

[...]

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We’re going to do it right. All the bullshit’s dying slow, can you see that?”

“Bullshit?”

“Yeah bro. Because Muslims are coming here from like a thousand different countries, all of them with their own ideas about what Islam is supposed to be. Arabs, South Asians, Africans, Persians, Bosnians, Turks, Afghans, Chechens, Kazakhs, Malaysians... every culture touched by Islam has taken it and added their own ingredients. So when you get all these brothers and sisters from different backgrounds together, how can you have a community? I stayed silent for the answer. “By leaving culture behind and sticking to what we have in common, just our iman [faith], you know?”⁵⁵

53 Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash: The Biography* (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo, 2006).

54 Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison: The Making of Masterpiece* (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo, 2005).

55 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 72-73.

By showing the diversity of Islam, Jehangir in a way justifies the existence of the taqwacore movement. For him, America seems like the bands at the concert that he organized. Dissimilar practices, different backgrounds and diverse ideas about Islam, but at the core there is one important thing they all have in common: the faith. Jehangir believes that such a positive mixture is not possible in other, more homogeneous countries such as Saudi Arabia. Not only, however, did Jehangir juxtapose different ways in which contemporary Islam is practiced in different countries, but he also ironically contrasted religious freedoms in an earlier era:

"And you know, brother, Muslim Spain had such an incredible freedom of thought... that's why the Inquisition happened. When the Catholics retook Spain, there were all these Christian heresies that had flourished [...]" "We used to be the good guys, and they were the assholes."⁵⁶

Jehangir said that the United States can save Islam. Yusef at one point of the novel states that "If Islam was to be saved, it would be saved by the crazy ones."⁵⁷

Knight's *The Taqwacores*, a novel which made its author a persona non grata in many Muslim countries and was called by Carl W. Ernst, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "The Catcher in the Rye" [a novel by an American writer J. D. Salinger] for young Muslims,⁵⁸ seems to have played a specific role in early 21st-century Muslim American literature. The controversial combination of the terms "Muslim," "rebellion," "punk" and "American" which frequently appear in the novel are perfectly acceptable for the followers of the taqwacore movement. As Noureen DeWulf (an actress who plays the rocker in the 2010 film adaptation of *The Taqwacores*) said, "I'm a Muslim and I'm 100-percent American [...] Rebellion? Punk? This is totally American."⁵⁹ Regardless of the general agreement or disagreement with the message of the novel, both orthodox and non-orthodox Muslim circles must acknowledge the American Muslim punk rock movement called taqwacore. On the other hand, Knight tries to stay objective by showing a variety of characters who represent different attitudes towards this movement: from the conservative Umar and Mustafa; through Yusef, who after a fascination with taqwacore's lack of rules comes back to orthodox Islam; to the rebellious Lynn as well as Jehangir, the leader of the taqwacores in Knight's novel. One of the reasons this novel was censored and boycotted is its presentation of, at one point, taqwacore both as "irresistible force" and "progressive Islam" as opposed to orthodox Islam as an "immovable object". The message, however, is not so one-sided. A number of images that follow, due to their contradictory character, seem to arouse even greater controversies: praying a few times a day against organizing a party with all that is haram; performing wudhu against water running over empty beer cans in a sink, etc. Knight presents an unusual mixture of traditional and anti-Muslim practices. This juxtaposition can be also observed when taqwacore's "irresistible force" is likened to a NASCAR auto crashing into Ka'ba. On one hand, the force contributes to the destruction of conservative Muslim values, but on the other hand, high speed driving which leads to the crash results in the destruction of the car, too. This image can be interpreted in many various ways. For example, not following traditional rules of

56 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 177.

57 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, 38.

58 Christopher Maag, "Young Muslims Build a Subculture on an Underground Book," *New York Times*, December 23, 2008, New York Edition, A16.

59 Maag, "Young Muslims," A16.

Islam leads to the destruction of Muslims (traditional view) or only extreme actions can change the traditional character of Islam (non-orthodox view). Knight uses different characters to show different ways of perceiving Islam. By means of Jehangir, Lynn and, in most parts of the story, Yousef, Knight tries to justify the taqwacore view (the disappointment of young Muslims living with orthodoxies in the United States). The characters of Omar and Mustafa are openly against and even disgusted with anti-Islam practices. There are other ambiguities in the novel. Yusef first calls Lynn a "Muslimah-gone-wrong", but later she is "Islam-done-her-wrong" for him. The fact that after a fascination with the taqwacores Yusef, one of the two key characters in the story, becomes again an orthodox Muslim may suggest that he in a way had got lost. On the other hand, we may see Islam in this novel as a religion open to randomness, which in traditional Muslim circles is not acceptable. Interpretations may vary and this seems to be the main cause of controversies around Knight's novel.

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