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**OPED****Being pious in the heart of modernity**

Maher Zain and other Muslims living in Europe and North America are using Western music to promote Muslim themes and in the process providing an answer to the challenges facing Muslims, writes SEAN FOLEY

SINCE the 19th century, Muslims in Malaysia and elsewhere have sought to reconcile Islam with Western modernity.

Today, the debate has taken on a new form: Maher Zain and other Muslims living in Europe and North America are using Western music to promote Muslim themes. Zain's latest video -- Ya Nabi Salam Alayka (Oh Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be upon You) was recently released to coincide with Ramadan.

Born in Lebanon but raised in Sweden, Zain worked in New York City with Nadir Khayat (or "RedOne") -- the producer/songwriter who has been instrumental in the rise of the United States pop star Lady Gaga.

Following his return to Sweden, Zain released Thank You Allah. The album earned the top position in May last year on Amazon.com's digital charts in the world music category.

Last year, 120,000 albums were sold in Malaysia, and Thank You Allah earned eight platinum awards from Warner Music Malaysia. That same year, Zain was the most Googled personality in Malaysia.

Remarkably, Zain spent no money on advertising and focused instead on social media -- a wise decision given that Facebook use in Malaysia increased from 1.1 million to 5.5 million users between 2009 and last year.

There were similar increases in other countries where Zain has a broad following. Not surprisingly, he was the first Muslim artist to reach a million fans on Facebook; today he has more than 2.5 million fans.

YouTube videos are also important to Zain's presence on the Internet, and his videos have received more than 50 million hits.

Last month, Zain told the British magazine Emel that the Internet was the "biggest blessing" for Muslim artistes, since they face obstacles in getting Islamic-themed music on radio and television. By contrast, the Internet allowed them to publicise their work directly to fans.

But Zain's success cannot be attributed entirely to technology: it also reflects his innovative use of Western and Islamic images and motifs to articulate his message. That message is that faith in Islam, God and personal dignity are the answer to the challenges facing Muslims.

On the album's cover, we see Zain wearing clothes suited to a rhythm and blues concert in New York -- blue jeans, a black jacket and a dapper cap. But he is sitting in Islamic prayer.

He also consciously goes against traditional formulas for popular songs and music videos. Such productions revolve around a glamorised image of the singer.

But in Zain's videos, he appears to be an ordinary person who is not a big deal except for his musical talent -- given to him by God, whom he regularly thanks.

Thanking God is a central theme to the album in which he calls on Muslims not to blame all of their problems on the West and to realise their own role in their problems.

Nor does Zain argue that Muslims have to either accept or reject Western modernity wholesale: instead, he implies they can accept aspects of modernity that they see as useful and reject those that are not consistent with their values.

While many of his videos are set in the Middle East, he has videos set in the United States with Muslims, which is meant to suggest that Muslims can be true to their faith and succeed in the West.

He also suggests that as a Western Muslim, he (and others) have the right to offer their faith as a part of the solution to the crises that are plaguing the societies that gave birth to Western modernity in Europe and North America.

One can see this process in Zain's two videos set in the US. The first, The Chosen One, aims to counter attacks on

Prophet Muhammad in both cartoons and on Facebook.

In the video, we see Zain singing about Prophet in English while walking in an American city filled with drug use, poverty, crime and other social problems. In the first scene, Zain's neighbour dumps garbage on his front porch -- an action meant to symbolise Islamophobia among some Americans.

Until the final scene, people other than Zain, including Muslim and non-Muslim Americans, address these problems.

In the final scene, Zain notices that his neighbour is sick and offers her soup. Zain is displaying his compassion and humanity here, but he is also invoking a story told about the Prophet.

For years, a woman dumped garbage on his home until one day it stopped. The prophet sought to see what had happened to the woman and offered to help her when he realised that she was sick.

In the second video, Ya Nabi Salam Alayka, Zain sings a salutation (salawat) to the Prophet that is similar to a Malaysian nasyid salawat -- a genre of Islamic vocal composition.

While singing, Zain delivers notes marked sala 'ala al-Habib (peace be upon Prophet Muhammad) to Muslims in the third-largest US city and the hometown of President Barack Obama: Chicago, Illinois. We see Southeast-Asian Muslims, a black firefighter, veiled and unveiled professional women and young men playing soccer.

In the final scene, we see the message of Zain's note illuminate the face of a white and blue-eyed astronaut circling the earth.

Here, it is worth noting that astronauts have been American icons and symbols of selfless patriotism for decades, while firefighters attained similar status after the Sept 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Finally, by choosing a city that is a centre of the nation's politics and showing Muslims occupying such important professions, Zain is implying that Muslims are patriotic, productive citizens whose faith has something to contribute to the foremost Western nation.

In effect, if you can be pious and Muslim in the heart of modernity -- America -- you can be pious and modern anywhere in the world.

Zain understands that Western music has entered the consciousness of the young in Malaysia and elsewhere and provides a powerful vehicle to answer a decades-old question: can Muslims remain true to their faith and succeed in a world dominated by Western modernity?

For Zain, the answer is not in politics, violence or in angry rhetoric. Rather, it is deeply embedded in the themes, structures and chords of Western music.

Indeed, it should come as no surprise that his music is immensely popular in a nation whose record at reconciling Islam and modernity has few peers in the world today: Malaysia.

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