

An Islamic perspective on the Performing Arts

By Abid Hussain – Cultural Diversity Officer ACE West Midlands

Music

The issue of music has divided Muslim scholars both in the past and in modern times. The general consensus amongst the Muslim world is that music is forbidden. There are exceptions to the general rule that will be discussed later in this treatise. Other viewpoints also exist which endorse the permissibility of music within Islam and these are also touched upon.

One of the strongest evidences prohibiting music quoted by Sunni Muslims is the following Hadith of the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH)¹ narrated on the authority of Abu Aamir or Abu Maalik Al-Ash'aree who said: he heard the Prophet (PBUH) say:

"There will be a people from my Ummah (Muslim nation), who will seek to make lawful; fornication, the wearing of silk (for men), the drinking of wine and the use of musical instruments."²

The strength of the evidence proposed in this Prophetic narration is that the prohibition on music is placed in the same context as the Islamic prohibition on fornication, the wearing of silk for men and the consumption of alcohol all of which are accepted as fact and beyond doubt. This highlights the importance and relevance of music being placed within the list of prohibited acts.

The narration is documented in the Hadith collection of Imam Bukhari, which is widely recognised within the Sunni Muslim community as the most authentic collection of Prophetic sayings recorded. This further validates the prohibition placed upon music according to Islam.

¹ Peace be upon him

² Narrated by: Al-Bukhari in his authentic collection, Abu Bakr Al-Ismaa'elee in his Mustakhraj and Al-Haafidh bin Hajr in Fathul-Baari the explanation of Bukhari and in his At-Taghleequt-Ta'leeq.

Other narrations that prohibit music include

"Indeed Allah has prohibited; wine, gambling, al-koobah (a drum) and every type of intoxicant."³

And

The Messenger of Allah said: "A people of my ummah will drink wine, calling it by other than its real name. Merriment will be made for them through the playing of musical instruments and the singing of lady singers. Allah will cleave the earth under them and turn others into apes and swine."⁴

The Shia perspective on music is similar to the Sunni position and this is echoed in many of the Hadith narratives collected under Shia traditions as well as the Fiqh⁵ rulings of the Shia Imams.

Some of the Shia traditions that highlight the prohibition of music include

The Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.) said,

"And the person with the [sin of] singing (*al-ghinā'*) will be raised [on the day of resurrection] blind, deaf and dumb. The person with [the sin of] adultery, of wood-wind, and of drum will also be raised in the same way."⁶

He also said, "Whoever listens to the entertainment (song and music), lead will be melted inside his ear on the day of judgement." He also said, "Singing and music are enchantment for adultery." That is, it is a stepping-stone or a way that leads to adultery.⁷

The Holy Prophet (s.a.w.s.) has also said,

"The Almighty Allah has sent me as a mercy to the worlds, to guide the people. And He ordered me to eradicate the playing of flute and other instruments of music, all games of vice, idol (worship) and all practices of the days of ignorance."⁸

³ Narrated by: Abu Daawood, Al-Bayhaqee and Ahmad in his Musnad.

⁴ Ibn Maajah in Kitaabul Fitan(*72) in the chapter on punishments.

⁵ Islamic legal rulings

⁶ As-Sayyid al-Khu'l, al-Masa'ilu 'sh-Shar'iyya, vol. 2, p. 22.

⁷ As-Sayyid al-Khu'l, al-Masa'ilu 'sh-Shar'iyya, vol. 2, p. 22.

⁸ Mustadrakul Wasael, Chapter 79

The fourth Caliph Ali stated

“Angels do not even enter a house that has wine, drum, tambourine or a flute. Even the prayers of the inhabitants of this house are unacceptable. They are deprived of barakat.”⁹

The differentiating factor between Sunni and Shia rulings is that whilst the Sunni ruling is general across the music genre, the Shia position on prohibiting music applies to a particular type of music that which has been created for the purpose of entertainment and amusement.

To distinguish between the permissible and prohibited rulings on music and singing within Shia traditions it is recommended to consult further with Shia scholars to gather advice on a case by case basis to determine the nature of what is defined as entertainment and amusement.

A good resource for Islamic rulings from a Shia perspective is <http://www.najaf.org/english/> the official English language site of Ayatollah Seestani one of the leading Shia scholars in the world today.

Whilst the general consensus prohibits music there are exceptions to the rule. Islam allows for Muslims to use the Duff. The duff is a version of a drum very similar to a tambourine where only one side is covered.

Muslims are allowed to play the duff on festivals, special occasions, and wedding feasts as well as to meet the arrival of distinguished guests and as part of the preparations for battle.

There is a difference of opinion in relation to the duff, some scholars believe it is only permissible for women to use on the occasions outlined above whilst other scholars deem it permissible for both men and women.

Outside of the orthodox interpretations of Islam many Sufi schools of thought regard music as permissible. A leading proponent of this perspective is the Sufi scholar Imam Al Ghazzali who wrote a treatise on music as part of his famed text “Alchemy of Happiness”.

⁹ Wasaelush Shia

Qawwali music has a strong following in the sub continent and is one of the most recognised forms of music that is encouraged within Sufism. Its important to stress that many Sufi inspired musicians can be non-Muslims this is particularly common in the sub continent.

For further reading on the subject of Music and Singing it is recommended to read “The Islamic rulings on Music and Singing” by Abu Mustafa Al Kanadi for the prohibited perspective and “Alchemy of Happiness” by Imam Al Ghazzali for the Sufi perspective that does not prohibit music.

Singing, Spoken Word and Poetry

Islam makes a clear distinction between singing and music. Singing is classified in the same category as spoken word and poetry.

There are differences between both the Sunni and Shia rulings on singing. The Shia ruling on singing is similar to the viewpoint on music, singing for the purpose of entertainment and amusement is prohibited under all circumstances.

The Sunni school of Islam allows singing as long as it is not accompanied by musical instruments with the exception of the duff. Furthermore singing should not distract the performer from fulfilling his or her religious obligations and should not be performed to excess at the expense of other responsibilities. Islam also prohibits singing in front of the opposite sex.

Both the Sunni and the Shia perspective both endorse the view that all songs should not contain any messages that are inconsistent with the teachings of the religion.

Increasingly within the UK and the West there is a growing trend of Muslims performing Nasheeds which are songs inspired by the artist’s faith. Nasheeds can be accompanied by the duff and many are sung without any musical instrument in the background.

Poetry and spoken word have a strong heritage within Islam. One of the leading Islamic jurists Imam Shaafee was also a renowned poet. As with the ruling on singing poetry is permissible as long as the subject matter is consistent with the religion and that it does not distract the performer or his or her audience from fulfilling their religious obligations.

Dance

The Islamic rulings on Dance vary across the different Islamic schools of thought.

Orthodox Sunni teachings state that dance is prohibited for men, however it is permissible for women within a female only environment and without the accompaniment of music other than the Duff. Dancing is primarily permissible for women to mark festivals and celebrations e.g. weddings. Even though dance is permissible for women it should not be the type of dance that encourages immoral behaviour.

Some branches of Sunni thought place a complete prohibition on dance for women as well as men.

Orthodox Shia teachings allow for dance to be performed in front of a husband or wife but outside of this marital relationship, participating in dance and showcasing dance is prohibited.

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) reports from the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.s.) that he said:

“I prohibit for you dancing and playing flute, drums and tabla.”¹⁰

Hassan (a companion of Imam Jafar Sadiq a.s.) said:

“There was a man in my neighbourhood who had singing girls; and he always remained immersed in music and dance. When I went to visit him I used to stay a bit longer (to listen to those sounds). When I went to Imam Jafar Sadiq (a.s.), he told me:” O Hasan, Verily the ear, and the eye and the heart, all of them will be asked. The ear and what it listened to, the eye and what it looked at and the heart and what it intended.”

Hasan said: When I heard that verse of the Quran in. it was a though I had never heard it before. Then I repented (from my sin of listening to music) and made a covenant with Allah not to do it again.”¹¹

The third perspective on dance comes from the Sufi school where dance is encouraged as a means of worship; this is most evident in the practice of the whirling dervishes.

¹⁰ Al Kafi

¹¹ <http://www.al-shia.com/html/eng/lib/index.php>

Many Sufis will incorporate music, singing and dancing into their acts of worship and use these art forms to heighten their emotional state so as to make a spiritual connection with their creator.

Theatre

Whilst there are no specific rulings on theatre that can be derived either from the Quran or the Hadith collections a number of more general rulings have an influence on theatre practice.

Orthodox Islamic teachings prohibit the depiction of God, the Prophet Muhammed PBUH, the Angels, the Unseen and other religious figures both in the visual and performing arts. Any portrayal of the figures mentioned is likely to cause deep offence to Muslims.

A play that portrays Islam should portray it consistently with the teachings of the religion; failure to do so is likely to cause offence to Muslims. Many plays explore issues of faith and culture but fail to make a distinction between what is cultural practice and what is religious belief. In these circumstances a cultural belief may inaccurately be portrayed as a religious principle also. It is important for theatre directors to undertake research into Islam if they are looking to present it as a subject matter within a play.

Conclusions

From the examples we've seen across the performing arts it is evident that there are a number of very different perspectives taken on music, singing and dancing that vary according to one's personal beliefs and school of Islamic thought.

Orthodox Sunni and Shia rulings on music, singing, dancing and theatre are very similar albeit relying on different proofs and reference sources for validating a particular position.

The main differences in reference to the performing arts exist between Orthodox and Sufi interpretations of the religion. Sufism adopts a more liberal approach in particular to music and dance where both art forms play a key role in helping the Sufi devotee to achieve a heightened sense of spirituality.

Orthodox Islam rejects both music and dance as a general rule based on the evidence provided in this treatise. Orthodox Muslims reject the viewpoint that music and dance can help a Muslim gain proximity to God on the basis that it was

not encouraged, taught or practiced by the Prophet Muhammed PBUH, the elected Caliphs appointed after his death nor amongst his companions.

Understanding the differences in viewpoint across Sunni, Shia and Sufi schools of Islamic thought is vital to understanding different responses from Muslims to the same performance. It would be too simplistic for any programmer to assume all Muslims agreed on the interpretation of the faith and what applies to one Muslim will apply to another.

What might be accepted and encouraged by Sufi teachings may cause offence to Muslims who follow a more orthodox interpretation of the religion from a Sunni or Shia perspective.

As a reference approximately 90% of UK Muslims are Sunni and approximately 10% are Shia. Sufis can be found across both of the Sunni and Shia community.

Care is also required to distinguish between practice that is endorsed by cultural norms and that which is prohibited by religious teachings.

Many musicians, dancers and performers are Muslims but may place a stronger emphasis on their cultural beliefs and values that allow them to practice an art form that is prohibited by the religion.

Music and dancing for example have long been a part of the cultural fabric of Middle Eastern countries and those in the Sub Continent however this sits uncomfortably with the teachings of the dominant religion in those regions Islam.

For Muslims where religion is the primary influence the Quran and the Sunnah¹² will influence their viewpoint on music and dance more than their cultural identity.

There is no conflict between being Arab/Pakistani/Indonesian and a musician or dancer but there is a conflict across many Islamic schools of thought between being a musician or dancer and a Muslim.

The challenge facing the Arts sector is to better understand the differences between culture and faith and not only within the context of Islam. Furthermore it is important for the sector to understand that Muslims and Islam in the modern world are not a homogenous entity and that differences do exist in interpretations that have significant ramifications for the sector.

¹² The way of the Prophet