

Tripping with Allah: Islam, Drugs, and Writing

Michael Muhammad Knight

Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2013. 256 pages.

I should begin by confessing that I have been a fan of Michael Muhammad Knight's work ever since I first read his novel, *The Taqwacores*, and his travel memoir, *Blue-Eyed Devi: A Road Odyssey through Islamic America*, back in 2007. I have since read all of his books and have taught several of them in my courses on contemporary Islam and Islam in North America. I regularly teach his account of the hajj from *Journey to the End of Islam* in my first-year "Introduction to Religion" course. I consider his book on the Five-Percent Nation, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip Hop, and the Gods of New York*, to be one of the finest ethnographies of a religious community ever penned. I was therefore pleased to find I have a blurb on the back of *Tripping with Allah* in which I praise him for his talent, his authenticity, and his passion. I consider the author a great writer. I envy his skill with language, his creative intellect, and, most of all, his formidable work ethic. After all, this is his ninth book since the publication of *The Taqwacores* (Soft Skull Press: 2004). However, I sometimes wonder exactly for whom he is writing because his books assume a sophisticated audience with backgrounds in a wide range of topics from the history of Islam to American popular culture.

In the final pages of *Tripping with Allah*, Knight sums up his career so far with this remarkable paragraph.

I've spent roughly twenty years as a Muslim of some form or other, a crazy convert and then an ex-Muslim, progressive Muslim, ghulat Shi'a, Nimatullahi dervish, Azrael Wisdom, Mikail El, Islamic Gonzo, "godfather of Muslim punk rock," Seal of Muslim Pseudo and now Pharmakon Allah, Muhammadus Prine, Quetzalcoatl Farrakhan who trips and says Fatima Kubra but has this goofy idea of taking up the way of the salaf, and Dr. Bruce Lawrence just called me a malamatiyyah at a lecture in Vancouver. (p. 248)

This paragraph is striking because it assumes so much of its reader, including a rather encyclopedic knowledge of Islam, African-American religious traditions, pop-culture, and what Frank Zappa might have called the "conceptual continuity" of the author's entire body of work. The line that grabbed me most powerfully was the image of Bruce Lawrence, the eminent scholar of Islam and Sufism, referring to Michael Knight as a *malāmāṭīyah*. This term,

of course, refers to the tradition within Sufism of those who walk the “path of blame,” presenting themselves in provocatively outrageous or even externally sinful ways to the outside world while internally walking a deeply spiritual path. This seems as an apt metaphor for his latest work.

Tripping with Allah: Islam, Drugs, and Writing is undoubtedly the most provocative of all of Knight’s books. From the cover illustration of a robot from the Transformer cartoons – I believe it is Shockwave, but I am not sure – wearing the emblem of the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths on his chest and brandishing Zulfiqar, the two bladed sword of Ali ibn Abu Talib, to its stark depictions of drug use, to its frankly disturbing blending of erotic and religious imagery, it is a book that will likely offend a lot of people. Along the way, it provides powerful insights into issues of the politics of intoxicants and their prohibition, race, colonialism, and the relationship between sexuality and religion. For those willing to take the ride there is a wealth of information and insights to be gleaned. Most importantly, it is also a brilliant rumination on the process of writing, especially the tension between artistic and scholarly writing.

One the most important characteristics of Knight’s writing is his ability to recognize and embrace the diversity of Islam. For him, Islam contains much more than what he describes as an “Islam of authority and control.” As he so aptly puts it:

Wherever there’s a story of control, there’s a story of resistance; wherever there’s narrative, there’s counter-narrative. Find the Caliph and you find the anti-Caliph. Find the ground and you find the underground ... When Muslims challenge the confused and excluded members of their community—“If you have so many problems with Islam, why stay in it? Why even call yourself a Muslim?”—the underground can offer them a home. Like the American story of power, the Islamic story of power will say “Love it or leave it,” as though the Islamic story of power is the only Islam, and anyone wanting to wear the tile of “Muslim” has to step through its gate. Only the Sith deal in absolutes. Beneath or beyond absolutism, Islam has always been home to misfits, freaks, rebels and queers. (pp. 21-22)

Knight is one of the very best chroniclers of this “Islamic underground” precisely because he does not treat it as something marginal and peripheral. Like many American converts, he originally came into Islam through the door opened to him by Malcolm X that initially led him to adopt a patriarchal and puritanical form of Salafism, an Islam of “us and them.” Ultimately, however, he moved beyond this Islam to uncover and celebrate the Islam of *hululis*,

malangs, Master Fard, and a myriad of other dwellers in the “Islamic underground” who might be subsumed under the category that Ahmet Karamustafa has wonderfully designated as “God’s unruly friends.”

The main narrative of *Tripping with Allah* centers on Knight’s decision to take ayahuasca, a psychedelic drug from South America, touted by many for its ability to induce profound spiritual states. As he explains:

I am a Muslim with plans for tripping with Allah, if Allah so wills, making me simultaneously a participant in two religions of high discomfort in our present America. Muslim writers on interfaith missions have placed Islam into dialogue with Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and even secularism, seeking common ground and shared values. None has done it with Islam and drugs. (p. 18)

He then proceeds to do just that. His quest culminates in a provocative chapter describing his ayahuasca experience that merges sexual and Islamic symbolism that will likely offend many of his readers. Let’s face it. Among contemporary Muslims and scholars of Islam many understand “the real Islam” as an Islam of hierarchy and authority—an Arabo-centric Shari‘ah-minded Islam rooted in *fiqh* and *kalām*. There is a similar tendency to be cautious, if not frankly uptight and puritanical, about issues of sexuality. For them, *Tripping with Allah* will be a difficult, perhaps impossible, book to accept. This is nothing new. Throughout his career Knight has brought together images of sexuality and anti-authoritarianism with images drawn from Islam. This can be powerfully disconcerting, in part, because so many people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, equate Islam with puritanism and legalism. Knight’s choice of topics and embrace of “the Islamic underground” has no doubt limited his audience. At the same time, many others, especially young Muslims, have found his approach extremely liberating. His latest book continues in this vein, and in some places is so provocative that it will certainly alienate many potential readers.

In my opinion that would be a shame, because parts of it are among the best things he has yet written. For example, his discussion of the history of drug use in the Islamic world is excellent and provides a wealth of information, although admittedly the scholar in me sometimes longed for footnotes. However, for me the most important aspect of this book is his discussion of the nature and process of writing. In particular, he discusses with great openness his process as a writer and the differences between writing as an artist and novelist and writing as an academic in the contemporary academy, especially the impact that his decision to seek a Ph.D. has had on his work. He writes:

You can't fake your language. You write the way you speak, and school has ruined my words. Now I vomit up things like, "For the sake of transparency, I will discuss the personal lens through which I engage this discursive tradition." Not only have I put my own power to sleep. I've also contributed to the journeys of others on academia's soul-murdering path. (p. 134)

I disagree. While *Tripping with Allah* shows the academy's impact on his writing, Knight's voice remains vibrant and alive. I fully intend to recommend this book to my students, especially the most creative ones among them, who similarly struggle with questions of how one can write within the limits of academic convention and still produce works of emotional and artistic power.

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