

## ARGUING OVER MUSIC

The internationally renowned Muslim singer and composer, Sami Yusuf, is about to make his debut performance in Guyana and people of all ages are excited. That's because many Guyanese Muslims are already deeply familiar with Yusuf's songs which are easily accessible online. Threatening to dampen their spirits however, is a handful of dreary extremists armed with a set of flawed arguments.

They are quoting verses from the Quran and sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, out of context in order to declare Yusuf's music as "forbidden" (*haram*) or disliked (*makruh*) according to the Islamic legal tradition.

These dour individuals wish to convince Muslims that the music of Sami Yusuf, Yusuf Islam (the artist formerly known as Cat Stevens), Zain Bhikha, Maher Zain, Native Deen, Aashiq Al-Rasul and a lengthy list of popular Muslim singers and composers are deviants hellbent on corrupting Muslim youth.

Listening to their arguments one assumes that Sami Yusuf might be performing an Arab version of Miley Cyrus' twerking to a rowdy crowd of badly behaved men and women who egg him on as they chug back a few bottles Banks beer.

The lyrics of Sami Yusuf songs praise God for his countless bounties, the foremost of which is His sending the noble Prophet, peace be upon him, as a mercy to all of mankind.

A similar genre of music in the form of Urdu naats and qasidas has sustained Muslim religious life in Guyana for nearly 200 years and no one has ever suggested, except an ignoramus, that this practice prevents believers from listening to or memorizing the verses of the Quran.

To argue that modern music, even religious songs like those of Sami Yusuf, is prohibited, is to go where no other scholar of law has ever ventured. Citing verses of the Quran as proof that music is prohibited (*haram*) according sacred law is contrary to the opinion of vast majority of classical and contemporary scholars such as Imam Al-Ghazali, Ibn Hazm, Qadi Abu Bakr Ibn Al-Arabi, Ibn Taymiyyah, the famous Hanafi jurist, Shaykh Abdul

Ghani al-Nabulusi and Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut, the late rector of al-Azhar university who passed a formal ruling (*fatwa*) declaring music which does not involve reprehensible acts censored by the Quran and the Prophetic tradition, as permissible, not prohibited.

The Quranic verse (chapter 31 v. 6) refers to those who purchase “*lahw al-hadith*”, i.e. things that are designed to amuse and entertain in order to distract people from the serious business of God’s revelation. It is true that some scholars put some kinds of music (*ghina*) into the category of “*lahw al-hadith*” but the majority stipulate that it is music which diverts a person away from God and His Messenger.

In his commentary of the Quran, Imam al-Suyuti interprets “*lahw al-hadith*” as “tales of distraction” such as never ending sagas of soap operas that are meant to keep viewers preoccupied with the lives of others instead of their own.

Those who argue for the impermissibility of all types of music often cite chapter 25 verse 72 of the Quran: “*Those who witness falsehood (zur) whenever they encounter people who are engaged in frivolous behavior, pass them by with nobility.*” The majority of Muslim jurists interpret the Arabic word *zur* to mean vulgarity and indecent behavior that may or may not include certain types of music that many of us would, in all honesty, find painful to the ears. Imam Al-Suyuti, the great jurist and polymath, interpreted this verse to mean “worthless conversation - obscenities, backbiting, and idle gossip.” Clearly, it would be a far stretch to dump the spiritually uplifting music of Sami Yusuf into this category.

Yet another verse of the Quran that is cited to indicate the prohibition of music is chapter 17 verse 64. This verse describes what God Almighty said to the Devil (Satan) when he refused to obey God’s command. The particular section of the verse that is getting some Imams in Guyana charged up is the following Divine dispensation to the Devil: “*stir up (provoke) those whom you can with your voice...*” Some classical jurists interpret the Arabic word “*sawt*,” i.e the devil’s voice, as meaning music (*ghina*) while others say it refers to string and wind instruments such as the flute, guitar, piano and even some types of drums.

In his authoritative exegesis of the Quran Imam Al-Tabari said the verse refers to “every voice which is not inviting to the obedience (worship) of God.” This is the mission of the Devil as described in all sacred scriptures.

The consensus in the Muslim legal tradition is that these verses of the Quran - and they are the strongest ones - are not explicit, unambiguous and unequivocal, qualities a text must have before something can be declared as “unlawful.” Rather, the doctors of Muslim sacred law say that “*lahw al-hadith*”, “*zur*” and “*sawt-al-Shaytan*” applies to the actions of people whose intent is to lead people away from the path of righteousness. In other words, these verses do not apply to people whose desire is to bring human hearts closer to the Divine presence and to goodness, such as singing a national anthem which cultivates love of one’s country.

The Quran is not the only source of legislation in Islam. Rigorously authenticated narrations of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, are also used to determine lawful and unlawful matters.

The Prophetic sayings (*hadith*) contained in the collection of Al-Bukhari is unanimously agreed upon among Muslims everywhere as the most authentic of all collections. Often cited to censor music is the following saying of Prophet Muhammad related by Abu Musa al-‘Ashari: “*There will be groups of people from my community who will seek to declare fornication, adultery, silk, wine and musical instruments (ma’azif) as lawful.*”

Imam Al-Bukhari places this particular *hadith* not in the section on prohibitions, but rather in a chapter titled: “*What is said regarding those who seek to declare intoxicants permissible by giving it another name.*”

Imam Al-Bukhari also offers a different version of this same hadith in another compilation of his - *al-Tarikh*. It states: “*Some people from my community will consume intoxicants by giving it another name. Singing girls and musical instruments (ma’azif) will accompany them day and night.*” The great *hadith* scholar Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani cites the second version to shed light on the meaning of the first in his commentary of Sahih Al-Bukhari known as *Fath al-Bari*.

The scholar Imam Ibn Taymiyyah, often cited by scriptural literalists to prove their hardline positions, wrote in his *Kitab as-Sama wal Raqs* that

music falls into various categories such as “*muharram* (forbidden), *makruh* (disliked), *mubah* (permissible), or *mustahabb* (commendable)”.

The opinion of the four great Imams - Abu Hanifa, Malik, Shafi’ and Hanbal - has never deemed all music to be “*haram*,” but has instead judged music as unlawful whenever it is associated with behavior that is sinful.

If all music were forbidden there could be no exception to the rule unless of course one’s life was in danger. However, during the ‘Battle of the Ditch’ when the enemies of Islam surrounded the adopted city of the Prophet, peace be upon him, he joined his companions in rhythmic chanting as they dug a ditch to protect the city’s inhabitants.

Anas related in Al-Bukhari that while digging the trench around Madina, the companions chanted: “*We are the ones who have pledged fealty to Muhammad; that we remain always constant in Islam.*” The Prophet responded: “*O Allah, there is no good but the good of the Hereafter, bless the Ansar and Muhajirin.*”

Likewise, the Prophet, peace be upon him, permitted the singing of songs on the occasion of the two Eid celebrations. In the compilation of Al-Bukhari his wife ‘Aisha narrated that the Prophet entered his home while two young girls were singing songs of Bu’ath (a battle between two warring tribes before Islam). He did not stop them. When his companion Abu Bakr (the father of ‘Aisha) entered he was angry that this was taking place in the home of God’s Messenger and he ordered them to stop without knowing the Prophet was present. The Prophet, peace be upon him, showed himself and said: “leave them be O Abu Bakr, for these are the days of Eid.”

Music is also permitted by the consensus of Muslim jurists at the time of the wedding feast (*nikah and walima*). Imam At-Tirmidhi and others narrate that God’s Messenger said: “*The demarcation between the lawful and the unlawful (at the time of marriage) is drumming (al-daff) and singing (al-sawt).*”

In another hadith, Imam At-Tirmidhi, Ibn Hibban and others narrate that the Prophet said: “*Proclaim this marriage, solemnize it in the mosque and beat the drum (al-dufoof, pl. of daff) upon the occasion.*”

In the collection of Al-Bukhari it is narrated that ‘Aisha informed the Prophet that a man and woman among his followers in Madina were married. The Prophet asked: “O ‘Aisha, was there any entertainment? The Ansar are happy when their is entertainment.” In a different version of the same *hadith*, Imam At-Tabarani narrates that the Prophet asked ‘Aisha to send a young girl with the bride to beat the drum (*daff*) and sing (*ghina*). ‘Aisha asked: “What should she say in her song?” He replied: “Let her say, ‘To you we have come, to you we have come! So welcome us, as we welcome you!’”

Singing and playing the drum is also recommended when respectable guests and dignitaries arrive. Imam Abu Dawud relates that a woman came to the Prophet and said: “A Messenger of God, I have vowed to play the drum (*daff*) in your presence. He replied: “Fulfill your vow.” Once the Prophet returned from one of his expeditions and a woman played the hand drum (*daff*) and sang for him because she was grateful that he had returned home safely. This narration is found in the collection of Imam At-Tirmidhi.

When the Prophet, peace be upon him, arrived in Madina after fleeing the city of his birth, the women and children who were resident in the city of Madina came out and sang a joyful song for him - “O the full moon has risen over us, from the valley of Wada, and we owe it to show gratefulness when the call is to Allah.” Muslims from all across the world sing this exact song in many languages even to this day out of joy that the Messenger of God walked the earth.

It is also narrated that Anjasha, the Prophet’s camel driver, sang songs on long arduous journeys to get his animals to move at a faster pace. Parents and grandparents are allowed to sing lullabies to their children to amuse them, teach or put them to sleep. Children are allowed to sing happy songs to brighten their parents mood.

The majority of contemporary Muslim scholars rule that songs whose lyrics heighten spiritual consciousness and encourage people to be pious are praiseworthy, even so they should be done in moderation and with proper decorum.

I have attended Sami Yusuf concerts in Toronto along with thousands of others and my experience has been extremely positive. Yusuf does exactly as the Quran commands: “Say: It is the favor of God and His Mercy that

should make you rejoice (fal-yafrahu). That is better than anything you can accumulate in this world.” (Quran:10:58).

Imam Al-Suyuti in his *Jalalayn* said “God’s favor (*fadl*)” in this verse refers to the religion of Islam and “His Mercy (*rahma*)” refers to the Quran. According to other commentators “His Mercy” refers to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and that is the dominant opinion.

I advise my fellow Guyanese to join Sami Yusuf and rejoice in celebrating God’s favors and Mercy and ignore those who don’t wish to participate.

(Nazim Baksh is a Guyanese born journalist in Toronto, Canada)