

# The Rise of the alt.Muslim

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The election of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States ushered in many changes. While one may have expected some type of norm-erosion on Capitol Hill following Trump's election, the impact of his rhetorical discourse has gone far beyond traditional bastions of secular Western politics. One of the more interesting developments in my opinion has been the impact of the 'alt.right' rhetorical style on socially conservative internet-savvy Muslims. A new trend has made its way into conservative/traditionalist Muslim social media spawning new popular social media personalities with abrasive, in-your-face approaches to contemporary culture war topics— I call this the *alt.Muslim* phenomenon. It is impossible to say exactly when this became so widespread, but it's also impossible to not notice its rise on social media over the past 2 years and how intertwined it is with the vocabulary and logic of the alt.right.

This article will briefly explore what the alt.Muslim approach to intellectual discourse looks like. It represents a radical departure from the ways controversial social issues previously have been articulated within more traditional Muslim circles. Rather than critically, yet respectfully engaging with approaches to values and norms that at times are undeniably antithetical to mainstream Islam, one instead sees bellicose rhetoric

coupled with gross misrepresentations and generalizations offered by people who demonstrate a very limited and static understanding of the discourses they attack. Unlike your garden variety bigot or hateful older relative that nobody takes seriously, the alt.Muslim seeks to give his arguments the veneer of actual scholarship and respectability— it is this conflation of pseudo-scholarship with biased opinion that makes the moderately articulate alt.Muslim more than just another annoying, yet harmless internet troll.

Intense disagreement over ideas amongst Muslims is hardly anything new. The great Persian *mujaddid*, Al-Ghazālī, himself did not parse words when commenting on those who embraced Greek metaphysics. In Michael Marmura’s translation of the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, regarding Muslims who embraced Greek metaphysics, he translates Al-Ghazālī as saying –

*When I perceived this vein of folly throbbing within these dimwits, I took it upon myself to write this book in refutation of the ancient philosophers, to show the incoherence of their belief and the contradiction of their word in matters relating to metaphysics; to uncover the dangers of their doctrine and its shortcomings, which in truth ascertainable are objects of laughter for the rational and a lesson for the intelligent.... (2002, p.3)*

Despite Al-Ghazālī’s aggressive opening gambit, rather than proceeding to make childish attacks upon Ibn Sīnā’s personal character and craft straw man arguments and caricatures of his positions, he went on to produce one of Islam’s most powerful and rigorous philosophical works. Throughout this work, he carefully refuted each point made by his opponents, engaging with their positions on their own terms and critiquing them via rigorous Islamic modes of argumentation.

This new alt.Muslim phenomenon does not appear to have such lofty aspirations. The alt.Muslim seems to speak out of hostility and spite rather than genuine intellectual curiosity. They seek to create their own safe space from the people they accuse of creating safe spaces in the first place. The language used by the alt.Muslim is not scholarly and their engagement with opposing theories is cursory and often outright inaccurate. The alt.Muslim focuses on broad categories rather than specific arguments. The main boogeymen are often feminism and liberalism. This is not to suggest these topics are not worth criticizing and engaging with— my current book project will spend about 300 pages looking at why Islam and liberalism are not compatible when understood at their higher order levels. However, for the alt.Muslim, these incredibly multifaceted topics are usually mutilated. Instead of engaging with the long and variegated traditions of feminist scholarship on their own terms, traditions ranging from 18<sup>th</sup> century conservatives such as Mary Wollstonecraft to contemporary radical queer feminists like Judith Butler, oversimplified binaries and straw men are created that do no justice to the discourse being critiqued. Interestingly enough, the alt.Muslim often has little to say about the actual oppression of Muslims transpiring at the hands of despotic global leaders like Donald

Trump, Vladimir Putin, or Xi Jinping. Rarely does one hear serious commentaries about the brutality of Middle Eastern tyrants either. Often when individuals are targeted, they are other popular rival social media personalities such as Linda Sarsour – easy targets who are neither theologians nor scholars (nor would ever claim themselves to be). The alt.Muslim likes to go after the low hanging fruit because they lack intellectual curiosity or capacity to get to the high ones.

Similar to the marketing techniques of the alt.right, the alt.Muslim likes to utilize meme-ready catch phrases and slogans. *White Knights*, one of the more popular insults among the alt.Muslim demographic, refer to those men who are seen as selling out their masculinity in order to impress women and ultimately, as one comment on such a forum recently noted, ‘get laid.’ The sexualization of insults itself is tell-tale sign of misogyny. My reading of Al-Ghazālī’s *Tahāfut* somehow missed the part where he castigated Ibn Sīnā for being too caught up in promoting his Aristotelian metaphysical claims to be successful picking up women. Also similar to the more public faces of the alt.right, alt.Muslim self-promoters often utilize clickbait titles to sell their product. One will often see advertisements for public lectures warning of things like the ‘the end of traditional Islam in America’ or cherry picked, highly unrepresentative examples of uncovered women or open homosexuals leading mixed prayers— as if this was some type of unstoppable wave that has battered down the doors of every mosque in America and Europe— to push an agenda that has little concern for accurately portraying reality. Sounds like a familiar script, doesn’t it? The most rabid Alt.Muslim foot soldiers regularly use the type of personal insults and *ad hominem* attacks on their opponents that one would expect to find on 4-chan or in an Info Wars comments section. Terms meant to insult like ‘cucks’, ‘feminazis’, ‘libtards’, and ‘social justice warriors’ are tossed around in the comments section of some of these alt.Muslim platforms just as they are on these aforementioned sites that draw heavy alt.right traffic

What are these people driven by then? Why would they use the same vocabularies as the alt.right? I would argue that both operate on similar principles; both are driven by anger, resentment, and misogyny. Much like the white male Trump supporter who fears he is losing his position of privilege and power, the alt.Muslim makes it a personal mission to attack those seen as threats to his (and I mean ‘his’ because the alt.Muslim almost always is a him) hegemony— his control of what is constitutive of what is right and proper. Referring to people who disagree with you on a chat forum as some type of sexually deficient beta-male hardly sounds like the type of talk one who hear from someone who prays five times a day and regularly reads Qur’an, however often you will see this kind of thing on these forums. Rarely do the moderators of these forums call on their followers to tone down such rhetoric either. Ultimately, I question whether many of these new alt.Muslim followers are really even that religious. Is their Islam about *Islam*, or is it more about being ‘anti’ something else? Is a new ‘cultural Islam’ emerging, one that is more about being *in opposition to* rather than *in support of* the same way ‘cultural Christianity’ in Europe has become a socially acceptable way to say *anything but Islam*? Is Islam being invoked merely as an excuse for bullying women and others one finds weak or unlikeable?

Judging by the language one often reads in these forums coupled with the lack of serious engagement with actual Islamic sources, this does not seem to be an unreasonable belief to hold.

Has there been a rise in unorthodox and even ‘unIslamic’ trends within Islamic circles over the past few decades? –Absolutely. Pressure from Western political actors and the backlash from horrific terrorist attacks and groups like ISIS have pushed many Muslims into adopting positions that are genuinely objectionable from a traditional Muslim perspective. However, the way to convince people that these positions are misguided is not via name calling and bullying. It is not via creating strawman arguments and ignoring alternative readings or interpretations of well-established social and political theories. Erring movements within Islam ought to be addressed with civility, measured criticism, and genuine dialogue. It is about avoiding dog whistles and red meat. Preaching to your own choir does not win over new followers outside that demographic. Getting a new audience to take you seriously is about, as Al-Ghazālī did to Ibn Sīnā, meticulously picking apart arguments with textual evidence and sound reasoning. Nobody can expect these novices to be Al-Ghazālī, however do they have to be so *not* like him? The problem is that the Ghazalian approach does not sell to a wider audience living in the world of the 30 second online video clips and pithy animated memes. Some twenty year-old checking his twitter feed between college classes does not have time to dialectically engage with Qur’anic arguments about rights and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s iteration of intersectionality. Not only would that require actually reading the Qur’an, but also actually reading Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw—an exercise that requires actually taking Crenshaw’s argument seriously enough to dedicate time to reading it, which of course, most alt.Muslims do not.

Indeed, conspiracy theories and belligerent clickbait fuel this current alt.Muslim fad. In the end however, that’s what I think the alt.Muslim movement ultimately will go down in history as— a fad. It will be remembered as the toxic byproduct of Trumpism, Donald Trump’s great ‘contribution’ to contemporary popular Muslim social discourse. It also serves as a painful reminder as to how much power non-Muslim actors— even ones absolutely hostile to Islam— still have on Muslim discourses. Insha’Allah, the less dogmatic followers of this alt.Muslim fad will see *the vein of folly throbbing within these dimwits* and realize that this approach is not changing anyone’s attitude, because only a dimwit would think that making unabated daily verbal attacks on Muslim women will cause more of them to tighten up their hijab and march back into the kitchen. Critique itself is an artform. If it is not properly done, one only further emboldens their opposition and eventually even loses their supporters.

#### References

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