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Young Video Makers Try to Alter Islam's Face



Ann Johansson for The New York Times

Ali Ardekani, a video blogger known to his viewers as Baba Ali, prepares for a taping in his studio, at his apartment in the Sherman Oaks section of Los Angeles.

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR
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LOS ANGELES — When Ali Ardekani started fishing around on the Internet a couple of years ago for video blogs about Muslims, he did not like what he found: either the world's 1.3 billion Muslims were depicted as bloodthirsty zealots, or they were offering defensive explanations as to why they were not.

[Ali Ardekani's Video Blog](#)
(youtube.com)

“Arabic sounds foreign and scary — you don't know what is going on,” Mr. Ardekani said in an interview at his small Sherman Oaks apartment, its walls decorated with Koranic verses. “Or they show a woman with the veil, who doesn't speak, and it is assumed if she did speak she would say, ‘Help me!’ ”

So Mr. Ardekani, a 33-year-old Web designer, cast himself on his video blogs as Baba Ali, an outsize character with a serious religious message who both dissects and lampoons the lives of American Muslims.

Mr. Ardekani is among the most visible of a new wave of young American Muslim performers and filmmakers trying to change the public face of their religion. His most popular video posting — “Who Hijacked Islam?” — has garnered more than 350,000 hits on YouTube since July 2006. Of course the uphill battle such efforts face is reflected in the comments section. One viewer remarked darkly, “It's Muslims that do the hijacking.”

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Scenes from a variety of videos made by young Muslims. From top, "I Am a Muslim," "Who Hijacked Islam?" and "A Land Called Paradise."

These video pioneers' arena of choice is mostly YouTube and similar Web sites, which young Muslims extol as a new way to take their arguments public. The role model is [Bill Cosby](#), who young Muslim filmmakers believe changed the perception of African-Americans by depicting them as ordinary.

For the moment, the filmmakers suspect, most of the hits they attract are generated by other young Muslims.

"They are deprived of any type of representation in the media which isn't a terrorist or an extremely pious Muslim," said Lena Khan, 23. So whenever an image to the contrary is seen "on YouTube or the Internet or on a TV show, it just spreads across the Muslim community like wildfire, because everyone wants to support it."

Ms. Khan has placed several short videos on YouTube, among them "A Land Called Paradise," which shows a variety of Muslims holding up signs. The sign held by a young boy says, "Broccoli is my personal jihad" — jihad meaning a personal, spiritual struggle rather than its more notorious translation as holy war.

"A Land Called Paradise" has attracted almost 250,000 hits. It has also won a \$20,000 grand prize in a multisponsored contest to produce videos that challenge stereotypes of Muslims. Mr. Ardekani won the \$5,000 first prize in the comedy category for "Muslim While Flying," a spoof of the way Muslims are treated at American airports.

Murad Amayreh, a 27-year-old filmmaker who works for the outreach department of the Muslim American Society, helped produce a video, "I Am a Muslim," that has shot to the top of searches for "Muslim" on YouTube, having attracted more than two million hits since it was posted on Sept. 28.

(By way of perspective, the most popular video ever on YouTube, "Evolution of Dance," has attracted more than 84 million hits, but traffic in that stratospheric range is usually garnered by music videos. Ms. Khan said student filmmakers rated 10,000 hits as a sign that a film had moved beyond friends and family.)

The "I Am a Muslim" video tries to contradict stereotypes with a man named Muhammad who presents himself as an ordinary American. It has drawn more than 131,000 comments, along with more than 50 video responses. Some are crude, like "I Am a Redneck."

One of the more sober video responses, from a young, skinny, unidentified man, has garnered more than 132,000 hits of its own. Echoing the sentiment of other viewers, this man says that Muslims wrongly depict all criticism of their religion as racism and that given the tiny fraction of the world's Muslims who live in the United States, any enlightened outlook among American Muslims may not be representative.

"Muslims need to come to grips with the fact that it is not always the extremism that we object to, it is simply your religion," the man says, going on to argue that people are troubled by what he calls Islam's opposition to homosexuality, free speech and women's rights. "Only in Islam can one be labeled not an extremist simply because he has no immediate desire to blow you up."

Mr. Ardekani said he developed his alter ego, Baba Ali, to try to move the discussion away from such broadsides or apologies by Muslims.

"I think that when they do the defensive approach, they never get to talk about anything except for the stuff that people hate," he said.

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Although born into a Muslim family in Iran, Mr. Ardekani says, he was reared in a secular Los Angeles household and "converted" to Islam at age 20. His studio is the second bedroom of the apartment he shares with his wife and two small children.

His roughly 30 video blogs focus on the clash between Muslim and American traditions. In one video, he ridicules the expense of Muslim weddings. "Christians get married in churches, Jews get married in synagogues, Muslims get married at the Hilton," he said in an interview. "I am talking about stuff that Muslims can relate to."

In a less spoofing vein, he answered viewers' questions for a time, a kind of Dear Abby to young Muslims with queries like whether it is O.K. for adolescents to have close relationships with the opposite sex. (The answer: Of course not.)

Some Muslims have questioned his credentials to offer advice, noting that among other things he is not a trained religious scholar. But his main goal, Mr. Ardekani says, is to try to make a difference in the lives of young Muslims facing problems that their parents or local imam never faced.

Certainly he has succeeded in transforming at least one life. His video blogs have blossomed into a second career for him, as a stand-up comedian playing clubs nationwide.

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