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GENERATION FAITHFUL

Preaching Moderate Islam and Becoming a TV Star

By **[ROBERT F. WORTH](#)**

JIDDA, [Saudi Arabia](#) — As Ahmad al-Shugairi took the stage, dressed in a flowing white gown and headdress, he clutched a microphone and told his audience that he had no religious training or titles: "I am not a sheik."

But over the next two hours, he worked the crowd as masterfully as any preacher, drawing rounds of uproarious laughter and, as he recalled the Prophet Muhammad's death, silent tears. He spoke against sectarianism. He made pleas for women to be treated as equals. He talked about his own life — his seven wild years in California, his divorce, his children — and gently satirized Arab mores.

When he finished, the packed concert hall erupted in a wild standing ovation. Members of his entourage soon bundled him through the thick crowd of admirers to a back door, where they rushed through the darkness to a waiting car.

"Elvis has left the building," Mr. Shugairi joked, in English, as he relaxed into his seat.

Mr. Shugairi is a rising star in a new generation of ["satellite sheiks" whose religion-themed television shows](#) have helped fuel a religious revival across the Arab world. Over the past decade, the number of satellite channels devoted exclusively to religion has risen from 1 to more than 30, and religious programming on general interest stations, like the one that features Mr. Shugairi's show, has soared. [Mr. Shugairi](#) and others like him have succeeded by appealing to a young audience that is hungry for religious identity but deeply alienated from both politics and the traditional religious establishment, especially in the fundamentalist forms now common in Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

In part, that is a matter of style: a handsome, athletically built 35-year-old, Mr. Shugairi effortlessly mixes deep religious commitment with hip, playful humor. He earned an M.B.A. during his California years, and he sometimes refers to Islam as "an excellent product that needs better packaging."

But his message of sincere religious moderation is tremendously powerful here. For young Arabs, he offers a way to reconcile a world painfully divided between East and West, pleasure and duty, the rigor of the mosque and the baffling freedoms of the Internet.

"He makes us attached to religion — sometimes with our modern life we get detached," said Imma

al-Khalidi, a 25-year-old Saudi who burst into tears when Mr. Shugairi, uneasy with his rock-star departure from the auditorium, returned to the hall to chat with a group of black-clad and veiled young women. There was an audible intake of breath as the women saw him emerge. A few bold ones walked forward, but most hung back, seemingly stunned.

“Before, we used to see only men behind a desk, like judges,” Ms. Khalidi said.

Mr. Shugairi is not the first of his kind. [Amr Khaled](#), an Egyptian televangelist, began reaching large audiences eight years ago. But the field has expanded greatly, with each new figure creating Internet sites and [Facebook](#) groups where tens of thousands of fans trade epiphanies and links to YouTube clips of their favorite preachers.

Mr. Shugairi’s main TV program, “Khawater” (“Thoughts”), could not be more different from the dry lecturing style of so many Muslim clerics. In one episode on literacy, the camera follows Mr. Shugairi as he wanders through Jidda asking people where to find a public library (no one knows). In another, he pokes through a trash bin, pointing to mounds of rotting rice and hummus that could have been donated for the poor. He even sets up “Candid Camera”-style gags, confronting people who pocket a wallet from the pavement and asking them if the Prophet Muhammad would have done the same.

At times, his program resembles an American civics class disguised as religion, complete with lessons on environmental awareness and responsible driving.

Criticized From Both Sides

Inevitably, hard-line clerics dismiss Mr. Shugairi as a lightweight who toadies to the West. From the other side, some liberals lament that Mr. Shugairi and the other satellite sheiks are Islamizing the secular elite of the Arab world.

And while most of these broadcast preachers, including Mr. Shugairi, promote a moderate and inclusive strain of Islam, others do not. There are few controls in the world of satellite television, where virtually anyone can take to the air and preach as he likes on one of hundreds of channels.

Moreover, some observers fear that the growing prevalence of Islam on the airwaves and the Internet could make moderates like Mr. Shugairi steppingstones toward more extreme figures, who are never more than a mouse-click or a channel-surf away.

“There is no one with any real authority, they can say whatever they want to say, and the accessibility of these sheiks is 24/7,” said [Hussein Amin](#), a professor at the American University in Cairo. “That’s why so many who were liberals are now conservatives, and those who were conservatives are now radicals.”

Mr. Shugairi and others like him, including the popular Egyptian television preacher [Moez Masoud](#), counter that their moderate message is the best way to fight Islamic extremism. Forging that middle path, they say, is essential at a time when many young Arabs feel caught between an angry fundamentalism on the one hand and a rootless secularism on the other.

Bakr Azam is one of them. Like many of Mr. Shugairi's fans, he received a dry, pitiless religious education that left him feeling resentful and hungry for something different.

"In high school, the way they taught us religion was very white and black," said Mr. Azam, a 28-year-old Saudi who works as a recruiter for Toyota. "You always felt you were doing something wrong, and it drove a lot of people away."

It drove Mr. Azam farther away than most. After moving to the United States for college in 1997, he more or less gave up on Islam entirely. He moved back here in 2001, a hip-hop fan with dyed red hair, a love for parties and no interest in religion.

But something was missing. In 2004, he happened to see one of Mr. Shugairi's programs on TV, and he was mesmerized. Here was a man who had lived in the West and yet spoke of the Koran as a modern ethical guidebook, not a harsh set of medieval rules. He seemed to be saying you could enjoy yourself, retain your independence and at the same time be a good Muslim.

Right away, Mr. Azam opened his laptop and found Mr. Shugairi's Web site. He joined a volunteer group in Jidda linked to the show. He found himself returning to the rituals he had grown up with, fasting and praying. He still counts himself a moderate, like his mentor. But — also like Mr. Shugairi — he became so devout that he separated from his wife, who did not wear a head scarf and retained the secular attitude he once shared.

"Ahmad made us look back at religion," Mr. Azam said of Mr. Shugairi. "He helped us see that Islam is not about living in caves and being isolated from the world. Islam is international. It is modern. It is tolerant."

As he spoke, Mr. Azam was sitting on a blue couch in the Andalus cafe, which was built by Mr. Shugairi as a gathering place for young people in Jidda. A few feet away, a televangelist could be seen talking about Islam on a large plasma TV screen. Nearby, young people sat gazing at their laptops, while Islamic music played quietly in the background. The design and furniture in the cafe are in the style of Andalusian Spain, widely seen as a high point in Islamic history, when scholarship and tolerance flourished.

Mr. Shugairi often spends time here chatting with friends and admirers, sipping tea and moving easily between Arabic and his California-accented English. He has become something of a celebrity in Saudi Arabia, but he seems uncomfortable with the role and does not have the arrogant manner of many educated Saudis. He makes a point of being friendly and respectful to everyone, including the Asian laborers who do most menial tasks here.

Mr. Shugairi got his start in television in 2002, when he began appearing on a program called "Yella Shabab" ("Hey, Young People"). Two years later, he started his own show, "Khawater," which runs daily during the holy month of [Ramadan](#).

Part of his inspiration, Mr. Shugairi said, came from the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, which hit him especially hard as someone who spent formative years in the United States. "Many of us

felt a need to educate youth to a more moderate understanding of religion,” he said, during an interview at the cafe.

Yet his approach to Islam, as with most of the other satellite TV figures who have emerged in the past few years, is fundamentally orthodox. He says that women should wear the hijab, or head scarf, and he talks of the Koran as a kind of constitution that should guide Muslim countries. His next program, “If He Were Among Us,” scheduled to be broadcast early this year, is focused squarely on adhering to the Prophet Muhammad’s life as an example.

To California and Back

Mr. Shugairi’s own life — and especially his struggle with the poles of decadence and extreme faith — is an essential feature of his appeal to many fans.

Born here in 1973 to a wealthy, cosmopolitan family, Mr. Shugairi went to college at age 17 in Long Beach, Calif. By his own account, he completely stopped praying. He chased women at clubs, and he even — for a year — drank. In 1995 he got married, and the pendulum swung toward a severe Islamism, as he angrily renounced the freedoms of his student life.

“Nothing violent, but intellectual violence,” Mr. Shugairi said, during an interview at the Andalus cafe.

He moved back to Saudi Arabia to manage his father’s importing business. His wife did not share his turn toward extremism, and the marriage soon ended in divorce.

It was then that he began studying with a cleric, Adnan al-Zahrani, who exposed him to the idea that Islam’s greatest strength comes from its diversity and its openness to new ways of thinking. For the first time, Mr. Shugairi found a way to balance the warring forces in his life, his American self and his Saudi self.

For much of his young audience, this synthesis is the key to his appeal. These young Muslims have inherited a world painfully divided between what they hear from the clerics and what they see on satellite television and the Internet. This is especially true in Saudi Arabia, with its powerful and deeply conservative religious establishment.

“Ahmad helped me see that I can want to be with a girl, and it’s O.K. — I don’t need to feel bad,” said Muhammad Malaikah, a lean 22-year-old with a shy smile.

Now, he said, he was able to spend time alone with his girlfriend and still feel he was being true to himself and his culture. He goes to the movies with her. Sometimes they kiss, “but no sex.” He has persuaded her to start wearing the hijab.

“Ahmad showed us a middle way in everything,” he said, “in relationships, in working, in fasting, in prayer.”

