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American Milad: Celebrating the Birthday of the Prophet

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Milad/Mawlid

Celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday

MARCIA HERMANSEN

A group of Indo-Pakistani American women gather at a private home in San Diego, California. White sheets are spread on the floor and the aroma of fried and spicy cooking lingers in the air. Small booklets entitled "The Greater Birth Ceremony" (*Milad-e Akbar*) comprised of Arabic invocations and poetry and prose narrations in Urdu are distributed among the small group of about twelve women.¹ Some participants who have the vocal talent melodiously recite Urdu *na'ats*—hymns of praise in honor of the Prophet Muhammad as well as poetic verses that commemorate females in his immediate circle—his mother, "Bibi"² Amina, and his wet nurse, "Dai"³ Halima. "Dai Halima—a moon is waxing in your lap" is just one line from a well-known religious song (*qawwali*).⁴

The booklets are opened and selected readings from the birth narrative of the Prophet are shared. "When she became pregnant with him his mother saw a light shining out of her by which she saw the castles of Busra in the land of Syria."⁵ At the conclusion of the ceremony all the women stand in unison with hands folded across the chest and heads slightly bowed in reverence and chant the "salam," a performative mark of devotional Islam in South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh: "O Prophet, peace be upon you, O Messenger, peace be upon you, O Beloved, peace be upon you, peace and blessings be upon you." The women quietly embrace tenderly in the aftermath of this shared communal moment. A meal is spread out and the opening chapter of the Qur'an—"al-Fatiha"—is read over the food to be consumed with hands outstretched, palms facing upward in a gesture of supplication.

The terms “milad” and “mawlid” refer to birth celebrations and are originally Arabic words.⁶ Public milad⁷ festivals are held in many Muslim cultures to commemorate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. Since he is said to have been born on the twelfth day⁸ of the third Islamic month, Rabi’ al-Awwal, celebrations and ceremonies are generally held throughout that month. The Islamic calendar is about eleven days shorter than the solar calendar and therefore the date of the Milad month is somewhat earlier each year. In some Muslim countries the Prophet’s birthday is a public holiday and at this time streets and parks may be decked with streamers, colored lanterns, or otherwise illuminated. During this period television programming in countries such as Pakistan may feature special performances of poetry and music in the Prophet’s honor. In venues such as private homes, Milad sessions may take place any time throughout the year, as they are thought to convey blessings and protection upon hosts and participants alike. Thus Milads are “holy days”—in the sense of celebrating and marking sacred time, but they are not necessarily tied to specific moments or calendric periods. In this sense they span the genres of holidays and prayer.

A Milad ceremony is a focus of devotional piety and may be scripted or free form. The “scripts” for Milad rituals may consist of books of devotional poetry, biographical anecdotes of the Prophet and his family, and prayers prepared especially for use on these occasions. Milads may be segregated, convened exclusively for males or females, and female Milads may give special attention to remembering Amina, mother of the Prophet.

In public spaces Milads may entail processions. Muslims in some of the larger U.S. communities such as Chicago or Jersey City⁹ may therefore celebrate Milads by marching in the streets of their towns or gathering in rented banquet halls where children and youth holding green banners or flags and emblems in the colors of various Sufi orders may process toward the stage. This is a time for males to don their special headgear, consisting of colorful caps and turbans, which perhaps signal respect and humility in sacred space. In some cases the colored turbans or special shaped caps may signal affiliation with a particular Sufi mystical order or to a contemporary Islamic movement such as Dawat-i Islami,¹⁰ or they may even suggest that the wearer has some elevated rank in a Sufi order. In some cases female attendees have their own sessions

and speakers convened in separate rooms, or they may join the collective assembly for all or part of the event while seated in a separate area or behind the male attendees.

In private homes a temporary ritual space may be created by spreading white sheets on the floors and burning incense so as to create a mood of sacredness. Special foods may be prepared and consumed and in larger public Milads these alimentary treats, designated by the Persian word for sweets, “shirini,” are distributed at the conclusion to be taken home by attendees. They may consist of small packages of South Asian sweets such as laddus (sweet rice or gram flour balls) similar to those distributed when a baby is born, or they may contain small sweet rolls.

In the United States Milads may feature chanting and recitation of poetry and homiletic speeches, or they may resemble academic conferences. Some Milads may be mounted to promote intra-Muslim harmony by including Shī’a and Sunni guests and presenters or they may encourage interfaith understanding by inviting non-Muslims with the goal of providing positive information about the Prophet as a role model. Other Muslim groups such as the Isma‘ili community or the Gulen movement in the United States have in the past convened intra-Muslim and interfaith Milads, possibly as part of a strategy to establish themselves among the broader constellation of American Muslims and also as a component of outreach to non-Muslim neighbors. In the context of recent controversies surrounding Muslim sensitivities about honoring the Prophet, Milads also offer the opportunity to educate non-Muslims about the positive aspects of Muhammad’s character and actions.

The Prophet Muhammad is a central element of Muslim faith and along with the Qur’an—the divine word of God revealed through him—the Prophet is a primary shared element across diverse sectarian, regional, and historical articulations of the religion. At the same time, divergent appreciations of the figure of the Prophet and how to understand and practice Islam according to one’s view of who he was may become litmus tests for internal differentiations and variations across Muslim piety. In summary, the content and performance of Milads are malleable according to diverse contexts and forms. They may be occasions for promoting unity within and across Muslim communities but may also be contested or received in divisive ways.

Who Is the Prophet?

Just as Christians vary in their appreciation of the significance and role of Jesus, Muslims likewise exhibit a range of approaches to appreciating the role of Muhammad. Among Muslims who espouse mystical or devotional attitudes to the religion the Prophet may be conceived of as a cosmic being whose existence is coeternal with creation itself or may have even preceded it, as in the hadith appreciated by Muslim mystics, "I was a Prophet when Adam was still between water and clay."¹¹ The Prophet is even on occasion presented as the cause for creation itself, as in the hadith reporting God's words: "If not for you (O Muhammad) I would not have created the universes," or he may be identified with an eternal cosmic Muhammadan Light (*nur Muhammad*).¹²

While Islamic theology certainly recognizes the exceptional nature of Muhammad's character, concepts such as the "sinlessness" of the Prophet or his role as an intercessor for Muslims and even for all of humanity may be embraced to varying extents and interpretations across cultural and sectarian differences. The more austere perspective among Muslims ranging from modernizing reformers to textual literalists such as Salafis and Wahhabis understands the Prophet to have been a great historical messenger who conveyed the divine word, reformed and established a religious community, and passed away having fulfilled his role. A major sin in Islam is known as "shirk" (associationism) which entails attributing to any person or object, powers or reverence that should rightly only be the purview of God. However, a more cosmic understanding of the Prophet as a being endowed with supernatural powers and knowledge and expecting the Prophet to intercede for believers on judgment day are views held by many Muslims. Other Muslims feel that such a level of veneration leads to a possible conflation of the Prophet with the divine and therefore reject all ideas and practices that might reinforce such understandings.

In many Muslim contexts these differences expand and harden from being individual proclivities to becoming sources of theological or ritual conflict. In Muslim South Asia, specifically the Indian subcontinent, over the past several centuries, differences about the scope of the Prophet's role and his religious significance have blended with other historical

and sociological factors into what might be considered sectarian subdivisions within Sunni Islam. The major groups in this debate are known as the Barelvis,¹³ Deobandis,¹⁴ and the Ahl-e hadith,¹⁵ representing the range from the most cosmic and devotional views of Muhammad to the more puritanical and austere emphasis on the historical Muhammad as a guide and example, but certainly not a supernatural being. Among new generations of American Muslims these distinctions have become less salient and are largely unknown. Within immigrant Muslim circles, however, celebrating Milads may constitute a visible way of expressing one's position along this spectrum of views.

History of Milads

In terms of the debates over legitimacy, both the concept of celebrating the birth of the Prophet and the details of the performance need to be anchored in some sort of "Islamic" precedent.¹⁶ The Qur'an and the Sunna, usually defined as the practice of the Prophet himself, are the major criteria for this. Thus, opponents of celebrating Milads argue that such events do not have a qur'anic foundation and that neither the Prophet nor his early Companions commemorated his birth through any ritual.¹⁷ The proponents of Milads, in response, cite the qur'anic verse affirming that "God and his angels send blessings on the Prophet" (33:56) and the historical incident where a Companion of the Prophet, the poet Hassan ibn Thabit, recited poetry honoring Muhammad during the latter's lifetime.

The "birth" aspect of celebrating the Milad, some scholars believe, emerged as Islam expanded to environments dominated by Christianity, under the influence of celebrations of the birth of Jesus. This, of course, would not argue for its Islamic legitimacy but simply explain its origin as a birth commemoration in cultures where this already existed. Other scholars trace the first public Milads to Shi'a communities, including the Isma'ili Fatimid dynasty in Egypt (969–1171 C.E.), among whom veneration of the Prophet and his descendants was an important component of piety and ritual expression.¹⁸ In the Arab world today, Milads/Mawlid are primarily celebrated in societies where Sufism holds some popular influence and the birth of the Prophet may be celebrated as a public holiday.

Milad at Home

On auspicious occasions Milads may be performed in a celebratory way to acknowledge blessings received and to create an atmosphere conducive to further spiritual and material benefit. A young professional Pakistani American family had established itself and recently constructed an impressive home in a posh northern suburb of Chicago by the shores of Lake Michigan. Therefore the first Milad held in the new space also functioned as a house-warming ritual. There were about fifty persons in attendance, evenly divided between males and females.

The Milad was officiated over by a senior male immigrant from India who, like many others in greater Chicagoland, has ties to the city of Hyderabad. This individual and in fact his entire family profess a strong background in devotional and scholarly pursuits and are known for holding monthly Milads and *Burda sharif*¹⁹ ceremonies at their residence. The family of the presenters also possesses a *mu'i mubarak*, a relic consisting of hairs (head or beard) of the Prophet which is strategically displayed during more important ritual occasions.²⁰

Female attendees were accommodated in an upstairs living room equipped with a flat-screen TV and speaker connecting to the basement where the men were gathered. The males performed; the females observed and listened during the Milad ceremony. The evening ceremony began about ninety minutes after the announced time with a young teacher of Qur'an recitation at a local Islamic school reciting Qur'an and then offering some brief preparatory remarks. Many of the male attendees involved directly in the Milad performance were dressed in white *thawbs* (long Arab-style robes) augmented with tasteful, high-quality Kashmiri shawls and turbans.

The teacher presented some homiletic remarks taking off from a hadith, or saying of the Prophet Muhammad, that "Allah bestows but the Prophet distributes,"²¹ which became the theme of his devotional oration. Such a statement would be highly contested by some Muslims since it presents a cosmic role of the Prophet in managing human affairs beyond his historical function as a guide and social reformer. The speaker also mentioned the benefits of the supplications of one's Sufi spiritual master (*du'a* of the Pir). This marks the intended audience as a group assumed to be at least familiar with, if not actual participants in,

traditions of mystical Islam. Certainly not all supporters of Milads are Sufis, but Sufism in particular is amenable to devotional appreciations of Muhammad.

These remarks were followed by an exposition of the *salawat ayat* (verses about supplication for the Prophet) of the Qur'an that devolved into an argument that sending blessings on the Prophet (salawat) is a customary practice of God himself and thus a customary practice (sunna) of Allah. The Sunna (customary practice) of the Prophet Muhammad based on his preserved sayings (hadith) and actions is the second normative source for Muslims after the Qur'an itself. The concept that Allah also has a habitual and normative way of acting (sunna) is qur'anic, as in "You will not find any alteration in the Sunna of Allah" (35:43). Here the practice of sending blessings on the Prophet is further reinforced as legitimate by being associated with God himself.

The speaker next veered into a grammatical explanation, noting that the verbal form "yusalluna" in Arabic means that *all together* offered praises, as in the qur'anic verse "Allah and his angels send salutations" (33:56). Thus Allah is giving us the great blessing of following the same practice that He himself performs in praising the Prophet. This, of course, establishes the Islamic nature of praising the Prophet both generally and also specifically through celebrating the Milad. Anchoring this practice in the qur'anic injunction attempts to legitimize it against Wahhabi or puritan criticisms that a ceremony such as a Milad is a heretical innovation (*bid'a*).

The speaker then explained the history of a devotional poem in praise of Muhammad called the *Burda* (Ode of the Mantle)²² that was to be recited as part of this Milad to an audience whose familiarity with that text was not assumed. In fact, there was a slightly apologetic or defensive element to the exposition, since the idea that the poem carried a special spiritual benefit needed to be established in Islamic terms. The historical background to the poem *al-Burda* (The Mantle) includes the life story of its composer, the Egyptian Sufi poet al-Busairi (d. 1294), in particular his illness in which he was afflicted by paralysis and had a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad appeared to him, cured him, and presented him with a cloak or mantle (*burda*). In Islamic traditions, dream apparitions of the Prophet Muhammad are taken very seriously. The speaker reminds the audience that while the Shaytan (devil) can take on almost

any form in dreams, even God's form, he cannot take on the form of the Prophet. This claim, in fact, is itself established by a hadith.

How to recite the *Burda* performatively was also covered in the speaker's remarks, in particular with reference to specific verses in the poem recited for their curative powers.²³ The presenter explained that there is a special way to perform these verses, which is to recite them, then blow on one's hands and rub them over the body in order to effect internal and external purification and healing.

The collective recitation of the *Burda* was performed aloud by the males in the assembly who could refer to small booklets in Urdu, Arabic, and even transliterations into the Roman alphabet distributed among them. Some attendees knew the poem by heart although they did not understand the Arabic language in which it was composed and recited. Some of the women turned to a *Burda* app²⁴ on their cell phones that allowed them to follow along, mouth, or even chant the words as the recital progressed. A small drum (*daff*) was beaten to accompany the rhythm of the rhyming verses.

The recitation of one section of the *Burda* took about twenty minutes and was followed by a talk in Urdu explaining the Islamic legitimacy of venerating relics based on qur'anic proofs—in this case an example was cited of the Ark of the Covenant that, according to some Islamic accounts, was lost and desecrated and then returned. The other example given to explain the Islamic legitimacy and benefits, even curative benefits, of relic veneration was the use of the cloak of Yusuf (Joseph) to cure his father, Jacob's blind eyes (Q 12:93). These justifications functioned as a prelude to a special feature of this particular Milad ceremony—an opportunity for the visitation (*ziyarat*) of a relic, a hair of Muhammad himself.

The proper attitude and comportment (*adab*) of the visitation ritual (*zirayat*) can be explained through an idea of synecdoche—the part becomes as the whole so that when a person comes into the presence of the hair he or she can feel and behave as if the Prophet himself is present. In the presence of the hair one is to demonstrate reverence by remaining standing and acting as if one is in a royal audience (*darbar*). Because the back should not be turned to the hair at any time, one exits the room facing forward. The idea of proper comportment (*adab*) in Muslim tradition is both religious and cultural.²⁵ Muslim ritual practices

such as prayer (*salat*) entail elements that are absolutely required for its performance to count, and other elements that are desirable or preferred. These desirable aspects of attitude or comportment are known as “*adab*,” while more generally the concept of *adab* is also associated with politeness and propriety. For example, before performing religious rituals in Islam, entering a mosque, or participating in a ceremony such as a Milad, Muslims would be expected to ensure that they were in a state of ritual purity by performing the ablutions known as *wudu*. Visiting a relic of the Prophet is a way of connecting with his presence and embodied practices and attitudes are embraced by those who participate. The practice of visiting (*ziyarat*) sacred sites such as the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, Shi’a shrines, or the tombs of Sufis are part of Islamic ritual and are believed to impart religious and spiritual benefit. Which sites should be visited for religious purposes is not universally agreed upon. While there is consensus on the holy cities of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, sites or shrines beyond these three may not be shared across sectarian and interpretive communities. In this case the practice of visiting the hair was augmented by ingestion—drinking holy water which had been brought from the Meccan well of Zamzam whose properties were enhanced by the immersion of a rose petal that had touched the hair itself. The water should be drunk while standing and facing Mecca, the direction of ritual prayer known as the *qibla*.

The men performed the visitation first. Then came the women’s turn. The hair was displayed within a special glass case set on a large table in the study of the home; there was a small receptacle filled with what looked like hardened brown mud in which the hair had been embedded. Two magnifying glasses were provided because in fact the two hairs in this relic were very small and curved around near the surface in which they were embedded. They were very fine, more like hair clippings than beard hairs. The women all faced the front of the room and approached the hair one at a time, perhaps to give a sense of private communication or audience. There was silence, and some women quietly wept after seeing the hair because they were so moved by the experience.

On the left side of the room was suspended a flat-screen TV where a loop of images presented tasteful backgrounds consisting of abstract calligraphic renderings of religious phrases interspersed with photos of the Prophet’s mosque in Medina. Meanwhile, in the background one

heard a revolving track of phrases conveying blessings on the Prophet chanted in a soft modern style, thereby creating a devotional ambiance. The blessed water was served in clear little Arab style tea glasses and quietly sipped after visiting the hair.

The smell of Pakistani curries began to waft through the home as a meal was heated and brought out and served buffet style. Dinner was followed by open mic recitations of melodious poems in praise of the Prophet by the male attendees that were piped to the women upstairs through the video connection.

Milads with a Message

Many mosque congregations do not permit the celebration of Milads, either due to the theological opposition of the leadership or to concerns that holding the ceremonies might stir up division or controversy among members holding divergent interpretations of the religion. Alternative spaces for American Milads are therefore banquet halls, community centers, rooms rented in hotels, university auditoriums, and even chapels.

For the past several years, Muslim chaplain Tahir Umar Abdullah has convened a Mawlid at the University of Chicago Rockefeller Chapel. This space was also regularly used by the Muslim students on campus for Friday prayer services. In 2016 about two hundred persons, both Muslim and non-Muslim, with a preponderance of college-age participants, gathered in the chapel. For the last several years the Mawlid month (Rabi' al-Awwal) has fallen in the depth of Chicago winters, and participants may have had to navigate snow banks and freezing rain to arrive at the various sites. The gothic architecture and somberly shining pipes of the chapel organs conveyed an appropriate solemnity and spirituality, as did some lingering whiffs of frankincense. Many attendees were young couples seated together, including families with younger children. The crowd was ethnically diverse with many African American participants and even some Chinese students and other diverse Hyde Park community members.

The female Muslim university chaplain from Northwestern, Tahera Ahmad, opened the gathering with recitation from the Qur'an. This was followed by the guest musicians, the Firdaus Ensemble from Spain, who performed Andalusian style instrumental and vocal music, in this case songs in praise of the Prophet.²⁶ The audience held up cell phones and

iPads to capture the moment. One number was especially introduced as a Mawlid song, “Nur al-huda wafana.” Some lines in translation were:

The Light of Guidance has come!
 His splendor, it revives us,
 Meeting him honors us,
 Lord lavish blessings on him.²⁷

Despite the fact that the songs were in Arabic, the performers appeared to be Europeans who had converted to Islam.

The messages communicated by various aspects of this Milad were inclusion and interfaith dialogue, intercultural and interracial encounter and engagement, and social relevance. The flyer billed the event as “an evening of poetry, song, and salutation in honor of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.” The University of Chicago Mawlid programs over the past several years had consisted of diverse Muslim speakers reflecting on the meaning of the Prophet according to annual themes: the light of the Prophet, connecting to the Prophet, and “The Prophet: A Mercy to the Worlds!” and so on.

For example, a 2016 speaker, Ustadh Ubaydullah Evans, was a young African American teacher from the Chicago Muslim community. He began his talk with a reflection on love for the Prophet, which he described as “visceral.” “What is the way of the Prophet, or sunna?” he rhetorically asked, asserting that it was “considering the other,” in contrast to what he described as “sunnamania.” This he illustrated by his recollection of “seeing a guy putting on eyeliner in the *masjid* (mosque) in order to imitate the Prophet.” After all, Evans reflected, the example set by the Prophet was care for the forgotten and marginalized and Allah was not a “rigid taskmaster.”

Along the lines of Sufi or Barelvi devotionism to Muhammad, Evans recounted the belief that the Prophet physically returns the salutations (*salams*) of the believer even from the grave, for Muhammad is returned to his body in order to do this. He exhorted the audience, stating, “Understanding this is transformative. What we need to do is orient ourselves to the fact that he [the Prophet] is present and spiritually involved through our calling on him. The Prophet constantly implores God to forgive his community.”

In summary, there was both a Sufi and an American quality to this Milad/Mawlid. The entertainment was multicultural and, Islamically speaking, liberal, in the sense that there were female performers, Qur'an reciters, and speakers, musical instruments were used, and the space in which the Milad was held was neutral, not specifically a mosque or Islamic center, while the seating was not gender segregated. The musicians used instruments, including stringed and wind instruments in their performance and one heard the female voice raised in song, prayer, and qur'anic recitation, in a public and authoritative way before a mixed-gender audience. This would not have been acceptable among more strict Muslim communities that shun any instrumentation other than the use of percussion, and consider female vocal participation in mixed public contexts to be forbidden.

The themes and messages conveyed at the University of Chicago Milad were the contemporary social relevance of the Prophet's life and teachings, his merciful nature, and intra-Muslim cultural and racial diversity, including prominent roles for African and African American speakers and, on some occasions, food. For example, in 2015 one speaker was Sokhna Rama Mbacke, great-granddaughter of the famous Senegalese Sufi Ahmadu Bamba, while the refreshments were catered by a local Senegalese restaurant. The University of Chicago Milad speakers and their messages were located in both an American and global political reality. For example, in 2014, shortly after the Charlie Hebdo killings in Paris, Muslim sensitivities about the Prophet could hardly be ignored, and the convener and several speakers condemned the attacks while emphasizing the merciful qualities of the Prophet.

Conclusion: Milads and Changes in U.S. Islam

As immigrant Muslim communities took root in various regions of the United States, ceremonies such as Milads were mainly held in private homes. During the 1970s global Islamization took hold and led some congregations to exclude local traditions such as Milads from their mosques since Islamist groups such as the Arab-based Muslim Brotherhood or the South Asian Jamaat-i Islami, which were influential in many large Islamic organizations in America, considered Milads to be heretical. As part of this trend ethnomusicologist Regula Qureshi observed the gradual

replacement in her community in Edmonton, Canada, of female virtuosity and the performance of poems and songs of praise to the Prophet by women silently participating in group readings of the Qur'an.²⁸

During the 1990s a revival in the public celebration of Milads took place in the Chicago area, spearheaded by the Naqshbandiya Foundation for Islamic Education,²⁹ a group of Indo-Pakistani immigrant professionals who favored Sufism and Barelvism. Participants in the revival of Milads felt that these rites had been unfairly excluded from many mosques dominated by ideological factions and imams who espoused Deobandi or Islamist interpretations that rejected such rites as inappropriate innovations (*bid'a*). These new Milads were celebrated in banquet halls or neutral spaces such as the auditorium of the University of Illinois.

Other groups such as Dawat-i Islami, followers of Pakistani Qadri Sufi leader Muhammad Ilyas, have taken the Milad public with street processions in recent years. For example, during one procession on Devon Avenue, heart of the South Asian diaspora in Chicago, a group of some thirty South Asian males of various ages dressed in white shalwar kameez and green turbans and carrying banners and placards in English, Urdu, and Arabic marched while loudly chanting "*marhaba ya Mustafa*" (welcome to the Prophet). This alarmed some passersby who had no context for the ritual and might have understood it as an aggressive political demonstration by Taliban-like figures. The signs in English bore messages such as "What Is Islam: Justice for All," "What Is Islam: Religion of Peace," "What Is Islam: Believe in All Prophets," indicating that the purpose of the march also included a broader Islamic public outreach, beyond its role as a Milad.

Some South Asian Muslim shopkeepers along the route seemed to appreciate the boldness of this public display and spontaneously began handing out water bottles and fruit juices to the marchers. A lone South Asian female attempted to tag along behind the procession and I joined her—to the chagrin of the leader of the group, who almost pleadingly invited us to segregate ourselves by having a seat in a car that was slowly driving alongside the group carrying some women family members. After a few blocks the caravan descended into the basement of the Bombay banquet hall where an exclusively male audience listened to speeches in Urdu.

Quietly and gradually more devotional and Sufi-inspired practices such as celebrating Milads have returned to American Muslim communities in new forms in recent years. For example, the recitation of the *Burda* poem may be engaged in by children attending Islamic schools. The online social media initiative “Celebrate Mercy” that commenced in 2010 allows participants to log on in real time to participate in commemorations of Muhammad’s life by well-known Islamic speakers.³⁰ A local initiative known as the Chicago Mawlid Committee³¹ sponsors an Internet and social media campaign augmented by periodic events in private homes, auditoriums, and some Islamic centers where speakers focus on the role of the Prophet and performers chant *nashids*, poems of praise and supplication with no instrumentation. Rather than presenting poetry in the Arabic language only, there is an increasing tendency to incorporate English translations of these hymns of praise or to compose original English works, sometimes using genres such as rap, popular among youth.

In conclusion, Milads/Mawlids among American Muslim communities have proven resilient in adapting from smaller ethnic gatherings to broader public and social media events that engage a new, younger, and more multiethnic audience in the United States and globally. At the center of these developments is the figure of the Prophet Muhammad himself. Although maligned by Islamophobes and according to some opinions marginalized, at least in his spiritual dimension, by Muslim modernist reformers and puritans, his image continues to attract and unite new generations of Muslims with an evolving yet perennial appeal.

NOTES

- 1 *Milad-e Akbar* by Muhammad Akbar Warsi, Shaykh Ghulam ‘Ali, Lahore, n.d. This work is briefly discussed in Marcia Hermansen, “Translation (from Urdu) and Introduction to *Milad-e-Akbar*, a Popular Religious Text from South Asia,” in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 367–372.
- 2 “Bibi” or “lady” is an honorific title in Urdu used before female names.
- 3 “Dai” literally means midwife in Urdu, although Halima’s role was that of a nursemaid.
- 4 The poetic words of this song, translated, are found at www.oocities.org. Accessed July 23, 2016.
- 5 This miraculous narration is found in an early biography of Muhammad composed by Ibn Ishaq. While not accorded the status of hadiths, such popular

- reports circulated in the texts developed to accompany Milad celebrations. See Marion Holmes Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007), 31.
- 6 In many Muslim societies *mawlid* is the term used for celebrations of local Sufi saints' death anniversaries.
 - 7 *Milad* is the term more commonly used in South Asian communities and *mawlid* in Arab ones.
 - 8 Shi'a tradition holds the date to be the 17th of the same month.
 - 9 Photographs taken at this Milad are available at "Milad Parade and Ceremony Held in Jersey City," www.nj.com. Accessed July 30, 2016.
 - 10 Dawat-e-Islami is a pietistic movement that was founded in Pakistan in 1984 by Maulana Ilyas Qadri, a Barelvi, a Sunni scholar.
 - 11 A longer discussion of this and other reports of this nature and their presence in the development of Milad/Mawlid traditions may be found in Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad*, 12–15.
 - 12 A number of reports and traditions connected to the cosmic understanding of Muhammad are discussed in Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad*, 15–29.
 - 13 The term "Barelvi" is derived from the name of a scholar considered to have laid the intellectual foundations of this school of interpretation, Ahmed Raza Khan of Bareilly (d. 1921), a city in northern India. This term is usually used by outsiders, those of this persuasion preferring the term "Ahl-al Sunna" which means "People of the Sunna," i.e., Muslims who follow the practice of the Prophet.
 - 14 This group takes its name from a famous religious school, the Deoband madrasa of northern India, established in 1866. While allowing some more mystical interpretations, the Deobandis are critical of what they consider to be excessive veneration of the Prophet or the incorporation of practices that do not have an Islamic basis according to their views. Deobandi-trained scholars dominate many South Asian Muslim mosques and communities in the United States. For a Deobandi set of opinions that elements of Milad ceremonies do not have precedents in the practice of Muhammad and his Companions, refer to islamqa.org. Accessed July 23, 2016.
 - 15 Literally, "the People of the Hadith," a relatively smaller group of South Asian Muslims who advocate a strict literalistic interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith. They eschew mystical elements and practices that they consider innovations or excessively devotional. In this way they resemble the Wahhabi and Salafi interpretations of Islam that originated in the Arab world but have global influence.
 - 16 See a detailed discussion of this in Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad*.
 - 17 See for example, "Why Mawlid-un-Nabi Is Bid'ah," www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPNh8tyxofy, accessed July 14, 2017.
 - 18 Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad*, 1–5.
 - 19 Recitation of an Arabic poem *al-Burda* (The Mantle) in honor of the Prophet. This poem will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.
 - 20 Ian G. Williams, "Relics and 'Baraka': Devotion to the Prophet Muhammad among Sufis in Nottingham, U.K.," in *Reading Religion in Text and Context: Re-*

- flections of Faith and Practice in Religious Materials*, Elisabeth Arweck and Peter Collins, eds. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 65–82. See also Y. Meri, “Relics of Piety and Power in Medieval Islam,” *Past and Present* (2010) 206 (suppl 5): 97–120.
- 21 Al-Bukhari hadith collection, Volume 4, Book 53, Number 346.
 - 22 A detailed source on the *Burda* in the context of the Arabic poetic tradition is Suzanne Stetkevych, “From Text to Talisman: Al-Busiri’s Qasidat al-Burdah (Mantle Ode) and the Poetics of Supplication,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 37, no. 2 (2006): 145–89.
 - 23 *Burda* Part V:
 26. “Nor was any Prophet accused (of lying when) giving knowledge of the unseen.
 27. His miracles are (completely) clear, not hidden from anyone.
 28. Without it justice cannot be established amongst people.
 29. How often has his hand granted freedom (cure) from disease by (his) touch.
 30. And set free the insane from the chains (fetters) of insanity.”
 - 24 itunes.apple.com and for Android play.google.com
 - 25 Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
 - 26 The Firdaus Ensemble performs as part of the annual evening of poetry, song, and salutation in celebration of Mawlid. Based in Granada, Spain, the ensemble draws upon classical European style, with influences from Celtic and Flamenco traditions, and from the rich heritage of traditional Sufi music from Arabic, Andalusian, and Turkish sources (Mawlid flyer 2016). Pictures from the 2014 Milad are available at the University of Chicago. See also, firdausensemblesufimusicgroup.blogspot.com. Accessed July 30, 2016.
 - 27 This translation of “Nur al-Huda” was located at jumacircle.com. Accessed August 1, 2016.
 - 28 Regula B. Qureshi, “Transcending Space: Recitation and Community among South Asian Muslims in Canada,” in B. D. Metcalf, ed., *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 46–64.
 - 29 Apparently still one of the largest sources of Milad videos on YouTube. Jonas Svensson, “ITZ BIDAHA BRO!!!!!! GT ME??—YouTube Mawlid and Voices of Praise and Blame,” in *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies: Notes from an Emerging and Infinite Field*, Thomas Hoffmann and Göran Larsson, eds. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 89–111.
 - 30 This initiative may be followed at www.celebratemercy.com. Accessed August 1, 2016.
 - 31 www.chicagomawlid.com. Accessed July 15, 2016.