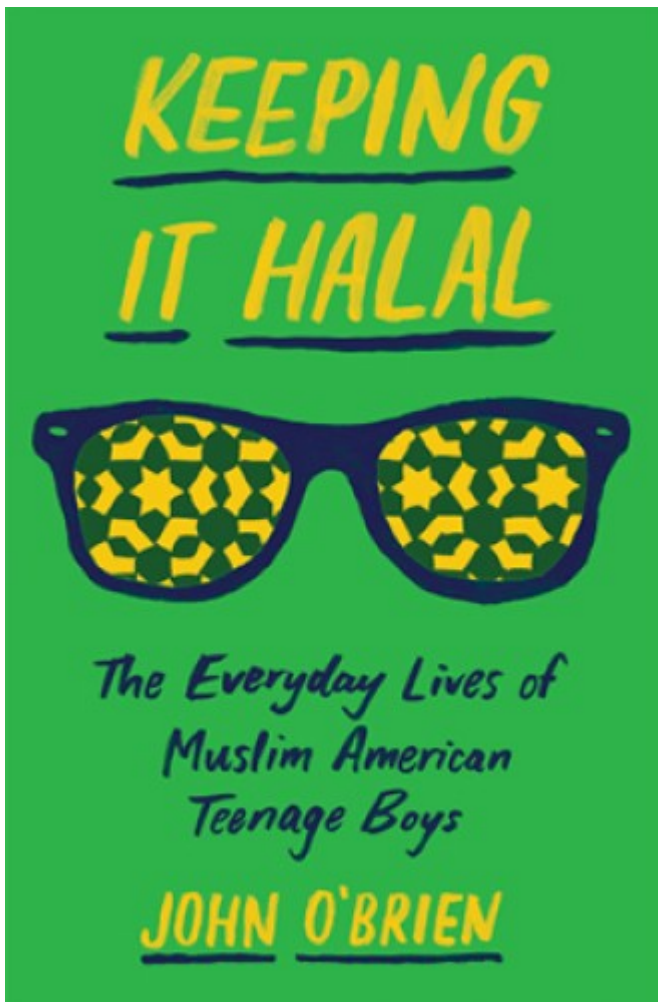


The cool piety of young Muslim hip-hop fans

**John O'Brien brings readers into teenage boys' frustrations and laughter as they struggle to integrate their different worlds.**

by [Abbas Chinoy](#) in the [December 6, 2017](#) issue

## In Review



**Keeping It Halal**

## The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys

By John O'Brien

Princeton University Press

As a first-generation American and the son of Indian immigrants, I grew up amid many cultures. My family is Muslim, and when I was born, they were living in a predominantly Orthodox Jewish community. I experienced slices of American culture at school alongside the Indian culture at home, all contributing to the multitude of forces forming my identity. Borrowing John O'Brien's language, I lived a "culturally contested" life as I devised ways of reconciling multiple "cultural rubrics." So do the Legendz, the group of American teenagers O'Brien examines in his well-researched ethnographic study.

O'Brien, who converted to Islam as an adult, unlocks numerous insights and generates stimulating questions as he observes how these Muslim teenagers negotiate their culturally contested lives. He concludes that "Muslim American youth are not only fundamentally similar to other American young people, but profoundly similar to all Americans."

This conclusion may sound obvious, but on the first page of the preface O'Brien cites a study claiming that almost half of Americans associate Islam with violence. He then explains that his exploration of American Muslim teenagers is not a study of terrorism or the radicalization of youth. That O'Brien must engage in apologetics at the onset of the book is an indicator of our society's current climate of hate and ignorance. For this reason, it is especially significant that O'Brien and other scholars are dedicating critical thought, time, and energy into providing more comprehensive and more accurate portrayals of Islam.

All American teenagers experience challenging moments when expectations from parents, friends, school, sports, religious life, and other communities pull in different directions. O'Brien shows how the Legendz engage in this struggle by studying the way they interact with multiple facets of American culture: music, the dating scene, and experiments with drinking and drug use. As they deal with the competing expectations of what it means to be a "good Muslim" and a "cool American teenager," the Legendz develop a stance that O'Brien calls "cool piety."

Fascinatingly, O'Brien compares this piety to that of Christian teenagers who struggle with parts of American culture that are viewed as profane or taboo by their

faith tradition.

The Legendz' methods of coping includes a lively encounter with hip-hop, which plays an important role in their conceptions of themselves and their sense of their own "Americanness." However, the Islamic portion of their identities, especially as defined by familial and congregational expectations, do not condone the licentious, vain, and vulgar parts of some hip-hop music. The Legendz reinterpret or redact popular lyrics, so the hip-hop they consume both remains connected to American culture and passes as religiously appropriate.

O'Brien recalls witnessing this cultural negotiation happening seamlessly when a group of boys are gathered in their mosque listening to an MP3 player. One boy passes the headphones to another boy who begins to sway. "Sayed starts moving his body to the music. Muhammad reaches out both of his open hands towards Sayed, and in an exaggerated Arab accent, says, 'Zere is no dancing in zee mosque, bruzzah (brother).'" Rather than abandon one "cultural rubric" for the other, the Legendz find their own method of integrating American hip-hop and Islam. O'Brien brings readers into these boys' frustrations and laughter as they negotiate the struggle.

The way the Legendz choose to integrate rather than bifurcate calls to my mind the practice of *lectio divina*. Within this Christian mystical tradition, readers engage texts in a manner that is deeply contemplative, even prayerful, as a devotional practice that integrates the words on the page with the faith of the individual who encounters them. Both Islam and American hip-hop are central components for the Legendz' identity, and the habitual practice of their spiritual listening techniques resembles the way *lectio divina* approaches the relationship between text and reader.

For me, O'Brien's study prompts significant questions about society and identity. What is American culture? How do we access it and how does it access us? What's it like to be a teenager in America? What's it like to be a teenaged American who is also Muslim? These questions are at once universal and specific. Pondering them will augment our conversations with one another both within and across faith traditions.