

# Interview with Eyad Zahra and Dominic Rains of *The Taqwacores*

— Written by *John Parrot* On 16th August 2011

“This film is meant to spark a lot of different ideas and create a lot of different discussions,” says Eyad Zahra, the director of *The Taqwacores*, a film that asks more questions than most. Eyad is in town with Dominic Rains, who plays the film’s star, a magnetic, Mohawk-sporting Koran-quoting Muslim punk called Jehangir.



*The Taqwacores* tells the story of a rather square and naive Pakistani Muslim engineering student who moves into an unusual Islamic centre in Buffalo, New York State. The inhabitants are representatives of a lesser known youth sub-culture: Muslim punks. Not only is the place plastered in graffiti and all the house mates are kitted out in torn denim and leather, but they have in-depth discussions about all their actions in light of Koranic instruction. It is a film of ideas.

*The Taqwacores* was originally a novel written in zine format by American Muslim convert Michael Muhammed Knight. After reading the book, Ehad, whose parents moved to the US from Syria, felt as if it was written for him, “I wanted to get those ideas out there.” But, he says, what made *The Taqwacores* punk wasn’t just “having these characters bang drums and play guitars. It was more about the discussions they had.” This is theology with a healthy dose of never mind the dogma.

Handsome and thoughtful, Dominic Rains was born Amin Nazemzadeh in Tehran in 1982. In the mid-eighties his family fled to London to escape the horrific war with Iraq. Although they later moved to the US after five years, Dominic feels his time in the UK had a formative effect on his character – it also left him with a nifty English accent which he demonstrates a few times in the film. He feels that the key to the *Taqwacores*’ understanding of Islam is the importance given to individual understanding. “Interpretation has to brew into something that becomes either solely yours or we start living someone else’s idea. The beauty of this film is to somehow break down the walls and, just for a moment in time, allows Islam and punk to be the individual’s... and not something that’s controlled.”

The film contains quite a lot of discussion about what is Islamic and what is not. Jehangir, Dominic's character, at one point explains that drinking tea is considered **makruh**, that is it is frowned upon, but not actually **haram** or sinful. "We tried to stay true to the novel" says Eyad, "but it's important to have that vernacular amongst these characters, because they are still Muslim, and if you strip that away they're just caricatures of Muslims." Eyad also makes the point that rather than spoon feeding the trickier points to the audience this approach properly respects their intelligence, before adding, "we get away with it because it is a punk film... and the end the audience can Google it."

The book contains even fuller discussions about doctrine, chapter and verse than appear in the movie, but the UK edition was edited to remove controversial elements. "The book has been out for a while and it gets reactions and gets people talking," says Eyad, "I think that is a reflection of how understanding and diverse the Muslim community is." Although the media often bring up the fear of strong reactions from certain sections of the Muslim community, for Eyad, anger towards Terry Jones and his Koran burning, among other examples, is rooted in a reaction to hate-filled and insincere provocation. "Obviously [Muslim] people do get a little perturbed by what they see or hear about this film," he goes on "but ultimately I feel that people understand where it is coming from so although they might not like it, they still give it some respect."



Michael Mohammed Knight originally wrote *The Taqwacores* book after his initial immersion in a more traditional form of Islam had ended and he found he didn't share many of the attitudes to women, gay people and alcohol held by some of the faithful. This led to him dreaming up a world where Islam "didn't have an absolute definition, and you had the power to define it yourself." For Eyad, Knight's book isn't so much an absolute truth that all Muslims must now come to grips with, but that "it's a different part of the spectrum that needs to be added to the whole. We need to be able to go to the far left, and be a little more liberal in exploring some of these things."

The strength of *Taqwacore* is not so much in religious disputation, but how it furthers self-acceptance. Knight felt, "the punk kids inspired me to not be afraid of who I was." Likewise, Eyad reflects that "we'll see how Islam

continues to grow, but as someone who came through a very strict and rigid Islamic household, it's a release that I needed and I'd imagine others needed too."

This warm, accepting face of Islam is embodied in Dominic's character, Jehangir. "He's a character that loves," as Dominic succinctly puts it. "He's able to take off the balaclava of religion or punk, he uses them to bring the people together, but he rises above it in the sense that he knows that the bottom line, the foundation for any of it, exists in the most innate human traits of love, compassion, gratitude, camaraderie, humility."

In true 'method' style, Dominic got into character a whole month before shooting started and began dressing as Jehangir and skating around LA. Luckily, he says, the character had been drawn with a great deal of detail in the book and he managed to develop him even further with a help from Eyad and Michael Knight. For Eyad, "sometimes you had to ask 'Jehangir' to do something, but for the most part he was in his own world and you just had to capture that."

Towards the end of *The Tawqacores*, Jehangir gives a significant sermon at the Friday prayer. With all the punk misfits gathered in the prayer room, which doubles as a gig venue, he enunciates the spiritual message at the heart of the film: "Islam is a fuckin' surrender... Allah is too big and too open for my Islam to be small and closed." Although Dominic feels that the speech is beautiful and clear enough not to need further explanation, he will say that it gives a good indication of Jehangir's character. He goes on to draw a more temporal analogy, "when you meet a woman for instance, sometimes if you just surrender and allow that thing to be what it is, it's far more beautiful than if it's controlled and if you want to direct it in a certain way."

The Sufi poet Rumi's lovers of God who "have surrendered themselves to Love's commands" come to mind. Lest the more sceptical among us get put off, Eyad reminds us that "it's not just something that's Islamic." He believes the essence of these perceptions are universal, "if you're an atheist, you can know that you're part of something bigger... and you're just part of that and not king of the galaxy. I really appreciated that element of his speech and I think it's something true to all of us, the basic essence of human life." Amen, or rather, Amin.