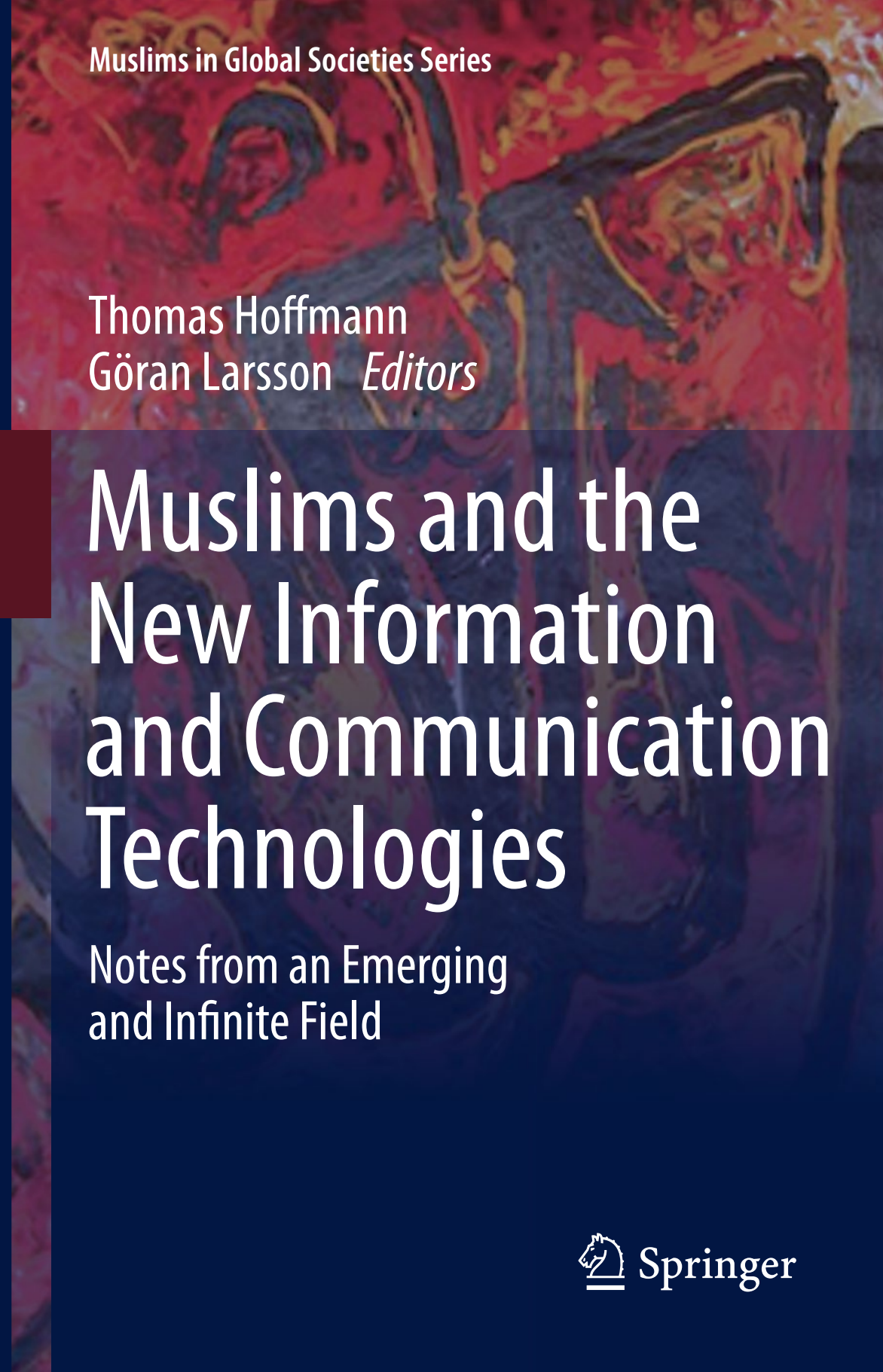
Muslims in Global Societies Series
Thomas Hoffmann
Göran Larsson Editors
Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies
Notes from an Emerging and Infinite Field
Springer

Muslims in Global Societies Series

Volume 7

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Editors

Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies

Notes from an Emerging and Infinite Field

Springer

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ISBN 978-94-007-7246-5 ISBN 978-94-007-7247-2 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7247-2
Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013956766

Printed on acid-free paper

Springer is part of Springer Science+Business Media (www.springer.com)

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Part I
Introduction

Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies: Notes from an Emerging and Infinite Field – An Introduction

Thomas Hoffmann and Göran Larsson

"Islam is the message!" "The medium is the message!" These two mottos – the former deriving from the modern Islamist camp, the latter from Marshall McLuhan's classic work *Understanding Media* – seem as pertinent as ever in the new millennium (McLuhan 1964). As sociologist of religion Lorne L. Dawson puts it in his comment on McLuhan's motto, "[m]edia are not neutral or passive conduits for the transfer of information. They mold the message in ways that crucially influence the world views we construct. They adjust our self-conceptions, notions of human relations and community, and the nature of reality itself" (Dawson 2004, 385). Hence, if we add 'Islam' and 'Muslims' to medium, we begin to realize the far-reaching and profound implications of this religious add-on, not only for the academic study of Islam but also for the believers, the Muslims and their communities. Furthermore, we should take into consideration the observation already put forth in mid-1990s that, so Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, "[i]ncreasingly […] large numbers of Muslims explain their goals in terms of the normative language of Islam" (Eickelman 2003, 7). Given that this proliferation is facilitated and moulded to a high degree by New Information and Communication Technology (henceforth ICT), we begin to grasp the relevance of an Islam & Muslim-orientated approach. Various definitions of the term ICT exist, some of which are highly technical, but for our present purposes we use it as the wider term for any communication device or application, which comprises access, transmission, storage, and manipulation of information. Different from what could be called classical ICT, such as books and

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T. Hoffmann and G. Larsson (eds.), *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies*, Muslims in Global Societies Series 7,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7247-2_1, © Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

newspapers, New ICT is characterized by a high degree of digitalization as well as convergence of data-, tele- and mass communication, the latter not necessarily restricted to conventional mass media like TV (stations) or film (industry) but extending into various so-called social media.

To be sure, the intensification of Islamic sensitivities is part and parcel of the Islamist resurgence that has been unfolding at least since the late 1970s. Thus, it is claimed from a wide variety of observers that a new Islamic public sphere is coming to the fore – not least reinforced by a growing number of Islamic satellite TV channels and new globalising Arab-Muslim TV stations like Al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya.[1] But not only in the sense of an Habermasian public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) steeped in critical and dialogical communication, but also as a public sphere that nests more semi-intimate, private and even furtive communication in various forms of social media and devices (SMS, chatrooms, blogs, Facebook and Twitter, cryptological information et cetera). Eickelman and Anderson's claim, then, should not be taken as an exceptionalist diagnosis regarding Islamic communities but should be seen in relation to a general, globalised 'return of the religious' or what Jürgen Habermas have identified as the emergence of a post-secular society.[2]

Of course, this does not imply that religion and media as such constitute unprecedented fields of attention, but rather that religion and media (and its producers and consumers) have caught our attention with a new urgency – not least with respect to Islamic studies. Not just our scholarly attention – whether humanities, the social sciences or theology with their host of scholarly programmes and publications – but also a wider public attention and awareness concerning the interrelatedness of media and religion.[3] To put it in the words of Gordon Lynch: "Public awareness of religion is framed through the media, and some of the deepest controversies around contemporary religion are bound up with the content and uses of media" (Lynch 2010, 549). Hence, it is clear that public attention has been particularly concerned with the representation of Muslims in migration debates or with more security driven interests (terrorism and 'the war for Muslim minds'). This state of affairs certainly owes much to the rise and convergence of new digital media and their more and less observable effects in terms of identity and community construction, socio-political negotiations and cultural formations. ICT encompasses and exploits a wide variety of technologies and platforms such as computers and smartphones, internet, mobile telephony, CD-ROM and DVD, cable and satellite TV, media streaming sites like YouTube and other so-called Web 2.0 social media like Facebook, Twitter and *wikis* (various forms of wiki-Islams are now online[4]), all of which expand, converge, overlap, and mutate in rapid and innumerable ways.

[1] See e.g. Mellor et al. 2011; Lynch 2006; Rugh 2004.

[2] The term was first used in a lecture which Jürgen Habermas gave on March 15, 2007 at the Nexus Institute of the University of Tilberg, Netherlands.

[3] For an overview, see e.g. Stout and Buddenbaum 2002, journals like e.g., *Journal of Media and Religion*; anthologies like Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Larsson 2006; and monographs like Bunt 2009.

[4] For an investigation of the anti-Islamic variant of wiki-Islam, see Larsson 2007.

Our use of the adjective 'new' in 'New ICT' should not be taken in the sense of something utterly new – the Internet has been around for over 20 years by now – but rather as an accumulation, an added element into the continuum of what was once *New ICT*, such as writing, postal systems, print (from block print to the rotation press), electrically based media (e.g., telegraph, telephone, gramophone, radio, fax-machine, photography, and film). This historical dimension is also reflected and investigated in Göran Larsson's recent book on *Muslims and New Media: Historical and Contemporary Debates.* Indeed, accumulation or convergence should be keywords if we wish to understand media and religion.[5] Stewart M. Hoover, one of the pioneers in religion & media studies, sums up: "We no longer have to limit ourselves to the possibility that religion is influencing media behaviours or vice versa. Both are happening, and the evidence would suggest that in their interaction, new ways of understanding both media and religion in the life of viewers and adherents emerge" (Hoover 2001, 59). This sweeping observation indicates that all scholars of religious studies as well as media studies now have to consider seriously the interplay between religion and media as well as the interaction between information technologies and human actors.

Much of the philosophical and theoretically driven research regarding New ICT can be grouped along two grand trajectories, namely those who view the New ICT in continuity with modern (perhaps even pre-modern) ICT and those who view New ICT in term of a radical break with past epistemologies and social structures, ushering in a watershed of epochal dimensions.[6] The former, including theorists like Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens, maintains the view that the world is basically unchanged in its deep epistemological and systemic structures – all other things being equal.[7] The rise and impact of the New ICT should therefore be construed as part and parcel of larger patterns of social developments. New ICT may bring in new structural and epistemological elements but they function as accumulations rather than revolutionary tipping points.[8] As for the latter theorists, often labelled as postmodernists, they argue for a real/virtual tipping point, inaugurating nothing less but a whole new universe, a cyberspace or a Internet paradigm (overwriting the so-called Gutenberg paradigm), with new playful, anarchistic or dystopic 'rules' of (hyper) reality, multiple selves and cyborgs. Postmodernist French philosophers like Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Gilles Deleuze have been particular apt to advance and inspire radical theories of cyberspace, all of which seem to transcend the ordinary hallmarks of modernity.[9] Baudrillard even made some kind of impact on Middle East studies with his writings on the first Gulf War (1990–1991), in which he argued that the war in Iraq had become so edited and 'mediatized' by US forces

[5] See also Anderson 2008.

[6] See Webster 2002.

[7] See e.g. Giddens 1990.

[8] Some cyber-culture theorists even argue that the New ICT are particularly apt to reconnect to pre-modern religious systems, e.g. Davis 1993.

[9] E.g. Baudrillard 1983; Virilio 1980; Deleuze and Guattari 1996.

and embedded journalism that it actually eluded the real war (Baudrillard 1995). However, since the launching of global Arab media platforms like Al-Jazeera Baudrillard's argument seems less persuasive. The overall impact of postmodernist thinking on the nexus of ICT & Islam is to this day still extremely marginal. The recent revolutionary events in the Middle East and the unprecedented use (and partial success) of social media in organizing, mobilizing and propagating the oppositions' cases is certainly another strong argument to counter the view that the Middle East is a passive and silent victim *tout court*. The impact of new media on the overthrow of regimes in the Middle East and North Africa in the wake of the Arab spring is still very much an open field for studies and we need both more empirical data and more thorough analysis to understand how the media were used in this process.

Trading back and forth between these two poles, we find various theoretical and methodological positions depending on general outlook, analytical and empirical interests. Some hold a bleak and almost apocalyptic view on the New ICT and argue that the technology will bring to life a new surveillance society going far beyond the neo-classic visions of Foucault's Panopticon and George Orwell's *1984*.[10] For Muslims living in authoritarian states as well as for some Muslims living in democratic post-9/11-states, this is not a future scenario but rather the realities of a vigilant and modernizing *al-mukhabarât*, 'the intelligence services', cracking down on everything from pornographic surfing, distribution of illegal political material, indecent or 'subversive' chat rooms et cetera.[11] Others hold a more optimistic view (though admitting the risk of intervention or surveillance of the intelligence services) and argue that the New ICT as useful short-range tools of subversion, rebellion and mobilization, sometimes labelled e-activism or DIY-media (i.e., Do It Yourself), but also as more 'slow', probably irreversible, tools for democratisation and liberal values.[12] What has been called Egypt's "Facebook revolution" and Iran's "Twitter uprising" belong to the more dramatic examples.[13] Here, we should keep in mind the ambivalent and sinister effects of New ICT, for instance its use by authoritarian regimes or by ultraconservative, illiberal or militant groups taking advantage of the technologies (from Iran's shi'ite cassette-revolution in 1979 to jihadi desktop publishing, YouTube-sermons and other e-forums). Since 9/11 the research on ICT-related jihadism or 'dark web' has been staggering and we can only guess how much of the research has been done clandestinely by the intelligence services. Dark web research pursued by civilians and civil enterprises and open, unclassified work presented by military academics, is also proliferating, e.g., The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, The Jamestown Foundation, MEMRI etc.[14]

[10] For a good overview of surveillance studies, see Lyon 2007.

[11] Numerous studies on this topic have been produced but an article by Dale Eickelman puts the New ICT in continuity with earlier forms of censorship, see Eickelman 1999.

[12] Studies in this field proliferate. See e.g. Seib 2007; Norton 1999; Alterman 1998; Howard 2010. See also the Harvard University based project *The Internet & Democracy Project* targeted at the Middle East, http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/research/internetdemocracy. Accessed 22 March 2013.

[13] See e.g. Nawawy and Khamis 2012.

[14] For a good overview of "Militaristic Jihad in Cyberspace", see Bunt 2009.

For our present purposes, we should consider the relevance of these mainly cyber-related trajectories with regard to Islamic studies. Do the New ICT define a watershed for Islam and Muslims with regard to textual, exegetical, and legal authority or should we rather search for continuities and gradual developments? For instance, with regard to Muslims' (self)image *as* individuals and community-anchored Muslims (along with other, non-religious elements of selfhood) in a globalised world, in Islamic majority nations, in diasporas (e.g., Western Europe and the English speaking world)? Or do they merely reflect or magnify larger societal developments already well under way? Do New ICT in the Muslim majority nations differ substantially from the impact of the printing press, the rise of journals and newspapers and the relative demise of the religious authorities, *al-'ulamâ'*, during the twentieth and nineteenth centuries?

Perhaps the answers to these questions are a 'both-and', depending on the specific subject and issue under scrutiny: for instance, studies on online communication in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf seem to indicate something like a small-scale gender revolution with respect to more unregimented communication between the otherwise strictly segregated sexes.[15] This is but one aspect of wider questions about intimacy and virtual community due the possibilities of more or less uninterrupted and safe communication. To be sure, chatrooms, emails, SMS and MSN, Blue Tooth and other appliances can develop and nurture new intimate, virtual social spaces. The bestselling chic-lit novel *Girls of Riyadh* (Alsanea 2005/2008) by Saudi author Rajaa Alsanea was composed as a number of email postings and reveals to the reader a sense of the social importance of the web in a deeply conservative and highly gender segregated country like Saudi Arabia (Ramsay 2007).

Disposition of the Book

As the subtitle of the introduction indicates, the topic of Muslims and the New ICT could very well be defined as an emerging field. However, the term 'emerging' is somewhat of an understatement given the extreme growth rates of the New ICT and its penetration into almost all spheres of global society (even when having taken the so-called digital divide into consideration). Given the fact that the New ICTs are being increasingly used as social media, and given that the social – to paraphrase Max Weber – is infinite, we are facing a task that is nothing less than tremendous. In light of such pervasive and invasive societal transformations the temptation to give in to grand theorizing and sweeping prognostication is considerable. However, as editors we have chosen to focus on more specific and case-orientated issues, even though this does not preclude some prognostication and guesswork.

Consequently, this anthology taps into what has been labelled Media Studies 2.0.[16] This second wave of media studies is first of all characterized by a new focus on

[15] For further references on the gender aspects, see Wheeler 2008.

[16] See e.g. Gauntlet and Horsley 2004.

everyday meanings and 'lay' users, which is in contrast to earlier emphases on experts or self-acclaimed experts. The lay adoption of ICT and the subsequent digital 'literacy' is certainly noticeable among Muslims. According to some global estimates, one in ten internet users is a Muslim living in a populous Muslim community. These aspects are, for example, explored and discussed by Daniela Schlicht in her chapter on Muslim university students who go online to debate both German and Islamic issues which relate to their own individual lives. In Egdunas Racius's contribution we find a related analysis of a Muslim online discussion forum. Resembling Schlicht's approach, this chapter also illustrates how an online forum can help build identity (in this case especially among converts to Islam). Mona Abdel-Fadil covers a somewhat similar aspect of mundane activity in an online environment (i.e. IslamOnline) and its online marital counselling service that targets Muslims who suffer various marital difficulties.

Besides mundane activities, one should also note that a new kind of moderation with regard to more sweeping and avant-gardistic claims is yet another feature of Media Studies 2.0. Moderation combined with a keen attention to empirical material is undoubtedly something that this anthology bears witness to. Furthermore, interest in various qualitative research techniques is growing simultaneously with the development of numerous quantitative techniques. In this anthology, Jonas Svensson explores, for example, how new media call for a development of new theoretical and methodological approaches in the study of Islam and Muslims. In his chapter YouTube-clips relating to the popular but also controversial ritual practice of celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, *mawlid*, are analysed by means of new computer programs. Svensson provides new empirical data as well as new theoretical and methodological insights as how to study religious practice in the twenty-first century. It is also evident that the technological developments have had an impact on more classical studies of Islam and Muslims. In his chapter on the digitalization of the text of the *Qurʾān*, Andrew Rippin includes a critical discussion of how the new technologies impact the religious status and study of Islam's classical texts – among the believers as well as secular scholars. As clearly pointed out by Rippin, scholars working on the ancient and classical texts of Islam must also be updated on the latest information and communication technologies if they want to develop their studies. Thus, Qurʾānic studies must develop its scope and skills in relation to the emerging field of so-called Digital Humanities.

Research inspired by 2.0 studies also tend to pursue studies in audiences and platforms other than the purely Westerns one (whether in spatial or ethnic terms), something this anthology patently bears witness to. Web journals like *Cyber Orient*, scholarly websites like Gary Bunt's *Virtually Islamic*, academic journals like *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research* attest to an intensified focus on Islamic issues. Scholars of Islam and the Islamic world have always be engaged and entangled in their object of study and this has led to deliberate interventions as well as unintended corollaries. Consequently, the developments within ICT have also affected how scholars take part in and influence public Islamic and

academic discussions.[17] Programmes and centres more broadly committed to ICT-studies, such as *The Berkman Center for Internet and Society* at Harvard University, regularly pursue studies on various ICT-related issues in relation to the Islamic world. Finally, in 2.0 studies we notice a shift from viewing ICT-audiences as a passive and somewhat homogenous mass to a recognition of the active, digitally literate user engaged in various DIY-dynamics, a more flexible negotiation of identity and a pronounced interest in 'narrowcasting' and niche-like communities. It is also clear that the technological development has yielded new possibilities to combat and question essentialistic and hostile images of Islam and Muslims. One example of a so-called counter narrative is explored in F. V. Greifenhagen's contribution which takes up the Canadian sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie.* This TV show is analysed as an intervention in the contested field of Canadian Muslim identity construction, thus demonstrating how new media can be used for questioning identities and for debating social issues in new ways. However, it is also evident that new media can disseminate hate messages and present opinions that are clearly false or highly prejudiced and be perceived as offensive or threatening to certain individual or groups. This poses a challenge to scholars' ethical and political commitments. Should the scholar intervene as a so-called public intellectual and – quoting Said who quoted a Quaker expression – speak truth to power? One example of decidedly anti-Islam/Muslim communication is analysed in Göran Larsson's chapter on the Dutch politician Geert Wilders' movie *Fitna* that was launched and disseminated on the internet. Another example is provided by Niklas Bernsand who analyses an identitarian Swedish blogportal, which argues that assimilation and integration of immigrants and Muslims pose a threat to Swedish society. Both Larsson's and Bernsand's chapters alert us to the fact that while new platforms and channels for communication can encourage progressive and critical endeavours, this in no way immunises against longstanding traditions of ethnic and religious polemics and Othering.

In conclusion, the academic study of these new information and communication technologies, their impact on Islam, Muslims and Islamic studies, is still in its very infancy and there is thus a great need for the development of adequate and fresh theories and methods. To be sure, we need to collect more empirical data before we make any general conclusions. We also need to develop methods for handling the vast amounts of data that is accessible within a few clicks or by means of various software programs.

Lastly, a caveat must be issued! It should be clear that we should not get blinded by the novelty of the so-called technologies. Many factors and problems in relation to the ICT are not that new but quite constant or recurrent in terms of human societies and their way(s) of dealing with technological change. In this perspective Islam as a historical and social phenomenon and Muslims as human actors should not be viewed as exceptional and insulated cases, but rather as part and parcel of human

[17] See e.g., Varisco 2011.

history and society. Neither should we become blinded by the categorical powers of the terms 'Muslim' and 'Islam' – Muslims are not and do not act as Muslims all the time. 'Islam' is of course 'Islam' all the time, but the way it is 'Islam' is legio. This means that we also need to keep track on other academic disciplines, both when it comes to theoretical and methodological developments. These issues are strongly stressed in Sune Haugbolle's analysis of a popular TV show in contemporary Lebanon. Instead of stressing the novelty of the media, Haugbolle argues that it is essential to do both ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., watching the shows with the audience in their very own living rooms or in the cafés) and that we need to 'return' to class analysis.

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Part II
Everyday Meanings and ‘Lay’ Users

Muslims on StudiVZ.de: An Empirical Perspective on Religious Affiliation and National Belonging in Times of Web 2.0

Daniela Schlicht

> We discuss how to come to terms with an un-Islamic system instead of asking what we can do to build up an Islamic system. (…) Let us use discussions such as this one to learn more about Islam and us Muslims! We are Allah's creatures. He created us in order that we abide by His will.[1]

This statement by a Muslim university student posted on the German social network StudiVZ.de,[2] articulates indispensable loyalty to Islam in its political and social implications. The same Internet forum, however, provides numerous perspectives on the relation between Islam and the secular state by other German students of Muslim belief that challenge this postulated primacy of Islam over Germany's secular regime, for example:

> Those who strive for an Islamic state should leave Germany as they violate the German constitution.

Quotes such as these two taken from the Internet give an insight into a topic lots of Muslims[3] in Germany deal with: the compatibility of loyalties to both the secular state and Islam. A lot of young committed Muslims seem to question their religion and their position in society in the process of identity formation. The current generations of Muslim university students many of whom were born, or

[1] All quotes from StudiVZ.de are translated from German into English by the author.

[2] StudiVZ is the German abbreviation of Studentenverzeichnis; in its English translation it is students' directory.

[3] The term Muslim in this chapter includes also those individuals who are not necessarily practicing Islam as a religion but who identify themselves to some extend with Islam culturally, as integral part of a set of ideas, customs, and social behaviour characteristic of their families' countries/societies of origin. This rather amorphic cultural identification with Islam is meant by using the terms 'cultural Muslim' or 'Muslim cultural background' within this chapter.

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T. Hoffmann and G. Larsson (eds.), *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies*, Muslims in Global Societies Series 7,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7247-2_2,

at least socialized in Germany, have grown into the German public debate on Islam (Tiesler 2007: 26). Muslim students or those who are due to their cultural background (originating from Muslim-majority countries) ascribed as being Muslims are often expected by the non-Muslim majority to have either expertise in the field of Islam or to define their position about political issues, which they assume to bear reference to Islam such as terrorism, the wearing of head scarves, honor killings, or the relation between Islam and democracy. Therewith, the German public questions the Muslims' loyalty to the state and thus also their "ethics of citizenship" (Habermas 2005: 124; see also Landmann 2005: 587). The constant pressure of justification has become part of the young Muslims' self-conceptions (Göle 2004).

According to Bielefeldt, individuals are acting subjects with regard to their religious attitudes and practices: Instead of being mere members of a religion, absorbing its guidelines passively, individuals change and develop their religious mentalities and identities – either by deliberate contention or by learning processes of everyday life (Bielefeldt 2009: 179). Many young German Muslims utilize the Internet, especially the Web 2.0 applications, which create an "architecture of participation" (O'Reilly 2005), as a means to dispute their collective identities in terms of religious affiliation and national belonging. In doing so, they develop actively their standpoint on Islam. Research on the question of how they use the Internet is therefore crucial for the understanding of today's public debate on Islam in Germany. Yet, few attempts have been made to elucidate the dynamics of religious and national identity negotiation online in order to bring German Muslim university students into focus.

In this chapter, I will address the question of how young German Muslims take advantage of the Internet to negotiate their standpoints on religious affiliation and national belonging by presenting some findings from German StudiVZ.de. First, I will introduce the social network of StudiVZ.de and give a description of the Muslim students' activities on it, focusing especially on one of its discussion groups namely "Sophisticated Islam" (SI). Secondly, I will provide a brief discussion of previous research on the public perception of Islam in Germany asking how the pressure of justification, resulting from the largely negative images of Islam that prevail in the mainstream discourse, influences the German Muslims' self-conceptions. Thirdly, I will turn to an examination of how Muslim students communicate and negotiate their sense of belonging to religion and nation, respectively the secular state, in the SI-online discussion-group.

Muslims on StudiVZ.de

The Web 2.0 application StudiVZ.de is a social networking platform for students. StudiVZ.de, launched in 2005, used to be one of the biggest social networking sites in Germany until facebook became more important somewhen in 2010/2011. StudiVZ.de provides, quite similar to facebook, several features for its members: Students are able to keep and maintain a personal page containing information about their name,

age, study subjects, interests, courses and group memberships within StudiVZ.de. They also have the option to upload photographs on their personal pages. With the help of the search function, former classmates, fellow students, learning partners or people sharing the same interests can be found. The latter are often organized in groups within StudiVZ.de. These groups have their own pages and a discussion forum open to group members. StudiVZ.de's users have established more than 700 discussion groups on Islam (counted in 2010, in the meantime, several of these groups have migrated to facebook). These discussion groups range from groups founded by Muslims exclusively for Muslims to discuss inner-Islamic issues, for example "Converts to Islam" (267 members)[4] or "Brothers and Sisters in Islam" (67 members), to groups founded by Muslims aiming at the proselytizing of non-Muslims such as "Dawa – Islam for Non-Muslims" (266 members). Furthermore, there are numerous groups on interfaith dialogue such as "Dialogue between Islam and Christianity" (263 members), groups which were founded by Muslims to provide information on Islam, for instance "Questions on Islam" (232 members), and groups founded by Muslims to discuss social-political issues referring to Muslims' everyday lives in Germany such as "Islam and Everyday Life" (165 members). Finally, there are also groups by non-Muslims, which have anti-Islamic contents, for instance "Islam is Peace – Yeah and the earth is flat" (429 members). Most discussions within all the groups refer to the public perception of Islam in Germany or to the assumed contrast of Islam and the West.

Having more than 2,300 members, "Sophisticated Islam" (SI) is the third largest group on Islam on StudiVZ.de following "Islam is peace" (4,663 members) and "Goethe and Islam" (2,821 members). When it comes to the total number of threads (1,690) and postings (23,619), it is even the most frequented Islam related group on this social network. SI was founded by a male Muslim student in September 2006 who has invited StudiVZ.de's users to ask critical questions about and to define Islam. Though he does not direct his calling exclusively at Muslims hardly any students, who do not label themselves explicitly as Muslims join in the discussions on the forum. What makes this online group particularly interesting is that the only characteristic its members have in common is their being Muslim university students in Germany. Consequently, the SI-members' stances over Islam vary. They do not represent one certain Islamic school of thought but rather the whole variety of ideologies and interpretations within the Islamic spectrum: Supporters of the Salafiya, who strive to emulate the life of prophet Muhammad and the first generations of Muslims, discuss their world views with Muslims, who describe themselves as liberal or secular; Students, whose religiosity is colored by Turkish traditions interact with those who mix their Islamic sets of beliefs for instance with Afghan, Algerian, or German cultures; Individual spiritualists encounter stern dogmatists; Converts exchange experiences with those who were born and raised as Muslims. It is not surprising that debates on this forum quickly heat up as the diversity

[4] The following data on group-membership were collected on January 4th 2010.

resulting from the group members' different stances on Islam and from their diverse cultural backgrounds holds a high potential for conflict. Cursing and swearing are thus a common means of communication, which is often deployed when members with differing stances on Islam encounter or when dominant discourses on Islam are challenged by members with dissent opinions. Hence, it is little surprising that the issue of the 'appropriate language' for discussions is highly contested on the forum. Language deemed (in)appropriate for Muslims as well as general good manners play a relevant role in this perpetual dispute on the forum's "Netiquette" (which is a portmanteau word formed from 'network etiquette'; Strawbridge 2006). Particularly the ongoing contention between the forums' members illustrates that SI forms a sphere, which allows the interaction of Muslim students, who presumably would not get together offline to exchange their thoughts. Both, the Internet in general and this online forum in particular generate a new quality of inner-Islamic debate, which would hardly come into existence offline. Numerous discussion threads on the SI-forum, which reflect the wide range of Muslim world views, centre on the questions of national belonging and religious affiliation in secular Germany. This is inter alia due to the ambivalent public perception of Islam in Germany which results in a permanent pressure on Muslims and individuals who are expected to be Muslims to justify themselves.

Public Perception of Islam in Germany

Ever since the end of the Second World War, the number of immigrants coming from Muslim-majority countries, mainly from Turkey as 'guest workers' in the 1960s and 1970s, has increased in Germany resulting today in the largest Muslim population in Western Europe following France. There are approximately four million people living in Germany, who are ascribed of being Muslims (Deutsche Islam konferenz 2009: 11) either due to their religious beliefs, their socio-political statements or in most cases due to their geographical origins or family ancestries. Approximately 50,000 of them are estimated to be German converts to Islam (Landmann 2005: 588). The number of German citizens of Muslim belief and the number of those Muslims, who were born and socialized in Germany, has constantly been increasing (Tiesler 2007: 24; Motadel 2009: 1). However, the question of how to integrate Islam into Germany's society was not under discussion in the German federal parliament before the 1990s (Bade 2007: 51–56; Oberndörfer 2009: 128). Prior to this decade, the issues of possible settlement and citizenship for the 'guest workers' were never seriously considered and Islam was treated as a "guest religion" (Fetzer and Soper 2006: 102) that the state had no obligation to accommodate under the law. Similarly, most of the largely male migrant workers had believed that their stay in Germany was temporary. Hence, they had, just as the German state, little reason to consider constructing a perennial presence of Islam. However, numerous Muslim 'guest workers' decided to stay permanently and thus brought their families to settle in Germany – and therefore did not live up to Germany's expectation that

the influx of Muslims was only temporary. Consequently, the educational, cultural, or religious needs of the growing Muslim population in Germany were hardly met.

In the 1990s, Germany's Muslim population started to ensconce itself, for instance, by constructing representative mosques, demanding the right to religious education in schools, or the right to wear head scarves in public. Only when Islam started to settle in Germany and thus became visible, did a broader public discourse of Islam set in. Halm (2008) and Bielefeldt (2009), to name just two authors who are engaged in the analysis of the mainstream discourse about Islam in Germany, found out that the German public tends to be prejudiced against Muslims and Islam in general. Following the attacks of 9/11, Muslims have encountered even more bias than before even though the vast majority of German Muslims passed severe criticism on the Islamist terrorists of al-Qaida. Apparently, as the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research detected, a high percentage of Germans associates Islam with religious fanaticism and radicalism (70 %), the oppression of women (80 %), and violence (62 %). Furthermore the research shows that more than half of the German population believes that Islam is obsessed with proselytizing others (56 %); and strives for political influence (56 %) (Petersen 2012). According to Bielefeldt, people in Germany indeed differentiate between Islam, Islamism, and terrorism – but many of them distinguish between these categories only theoretically: There seems to be a gap between accepted theoretical differentiations and the practical irrelevance of those differentiations for the general attitude towards Islam, which often remains ambivalent or negative (Bielefeldt 2009: 175).

Meanwhile, the German state has discerned the necessity of integrating Islam into the German system and Muslims into the society. On that account, the last two governments have put a strong focus on Islam while having worked out programs for the social integration of migrants and thus, as Halm stresses, have culturalized the discourse of integration, overestimating the importance of religion for the politics of integration (Halm 2008: 106). One example for the attempt to integrate Islam into the German system is the convening for the "Islam Conference" by the former German Minister of the Interior Wolfgang Schäuble in September 2006. This conference aims at opening a permanent dialogue with Germany's Muslim minorities. The Islamic delegation comprises representatives from the major Islamic organizations in Germany, as well as independent Muslim citizens. Schäuble has made it clear that the Islam Conference not only targets at the social integration of the German Muslims, but also meets the demands of Germany's national security (Deutsche Islam Konferenz 2006). In the interconnection of Islam and the politics of integration with the politics of national security manifests itself on the one hand the Germans' general distrust in the Muslims' loyalties to the constitution and the secular system. On the other hand it indicates that the German public still perceives Islam as the 'foreign other' (Jonker 2009). The general suspicion against Muslims becomes even more explicit by focusing on the "Muslim-Test" (Halm 2008: 14), a disputed beliefs test elaborated by the Home Office of the German Federal Land of Baden-Württemberg in 2005/2006 aiming at those individuals of a cultural Muslim background who wish to acquire German citizenship. The Home Office expects potential citizens to answer up to 30 questions covering subjects such as religious

freedom, democracy, terrorism, equality of the sexes, homosexuality, promiscuity, freedom of expression, and the concepts of honor and forced marriages. Questions asked include:

> What do you think if a man in Germany is married to two women at the same time? What do you think of the fact that parents forcibly marry off their children?; Do you think such marriages are compatible with human dignity?; Do you think a woman should obey her husband and that he can beat her if she is disobedient?; Imagine that your adult son comes home and says he is homosexual and plans to live with another man. How do you react?; Your daughter or sister comes home and says she has been sexually abused. What do you do?; How do you react when noticing that one of your acquaintances was involved in or is planning to conduct a terrorist attack? (Zeit Online 2006).

This questionnaire has been sharply criticized amongst others by representatives of several German political parties, the Central Council of Muslims and other Muslim organizations in Germany, the Central Council of Jews, and numerous German publicists. Following this opposition, Baden-Württemberg's Home Office announced that particularly sensitive questions on matters of conscience, such as homosexuality, are to be deleted. But it also made clear that it was going to stick to the beliefs test (Innenministerium Baden-Württemberg 2006; Polat 2006; Shakush 2009: 369–371).

While there is a growing awareness that Islam is not as homogenous a religion as the general public tends to believe, essentializing ideas and largely negative images still prevail in the mainstream discourse. The pressure on German Muslims to justify themselves resulting from the public's distrust influences not only their interactions with the non-Muslim majority but it also generates new dynamics of communication within the Muslim communities. Numerous Muslims respond to the essentialising mainstream discourse with opposing but equally essentialising self-representations: Some, especially young Muslims tend to advocate a new purist and 'true' form of "Muslimness"(Tiesler 2006: 153; Sisler 2007), distancing themselves from the perceived value relativism of the German, respectively Western, societies and creating a religious "resistance identity" (Castells 2004: 8). In doing so, Bielefeldt explains, many of them understand 'true' Islam as peaceful, ecumenical, and philanthropic, thus closing their eyes to existing forms of Muslim fundamentalism and extremism (Bielefeldt 2009: 176). Others lead an inner-Islamic discourse to enforce reforms and plurality. Often, these Muslims dissociate themselves from Islamistic – or what the non-Muslim majority understands as being Islamistic – views and, with regard to the German public, try to convey a heterogeneous image of Islam to counter negative stereotypes (Halm 2008: 14). Others again are – just as the majority of Germany's (non-Muslim) population – not intensely or not at all devout and are thus in accordance with the European rather secular context (Deutsche Islam konferenz 2009: 128–137). Furthermore, a strong inner-Islamic discourse between European Muslims, who promote the compatibility of practiced Islam and secular citizenship in Europe, has developed. One of its popular representatives is Tariq Ramadan, who has become generally known for books such as "To be a European Muslim" (1999) or "Western Muslims and the Future of Islam" (2004). Also his ideas find agreement especially on the part of young Muslims (Tiesler 2006).

Ramadan's views manifest themselves for example in certain forms of youth culture such as "Pop Islam" (Gerlach 2006).

The German Muslims' interaction with the non-Muslim majority, its ambivalent perception of Islam, and the culturalisation of the politics of integration has resulted in the growing importance of Islam for self-conceptions, attributions by others and of others. Ramadan centralizes the Muslims' living conditions in Germany and in the West in general:

> We are currently living through a veritable silent revolution in Muslim communities in the West: more and more young people and intellectuals are actively looking for a way to live in harmony with their faith while participating in the societies that are their societies, whether they like it or not (Ramadan 2004: 4).

Examples of how German Muslim students negotiate their social affiliations within the context of the general public's perception of Islam can be elucidated on StudiVZ.de. The Muslim students use most notably two means to communicate and justify their attitudes towards Islam and the German state online: First, the negotiation of social and religious norms; secondly, the linguistic generation of social belonging.

Negotiation of Social and Religious Norms

Social norms have an impact on the individual's affiliations to social categorizations such as religion, state, or nation. The members of StudiVZ.de, who communicate on the Muslim SI-forum, respond among many things to social norms, respectively prejudices, that the non-Muslim German majority confronts them with, such as "Islam glorifies violence" or "Islam is against democracy" as for instance assumed in the "Muslim Test". The same applies to the religious norms and traditions which members of the Muslim communities approach the students with, for instance: "Muslims ought to be loyal to the Ummah" or "Islam stands for Peace". The Muslim students under consideration utilize online discussions to develop their own standpoints on those diverging norms of the non-Muslim public and the Muslim minority. The following quotes, which display two oppositional modes of negotiating norms, are extracted from a thread about the relation between national conscience and Islam on SI. A male Muslim (henceforth Irfan[5]) opens up the discussion by asking the following question:

> Why is nationalism forbidden in Islam, even though Mohammed banned child adoption to prevent the tribal lineages from disconnecting? There have certainly been several good reasons for issuing this old instruction, which I will not specify here. For my point the importance of the tribe and its unifying collective identity [which Irfan understands to be the reason for the banning of child adoption] is relevant. This generally accepted regulation which aimed at the tribe's identity can be conferred to a state's identity today, as no nation states and therefore no national identities existed in the seventh century. I am looking forward to receiving your answers.

[5] The interlocuters' names are made up to maintain their anonymity.

The first comment on this question follows promptly:

> "In Islam nationalism is haram and there is no 'permitted' haram."

The male author of this posting (henceforth Siddiq) justifies his view by attaching a text entitled: "The Prohibition of Nationalism in Islam", which he copied from the Internet (short extract):

> Nationalism is a concept alien to Islam because it calls for unity based on family and tribalistic ties, whereas Islam binds people together on the Aqeedah, that is belief in Allah (swt) and His Messenger (saaw). Islam calls for the ideological bond. Grouping the Muslims on tribalistic lines is clearly forbidden. It is narrated by Abu Da'wud that the Messenger of Allah (saaw) said, 'He is not one of us who calls for Asabiyyah, (nationalism/tribalism) or who fights for Asabiyyah or who dies for Asabiyyah.' (…).

Irfan, as exemplified by the first posting, tries to develop arguments from within the Islamic tradition for a twofold identification with both, Islam and nation. By restudying religious norms (ban of child adoption and ban of national conscience) he develops his own arguments to harmonize Islamic and secular social norms. Instead of resorting to the explanatory statements of institutionalized Muslim authorities, Irfan enters into a debate with fellow Muslim students on this social network. His way to negotiate secular and religious norms is to apply his own logic within the framework of a discussion with peers and not to consult Muslim authorities. This sort of 'bottom-up' Islamic knowledge production embodies the characteristical decentralization but also the recent eroding of the traditional system of knowledge production in Islam. As Peter Mandaville illustrates, the history of authoritative knowledge production in Islam has been one of competition between diverse social, epistemological, and political orders, which is due to the fact that Islam lacks formal clerical structures and church-like institutions. Therefore, Islamic knowledge production always occurred within local contexts. But it was only a particular class of legitimate authorities who had the exclusive right to produce it. With the rise of literacy rates, mass education, new technologies and new modes of communication, 'lay' Muslims have started to challenge the institutionalized authorities' monopoly on Islamic knowledge (Mandaville 2007: 102). Especially the Internet has created a new media ecology in which various interpretative authorities and 'lay' Muslims compete for audience (Sisler 2007). The contents of SI-discussions are what Christopher Helland describes as 'online-religion' (in contrast to the institutionalized and top down organized 'religion-online'), which is characterized by bottom-up communication supported by the applications of the Internet:

> (…) a new form of religious participation is occurring. This form of religious participation I choose to recognize as *online-religion.* Individuals are interacting with the religious beliefs systems presented on the Internet; they are contributing personal beliefs and receiving personal feedback. It is a dialectic process; the beliefs are developing and altering, adapting and fluctuating in the direction participants wish to take them (Helland 2007: 214).

For individuals the Internet, notably the Web 2.0, is a perfect space to exchange opinions particularly on delicate subjects such as religion because online communication is usually not as socially binding as offline communication. That is due to the

fact that the user is mostly able to remain anonymous: "The majority of one's correspondents in cyberspace, after all, have no bodies, no faces, no histories beyond what they choose to reveal" (Slevin 2000: 55). Consequently, not needing to be greatly afraid of social exclusion in the offline context, the user is more likely to overcome his inhibitions to advance his views online. By analyzing Irfan's statement, it becomes obvious that he uses the Internet to actively develop (by means of contention with peers) a standpoint on Islam which allows for the integration into the German secular system without needing to give up Islamic norms.

Siddiq justifies religious norms differently. Unlike Irfan, he does not develop his own arguments to harmonize religious and secular norms online; rather he presents and sticks to a religious norm that he attaches universal validity to ("nationalism is haram"). By applying this norm to the context of the compatibility of religious affiliation and national belonging Siddiq expresses primarily loyalty to what he perceives is the Muslim community. He does not justify his standpoint with the help of his own arguments, but by referring to a text he copied from the Internet. The unknown author of this text gives reasons for the prohibition of nationalism deploying Islamic norms. Even though Siddiq differs from Irfan in the way he justifies Islamic norms, both students share that they undermine the traditional system of knowledge production: Irfan by applying his own logic and Siddiq by relying on a text he found on the Internet. The Internet allows information to flow among millions of sources at practically the same time. While information in the "Gutenberg Galaxy" (McLuhan 1962) came to be associated with exclusivity and exclusion ("exformation" instead of information as Schiltz et al. 2007: 96 put it) it is accessible and producible for potentially everybody in the "Internet Galaxy" (Castells 2001). Thence, participants in interactive communication on the Internet can be coevally producers and recipients of information. The unmitigated proliferation of social software (such as discussion forums) has led to the growth of knowledge through information sharing, but it has also eroded the traditional definite authority of what knowledge is. Information individuals collect on the Internet (for instance the text Siddiq copy/pasted) becomes knowledge as long as these individuals belief in its validity. According to Schiltz et al. (2007: 99) traditional and Web 2.0-generated knowledge differ. They argue that social software leads to another, probably superior kind of knowledge. Instead of holding knowledge solely in its mind, the individual is able to outsource knowledge into social knowledge networks:

> More than ever, knowing means being embedded in a social knowledge network that guarantees the JIT [just-in-time] delivery of the knowledge components you need. At the same time, the robust types of trust mechanisms that have made traditional knowledge what it is today are still in place (1) to entrust the supply chain to a degree that one can place one's beliefs on it (2) such a way that they are not only true and justified but also that you do not even need to activate them. They are active in the social network, and guiding your actions as if they were personally activated beliefs (Schiltz et al. 2007: 100).

Correspondingly, the Web 2.0 grants Muslims access to all kinds of digitized religious sources. It enables them to search either with the help of wiki-like databases (for instance islam-pedia.de) within Quran (the literal word of God revealed to Muhammad) and Sunna (the collected reports of Muhammad's deeds

and pronouncements) to find religious evidence for their opinions. Also by employing search engines such as Google, the Internet allows them to find confirmation of their views by (alleged) Muslim authorities whose threads of arguments and interpretations of Islamic norms are displayed online. In contrast to established religious scholars however, Muslims taking part in online-discussions (such as Siddiq) are usually not expected to have memorized a huge corpus of Islamic knowledge. Instead – in agreement with Schiltz et al. (2007) – they establish their authority by knowing where to access Islamic knowledge when needed. The fact that Siddiq makes use of the Web 2.0 as a source for the justification of religious norms demonstrates that this modern medium – no matter how religiously conservative he presents himself – has influenced his means of claiming religious legitimacy.

The different demands regarding the justification of norms – either for developing own logic-derived arguments or for employing religious evidence – complicate the communication between the Muslim students on SI. The interaction between Irfan (I) and Siddiq (S), which follows the first two postings, further elucidates this:

[I]: (…) What is the text's source? There is no reference to the banning of child adoption in this text. Everyone can copy and paste texts.
[S]: (…) If you had read the text like an educated man, you would have noticed the sources within the text.
[I]: I would like to know which Internet page you copied the text from. I have noticed the religious evidences in the text, of course. (…).
[S]: You can find all these evidences from the Quran and Sunna, which are self-evident, in the text. If you still do not understand them, then you can search them in the Islamic Hadith-collections and in the translations of the Quran. There their meanings are explained.

Apart from the observation that Irfan and Siddiq draw on different sets of sources for the justification of norms (technical/academic sources such as Internet pages versus Islamic evidences' authority) their dialogue also provides some information about the students' stances over Islam. Irfan seems to have an individual access to Islam as his own reasoning is central for his acceptability of religious norms. Not authority but plausibility is what he relies on. Siddiq in contrast, relies solely on the authority of religious sources. Carmen Becker describes in detail this sort of (Salafi) religiosity and the concept of religious knowledge production related to it. According to her it is the centrality of religious sources what sets Salafism apart from other forms of Muslim religiosity. Salafists strive for the purification of Islam portraying the lives of the prophet Muhammad and his companions, the salaf al-salih, as the perfect Muslim role-model. Therefore Salafi knowledge practices build upon categories such as true/false or good/bad and thus upon halal/haram testing everything whether it is in accordance with the religious sources, which they consider to be the ultimate authorities (Becker 2009: 81). By referring Irfan to the Hadith-collections and the translations of the Quran, Siddiq establishes himself as an authority who knows where to access Islamic knowledge. Irfan in contrast, expresses his reluctance to accept the opinion of an alleged Muslim online-authority which Siddiq offers. As a consequence, Irfan and Siddiq talk cross-purposes but the same they both challenge – thanks to the online-sphere, which allows for their interaction – each other's world views.

There are numerous other examples for the negotiation and the different modes of justification of religious and social norms on SI, which this forum allows for. Another common means the Muslim students on SI utilize to negotiate their religious and national belonging is the linguistic generation of membership categorizations.

Linguistic Production of Social Belonging

Individuals experience themselves and others as members of social groups. Membership categorization devices help to generate groupings of every description (Sacks 1992). According to Hausendorf, the communication of social belonging describes the linguistic-communicative aspect of these membership categorizations (Hausendorf 2006). In the online-discourses within SI, Muslim students use several linguistic devices to create collective identities and to categorize themselves and others in terms of social positioning regarding state and religion. One common device the Muslim students under consideration employ online is to *attribute* others to a certain social group and to *ascribe* and *judge* accordant group-specific characteristics. Therewith, they distance themselves from the respective generalized other and define in contrast what accordingly to their perception a 'true' Muslim should be like. The definition of both, what the respective other is and which characteristics a Muslim should possess varies depending on the numerous world views the students hold: The spectrum of the 'other' ranges from the non-Muslim, the Muslim who does not behave like a 'true' Muslim (whatever a true Muslim is), from the Islamist or the Salafist to the Kemalist, or nationalist. Following James Slevin's research on the interrelations between Internet and society, Martin Thomsen Højsgaard illustrates that interaction on the Internet ('primary arena of circulation') mirrors the tense pushing and pulling of real people in offline-settings ('secondary area of circulation'). Thus, online-interaction is always integrated within the individually constructed and socially situated life stories of all its participants (Højsgaard 2006: 167). Keeping the contextual factors of the interaction on SI, here the huge variety of its members' cultural backgrounds and their differing stances over Islam in mind, the multiplicity of the constructed 'other' is little surprising. Relating to interfaith dialogue, Højsgaard concludes that:

> (…) the Internet functions as an arena of circulation within society at large where individuals produce and receive very different types of information. (…) There seems to be a constant flux of messages being written, read, and responded to. Some users produce very hostile religious messages, others produce messages that seek to overcome tensions either by engaging in dialogue, by activating irony or humor, or by being even more hostile or rude (Højsgaard 2006: 176).

The same applies to the inner-Islamic discussions on SI. Even though the participants label themselves as Muslims, their world views vary extremely, which is due to their differing offline contexts again: The SI members' online interaction is part of the ongoing process of constructing or deconstructing their identities offline:

> Online communications facilitate these processes by providing an attractive communicative arena for finding out what is either 'in place' or 'out of place' in religious affairs (Højsgaard 2006: 176).

The most popular divide on SI is the one between alleged Kemalists, respectively supporters of the secular state in general, and alleged Islamists. The following quote by a male Muslim student is directed against the commitment to the secular state, which was articulated by several Muslim students', one of whom is of Turkish origin:

> You are a nationalist. And you are as racist as Atzis[6] and as criminal as the nationalistic terrorists of Ergenekon.[7] People like you should be in jail.

In this quote the three above mentioned steps – attributing, ascribing, and judging – of membership categorization become visible: First, this student attributes being nationalistic to his opponents. Secondly, he ascribes them to be racist and criminal and thirdly, he judges that these alleged nationalists should be imprisoned. Within the same context, also addressing the same opponents, another Muslim student adds:

> Is your prophet Atatürk or Muhammad?

By asking this, the student even questions his opponents' faiths and thus excludes them from what he perceives is the Muslim collective. What follows is a definition of what a Muslim is by another student with a critical stance to the secular state:

> If you describe those people as Islamists, who commit themselves to Islam then it is justified to call you Kemalists.

Implicitly, he blames and imputes the assumed secular students not to be true Muslims as they do not commit themselves to Islam completely, but also to the secular state, respectively to Mustafa Kemal's form of laicism in Turkey. What is striking is that these students alloy the concepts of secularism, nationalism, Turkish laicism and Kemalism using them synonymically. The strongest devaluation of the other within this context is the explicit questioning of the opponents' faiths:

> Brothers, are you surely Muslims? How do you treat your brothers and sisters in Islam? Do you want to know the truth or are you simply aiming at provocating us?

Within this dispute, several critics of the secular state stand up against the compatibility of religious affiliation and national belonging, for instance by stating:

> Nationalism is a Western monstrosity that has nothing whatsoever to do with Islam.

Thus, they define the secular state as the generalized other. The other way round, those students, who in this dispute on SI advocate the commitment to both, to the Muslim community and to the secular state, blame their critics to be Islamists:

> I do not accept your opinion, which is that Islam is against nations and national conscience. That is an Islamist's view.

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[6] Nihal Atzis (1905–1975), a prominent Turkish writer, poet, and novelist who was a fervent supporter of Turanism.

[7] Ergenekon is an alleged clandestine, Kemalist ultra-nationalist organization in Turkey.

By stating this, this student conveys an image of Islam, which enables Muslims to have a twofold social identification: with a nation state and with Islam. Those, who do not agree are ascribed as being Islamists who have a political stance to Islam:

> You can talk politics, but don't you dare call that Islam.

It is common also for these students to use the linguistic devices of attributing, ascribing and judging:

> You harm Islam [judging]. I certainly know Islam better than you do. The difference is that I am not an Islamist [attributing]. I do not have to agree with you. No matter what you believe of me: I stick to the German state. You are as much a menace to the state as the PKK[8] [judging]. Individuals, who share your ideology, are dangerous for the society and the state [ascribing]. There are more and more radical Islamists. We have to fight that tendency.

By stating that "we have to fight that", this student creates an alternative Muslim collective, including those students who do not see a conflict between national belonging and religious affiliation. This collective identity thus excludes those Muslim students, who do not agree with this definition of Islam. The alleged 'Islamists' defend themselves against this attribution by stating for instance:

> I do not understand those people, who depict themselves as Muslims. And who at the same time accuse other Muslims of being Islamists or Fundamentalists just because they underline their views by quoting from Quran or Sunna.

The longer the dispute between these Muslim students continues the more insulting the interaction becomes. Invective such as "apes!", "terrorist!", or "green communist!" is often utilized by either of the opponents. Only after the interference of some uninvolved members of SI, who criticize the behavior of the conflicting parties and who negotiate between their differing positions, it is possible for all of them to debate objectively again:

> What has been going on here? Your way of debating is not at all constructive and acceptable. If you are not able to stay objective, please stay away from this discussion.

Similar dynamics of interaction can be found between any other opponents creating specific collective identities with the help of linguistic membership categorization devices, be it supporter of the Salafiya versus liberal Muslims or individual spiritualists versus stern dogmatists. On SI, othering is a common and strong means of defining and securing one's own positive identity through the stigmatization of interlocutors who hold opposing world views.

Conclusion

> When all is said and done: "Who of you does not feel able to cope with the German secular system and why?"

[8] The Kurdistan Workers' Party.

This question by yet another Muslim student on SI pinpoints once again the issue a lot of young, committed Muslims in Germany try to settle amongst others on the Internet: The negotiation of religious affiliation and national belonging. The SI-discussion-forum on StudiVZ.de provides an online-sphere which allows for the interaction of students holding different, sometimes even opposing world views, who would have probably not got into contact offline. By thrashing the differing ideas of Islam, nation, and secular state the Muslim students under consideration challenge each other. The anonymity of the Internet might intensify (inner)-religious conflicts as some users behave more "unpleasantly or ludicrously than they would have in face-to-face contact" (Højsgaard 2006: 165). Nonetheless, in the end it could probably result in the students' reassessing their attitudes aiming at the general settlement of dispute regarding the relation of Islam and state within Germany. That would be in accordance to Campbell's description of the Internet: "The Internet as common mental geography is more than a tool for communication; it is used by individuals to construct a common world view" (Campbell 2005: 20).

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A "Virtual Club" of Lithuanian Converts to Islam

Egdūnas Račius

Though the majority of Lithuanian Muslims (among them converts) reside in either Vilnius or Kaunas, a sizeable share of them live in smaller towns far from the two cities and have no real opportunities to be part of a physical congregation whose members can meet face to face. Given the fact that even those who live in Vilnius or Kaunas do not actively engage in communal affairs of the congregations there (or seek religious guidance from the local *ulama*), one is confronted with the question of how the Lithuanian Muslims realize their islamicity both on intellectual (knowledge of Islam) and practical (performing rituals and fulfilling duties) levels. This question is especially dire in the case of converts who have not been socialized into their chosen religion by either family or wider community and as newcomers are not always aware of the complexities of Islamic beliefs and practices.

Part of the answer (comprising the intellectual-rhetorical level) may lie in appreciation of how heavily Lithuanian converts to Islam (in line with Muslims the world over[1]) use the World Wide Web for religious guidance and networking, or to use Gary Bunt's terms, have tapped into the "Cyber Islamic Environments" (Bunt 2003). For instance, a decade or so ago they had effectively created a self-sufficient "virtual club" of theirs on a Lithuanian-language Islamic online forum at www.islamas.lt, based on, to paraphrase Tina Gudrun Jensen's expression, their invented exclusive "symbolic ethnicity" (Jensen 2006: 645–646) comprising two natures – being at the same time Muslim and Lithuanian. In effect, the Forum had become a sort of "digital diaspora" and as such served not only the religious needs of the members but was also a space of shared co-ethnic belonging for a particular group of people.[2] In other words, it was both for and about Lithuanian converts to Islam.

[1] For analysis of a Swedish Muslim online discussion group and an international Islamic chat-room, see Larsson 2005 and Barak 2006 respectively.

[2] I thank the anonymous reviewer at Springer for suggesting this important aspect in the context of the workings of the islamas.lt forum.

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T. Hoffmann and G. Larsson (eds.), *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies*, Muslims in Global Societies Series 7,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7247-2_3,

Since its inception in the spring of 2004, the Forum had by the Spring of 2010, when it was closed by its administrators in May of that year,[3] accumulated more than 45,000 entries on several dozen Islam-related topics ranging from theological-dogmatic to rituals-related to practical issues submitted by almost 700 registered members[4] (of whom probably more than a half were non-Muslim) and scores of occasional visitors. Since the Forum, soon after its inception, became and, up till the closure, remained, next to being the first of its kind, almost the sole source in the Lithuanian language for interactive online religious guidance and religious knowledge seeking among Lithuanian converts to Islam, it deserves a separate treatment.

Like many similar forums, the islamas.lt forum was anonymous – its users needed not provide their "true" identity and as a rule would introduce themselves through nicknames or adopted Muslim names. The choice not to use one's official name in online forums and chat-rooms and instead substitute it with an adopted "Islamic"/Arabic name or a nickname might be explained variously (see Barak 2006) but in the case of islamas.lt it could be plausibly speculated that most of Lithuanian converts to Islam distrust the non-Muslim people they know and seek to avoid any unwanted reactions and reproach on their behalf if their conversion to Islam is discovered. Anonymity of users' identities, though, has a double beneficial side – first of all, presumably users can express more openly (be themselves) without risking being recognized and exposed by unwanted onlookers. This, in its turn, is very much sought after by researchers – they are on the lookout for 'authentic' positions and ideas, even if anonymous. Due to their anonymous nature, citation of thoughts of the Forum users used in the current text is deemed not to breach any privacy rights.

However, precisely because of its anonymous nature, the Forum at the same time had its limitations for anyone following communication on it (and the author of this text has been its member since the first day) – it is impossible to verify whether an individual who introduced her/himself as a Muslim (or a convert) indeed was such, and whether her/his thoughts were genuine. Ultimately, the question, how representative the Forum was of general trends within the community of Lithuanian converts to Islam, especially in regards to their actual (e.g. offline) religious practice, remains open.

Limitations notwithstanding, the most symptomatic feature of the Forum was its apparent serving as a self-study (and self-help) circle (virtual *madrasa*?) where

[3] Since then a new website and an online forum at http://islam-ummah.lt/index.html/ were launched in October of 2010 and by late 2013 the online forum had accumulated over 40,000 posts by over 320 registered users and visitors. As the majority of the registered users are the same as in the closed forum, one can consider the new forum to be essentially a continuation of the earlier discussions. The present chapter, however, is exclusively limited to the analysis of the defunct forum.

[4] Statistics taken from the main page of the online Islamas.lt forum at http://www.islamas.lt/forumas/index.php?act=idx. Accessed 21 April 2010.

more experienced members had assumed position of proxy religious guides/"tutors" (engaged in *dawa* of sorts) to both neophytes and interested non-Muslims. However, since even the converts most advanced in their religious knowledge have no formal religious education (and only a handful can speak some colloquial Arabic) and cannot pretend to be speaking in the name of "true" Islam,[5] plurality (and a great measure of cacophony) of visions of what is believed to constitute proper Islamic beliefs and behavior was ensured.

At the same time, one could observe a general trend among the members of the Forum toward a sort of revivalist-type, deterritorialised (Roy 2004: 18–20), *ulama-less* quazi-legalist[6] Islam (and at times, even neo-fundamentalism[7]) with an expressed "desire to follow the 'straight path', or even relocate it amidst the maze of alternatives generated through history" (Bunt 2003: 128), which among other things revealed the mistrust at the time by Lithuanian converts to Islam in competence of local (and indeed any) formal religious leaders – the *ulama*.[8] Thus in general, the Forum fits the pattern aptly observed by Barak, when he writes that "the Internet not only increases the number of religious opinions and interpretation to which one has access, thus changing the relationship between the followers of a religion and the texts, but also changes the nature of the relationship between believers and authority." (Barak 2006: 30) One might even argue that in the case of the islamas.lt forum, the very nature of authority (in the human, not textual, sense) had been redefined.

In view of the aforementioned circumstances, the primary aim of the chapter is to reveal, through an in-depth analysis of the islamas.lt forum, the ways religious knowledge has been and in fact continues (in the recent avatars of the forum) to be built and sought among Lithuanian converts to Islam, especially on an intra-communal basis. Furthermore, as sharing of knowledge inevitably involves those giving and receiving it, it is sought to expose nascent internal authority structures and hierarchies within this "online community". In a direct relation to this, the contents (nature and quality) of the (often "negotiated") religious knowledge is also addressed in the chapter.

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[5] Such position was enshrined in the rules of the Forum, where the rule number 5 stated: "No one from among the members of the islamas.lt forum is an official Islamic scholar, (except for those cases when it is publicly announced in the forum), therefore no one has a right to proclaim fatwas or a right to boast that has some sort of privileges to explain to others how they ought to live". At http://www.islamas.lt/forumas/index.php?showtopic=273. Accessed 13 January 2010.

[6] Quazi-legalist Islam in this article is a term used to designate a hybrid sub-dimension of revivalist Islam common to contemporary converts to Islam in the West, the main features of which are longing for a non-denominational *fiqh* and unreserved hostility to folk Islam.

[7] For the "basic tenets of neofundamentalism", see Roy 2004: 243–247.

[8] With the election of a new Mufti in 2008, who is a graduate of an Islamic college in Lebanon, the situation started gradually changing – more and more converts would engage with the Mufti and seek his spiritual guidance. The current Mufti, in his turn, has made himself more accessible to believers than the previous one.

Islam in Lithuania: The Context

The preliminary results of the 2011 Census, which like the previous ones included a question of religious identity, returned some 2.7 thousand residents of Lithuania as Sunni Muslims,[9] which is less than 0.1 % of the total population. For comparison, in the 2001 Census, 2,860 residents of the country had identified themselves as Sunni Muslim, 1,679 of whom (or 58.7 % of all Sunni Muslims) identified themselves as ethnic Tatars, 362 (12.6 %) as Azerbaijanis (Department 2002: 204–205). The 2011 Census showed that the biggest ethnic groups traditionally associated with a Muslim background are Tatars (2,793, a 13.7 % decrease from 3,235 in 2001) and Azerbaijanis (648, even a bigger decrease of 17.8 % from 788 in 2001) (Statistics Lithuania 2012: 20).

The biggest group with a Muslim background, the Lithuanian Tatars, have been living in the eastern part of today's Republic of Lithuania since the fourteenth century when they started settling in what was the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (the territories of which are now divided among Lithuania, Belarus and Poland) as mercenaries and political immigrants (Račius 2009: 16–17). Despite or because of the fact that Muslims have been only a tiny minority (though precise data are not available, it can be safely assumed that at no time in history did the Muslim population of the GDL exceed 100,000) of the citizenry of the GDL, they enjoyed almost all rights and freedoms that their Christian fellow citizens did. Though over time Lithuanian Tatars lost their mother tongue, they retained their religion and survived as a distinct ethno-cultural yet well integrated group. Today the Lithuanian state recognizes Islam (albeit only in its Sunni Hanafi rite) as one of the nine traditional confessions in Lithuania (Parliament 1995).

Descendants of immigrants from the Muslim Central Asian and Caucasian republics who settled in Lithuania during the Soviet period made up most of the rest of Muslims in Lithuania throughout the Soviet period and well into the independence (around 1,400 in 2001, (Department 2002: 188–189)). Though a substantial number of Lithuania's inhabitants with a Muslim background (around half of both 3,235 Tatars and 788 Azeris in 2001) did not indicate their affiliation to Islam many nonetheless might potentially be considered nominal Muslims. This especially applies to Azeris, traditionally Shi'is, some of whom might have chosen not to identify with Sunnis but may still be observant.

There are so far very few recent Muslim immigrants and most of them are still non-citizens though several dozen have been naturalized. In addition, some 500 or more citizens of Lithuania converted to Islam in the past two decades, some of whom have not made their conversion public.[10] Taking all these circumstances into

[9] Personal e-mail communication from Vanda Vaitekūnienė, Head of the Population Census and Survey Organisation Division, Department of Statistics of the Republic of Lithuania, October 3, 2012.

[10] Data from observations of on-line Muslim Internet forums and personal experience of the author. A note has to be added here – many of Lithuanian converts to Islam temporarily or permanently reside outside the Lithuanian borders.

account, the total number of people of Muslim background in Lithuania as of 2013 could be as high as 7,000, but Muslims who actively practice religious rituals and adhere by religious injunctions on a daily basis are unlikely to exceed a tenth of the total. Converts presumably constitute a prominent size among those "truly living" their religion.

Lithuanian Converts to Islam: An Attempt at Typology

Conversion of Lithuanians (both ethnic and of other ethnic origins, like Polish, Russian) to Islam is a recent phenomenon – two decades ago there virtually were no Lithuanian convert Muslims. By 2013, their number had possibly passed 500. However, no any official data on number of Lithuanian converts to Islam exist. Estimates given below are based on survey of internet and other sources (published media, conversations with Muslims) and private acquaintances of the author. The author has at least basic personal information on some 60 of Lithuanian converts to Islam. Although it is too early to talk about any noteworthy tendency, it is already possible to offer a crude typology of Lithuanian converts to Islam.

One may speak of three types (or groups) of Lithuanian converts to Islam based on "motivational experiences" forwarded by Lofland and Skonovd: *intellectual*, *mystical*, *experimental*, *affectional*, *revivalist*, and *coercive* (Lofland and Skonovd 1981: 373–385), to which later authors added several more "motivational experiences", among them *negativist* (Lakhdar et al. 2007: 1–15). In the case of Lithuanian converts to Islam, affectional and experimental "motivational experiences" evidently dominate.[11]

Probably the biggest group (between 200 and 300 individuals) of converts are female Lithuanian citizens who have either married or maintain close personal relations with Muslims hailing from Muslim-majority countries. Most of these female converts may be assigned affectional "motivational experience". Or, to use Stefano Allievi's terminology, this type of conversion can be called "relational" and "conversion under these circumstances is a means to reach another aim (marriage), not an end in itself" (Allievi 2002: 1). Yet, many of such women married to Muslims become themselves devout Muslims though few gain any proper (and virtually none formal) religious education. It is the members of this particular group of Lithuanian Muslims who were most active on the islamas.lt forum (and its recent reincarnation at islam-ummah.lt) in the capacity of amateur religious guides – "tutors" (engaged in household level *dawa*) and who best represent the Lithuanian case of what in this text is called quazi-legalism.

Most of converts in this group, however, do not live in Lithuania. Those who do, as a rule, raise their children as Muslims (understood here in a nominal sense, as

[11] A similar distribution was found in a research on 70 British converts to Islam (Köse and Loewenthal 2000: 101–110).

opposed to non-Muslims). Thus, one might start considering half-Lithuanians born Muslim, numbers of whom will doubtlessly only increase.

The second group (between 150 and 200 individuals) of converts might tentatively be called "adventurers" or "lovers", what in part corresponds to the experimental "motivational experience", though negativist "motivational experience" is also often present. Usually these are young unmarried males and females. Many of them simply "stumbled" upon Islam by accidentally coming upon information on Islam on the World Wide Web or meeting Muslims while abroad and became fascinated with it. According to Allievi (Allievi 2002: 1), such conversions belong to a "discovery of Islam" type. In the initial phase after their conversion converts of this type painstakingly aspire to become as Islamic as possible: constantly repeat Islamic formulas in Arabic, use religious symbols, don "Islamic" attire. Members of this group are as a rule at the receiving end of the intra-*ummaic dawa* found in abundance on the islamas.lt forum.

Many among this group decry living in Lithuania for perceived its society's ignorance of Islam and intolerance toward Muslims and actively seek to leave Lithuania for a country with significant Muslim minority, like Germany, USA or UK. As a result, many of them temporarily or permanently reside abroad.

However, conversion to Islam for some in this group is a passing matter, a sort of protest against one's own culture, a sign of rejection of the culture received through socialization in family and school (hence a hint of negativist "motivational experience"). Once adventure becomes boring and the thrill it initially brings wanes away, a share of them leave Islam behind and return to their original identity or move onto another.

The third, and by far the smallest (up to 50 individuals), group of converts might be called "spiritual seekers" (with intellectual "motivational experience") whose conversion, in Allievi's words, belongs to the "rational" conversions type (Allievi 2002: 1). These are people who discovered Islam after having gone through several other religious traditions, movements and cults (in other words, with a "conversion career"[12]). As a rule, they are married middle-aged males with families and careers in Lithuania. Sometimes they manage to pursue their family members to also convert to Islam. Such converts plunge into religious self-study: they analyze the Quran and Hadith and devour religious texts in search for what the belief is the essence of Islam. Though members of this group do (even extensively) use Internet in search for religious guidance, as a rule they abstained from engaging in discussions on *islamas.lt* forum. Those who have tried have since abandoned the Forum. Some of these converts grow with time tired and ultimately distance themselves from active religious practice and social interaction with other Muslims.

As the first two types of converts constitute both the majority of Lithuanian converts to Islam and the active majority of users of the islamas.lt forum they are the main group which the present text focuses on.

[12] Expression 'conversion career' has been borrowed from *Conversion Careers: in and out of the New Religions* (Richardson 1978).

Islamas.lt Forum – A Virtual Madrasa?

The nature and mission of the islamas.lt forum was succinctly expressed in the words of one of its most active (with more than 5,800 posts as of April 2010) members, Rimantė, who argued that

> this website and forum has been created by people of goodwill, Muslims. It is stated in the forum rules that no one of the members is Islamic scholar or sheikh and no one of us pretends to be. But we are simple Muslims supporting one another, instructing, if one of us knows something, explaining, doing mistakes and correcting them. We, Lithuanian Muslims are so few in numbers, we need to unite, stay together, help each other, advise, tutor and engage in dawa together as well as look for best solutions. (Rimantė 2009a)

The accumulated over 45,000 messages posted on the Forum had become a pool of "religious knowledge" which in itself had become as of 2010 a single largest "text" on Islam in Lithuanian language made available to public audience, both Muslim and non-Muslim, 24/7 and free of charge. Moreover, since the Forum was alive almost round the clock – there seemed to be someone from among the converts logged in and browsing at any given time of day – a posted query, especially on relevant and urgent issues, would get almost instant reaction. In the end, one could not think of any other better source or resource for Lithuanian speakers seriously interested in Islam or newly converted, especially those living outside Vilnius and Kaunas (or outside Lithuania altogether) and with no possibilities to physically congregate with fellow-believers. To some of its members the Forum served as almost the sole channel of communication with fellow believers. As one of the members lamented,

> where I live [in Greece – *my insertion*] there are no Muslims or mosques at all; I know only several female Muslims an hour away. I do not have any support from anyone, my husband is not interested in what I do. Thus I lean on this forum, conversations, ideas of other sisters, take examples from some of them. And it even is not necessary that there be a mosque or a Muslim community nearby. AlhamduliLlah there is this forum and you sisters (Layla30 2009).

One is tempted to call the former online forum at islamas.lt a "virtual (or "online", or "cyber") community". Indeed, if intimacy and trust are features of a community then *islamas.lt* forum, or at least the password-protected "sister"- and "brother"-only sections of it might perhaps be regarded as, albeit closed, communities for as Garbi Schmidt correctly points out "Internet forums (…) create intimacy in the sense that people "get to know each other" through the sharing of information and experiences." (Schmidt 2006: 154) The common experiences as well as recognized vulnerabilities and expectations of the converts (most of whom are of the same ethnic origin and gender, about the same age, similar social status) extensively shared among the members inevitably drew them closer. This intimacy was at times translated into physical (offline) interaction, when members of the Forum met in physical space. In fact, many of the Muslim members of the Forum keenly searched for fellow believers who might have been living in the vicinity, both inside and outside of

Lithuania, and on stumbling upon one of them would proceed with arrangements for a meeting off-line.

This, however, was typical only of a fraction of the Forum members. Involvement of the bulk of the members (Muslim but especially non-Muslim) was way below the point at which their interaction would amount to relations observed in classically defined (*ala* Tönnies) communities for as Lorne L. Dawson pointedly argues, as a rule such online fora hardly meet the criteria for a community for the exchanges on them "are not conducive to building the more multi-faceted relationships commonly associated with a sense of community" (Dawson 2006: 41) and rather tend to stay superficial and sporadic, and are "closer to the reactive or declarative end of some hypothetical continuum of interactivity" (Dawson 2006: 41). This has been valid in the case of most members of and visitors to the islamas.lt forum.

Therefore, based on long-term observation of the Forum activities, it is possible to discern several tiers of interaction among members of the islamas.lt forum where at the core there was a group of members who had used the Forum to create bonds among themselves that could be regarded as those typical of those found in physical (territorial) communities. Members of this tier could be tentatively called "natives". The second (middle) tier was mainly composed of newcomer converts and those with clearly expressed intentions of conversion who still needed to earn the trust from the members of the first tier in order to be drawn into it. Members falling into this tier could be called "settlers". In principle, the movement from the "settler" to the "native" was conditioned by the member's level of activity (both quantitative – the number of postings and qualitative – contents of postings). The third – outer – tier was mainly the domain of non-Muslim members who would come to the Forum with questions on Islam, and though they did take an active part in the discussions (sometimes from a reserved or even negative stance), they were not, however, enthusiastic and ecstatic about the Forum and perceived it as a mere venue for unbinding socialization and self education. These members could be labeled "visitors". Ultimately, most (especially Muslim) members of the Forum made even less of an offline community, for their geographical distribution was very wide – though apparently the biggest part of them (virtually all non-Muslims and a bulk of Muslims) resided in Lithuania others were dispersed as apart as the USA, Western Europe, the Middle East and even South Asia.

A sustained observation of the Forum on a grand scale leaves one with the impression that the islamas.lt forum had some semblance to a "virtual *madrasa*" with a fairly small group of "tutors on call" (e.g. the most active members, most of whom belonged to the first group of converts and the inner tier described above) and a pool of "seekers" – neophytes (mainly of the second type of converts and in the second tier) and non-Muslim visitors among whom those with keen interest in Islam were dominant. The latter category of "students" was a natural object of *dawa* engaged in by "tutors", who would encourage the hesitant to make the seminal step and would enthusiastically welcome and express support for them once they made it, something that had been happening constantly.

The main objective of the Forum, as expressed by the quoted member above, was to facilitate strengthening of faith and increase in religious knowledge

(hence the notion of "madrasa") and "proper" practice among converts. However, the source of "knowledge and proper practice" was very heterogeneous and as a rule mediated – every member would contribute to the pool of "knowledge" with her (or his) understanding of certain dogmatic and practical issues drawn from primary and secondary sources which only rarely were indicated or quoted properly. In other words, members would as a rule express someone else's ideas the way they perceived them.

Yet, on the question of authority there was no consensus (and indeed there had not been an attempt at reaching it) among the Forum members – though majority of them identified with the Sunni branch of Islam only a few had been able to indicate which *madhhab* they belonged to, as a rule "inherited" from the husband upon marriage or conversion. Rimantė in one of her numerous posts was explicit about this:

> It is probably most convenient to choose that trend [*madhhab – my insertion*] to which the husband belongs, this is easier when there is the same understanding in the family, one may consult and the like. Or the madhhab dominant in that country. Then it is easier to live (Rimantė 2010).

On the other hand, one would discover skepticism, if not outright rejection, among some of the Forum members about the historical divisions within the *Umma* into *madhhabs* and indeed even Sunni-Shia branches. The same Rimantė argued some years ago that "belonging to a certain group is a risk factor to stray into bida and shirk. Because usually every group has a founder – expert of Islam who provides his own version of Islamic profession." (Rimantė 2006). Yet another member of the Forum was even stricter: "I do not get it at all, with those schools. I think there is just one Sunna from the prophet Muhammad. How did they come about and what are they needed for?? It seems to me that Sunna is Sunna and what those different interpretations are needed for??" (Rahima 2008) Incidentally, such an attitude is common of Muslim revivalists who vehemently decry Umma's internal divisions which they find to have been a major obstacle for its progress. In fact, several converts had openly expressed their sympathies for Salafism and Wahhabism – the two boldest trends in the Islamic revivalism.

However, it remains to be seen how Lithuanian converts understand the essence and relations among Muslim groups representing differing traditions and ideologies. A preliminary inquiry reveals that even the "tutors" expertise in this field was at best shallow. For example, the founder of the Forum, Siddiqa (who converted to Islam around 2000, is married to a Muslim and currently resides in the UK), argued that

> the Egyptian Islamic brotherhood and Al Qaeda are both Sufi schools. Representatives of traditional Sufism are such people like Wahhabiyyah and Al Qaeda, who insist that Sufism is an eternal spiritual path of an individual to perfection and historical folkloristic elements, like dervishes, should never entwine into it (Siddiqa 2004).

Her "informed" reasoning betrays ignorance (very likely common of most of converts) of the historical realities and lack of ability to wrestle with ideological nuances and differences among the multiple Muslim ideologies, especially of revivalist type.

On the other hand, members in unison reacted rather negatively to ideas on religion in general and Islam in particular expressed by a self-proclaimed member of the syncretic *Sufism Study Circle* operating in Lithuania and one of the members concluded that "rarely any other trend or sect has as much bida (*unacceptable innovations* – my insertion) as Sufism" (Umm Hafsa 2009a). Such position, though not necessarily expressed so bluntly, was typical of most neophytes.

Given the fact that the members (and especially the "tutors") of the Forum represented a range of views as to what constitutes proper Islamic beliefs and practice adopted both from online and offline sources, it is natural that no one religious (of a '*fatwa*-issuing' grade) authority would be accepted by all or majority of them. None the less, there had been an attempt in 2006 by the founder of the islamas.lt site to provide services of an imam in the UK for the benefit of the Forum users. Members were urged to address their queries to Ajmal Masroor, a fairly well-known Sunni imam and British political activist identified by the Forum administrator as affiliated with the Goodge Street mosque (Admin 2006). Half a dozen of queries in English were posted over the period of 1 year to each of which the imam gave a reply in English. However, this exchange was abandoned in 2007 and since then no other *ulama* had been drawn into the Forum deliberations. There had never been an attempt to involve the Lithuanian muftis (both of whose mother tongue is Lithuanian) in the Forum discussions either. On the converts' general opinion about the Lithuanian *ulama*, see further below. In view of these circumstances one might argue that the islamas.lt forum was not only virtual but in essence an *ulama*-less "*madrasa*" of non-denominational nature.

To some such nature of the Forum was too much to handle, for at least once the correctness of information and overall usefulness of the entire islamas.lt website has been challenged by a female user claiming to speak in the name of a group of learned Muslims (introducing them as sheykh Ahmad al-Khalidi, sheykh Mansur al-Tamam, and sister Umaja Kazlauskaite). She claimed that their group had found serious mistakes and flaws (called by her "falsifications") in translations of the Islamic texts and presentations of Islamic concepts on islamas.lt and strongly urged others to

> never trust any Lithuanian internet website before double-checking its Islamic content in other language and always ask Muslim teachers (whom you trust). (…) We have noticed and have experience that many false Muslims (of Lithuanian and Russian origin) attempt to look like good Muslims and they try to "sell Islam" like this internet website and other similar things in the Lithuanian language (Amina55 2009).

To what overwhelming majority of long-time members of the Forum only naturally reacted defensively. A typical reaction can be captured in the words of Rimantė:

> This is not a discussion website of sheikhs. It is a virtual gathering place of ordinary Lithuanian Muslims, Muslim sympathizers and people interested in Islam. We talk on all topics, discuss, clarify and go deep into issues, look for and provide information, correct each other, advice and so forth. Every more active member knows this and no-one is offended by the free atmosphere of this forum (Rimantė 2009b).

The Best Islam?

Non-affiliation with any traditional *madhhab* has its advantages – there is neither dogmatism nor pressure to adopt any single approach as the solely "truly Islamic" and members of the Forum were free to explore and promote "best practices" drawn from any sources. Yet the resolve of newly converted to be the best among their brothers and sisters-in-faith in their compliance with religious injunctions sometimes pushes them to the extremes. For example, in their chats and discussions on the islamas.lt forum Lithuanian converts to Islam would constantly emphasize a perceived distinction between cultural Muslims (usually seen as not enough Islamic) and "true" Muslims: "we do not mix Islam with cultural stuff…" (Jurga 2004); "as a rule converts seek to practice "pure" Islam without cultural impurities" (Rimantė 2007); "they (converts – *my insertion*) indeed seek to get to know Islam from the roots and are least influenced by culture." (Salma Benyahya 2004), the likes of whom they looked for to become themselves.

Such stance often makes communication with Muslims by birth difficult for, as Jansen correctly observed, "converts often experience conflicts that relate to what they call "culture differences," often articulated as born Muslims' inability to distinguish "Islam" from "culture" and "tradition"." (Jensen 2006: 647). For instance, one of the converts rhetorically asked: "is it OK if while believing in God some brothers and sisters (…) prefer cultural and not religious traditions?" (Rimantė 2006). In reacting to the impression of one of non-Muslim visitors to the Forum that new converts sought to be "more Muslim than Muslims themselves", the founder of the Forum Siddiqa replied that

> it is natural that such an opinion is prevailing because most likely it is so… Those who convert to another faith see in this sense and thus practice what they have chosen. While the Muslims by birth (…) are "carriers of traditions", not much knowledgeable about and not so much interested in this religion (Siddiqa 2007).

Ultimately, this "often leads to ironic situations in which converts repudiate people who are born Muslim for not doing things "the right way," or for not living up to the "definition" of being "a Muslim"." (Jensen 2006: 646) Indeed, some of the female converts who had visited or even lived in Muslim-majority countries in their communication with other Forum users expressed their indignation at the perceived un-Islamic behavior of fellow believers (Siddiqa 2006).

On the local (Lithuanian) level, it was apparent in the Forum that Lithuanian converts to Islam are of poor opinion about both ordinary Tatars (who might be practicing some sort of folk Islam or not practicing at all) and even their spiritual leaders (imams and muftis). This was pointedly revealed in a discussion the incentive for which was an article about the former mufti Romualdas Krinickis published in Lithuanian printed media (Balikienė 2006). One of the most senior members of the Forum expressed her amazement:

> they all are so relaxed there as if their religion is of no interest to them… That expression (by Krinickis – *my insertion*) that "the most important thing is not to be fanatical", but excuse me, is it fanaticism when the person strives to abide by the religion?.. If the head of

> the Muslims in Lithuania himself thinks so, what to say of the others?.. In my opinion, Lithuanian Tatars have simply been totally lithuanianized and do not know much about their own religion or maybe do not want to know… (Saddiqah 2006a).

And later summarized:

> well, as far as I understand, Tatars simply want to live "at peace" with all the others. (…), those Lithuanian Muslims, whose ancestors have been living here already for several centuries, have not kept any traditions and indeed have not kept anything… (Saddiqah 2006b).

These and similar ponderings reveal that what the Lithuanian Tatars indeed cherish most – their etho-cultural heritage (that is, a subculture that distinguishes but not excludes them from the main culture) – was summarily rejected by the converts on religious grounds and substituted with an ideal anti-culture separating them (and all "true" Muslims) from the entire main culture with all its historical subcultures. In other words, the position of Lithuanian converts to Islam congregating on islamas.lt is to be seen as a constructed hostility toward the Lithuanian (in a geographical sense) culture[13] and its part (in an ethnic sense) – Tatar subculture as non-Islamic.

A close observer could tentatively conclude that an unavoidable rift if not a gap, caused by differences in degree of intensity of personal relation with religion (and indeed culture), has been opening between the autochthonous Lithuania's Muslims (Tatars) and Lithuanian converts to Islam. The absolute majority of Lithuanian Tatars today are extremely secularized (they are rare guests at Friday prayers and do not seem to keenly abide by even the basic religious injunctions or fulfill *arkan*) and rather see religion as a cultural feature related to their ethnicity. Conversely, to most converts becoming/staying Muslims is a state of mind and converts to Islam as a rule receive their new religion in its totality, holisticly, with all ensuing consequences to their daily life. Because of their fundamentally different perception of the place and role of religion in one's life Tatars (and Muslim settlers from the Soviet time) and converts make parallel autonomous communities (which in the case of converts is in part virtual) with practically no interaction among them.

In her research on Danish converts to Islam Jensen has discovered that "the newly converted often exhibit a so-called fanaticism with their new religion, which is generally expressed with very ritualized behavior, such as taking on the entire Islamic dress code and forming a preoccupation with Islamic rules of what is *haram* ("forbidden") and *halal* ("allowed"), of doing things "right"." (Jensen 2006: 646) The islamas.lt forum was replete with "*haram*/*halal* fetishism" where concentration

[13] Hostility of Lithuanian converts to Islam toward the Lithuanian culture, though of a complex nature, is in part caused by the generally negative reactions to the conversion fact on the side of family members, colleagues and friends whom the converts eventually often distance from or even loose for good. Ultimately, left alone the converts tend to creative alternative identities, like the earlier mentioned 'symbolic ethnicity', which by default sets them apart from the mainstream culture (as a rule directly related to dominant ethno-confessional group(s)).

on distinguishing *halal* from *haram* is a focal point of discussions among the Lithuanian converts. In one of her posts Rimantė insisted that "it ought to be every Muslim's aspiration. Not only to reflect if we do not engage in haram but in general always to have in mind if what we say, how we act, how we judge things – is this all appreciated by Allah." (Rimantė 2009c)

This appears to have been a preoccupation of at least some of the converts. Take for instance the discussion on the question of whether men and women are allowed to chat together online. One of the female members attempted to chart a general rule: "It depends on whether your question relates to unmarried or married women? I'd say, married Muslim women should not chat with unknown and moreover non-mahram men, moreover, will her husband approve of her doing this? (I do not think so)…" (Dunya 2005), while the other female user was even firmer: "According to Islamic teaching wasting of time is haram, so do not waste your time on chats, and when you are chatting with a non mahram man – it is even worse." (Admin 2005)

Drive to draw a line between "permitted" and "prohibited" was also evident in another discussion, focusing on the translation of the Quran into the Lithuanian by a well known Lithuanian poet. One of the female users was eager to figure out if she needed to perform *wudu* (ritual ablution) prior to taking the book into her hands. After some considerations, the users came to a consensus that if in the translation the original Arabic makes less than a half of the entire text, *wudu* is not required. One of the members of the discussion was joyous that the Lithuanian translation contained no Arabic text at all, for Muslims could be then confident that non-believers' dirty hands would not touch the holy script. (Survey: what do you 2008)

Finally, one more typical discussion on *halal*/*haram* focused on the question whether Muslims are permitted to treat epithelial scars. One of the users sought advice by asking: "Is it permitted to treat epithelial scars even if they are not keloid (thriving, ulcerous) but only for the sake of being more attractive to the spouse?" (Fellah 2007a) to which she got a conditional answer by another member: "This also depends on where those scars are and how much they disfigure the looks, how much they prevent you from feeling and living normally…" (Rumisa 2007) to which she replied in the following words: "Well, they are not big, just 1–2 cm in diameter or square, and they do not obstruct my life, and are not harmful to health, but they disfigure the looks. Or maybe not, it's just my naïve understanding. Forget it, I will survive with those scars, it is only that I had already started treating them, somehow did not consider this to be disallowed…" (Fellah 2007b) In the end, one of the more active male converts interrupted the discussion, apparently out of dismay, with an urging: "I think, treat (them) and do not come up with idle thoughts. And read once again the article on pettiness… (posted elsewhere on the Forum – *my insertion*)." (Svecias_dawood_* 2007)

However, to some of the converts the casuistics about *haram* and *halal* was frustrating – as one of the converts expressed it: "I think there are way too many shaikhs. According to one, it is haram, according to another, it is halal, according to a third – in the middle and moreover all of them interpret differently the same

source they rely on. There could be fewer of them, but more reliable and united." (ela14 2009) This ties well into the discussion on authorities to be or not to be followed addressed earlier in this chapter.

Diagnosis: Islamas.lt – A Blessing or a Curse?

Online forum at islamas.lt had become at the time the biggest source and resource for Lithuanian converts to Islam in their search for the "true" Islamic belief and practice. Yet the tolerated cacophony of alternative (classical and contemporary) perceptions and views by Muslim thinkers coupled with amateurish thoughts of members of the Forum and conspicuous absence of *ulama* voice on the Forum were leading to a potentially explosive and damaging outcome for the very members of the Forum. Just before the forum was closed by its administrator one could observe certain weariness in the discussions, especially pertaining to religious (both doctrinal and practical) issues, with focus having shifted to sharing and commenting on media news pertaining to Islam and Muslims worldwide. The shortages of the Forum were reflected by some of the most active members, who lamented the fate of some converts who had abandoned the Forum and possibly Islam itself (Rimantė 2009d). Those who still visited the Forum (and had become even stronger in their belief) also expressed dismay at the level of quality and arrangement of information and knowledge on the Forum: "it is pity but the forum has become for me a source for communication with the Lithuanian speaking sisters. I gain knowledge elsewhere." (Umm Hafsa 2009b)

Intimate observation of the developments throughout the span of islamas.lt forum life suggests that though the Forum indeed seemed to be of great value to neophytes and converts-to-be, who not only in most probability quietly devoured its contents but also would joyfully contribute to the discussions (as a rule with a barrage of questions and marvels at "achievements" by older Muslim Forum members – the "tutors") its appreciation decreased relative to the "age" of individual Muslims, who either would grow tired of the "club" and would drift to other similar online social networks or start seeking knowledge in what they believed were more reliable sources, likely run or at least overseen by *ulama*.

This way, as more and more people joined (and some left) the islamas.lt forum, it could have served as a sort of starting point (if not a litmus paper) to measure the maturity (first of all individually but also as a group) of Lithuanian converts to Islam in their adopted religion. Unfortunately, the Forum did not survive, albeit, as indicated, it was succeeded by a reincarnation of sorts. On this new forum the contents has somewhat changed as old and new "tutors" started contributing on religious issues with more certainly and authority.[14] Parallel to that, the trajectories of off-line lives of ever-increasing number of Lithuanian converts to Islam have continued taking ever more diverse directions.

[14] For more analysis of the islam-ummah.lt forum, see Račius, E. and Norvilaitė, V. (Forthcoming).

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Islam Online Guides Spouses Towards Marital Bliss: Arabic vs. English Counselling Perspectives on Marital Communication

Mona Abdel-Fadil

Introduction

In response to the question: what characterizes Islam Online's (IOL) marital counselling?, the leader of IOL's English social section,[1] Hwaa Irfan, says: 'Islamic psychology is not about boxing people in. It is about *jīhād al-nafs*,[2] and realizing who you are'[3] (Irfan 2009). Kawther Alkholy, leader of the IOL Arabic social section responds thus:

> There are conflicts in all homes, and in all societies. Our focus is on how to deal with these conflicts. For instance if (you as) husband and wife quarrel, how do you convey your opinion to the other without hurting their feelings?
>
> (AlKholy 2009).

IOL was one of the first Islamic portals to become established online (1997), and enjoyed immense popularity amongst users for over a decade (Gräf 2008: 1; Hofheinz 2007: 75). In this chapter, I analyse IOL's (www.islamonline.net) counselling perspectives on how to improve marital communication. More specifically, I compare

[1] When I refer to the IOL employees, I am referring to the pre IOL-crisis employees, who were IOL employees when I interviewed them. However, due to the IOL-crisis these individuals are formally no longer part of IOL. Upon the conclusion of my fieldwork at the end of June in 2010, many former IOL employees joined in the creation of a new Islamic website called www.onislam.net where they hoped to continue doing similar counselling work.

[2] I follow IJMES standards for transliteration, with certain adaptations to Egyptian oral dialect.

[3] I conducted all interviews. The interviews conducted with Kawther Alkholy and Samar Abduh were conducted in Arabic, and translations into English are my own. The interview with Hwaa Irfan was conducted in English (She is not Egyptian). All the interviewees quoted in this chapter, have given their consent to be cited in my academic writings.

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T. Hoffmann and G. Larsson (eds.), *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies*, Muslims in Global Societies Series 7,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7247-2_4,

counselling perspectives on IOL's English and Arabic websites based on online counselling essays[4] published between 1999 and 2010.

From the outset, IOL was envisioned as a website that should deal with all aspects of life, employing knowledge from all possible sources, such as the expertise of non-religious scholars such as social counsellors or psychiatrists (Gräf 2008: 1–2). IOL's social sections, the sections dealing with marital relations, have been true to this aim. Indeed this expanded focus, combined with the portal's high level of interactivity with users, set IOL apart from other Islamic websites.[5] IOL's marital counselling services remain understudied despite their popularity amongst users – and an increasing scholarly interest in online fatwas, marriage and divorce (Bogstad 2009; Kutsher 2009; Sisler 2009; Tveitereid 2007).[6]

For over a decade IOL was unique in that it was an Islamic website that provided counselling and hands-on advice to married couples on how to solve various marital problems, beyond fatwa services. In March 2010, IOL suffered from the so-called IOL-Crisis,[7] which had widespread ramifications including an eventual restructuring of the portal's services and scope. This chapter depicts IOL as it was prior to the crisis (employing ethnographic presence), but will inevitably bring in some of the latest changes to the website, upon conclusion.[8]

Broadly speaking, this chapter aims to explore three tangents: First, what types of counselling perspectives does IOL employ when addressing marital communication

[4] The emic term for counselling essays is 'protocols'. Protocols are heavily influenced by the counselling perspectives prevalent on IOL. In this sense, protocols are a product of the producers of IOL and are non-interactive in that they appear to be produced primarily for reader-consumption. Yet, protocols also suggest topics members of the IOL-audience often write in about. In addition to protocols, two types of interactive online counselling have been available to married couples on IOL: 'cyber-counselling' (an asynchronous exchange between questioner and online counsellor) and 'live-dialogue' (a synchronous exchange resembling a chat). Also under the heading 'Husbands and Wives' there are a number of journalistic articles: covering a regional or local event.

[5] IOL has been known to differ from other popular Islamic websites such as Islamway.com and Amrkhaled.net in that it offered a range of other services such as online fatwa and counselling services, in addition to digitalized scripture. Whereas admittedly other Islamic websites provide fatwa services, IOL's degree of interactivity with the users has been characterized as superior by far (Sisler 2009: 9).

[6] Bunt (2003: 147–155) has divulged some interesting, albeit general reflections about IOL English's counselling services.

[7] In March 2010, the IOL Crisis broke out, souring relations between the owners of IOL (the Al-Balagh Society in Qatar) and the IOL staff in Cairo. The IOL-crisis eventually led to a total breakdown in communications between the parties and the withdrawal of the Cairo staff's password-access to the IOL server. The end result was the abrupt shutting down of the Cairo offices with some 350 employees, and a shift of production operations to Qatar. In the immediate wake of the crisis, the predominant interpretation among my informants was to see the IOL-crisis as a struggle between Salafism (Doha) and *wasaṭiyya* Islam (Cairo). The new Qatari board of directors maintain that the reason for the dispute is what they see as poor administration of IOL, rather than ideological differences (Elawady2010, March 27). See Abdel-Fadil (2011) for an analysis of the crisis.

[8] I updated the final version of this chapter with post-2010 observations shortly before preparing the manuscript for the publication of this book. Still, the post-2010 period is not the main focus of this chapter.

problems? Second, what type of advice does IOL provide? And, third – how does advice provided on IOL Arabic and IOL English compare to one another?

The latter question warrants a clarification. While, adhering to the same overarching principles, IOL English and Arabic are run by different teams and cater to distinct audiences – respectively Muslims in minority context and Arabic-speaking Muslims in majority contexts.[9] The IOL social sections focus on matters relating to family and society and constitute a subpage of IOL on both the English and Arabic websites. In interviews, both heads of the social sections, Kawther Alkholy (IOL Arabic) and Hwaa Irfan (IOL English) stress the importance of user-friendliness and providing practical solutions to their users (AlKholy 2009; Irfan 2009). However, the English and Arabic social teams do not cooperate much about content. The two section leaders refer to workload and addressing different audiences as the reason for this lack of cooperation.[10] Moreover, the difference in content of the websites is both apparent and something IOL profess openly. Still, little is known about the differences, as studies tend to deal with *either* an English or Arabic–language Islamic website (and mostly the former). Some scholars such as Tveitereid (2007: 83–4) have suggested that IOL Arabic may perhaps be 'stricter' than IOL English.[11] One of the main aims of this chapter is to examine whether IOL English and IOL Arabic send the *same* counselling message. Discussing and attempting to understand differences on the English and Arabic versions of Islamic websites on a given topic is something of a novelty, and addresses a gap in research. Moreover, this bi-lingual focus aims at contributing to a deeper, empirically based understanding of how new media, and specifically Islamic websites are rooted in and influenced by global, as well as local and regional trends.

Overall, since the topics explored in this chapter appear to be unmarked academic territory, I rely heavily on my own empirical research and analytical constructs. Having a research background in the study of gender and Islam and a practical background in counselling,[12] I set out to analyse marital counselling perspectives in 'protocols'[13] on IOL. 'Protocols' is the emic term (Ferraro 1992: 17) used by

[9] This is how the two social section leaders describe their audiences. This is not to say that there are no Muslims in Muslim-majority contexts who use IOL English nor that no Arabic speaking audiences in minority contexts use IOL Arabic. However, as expressed by the two social section leaders, this is not the main trend.

[10] In addition to preliminary interviews with IOL Arabic and English in May 2009, I conducted longitudinal fieldwork with the IOL Arabic social team from December 2009 to June 2010. One possible limitation of my study, is that I have more in depth data about IOL Arabic than IOL English. This is not an intentional bias. Rather, fieldwork plans with IOL English had to be shelved since I was informed that they did not have the capacity (due to workload) to receive me.

[11] They have not explored the postulate further, as they do not possess the necessary Arabic skills.

[12] I worked with multicultural counselling at a refugee office for 7 years, although not specifically as a marital counsellor.

[13] I have delimited my online data by two criteria, in that the data is to: (1) constitute online essays of the protocol genre, and (2) deal with the topic marital communication. The protocols were selected by theme, and not production date. In effect, this chapter documents an important form of marital counselling available on IOL English and Arabic for over a decade (from 1999 until the Islam Online crisis 2010) which eventually led to a refashioning of the website.

IOL-employees to describe essays published on their website that are framed as 'how to deal with' a specific problem. Themes for protocols are selected on the basis of real problems that IOL-users write to IOL-counsellors about. The rationale of protocols posted under the heading 'Husbands and Wives' is to provide IOL-users with general advice on how to solve common marital problems. Protocols often include IOL-counsellors' perspectives on how to solve particular problem(s), and a step-by-step list of advice. In this chapter I focus on protocols about marital communication.[14] The current contribution is based on a comparative analysis of protocols about marital communication posted on IOL English and Arabic between 1999 and 2010.

With a comparative case-study design, I examine and analyse similarities and differences on IOL English and IOL Arabic. My main research questions are:

- What type of influences and counselling perspectives does IOL employ when addressing marital communication problems?
- How do protocols on IOL English and Arabic compare to one another?

Against this backdrop, I also wish to examine what extent can IOL's marital advice be categorized as:

- supporting either an egalitarian or complementary gender position?[15]
- contributing to new or different Islamic content?[16]

[14] The selection of the category 'Communication' for further analysis is based on statements by the Arabic IOL team about 'unhealthy communication' being a prevalent problem that married individuals write to IOL about. Moreover, I presuppose that protocols under this heading may deal with both ideal and less than ideal patterns of marital communication. Furthermore, protocols target providing remedies and solutions, and are likely to contain counselling elements. And, last but not least, I assume that it is one of the most likely chains of protocols consulted by visitors who are in unhappy marriages and are seeking comfort and advice on IOL.

[15] Somewhat schematically the concept 'egalitarian gender relations' can be defined as women and men being equal without any reservations. More importantly, an egalitarian perspective presupposes that gender differences are socially constructed.

Ideally, gender egalitarianism is a perspective that transcends religious affiliation. Proponents of this perspective are often classified as feminists. The concept 'complimentary gender relations', on the other hand, is founded on the idea that women and men are in fact created different (not only biologically). Advocates of complimentary gender relations may argue along the lines of 'men are women are equal, but not identical'. At times this is understood as being equal before God, but having been allocated different roles in this life. Within a complementary gender perspective, women are often considered well-suited for child-rearing and home-making, while men are envisioned as suited for labour outside the home. Another typical example of a perceived difference is that women are more emotional, and men are more rational. The egalitarian and complementary approaches to gender are often considered mutually exclusive perspectives. A complementary approach to gender is most often associated with Islam, and indeed most religions.

[16] This research question develops out of the theoretical postulate: 'The internet transforms the content of Islam'. Several scholars argue that the renewal of ideas and concepts of 'Islam' and 'being Muslim' is intrinsically linked to Islam going online (Anderson 2003: 46, Eickelman and Anderson 2003: 12, Mandaville 2002: 156). Moreover, according to Anderson (1996: 7–9) a renewal of concepts intertwine with the merging of different or dissimilar perspectives in new constellations.

- displaying a plurality of views on a given topic?[17]
- representing an individualization and/or privatization of Islam?[18]

This chapter is structured in the following manner:[19] In the first section, focus on recurring themes and counselling perspectives on IOL in general. This is followed by an example of a protocol from IOL English and IOL Arabic, respectively. Finally, I discuss general differences in the protocols posted on *IOL* English and *IOL* Arabic.

IOL's Counselling: Perspectives and Tendencies

In this section, similarities and tendencies in the protocols posted on IOL English and IOL Arabic are outlined. I will briefly touch upon the question of style before elaborating upon prevalent counselling perspectives and recurring themes in the marital communication protocols.

Thinking vs. Living Islam

An elaboration on writing styles is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, I briefly sketch out two stylistic tendencies. All of the 'Communication' protocols on IOL English may be said to fit stylistically somewhere along a continuum. The one end of the continuum is abstract and may be termed 'thinking Islam'. In this style, there is a tendency to boil Islam down to particular ethical principles that ought to influence contemporary Muslims' way of thought. Examples of such principles may be 'peaceful' or 'egalitarian'. The reader is thus stimulated to think through his or her own understanding of Islam both at a general, abstract level and also to apply these ethics to the specific theme in question. The opposite end of the continuum may be termed 'living Islam', and in this style readers are often provided with

[17] This query develops out of a wish to test the postulate 'Islam going online facilitates the plurality of religious opinions' (Anderson 2003: 57, Mandaville 2002: 156–157). The is postulate builds on the assumption that the internet enables traditional gatekeepers of religious authority to be bypassed. And this in turn leads to a plurality of religious interpretations, i.e. that Islamic website-users are exposed to assorted views on the same topic.

[18] This question relates to the postulate: 'The internet leads to individualization and privatization of Islam'. According to Sisler (2007: 3, 2009: 4), a plurality of religious interpretations online enables each individual to search for and select suitable Islamic perspectives. Similar arguments have been put forward about the internet and religion in general (Dawson and Cowan 2004).

[19] Apart from providing an empirical case study of online Islamic counselling, this chapter can also be seen as contributing to two bodies of academic literature, namely: (1) new media and moderate Islam, which may serve as an important enterprise in itself against the backdrop of extensively studied Jihadist sites (Bunt 2009; Halldén 2006), and (2) gender relations and Islam, providing a relevant alternative understanding of gender roles in contemporary Islam.

concrete advice on how to solve various marital problems. One could say that at this end of the continuum the reader is advised on how to translate 'thinking Islam' into their everyday lives, i.e., 'living Islam'. The fluctuation between protocols in the styles of 'thinking Islam' and 'living Islam' is particularly descriptive of IOL English. On IOL Arabic, on the other hand, the protocols appear to be penned primarily in the 'living Islam' style, a point I will return to later. On IOL English, both of these styles occur together with recurring themes and common counselling perspectives. The latter will be elaborated upon further in the next section. More precisely, I will take a closer look at what the communication protocols reveal about IOL's approach to counselling.

Common Counselling Perspectives

The analysis of the protocols[20] led to the identification of three types of counselling influences in the protocols:

1. Elements from traditional Islamic counselling such as references to Islamic sources and piety
2. Concepts of American humanistic counselling theory such as 'empowerment' and 'self-actualization'
3. Communication and relationship advice from *Men are From Mars and Women are from Venus* (MMWV) (Gray 1992).

In the following I will substantiate this claim.

Islamic Counselling

Protocols often reveal an influence from what may be termed the Islamic counselling perspective since there are rather frequent references to Islamic sources and God. IOL protocols often include references to *Qurān* verses and *aḥādīth*, and/or encourage devotion to God. According to Eickelman and Anderson (2003: 3), religious advice is increasing marked by a tendency to formulate 'more generic messages for a mass audience'. Such opinions are 'impersonal in the sense that they may be fitted to multiple contexts, put to different uses, employed by different people' (Eickelman and Anderson 2003: 3). This description is, in my view, a good match for the type of Islamic advice that is incorporated into the IOL protocols. Here, the advice serves as a platform for all readers, and is not in response to an individualized response.

[20] In March 2010, there were 28 protocols pre-organized into the category 'communication' under the category 'Husbands and Wives' on IOL English. On IOL Arabic, I had to select 'communication protocols' from 204 posts of various from the category 'Husbands and Wives'. Of these, I considered 62 protocols as dealing with communication problems. The current analysis is based on logging tendencies in these protocols.

It is also, interesting to note that while talking about IOL's counselling perspective, Hwaa Irfan (IOL English) explicitly refers to the Islamic concept of *jīhād al-nafs*. She appears to understand *jīhād al-nafs* as 'the struggle against oneself/one's bad inclinations' in line with contemporary definitions of the concept (Peters 2005: 116).

American Humanistic Counselling

Elements from the American humanistic counselling[21] approach are also part and parcel of most protocols. This is not explicitly stated on IOL, yet humanistic counselling entails a specific approach to clients[22] which I believe is recognizable in the protocols. This counselling perspective rests on the assumption that clients are in need of counselling in order to 'increase the range of choices, and enable the client to handle successfully this increased range of choices' (Rowan 1983: 5). Indeed, the presupposition is that all clients hold the potential to solve the problems in their lives, if given guidance (Hough 2006: 119–21). Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on increasing feelings of happiness through trying out new patterns of conduct (Rowan 1983: 4). There are two key concepts in humanistic counselling theory which are particularly relevant. Firstly, 'empowerment', which refers to helping clients to identify their own resources. 'Empowerment' is thus of utmost importance for clients who feel unhappy, marginalized or powerless in a given situation (Hough 2006: 4). The second key-concept is 'self-actualization', and connotes counselling clients on how to use their inner resources to improve their situation (Hough 2006: 129–135). Within the humanistic counselling framework, there are three main stages. The first stage, 'review of present situation', entails identifying the problems of the current situation. The second stage, 'development of a new or preferred scenario', involves envisioning a preferred state of affairs and identifying ones own resources that may help put things right (empowerment). And, lastly, the third stage, 'moving into action' entails achieving change, i.e. solving the problem(s) or 'self-actualization' (Hough 2006: 31).

During my interviews with individuals from the Arabic IOL social team and their counsellors, it has become evident that the term 'American humanistic counselling' is not one that they are familiar with. Yet, I have not abandoned the term for three reasons. Firstly, when I explain the foundations and assumptions of the American counselling perspective to my interviewees, in much the same fashion as I have here, they all express recognition and state that this is similar to their perspectives. Secondly, American humanistic counselling is useful in that it serves as an analytical label to signify a particular approach to counselling.

[21] According to Hough, there was a slightly different theoretical development in Europe (Hough 2006). Further reference to humanistic counselling theory is to American humanistic counselling theory, in line with Hough's argument. Still, the key concepts that are employed in this chapter are, to my knowledge, also imperative in European humanistic counselling theories.

[22] Here I use the term 'clients' in line with counselling theory. In this context, the 'client' is the 'reader' of the online protocols.

Moreover, IOL-counsellors do not provide an alternate label in the interviews. And, last but not least, my interviewees expressed resonant recognition of the three stages of American counselling.

Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus

A third counselling perspective the protocols employ, is advice from the international bestseller *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus* (MMWV) (Gray 1992). John Gray's popular volume is estimated to have sold over 50 million copies in 50 different languages worldwide (MarsVenus.com). Not only is the book a big hit in the US but it is also ranked amongst the top bestsellers in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. MMWV is a 'self-help' book addressed to spouses, and provides tangible advice on how to improve communication patterns. It has been translated into numerous languages, including Arabic. And, what does MMWV have to do with IOL? Well, firstly, several protocols, on both IOL English and IOL Arabic, explicitly refer to MMWV. Secondly, I believe that many protocols that do *not* cite MMWV are also influenced by it. This hypothesis was strengthened during an interview with Kawther Alkholy, the executive of family section of IOL Arabic, in May 2009. When I asked her whether there were certain perspectives (other than Islamic) that merged on IOL (Arabic), she said: 'Yes (…) You know, we use, MMWV quite a bit' (AlKholy 2009). During subsequent interviews and fieldwork, the use of MMWV has been confirmed further by most of my informants. I contend that a number of key points in MMWV resurface in the IOL communication protocols. In the next paragraphs, I will summarize the framework of MMWW and the type of advice that it provides, the latter of which appears to be re-circulated on IOL.

MMWV is founded on the assumption that men and women are dissimilar, and thus have different needs and communication patterns.[23] It is argued that such gender-differences create tensions in communication between spouses. Learning how the opposite sex will react to a given situation is considered essential. The crux of the argument underpinning the book is that a woman will react in one way, and a man in another. For instance, men are depicted as going into hiding 'into a cave' when they are upset (Gray 1992: 31–44). Women are described as the opposite, in need of sharing their emotions and being acknowledged when they are upset. Although, it is mentioned that sometimes males can have 'feminine' traits and vice versa, this is not the general trend. MMWV has been critiqued for being sexist and reinforcing gender stereotypes, such as men being 'actors' and women being 'recipients' (Cameron 2007; Zimmerman et al. 2007). MMWV has also been criticized for mainly providing suggestions on how women can change in order to

[23] MMWV is an easy read (if exasperating to some readers). It employs simple language, frequent repetition and excels in the use of contrasts and examples. Women and men are divided into two typologies with regards to standardized 'female' and 'male' needs, reactions and communication patterns. Gray does not appear to be advocating that gender roles are socially constructed. Rather, MMWV provides sweeping generalizations about gender.

accommodate their husbands, and not vice versa (Zimmerman et al. 2007). In my view, John Gray can, at best, be seen as circulating a concept of gender differentiation and complementary gender roles. Interestingly, the gender-typologies in MMWV are not those that IOL seems to embrace most frequently.

Critique of gender-generalizations aside, in my reading, John Gray appears to have a genuine interest in helping spouses make the best of their marriage. A considerable portion of MMWV is explicitly dedicated to providing couples with practical tips and techniques on how to improve communication and the marital relationship in general. Some of the advice is egalitarian in the sense that the same method is recommended for both genders. Indeed, couples are advised to show love and appreciation towards one another, to be quick to apologize, to avoid trying to change the other but rather work on *themselves*, and never to talk in anger. Much practical advice is provided on how to sort out feelings of frustration: sleep on it or take a 'time-out', calm down, talk to a friend, write a 'love-letter', set aside time for a heart to heart talk, etc. In short, if a spouse wants to approach his or her partner with a difficult or upsetting topic, the advice is to do so calmly and with as little anger and blame as possible (Gray 1992). Other guidelines are clearly gender-differentiated. For example, men are encouraged to allow their wives' space to talk about their feelings and not to try to 'fix' their wives' problems during these talks. Conversely, women are encouraged to refrain from nagging and giving orders, but instead to give their husbands actual choices. Women are also encouraged to find happiness and self-worth through roles other than wife and/or mother, so as not to have their happiness entirely dependent on their marriage or husband (Gray 1992). As will be illustrated, MMWV-inspired advice appears to be an integral part of the advice and solutions that IOL Arabic provides.

Before turning to examples of protocols, I will present recurring themes that feature in the protocols as a whole.

In the next section, I take a closer look at recurring themes in the protocols and the type of influences and counselling perspectives that IOL employs when addressing marital communication problems.

Recurring Themes

My review and analysis of the marital communication protocols revealed three recurring themes, namely: idealized marital relationships, contemporary problems (that affect marriage) and solutions and advice.[24] These themes correspond to a large degree with the three stages of American humanistic counselling.

[24]The three themes were identified and logged prior to conducting fieldwork, i.e. prior to learning the IOL Arabic team's definitions of protocols. The present analysis is a further development of ideas presented in a paper at The Centre for Arab and Muslim Media Research (CAMMRO), April 2009.

Idealized Marital Relationships

Idealized marital relationships are frequently referred to. This theme corresponds to a large degree with the second stage of humanistic counselling, namely 'development of a new or preferred scenario'. In almost all of the protocols ideal husband-and-wife relationships are depicted as including understanding, love, respect, good communication – and these are depicted as efforts that are required from both husbands and wives. This is arguably a rather egalitarian focus. A few of the protocols appear to be founded on a gender-complementary perspective, with a clear division of gender roles. In such instances, the husband is referred to as the head of the family, while the wife is seen as the primary caretaker of children and the home. In a similar vein, there is often emphasis on the home being a safe and tranquil haven. This is seen as chiefly the wife's responsibility. When there is mention of no abusive/violent tendencies, the reference is to husbands. Quite often, ideal marital relations are mentioned with reference to the *Qurān* verse 30:21, on the 'tranquillity' and 'love and mercy' of spousal relations in addition to citations of various *aḥādīth*. The example of the Prophet Muhammed is often referred to. He is portrayed as a loving and affectionate husband who shared in household responsibilities, and thus comes across as rather egalitarian (see Abdel-Fadil 2002: 160–3, for a discussion of similar offline tendencies). This is significant since the Prophet Muhammed serves as a model for emulation for contemporary Muslims.

Contemporary Problems (That Affect Marital Life)

A number of the protocols list a variety of contemporary problems that may put a strain on marital life. This theme overlaps with the first stage of humanistic counselling, 'review of present situation', which entails identifying the problems that ought to be resolved. The most frequently listed examples of the latter are: general tensions of everyday life, anger, frustration, lack of devotion (between spouses), and, lack of – or – unhealthy communication (between spouses). Most of the examples of contemporary problems do not appear to be gender-specific. However, the examples of unhealthy communication often follow a gendered pattern. Wives are often depicted as being too talkative or nagging, while husbands are frequently portrayed as being too brusque in their responses, sometimes uttering only monosyllabic replies.

Solutions and Advice

Most of the communication protocols offer solutions and advice on how to fix marital problems. This theme intersects to a large degree with the last stage of humanistic counselling 'moving into action' and the concept 'self-actualization', i.e. using the knowledge gained in the previous stages to remedy the problem(s). Advice is usually framed in such a way so as to encourage the reader to work on his or her virtues.

Typically, such virtues are: patience, forgiveness, communication skills, understanding the other, general improvement of the self, and not least: devotion to God. Piety is often depicted as both improving the relationship to God and to the spouse, and thus is often displayed as part of the solution to any given problem. Solutions are often (but not exclusively) presented as step-by-step lists at the end of each protocol. Overall, solutions are not exclusively gender-differentiated. Indeed in the proposed solutions there seems to be evidence of both an egalitarian *and* a complimentary approach to gender relations. I will now turn to two examples of actual protocols on IOL.

Examples of Communication Protocols

I start out with a sample from IOL English.

'The Seasons of Love: Spring and Summer'

'The Seasons of Love' is a protocol, written by Dina Rashid, who is listed as a writer based in Egypt. The protocol starts out with a reference to the fact that Islamic sources address marital relations, and it quickly follows up with a quotation of verse 30:21 of the *Qurān*:

> And one of His signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you find tranquillity in them, and He put between you love and mercy; most surely there are signs in this for people who reflect
>
> (Rashid 2007).

The citation of the verse seems to serve as a description of an ideal marital relationship, *per se*. That is, it stands on its own as a description of a 'preferred scenario' without further interpretation. Dina Rashid also includes a reference to a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet Mohammad is described as advocating marriage for those who are in love. There is also a slightly confusing reference to a fatwa issued by Sheikh Al-Qaradawi, in which Al-Qaradawi is to have stated rather ambiguously that love 'must follow Islamic guidelines'. The author does not elaborate on what this is supposed to mean. In addition, Dina Rashid quotes the analogy that 'marriage is a garden that needs to be watered and tended to if it is to thrive' from MMWV. Moreover, marriage therapist Glenn Lutjens is quoted concerning changes that are bound to occur in marital relationships.

The theme 'Contemporary Problems' (that affect marriage) occurs rather distinctly. Dina Rashid discusses the differences between the 'springtime' and the 'summertime' of a marriage. The former indicates the first phase of engagement and/or marriage in which the spouses are often smitten with romantic feelings and hardly see one another's faults. 'Summertime' on the other hand, entails the ideal

marital relationship in which a deeper love and understanding prevails, creating a tranquil safe haven for the spouses, i.e. a 'preferred scenario'. Still, reaching this stage does not come without effort and can thus be considered as a 'contemporary problem' that affects marriage. Dina Rashid contends that it is fundamental to take into account that the 'springtime' perception of the infallible spouse will wear off with time and proximity. Thus, this insight can be viewed as part of 'reviewing the present situation'. It is in this context that the author refers to a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet is to have said that if a man dislikes one of his wife's characteristics, he will be pleased with another of her traits. The discussion of springtime and summertime can be considered an elaboration of the points quoted by the marriage counsellor. Moreover, the whole concept of 'seasons of love' is probably an appropriation of MMWV's four seasons, even though this is not explicitly stated. In my reading, Dina Rashid compresses MMWV's four seasons into two. This protocol is full of explicit references to Islam, not only in the use of religious sources but also in statements such as:

> So hold your breath and gather all the wisdom that Allah gave you to go through this stage, and reach tranquillity, mercy and love mentioned in this verse. These will be the lasting, calm, and warm emotions of love between a husband and wife who are living for the sake of Allah.
>
> (Rashid 2007).

After this lengthy introduction, Dina Rashid then dedicates the rest of the protocol (roughly half) to the theme 'Solutions and Advice' on how to achieve 'summertime'. The advice she lists may be considered pointers on how to 'move into action' in order to realize the 'preferred scenario'. The following is an extract from her list:

> Choose to love your partner. Remember it is Allah who makes the 'love and mercy happen between the husband and the wife.[25]
>
> Seek Allah's help and ask Him to make the 'chemistry' happen. Also, open your heart and give your partner the benefit of the doubt; stand in your partner's shoes and try to see things from his or her perspective. (…)
>
> You will not be able to actually change someone. All you can do is provide a different and favourable environment for your partner to want to change.
>
> Realise that you have legitimate concerns. Voice them to your partner in a constructive way.
>
> Express with respect. Use 'I-messages': 'I' feel and 'I' think, and not 'you' did such and such.
>
> Invest in this family. Paradise is worth your best effort.
>
> (Rashid 2007).

Throughout most of the protocol, the message seems to be egalitarian and is addressed to both spouses, without differentiating across gender. However, at the end of the list of advice, another *ḥadīth* is quoted about good, obedient and devout wives entering paradise. With the exception of the last *ḥadīth*'s reference to 'obedient wives', there is no explicit evidence of this protocol endorsing differentiated gender roles. Moreover, it is only at the very end of the protocol that it becomes evident that

[25] The sign ' is without the sign ' in the original. Also, the text is divided into separate lines per sentence in original.

the protocol may be primarily addressed to women. In my view, Dina Rashid's list of pointers is a good illustration of how the three diverse counselling perspectives are incorporated into the same text. Dina Rashid addresses working on the self *and* cultivating piety. In fact, 'seeking Allah's help' appears to play no minor role in her suggestions for remedy of marital problems. In 'Seasons of Love', Dina Rashid explicitly quotes a variety of religious sources: the *Qurān*, *aḥādīth* and a fatwa. Furthermore, she uses the word 'Allah' five times in addition to the number of times the word occurs in the religious sources quoted. Even then, she also quotes from MMWV and a presumably non-Muslim marriage counsellor, indicating broader influences. Moreover, in her list of pointers, Dina Rashid appears to promote 'self-actualization' and change at the individual level, not relating exclusively to the development of a more devout relationship to God. In this sense, it would seem that 'self-actualization' in Dina Rashid's protocol also pertains, for instance, to improving communication skills, thereby contributing to a better understanding between the spouses.

Presently I will turn to how this protocol compares to the sample protocol on IOL Arabic. Before introducing the example from IOL Arabic, however, I wish to make one point clear. Some protocols on IOL Arabic are similar to 'Summertime', in that they deal with a rather focused topic and provide lists of pointers on how to improve communication patterns between spouses. However, for the sake of comparison I have chosen to select a protocol that is slightly different in emphasis from many of the protocols on IOL English. Nevertheless, the sample protocol from IOL Arabic represents a trend on IOL Arabic, in that many protocols on IOL Arabic are similar to the one selected for analysis here.

'Common Thoughts that Steal the Happiness of Wives'

'Common Thoughts… that Steal the Happiness of Wives' is the name of the protocol selected from IOL Arabic (Mahfouz 2006). It is written by Nagla Mahfouz who is listed as a writer and an IOL-counsellor. The text is clearly addressed to wives and takes Arab women's premarital expectations of marital bliss as its starting point. The main argument expressed is that women's unrealistic expectations may lead to conflicts and unhappiness in a marriage. Moreover, such unhappiness can in turn lead to both psychological and physical illness amongst wives. The protocol contains a number of quotes from female IOL users. The quotations display less than exemplary views of (their) marriage. These quotes appear to illustrate and/or underline the contemporary problems that the author believes Arab wives/IOL users need to deal with in order to achieve happy marriages. One example is a wife, who, amongst countless other grievances, articulates:'(…) he [my husband] makes my life gloomy, and I spend most of my days thinking and complaining about his faults' (Mahfouz 2006). The protocol is fraught with various contemporary problems that affect marital relations. Here I select a sample relevant for further discussion.

One of the contemporary problems dealt with is that Arab wives expect their husbands to make them *the* number one priority in their lives and to treat them as

they did during the prenuptial-phase. In Nagla Mahfouz's view, this problem is partially related to Arab wives being too dependent on their husbands. With exaggerated dependency on husbands, Arab wives mistakenly hold their husbands responsible for their [the wives'] happiness or sadness. The preferred scenario sketched out is that the wives should recognize that they are the sole source of their own happiness or sadness. It is recommended that wives indulge in diverse roles and interests beyond the role of wife and/or mother. Rather than constantly demanding that the husband utter words of appreciation, non-dependency on the husband for feelings of worth is considered key. In order to move into action and achieve self-realization, wives must love themselves and discover self-worth within *themselves*, in addition to taking responsibility for their own lives. On the one hand, this advice seems to rest on an assumption that women are passive, while men are active, busy with work etc. On the other hand, the advice provided here can also be interpreted as indicating that both women and men should be active and take responsibility for their own lives. In the latter rendering, the advice may be considered egalitarian.

Another contemporary problem that Nagla Mahfouz discusses is the aggressive or controlling wife. She warns that being aggressive or controlling towards the husband is a recipe for disaster. In fact, it may lead to the husband's becoming pigheaded (*ʿanīd*) and dismissive of her requests, out of spite. In reviewing the current situation Nagla Mahfouz states that treating the husband with aggression and control 'turns the home into a battlefield instead of a haven for respect, as the Creator willed it' (Mahfouz 2006). This is in fact the *only* explicit reference to God or Islam in the protocol. It also appears to be an indirect reference to verse 30:21 in the *Qurān*. The preferred mode of moving into action for wives who wish to get their ideas across to their husbands is summarized thus: think calmly through your stance, use tactful feminine communication and feminine wisdom in speech. Let the husband choose, but not before briefing him in a concise and non-nagging, tactful manner on the benefits of your view, leaving him with the affirmation that he will make the best decision for the family. Here both the problem and the advice provided are gender-differentiated. Women are depicted as inclined towards being controlling and nagging. Men are described as prone to being pigheaded. The advice to wives is essentially to tactfully make the husband believe the solution is his own idea.

To resolve a marital conflict, the wife ought to move into action by thinking calmly through the situation on her own, and then talk to the husband in a calm and tactful manner, when she is ready to do so. Nagla Mahfouz states that in general, communicating love and smiling enhances good communication. Part of the solution according to Nagla Mahfouz is also the wife's frequent deposits into the couple's 'love account'. The implication seems to be that if the 'love account' is constantly filled up, then the couple will always have love between them, even during more trying times of disagreements.[26] Here the message is unclear. Is it the wife's primary responsibility to ensure that the couple's love account is full? Or is the author referring only to the wife's 'deposits', without mention of the husband's, simply because the protocol on a whole is addressed to wives?

[26] This particular analogy is used in several protocols on IOL Arabic.

The lack of consideration for each other as a life partner is yet another contemporary problem dealt with. This problem may manifest itself in various ways. One example is that the wife persistently thinks and speaks along the lines of 'I rear *his* children and clean *his* house, cook *his* food' etc. The preferred scenario is that women should 'not degrade themselves from their status as wives and mothers to [domestic] servants' (Mahfouz 2006). Rather, spouses should see one another as 'life-partners'. In a similar vein, some wives consider sex a duty to their husbands, a token for *his* pleasure. Some wives may even negatively sanction their husband by withholding sex. The preferred scenario is that sex is an 'intimate encounter based on love, warmness, and satisfaction for both', in other words a call for egalitarian sexual relations (Mahfouz 2006).

In sum, according to Nagla Mahfouz, idealized marital relations entail: being life-partners, having a feeling of shared conjugal unity ('we') yet giving each other individual space, frequent deposits into the 'love account', good communication, respect for differences, feelings of self-worth, and not least, loving and pleasurable sexual relations for *both*. Part and parcel of a wife's good communication is being feminine, soft-spoken, wise and tactful, and not trying to change or control the husband. This latter aspect seems to be clearly based on a gender-differentiated rationale. In my reading, this protocol also demonstrates an intriguing synthesis of counselling perspectives. Nagla Mahfouz encourages wives to embrace themselves with feelings of self-love and self-worth. This is very consistent with the concepts of empowerment and self-realization of American humanistic counselling. The advice regarding, communicating love and appreciation to one's spouse, having other roles and sources of happiness outside the family and taking a time-out before conveying feelings in a calm manner, are nearly carbon copies of the advice provided in MMWV. There is also reference to Islam, and/or God in the declaration that it is 'God's will' that marriage is 'a haven of respect'. In my interpretation this statement is both an indirect reference to the *Qurān*, and an overt reference to God. Still, this is the *only* explicit reference to God or Islam in the whole protocol. This is in sharp contrast to Dina Rashid's protocol, which contains direct references to numerous Islamic sources and 'God'. Also, the Arabic protocol appears to provide advice founded on a mixture of an egalitarian and a complementary approach to gender-relations.

The two protocols just examined, share some interesting qualities, such as the integration of different currents in counselling. Still, there are some intriguing distinctions between the two. In the next section, I will use the sample protocols as springboards to draw the reader's attention to differences on IOL English and IOL Arabic.

Differences Between IOL English and IOL Arabic

In this section, I will compare the two sample protocols with an eye to differing general tendencies on IOL English and IOL Arabic. In addition, I will discuss the degree to which IOL displays a plurality of views on a given topic and how IOL appears to contribute to the individualization of Islam. In Table 1, I summarize the observed differences that will be discussed in more detail below.

Table 1 Comparison of tendencies on IOL English and IOL Arabic

Incidence of/Reference to	IOL English	IOL Arabic
Piety, religious observance (e.g. prayer)	Frequent	Seldom
God/God's intentions a. marriage	Frequent	Some times
Qur'an Verse 30:21 (*mawada & raḥmā)*	Frequent	Some times
The example of the Prophet Muhammed	Frequent	Some times
Addressing the reader as 'you'	Frequent	Some times
Addressing the reader as 'husbands and wives'	Seldom	Frequent
Numerous contemporary problems	Seldom	Frequent
Clear focus on 1–2 contemporary problem(s)	Frequent	Some times
Quotes from IOL-cyber-counsellor –users	Seldom	Frequent
Quotations of IOL cyber counsellors	Seldom	Frequent
'Feminine tact'	Some times	Frequent
Sexual relations	Seldom	Frequent
Step by step lists of advice	Frequent	Frequent
'Thinking Islam' style	Frequent	Never
'Living Islam'	Frequent	Always

One of the apparent differences between the two sample protocols is whether or not actual husbands and wives are quoted. While ample quotations from actual IOL-users/wives are included in 'Common Ideas', none are provided in 'Seasons of love'. Indeed, there appears to be a general tendency on IOL Arabic to quote numerous husbands and wives. In 'Common Ideas' the quotations appear to serve a function, in that the themes in the quotes are returned to in the author's further discussion. This, however, is not always the case. Sometimes the use of quotations on IOL Arabic appears to serve no other function than simply to demonstrate a variety of views on the topic(s) in question. By comparison, there are barely any IOL-users quoted in the IOL English communication protocols. A similar pattern can be observed with regards to quoting IOL-counsellors.

On IOL Arabic, the views of counsellors are often integrated into the protocols. In fact, IOL Arabic frequently refers to counsellors' differing opinions on a given topic. This is much less common on IOL English. It is tempting to assume that the IOL Arabic team has an intentional emphasis on the experience near, and the diversity of lived experience of ordinary people in Arab societies. At the same time, in choosing this approach, IOL Arabic is also able to maintain a close tie to both IOL-users and IOL-counsellors. One possible interpretation is that IOL Arabic is attempting to expand the readers' envisioned alternatives to a given problem. Or maybe the purpose is simply to induce recognition? Perhaps IOL Arabic considers living in an Arab society the common ground that enables their readers' to relate to both the problems and the IOL-users quoted. In a similar vein, inducing recognition with local problems may possibly be a more challenging task for IOL English, if they perceive their audience as being more diverse and globalized. Alternatively, IOL English may believe that their audience simply takes diversity for granted, and does need to be spoon-fed a variety of voices.

Another difference between the two protocols is related to structure and focus. ‘Seasons of love’ (IOL English) is a more focused piece, dealing with a well-defined topic, and presenting functional advice and solutions on how to reach a preferred scenario. In contrast, ‘Common Ideas’ (IOL Arabic) is overflowing with contemporary problems, albeit interconnected, and numerous preferred scenarios are presented. Notably, there are examples of protocols on IOL Arabic that, in a manner similar to ‘Seasons of Love’, deal with a clearly defined problem and potential solutions. However, there appears to be a clearer tendency on IOL Arabic to post protocols brimming with contemporary problems. I have not yet observed a similar tendency on IOL English. Does the IOL Arabic team believe that there are simply *more* contemporary problems to address in an Arab context? My observations of the IOL Arabic team’s editorial meetings may perhaps lend support to this hypothesis. Members of the IOL Arabic team frequently express that there are (too) many problems to address in Arab societies. Or, is the difference related to context and perceived readership? Perhaps it is easier for IOL Arabic to address specific social and cultural problems that are prevalent in the Arab world, since this is where most of their readers are based (Alexa 2010). An alternate interpretation may be related to what is considered a pedagogical way of presenting an issue. It is perceivable that IOL English believes that a clear definition of focus, in addition to concise and clear language, is crucial if one is to keep the reader interested. This may be particularly true of writing to an American audience.

The two sample protocols exemplify a difference in the use of pronouns, more specifically: how the reader is addressed, and how the author’s voice is conveyed. In ‘Seasons of Love’, on IOL English, the author at times writes ‘we’. In my view, the use of ‘we’ does not to seem to be the ‘royal we’, substituting for ‘I’. Rather, Dina Rashid appears to be including herself in the category ‘we Muslims’ or ‘we Muslim husbands and wives’. Moreover, Dina Rashid frequently addresses the reader as ‘you’. Both the use of ‘we’ and ‘you’ may be considered in this context as a strategy to establish a closer bond with the reader. In addition, it is reminiscent of the self-help genre, which most definitely addresses the reader as ‘you’. At the same time, it may also be related to a conviction that humanistic counselling may be more successful if the counselee is addressed directly. In contrast, the IOL Arabic sample mainly addresses the reader in the third person as ‘the wife’ or ‘the husband and wife’. Although, there are a few passages in ‘Common Thoughts’ (3 out of 18) in which the reader is in fact addressed as ‘you’. Most notably, in the section where the reader is given advice on how to proceed or solve various problems, the reader is not addressed as ‘you’ but in third person.

Overall, the IOL English protocols appear to be more consistent with regards to addressing the reader as ‘you’. Especially in the section where pointers are provided to solve the problems, the tendency is to address the readers directly. In contrast, the IOL Arabic protocols appear to be less consistent in addressing the reader as ‘you’. Although, ‘you’ is sometimes used on IOL Arabic, it is not necessarily used in the section providing readers with tips and solutions. Moreover, the use of ‘you’ frequently occurs together with addressing the reader as ‘husband and wife’. On the whole, addressing the reader in third person appears to be more prevalent on IOL

Arabic. At first glance, the discrepancy in the use of 'you' on IOL Arabic and IOL English, may give the impression that the American humanistic counselling approach and the self-help genre are more thoroughly adopted on IOL English. Indeed, IOL Arabic may perhaps be unintentionally creating a distance to the reader. Alternatively, the use of third person could perhaps be perceived as a more polite or respectful form of addressing the reader, especially when taken together with cultural speech patterns in the Arabic language. It is interesting to note, that the IOL Arabic social team (who edited and published the communication protocols) seem to steer away from addressing one another as 'you' (*inta/tī*). Instead, they appear to consistently address one another with the respectful form *ḥadritak/tik* or *ustāz/a* followed by the colleague's first name.

'Common Ideas', on IOL Arabic, explicitly advises wives to use 'feminine', 'tactful' and 'soft-spoken' communication with their husbands. There is additional emphasis on allowing the husband an element of choice, after briefing him on the preferred outcome. There seems to be an indication that if the husband is allowed an actual choice and reaches a conclusion on his own accord, he appropriates the idea as 'his own' rather than as a dictate from a nagging wife. This type of gender-differentiated advice appears to be more prevalent on IOL Arabic than on IOL English. Publishing advice on 'feminine tact' may be related to the type of conduct the IOL Arabic team believe 'would work' in Arab contexts. On the other hand, this type of advice is undoubtedly in accordance with recommended communication patterns presented in MMWV because in MMWV there is a strong emphasis on the assumption that husbands need to be presented with *choices* rather than *orders*, from their wives. In this sense, IOL Arabic's frequent references to gender-differentiated advice may be due to extensive influence from MMWV. It may also be an indication that IOL Arabic is more inclined towards MMWV than IOL English is.

Similarly, sexual relations are explicitly dealt with under 'Common Ideas'. Indeed, there appears to be much more emphasis on realizing good sexual relations on IOL Arabic than on IOL English. It is repeatedly stated that sexual education is sorely lacking in Arab societies, and as a consequence many Arab spouses do not know much about sex prior to marriage. Kawther Alkholy, confirmed that IOL Arabic has a particular emphasis on sexual education; in an interview in May 2009, she says:

> You know the problem with Arab society is that there is no good sexual education (*thaqāfa ginsiyya*).[27] There is a total lack of sexual education. People need to get educated about sexual relations. So we in IOL try to address these issues. Of course, some people think it is outrageous that a website called something with Islam does this. We are not exactly *taqlīdī* in our approach to Islam. We are very open-minded.
>
> (AlKholy 2009)

Indeed, talking about sex is considered taboo in many segments of Arab society, particularly *prior* to marriage (Yousef and Abdel-Fadil 2006: 80). Being an Islamic website presumably assists IOL Arabic in their mission to enlighten Arab

[27] *Jins* (sex) is pronounced *gins* in Egyptian dialect.

populations about sexual relations between spouses.[28] I think Kawther Alkholy's comment about not being *taqlīdī* may be valid to a large degree for the IOL Arabic social section that she was the leader of, but not necessarily for all sections. The different approach to sexual relations that IOL English and IOL Arabic display may perhaps be attributed to a dissimilarity with regards to the topics the two IOL social sections wished to focus on. In a similar vein, the difference may perhaps be attributed to differences in orientation amongst the individuals running the two sections. Another possible interpretation is that IOL English's audience is perceived as being more well-informed about sexual relations than a primarily Arab audience.

The final difference I wish to discuss is perhaps the most striking. In 'Common Ideas' (IOL Arabic), the only explicit reference to God is a warning that treating the husband with aggression and control 'turns the home into a battlefield instead of a haven for respect, as the Creator willed it'. Moreover, no Islamic sources are quoted. This is in stark contrast to 'Summertime'. I wish to make clear that there are a number of the protocols on IOL Arabic that are similar to 'Summertime' in that they too frequently refer to Islamic sources, and piety. Nonetheless, it would seem that 'Common Ideas' represents a tendency on IOL Arabic in contrast to IOL English. On the whole, references to God, devoutness and Islamic sources appear to receive more emphasis in the English protocols. In a similar vein, the 'thinking Islam' style features frequently on IOL English, either alone or together with 'living Islam'. In other words, IOL English appears to be rather set on portraying abstract Islamic principles/ethics, in addition to frequent references to God and Islamic sources. In contrast, all of the selected protocols on IOL Arabic appear to be penned in the 'living Islam' style with no explicit references to abstract Islamic principles. And, while I found certain protocols on IOL English that displayed a fusion of 'living' and 'thinking' style, I did not find this to be the case on IOL Arabic. Indeed this difference in orientation is observable in the different responses the IOL-section leaders gave to the question 'what characterizes IOL's marital counselling?' (quoted in the introduction). Kawther Alkholy (IOL Arabic) replies in a pragmatic fashion, that their emphasis is on how to deal with marital conflicts (AlKholy 2009). She provides no explicit references to Islamic concepts. While, Hwaa Irfan responds in a more abstract manner: 'Islamic psychology is not about boxing people in. It is about *jīhād al-nafs*, and realizing who you are' (Irfan 2009). In contrast, I have not once heard the term *jīhād al-nafs* during my longitudinal fieldwork with the IOL Arabic social team.

Does this necessarily mean that IOL Arabic has less emphasis on the abstract or ethical principles of Islam? One possible explanation may be that IOL Arabic, does not consider lack of knowledge of the ethical principles of Islam to be a relevant concern for their audience. They may even argue that many Arabic-speaking Muslims could probably recite a number of abstract principles of Islam, at the drop

[28] Over the last decade, Arabic satellite channels have been following suite. The MBC program *Kalām Naʿim*, which translates as 'Sweet Talk' is a hit. Likewise, the program *Kalām Kibīr* (Big Talk) with Dr. Heba Kotb. Dr. Kotb explicitly deals with sexual relations and Islam, and at times in a most graphic fashion.

of a hat. Rather, IOL Arabic may perhaps consider the translation of ethical principles into deeds, to be the real issue at hand. Or perhaps IOL Arabic simply takes Islam as a given, in a Muslim majority context. Similarly, IOL English may envision their audience as being primarily Muslim minorities residing in Western countries, where rationalization of religious belief is a common phenomenon, and often a necessity. A similar point can be argued with regards to addressing Muslim coverts. Yet another possible interpretation is that IOL Arabic wants to abstain from lecturing troubled spouses about Islamic sources and God in the midst of their marital problem. Instead IOL Arabic may want to cut the message to the bone, providing easy and practical steps to follow. Another possible understanding was offered to me by one of my informants, Samar Abduh, a counsellor and member of the IOL Arabic social team. She proposed that IOL English caters to an audience who have ample alternatives with regards to online counselling, that is, those who choose IOL English most probably want content that is specifically and explicitly Islamic (Abduh 2010). In contrast, for Arabic audiences, IOL Arabic may be the only, or at least one of few counselling alternative(s).

Concluding Reflections

> Cyber counselling [on IOL English] incorporates conventional counselling models, which might not be deemed conventionally 'Islamic' in other contexts, together with other forms of 'professional help' integrated with an Islamic ethos (Bunt 2003: 148).

My conclusion is similar but more specific. Protocols about marital communication posted on IOL English and IOL Arabic have been the focus of this chapter. In exploring the type of counselling perspectives IOL employs when addressing marital communication problems, I revealed influences from Islamic counselling, American humanistic counselling and relationship advice from *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (MMWV) (Gray 1992). The English and Arabic version were equally influenced by the Western sources, yet adapted to local scenarios. Furthermore, rather than viewing these three counselling brands as irreconcilable, IOL-producers appear to adopt and adapt these counselling perspectives in to one and thus construe their specific blend or brand of counselling. Since this particular fusion of Islamic counselling, American humanistic counselling, and MMWV appears to be unique to IOL, it may be useful to think of this blend as the 'IOL counselling brand' (my analytical construct). The IOL brand appears to be in concurrence with previous theoretical postulates about how Islamic portals become a site for new and different content, particularly since I have not yet encountered offline parallels.[29] Still, this warrants further investigation.

[29] See Abdel-Fadil (2012) for a discussion of similarities with counselling trends in the US fused with other religions.

The findings of my study also suggest that an Islamic perspective does not need to be *either* egalitarian *or* gender-differentiated. It can be both simultaneously, as illustrated in the type of advice posted on IOL. Also, the basis for a complementary approach to gender need not be founded on non-egalitarian interpretations of Islamic sources. A gender-differentiated approach may draw equally on Western, non-Islamic sources, such as MMWV. Among the most interesting findings pertaining to how the protocols on IOL Arabic and English compare is that IOL English has more emphasis on Islamic sources, piety and the relationship to God. Furthermore, IOL Arabic seems to much more frequently represent a plurality of views on a given topic. This is done by quoting both IOL-users and several IOL-counsellors who do not necessarily see eye to eye. This is a fascinating observation, in light of the postulate about the internet contributing to a plurality of religious opinions. Still, it seems to be a more apt description of IOL Arabic than IOL English. Moreover, both the IOL brand and the type of advice incorporated into the communication protocols provide a slightly different angle on the process of individualization of Islam than has been put forward in other studies. On IOL, the emphasis is on equipping each individual with an awareness of a range of choices and solutions that may improve (marital) life.

Yet, the refashioning of the IOL portal, following the IOL-crisis in March 2010, indicates that IOL is not what it once was. IOL is now only available in Arabic.[30] The website no longer showcases the once IOL-counselling brand. In fact, IOL has ceased to provide any form of online counselling or interactive features all together. In sum, it has lost its characteristic traits and what set it apart from other Islamic portals. This makes documenting IOL as it once was, an even more important enterprise. In my analysis, IOL's counselling brand migrated a long with employees to their new website: www.onislam.net. The era of Islam Online appears to be over. Perhaps, a new era has begun with the creation of On Islam.[31]

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[30] This is especially interesting in the wake of the IOL-Crisis. This together with 'old-school content' suggests that the local Arab audience is considered the prime target for the website, and that the IOL-crisis may well have been fused by a plan to refashion the website in a more religiously conservative direction. Up until 2012, the changes to the website were at best evidence of a website in transition, and it was difficult to determine which way IOL would go.

[31] At present, the Arabic version of On Islam is running on strained funds, while the English version of the portal has more long-term funding. It provides much of the same type of content as the old IOL, and many of those who work there used to be IOL'ers.

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Pop Culture and Class Distinction in Lebanon

Sune Haugbolle

Lebanon, March 1999. It is a Friday night, but the streets of Beirut are almost deserted. Instead of flocking to nightclubs and parties like they would normally do on the weekend, a great many people are glued to their TV screens watching LBC's new ultra popular quasi-Karaoke show *Ya layl ya 'ayn*.[1] I am visiting friends in Beirut from my base in Damascus and together, instead of going out as planned, we end up watching what is arguable the beginning of the reality TV genre in the Arab Middle East. At the time, the dancing and singing contestants on the show seem plainly silly to me, but my Lebanese male friends are spellbound. The show's simple formula pits men against women in a battle of singing, dancing, and knowledge about pop music and is, like most Arab TV shows, a spin-off from Western show concepts.[2] The team with most points wins a prize of around US$4000, which is usually donated to charity. For the contestants the prize is not so much the money as the participation itself: the whole glamorous atmosphere, the media exposure and a chance to mingle with celebrities. During the show, the two teams engage in karaoke contests, sing along with live performing pop stars, dance, and quiz. "The *Ya layl ya 'ayn* dancers," five or six female dancers in skin-tight dresses placed on individual platforms, are another central component as the camera dwells on

[1] This chapter refers to episodes of *Ya layl ya 'ayn* which the author watched in Beirut in March 1999 and April 2000. Other episodes have been found on www.youtube.com. LBC's webpage is www.lbcgroup.tv/lbc. I also rely heavily on the observations of Nadya Jeanne Sbaiti, *Ya Layl Ya 'Ayn: Singin' Along in Lebanon*, unpublished paper (2001) and thank the author for allowing me to use her observations in this article.

[2] See Joe Khalil, "Blending in: Arab Television and the Search for Programming Ideas," in *TBS Journal* 13, 2004. http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall04/khalil.html.

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T. Hoffmann and G. Larsson (eds.), *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies*, Muslims in Global Societies Series 7,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7247-2_5,

their rotating dance moves throughout the show. In the finale, the losing team is subjected to a practical joke, a *ma'lab*, the significance of which I will return to later. At the very end, both teams join the special guest singers and dancers in an emulation of a night club dance floor. As it turned out, staying in was a lot like going out on this particular evening in late-1990s Beirut.

Shows like *Ya layl ya'ayn* (YLYA) have today become an integrated part of Arab pop culture and have generated a substantial academic literature analysing its socio-cultural and political significance.[3] At the time, however, YLYA marked somewhat of a departure from LBC's usual fare of entertainment and from that of Lebanese and Arab TV in general, which is why my friends were spellbound by its novelty. Up to 1999, LBC's main foray into game shows had been a copy of the American *Wheel of Fortune*, launched to coincide with *iftar* during Ramadan in 1996 and hence cash in on a broader constituency than the usual Christian viewers of LBC. The broadened appeal and the game show format were natural outcomes of LBC's transformation into a satellite channel for all Arabs, including Lebanese communities abroad. In accordance with changed ownership of LBC in the mid-1990s, the station gradually moved away from its exclusively Christian origins and became known as the queen of Arab satellite entertainment, a label owing to a string of hit programmes like the erotically charged outdoor aerobic show *Ma ilak ila Haifa* ("All you've got is Haifa"), and a range of popular talk shows recorded in front of a studio audience. By 1997, the *Wheel of Fortune* show, popular not least because of the scantily clad women of Eastern European origin turning over the letter and prize cubes, was no longer an *iftar* affair but an all-year success, spawning copycat shows on other Lebanese channels. Murr TV, another Christian owned Lebanese channel, may have been pioneering imports of Western game show concepts. But it was LBC more than any other channel which became associated with the kind of superficial (so the critics claimed) entertainment and sexiness, if not even tartiness, which to some Arabs came to be emblematically Lebanese, at once repulsive and seductive. When reality TV series started airing in 2003 and 2004, they built on a platform of entertainment established in Lebanese TV during the 1990s.

YLYA continued the trend with short skirts and skimpy tops from the previous LBC shows, but took it to another level of popularity by fusing sexy outfits with pop stars, a live audience, and gender battles. Although not reality TV as such because we don't get very close to the contestants, YLYA arguably was an important step towards the long series of block-busting singing, dancing and beauty contests fused with reality TV elements, like *Star Academy*, which have been so hugely popular in the Arab world since *Miss Lebanon* on LBC in 2003, followed by *al-Hawa Sawa* (Fun Together) on ART and Future TV's *Superstar* in 2004. YLYA and "reality" song and dance contest programmes have been met with barrages of protests from religious leaders, commentators and governments for their decadent, sexually charged and "Westernized" content. In particular, they have ushered in a

[3] Marwan Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

culture war between Islamists and media producers, which intersects with the struggle for "clean" media (such as what Egyptian film critics since the 1990s have called *as-sinama an-nadhifa* (clean cinema),[4] clean cinema influenced by a religiously inflected ethical project of proper bodily comportment, piety, social awareness and responsibility). However, in 2013, the reality genre is showing no signs of letting up and continues to develop in new directions, including Islamic co-optations.[5]

Ya layl ya'ayn, which roughly translates "Oh, what a night" and is the drawn-out, repeated chorus of many traditional (as well as modern referring to traditional) Arabic songs, obviously showcases important representations of gender relations in an Arab society. More broadly, the show is an interesting example of the way in which popular culture creates, reifies and negotiates social identity in the contemporary Arab Middle East. Like Marwan Kraidy, I see the new very popular contests and reality TV programmes as venues for articulation of Arab modernity with all its multiple contradictions but also dynamic developments.[6] They are important for scholarly reasons simply because they are among the most widely consumed pop culture of the last decade. Contrary to many Arab cultural elites' denigration of popular culture as "mere entertainment," media scholars in the West have started to notice the importance of entertainment, as it provides us with a window into the ground level social processes at play in the contestation over modernity. In particular, much of the research so far has speculated about the potentially democratising effects of reality TV, be it its ability to create space for contention over public issues like the role of media,[7] to formulate hard-hitting slogans that have then been recycled in the 2005 Lebanon Independence Intifada and Egypt's *Kifaya* movement,[8] or to challenge social norms on sexuality. The latter issue in particular has triggered a *Kulturkampf* of sorts between secular and Islamic visions of Arab modernity. These are all important aspects of the new, racy TV entertainment.

In this article I focus particularly on another aspect which has perhaps been understudied in the bourgeoning literature on Arab media, but which should not be overlooked, namely the class dimension of media productions and viewership. Conversely, studies of class – more in vogue in the 1970s and 1980s before the birth of modern Arab media studies as a sub-discipline (but perhaps on their way back as a result of the Arab Uprisings) – barely mention media consumption. Most Marxist

[4] Karim Tartoussieh: *Pious Stardom: Cinema and the Islamic Revival in Egypt*, unpublished paper, 2008.

[5] Lindsay Wise, "Whose Reality is Real?" in *TBS Journal* 15, 2005. http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall05/Wise.html. See also Christiane Gruber and Sune Haugbolle (eds.), *Visual Culture in the Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image*, Indiana University Press, 2013.

[6] Marwan Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

[7] Marwan Kraidy, "Reality Television and Politics in the Arab World," in *TBS Journal* 15, 2005. http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall05/Kraidy.html.

[8] Marc Lynch, "Reality is Not Enough," in *TBS Journal* 15, 2005. http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall05/Lynch.html.

inspired historians would stress people's relation to the means of production over and beyond class consciousness. Yet, people's choice of media usage is indispensible when we want to make sense of class today. It is an intrinsic part of a broader set of everyday social distinctions people make more or less consciously through categorizations of taste, cultural references and even political and ethical values – in short, the *habitus* thorough which class is established. In a post-socialist Middle East where notions of class are increasingly de-coupled from formal political parties and their ideologies,[9] the more salient arena for studying class positions and class consciousness is precisely the realm of *habitus* and cultural capital. Media producers are, again more or less consciously, aware that their products inform class distinctions, and apply these effects accordingly. What interests me in this article is whether or not a privatizing and increasingly transnational media sector in the Arab Middle East can be linked to (and/or is contributing to) significant class transformations in recent decades, such as the consolidation of new urban middle classes and the pauperization of working classes, including people in the informal sector, and the extent to which the media take a position on these class formations.

A broader point of introducing a class optic in the context of this book about Muslims and new information technologies is to underline that the consumption of media – the usage patterns and de-decoding of meaning in Arab societies – cannot and should not be made sense of purely by grouping people according to religion. If we insist on creating analytical categories such as "Muslim media use," we are in my opinion imagining media communities which do not exist in reality as reified entities except perhaps for in the case of particularly religious media. For most of the media in the Middle East, we are rather confronted with widely differentiated messages, content, entertainment, news, opinions, images, and sounds, some of which refer to religion, some of which do not, but all of which participate in the same marketplace of opinions and taste, in the same enmeshed and fast-moving making of public culture. Crucially, this public culture is shared and consumed in ways that can certainly be surprising, but most of all remain rather difficult to detect. Very pious Muslims use Lebanese pop culture – sometimes covertly, sometimes with a sense of pride. Secular Muslims and religious Christians watch Yussuf al-Qaradawi's programmes on al-Jazeera and Hizbollah's al-Manar channel. Devout young Muslims are crazy about Harry Potter. What is Muslim media here, and what is not? We should be very careful about professing that Muslims use media in particular ways, or that particular media are "Muslim." As I intend to show in this article, I believe that class reflects the actual social role that media play today in a much better way than religious categories. In Lebanon, where questions of class intersect with long-standing debates about sectarian identity politics, analyses of particular TV shows, blogs and soap operas can highlight social as well as sectarian differentiation. Through detailed analysis of one particular TV show, YLYA, I hope to illustrate the importance first, of a class analysis, and second, of media ethnography.

[9] Michelle Brouwers, *Political ideology in the Arab World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Oh, What a Night of Gendered Racism

YLYA aired on LBC from 1999 to 2002, and was re-launched after the 2006 war between Hizbollah and Israel with a guest appearance by starlet Nancy Ajram singing a tribute to Lebanon's war victims.[10] The re-launch was geared particularly towards a Shiite lower-income audience as LBC sought to build a broader base beyond its traditional Christian viewership, and not be confined by the political dividing lines between the Marc 8 and March 14 coalitions dominating Lebanese politics after 2005. This paper focuses particularly on the first period of YLYA shows and the quite different political and media environment back in the days before Nancy and Hayfa, and before reality TV had established itself. Just a mere decade and a half ago, it seems like a different media age. As already explained, this was a period in Arab media history with heavy expansion and consolidation of satellite TV as the most broadly consumed media form in the Arab Middle East. In the context of Lebanon's political history, these were the last years of relative calm before the stability of Syrian hegemony gave way to the anti-Syrian movement which transformed Lebanese politics and culminated in the killing of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005. The relatively stable political consensus around *Pax Syriana* reflected on society. During the 1990s and early 2000s, most Lebanese were focused less on politics and more on reestablishing their livelihoods and a sense of security and the good life. Entertainment, consumption and reconstruction were pillars in the philosophy of Rafiq al-Hariri, the towering political figure of the period, but also – perhaps quite understandably, given the mayhem of the civil war years – trends in Lebanese society more broadly. A section of Lebanese youth partied like there was no tomorrow, and nightclub culture became mainstream culture and to a large extent synonymous with Beirut rediscovering its role as a centre for fun, liberalism and modernity in the Middle East, harking back to an ideal image of Lebanon as Switzerland of the Middle East in the 1960s. And, as already mentioned, this vision was exported through Lebanon's satellite entertainment industry.

Outside of Beirut's relatively thriving economy, large areas of absolute poverty in the North and the East (almost a third of Lebanon's population live on less than 5 dollars per day according to United Nations Development Programme),[11] as well as a continuing battle zone with Israel in the South, represented contrasting realities. More troubling, the sectarian and class divides that had fuelled Lebanon's long civil war from 1975 to 1990 persisted and were exacerbated by the prevalence of a sectarian political system combined with free-wheeling economic liberalism. Despite these contradictions, and despite the sclerotic political partnerships between the country's leaders, the image promoted and projected onto the national and international public was a carefully engineered postcard picture of a modern, well-educated, recovering nation.

[10] At the time of writing in January 2013, the show is no longer airing.

[11] http://www.undp.org.lb/WhatWeDo/poverty.cfm.

Media played a large role as provider of entertainment, advertisement and consumption, and also contributed to engineering the mirage of reconstructed Lebanon after 1990. Moreover, TV, radio and newspaper (internet media played a small role before the 2000s) were important arenas for negotiating social identity in a post-civil war setting, where sectarian and political divides still ran deep. YLYA showcases how media entertainment often sought to override or ignore sectarian issues, whilst focusing on consumption and cultural tradition (*turath*) as areas of life that bind the Lebanese people together in a common ethos.[12] Like many other forms of pop culture, YLYA claimed to be a show for everyone, with everyone (that is, all sects), and even to promote gender equality – in short, to be a national show based on quintessentially Lebanese qualities like beauty, charm, fun, and light-hearted entertainment. The shallowness of this pretension to all-inclusiveness is most obvious in the contestants' primarily Christian character which can be gauged from names, clothes, and not least language. While the live performances of popular singers of the late 1990s like Wael Kfoury, Nawal al-Zoghby and Ragheb 'Alameh are all sung in Arabic, the songs in the games are in Arabic, English and French, which requires the contestants to demonstrate their cultural capital as well-educated middle or upper class "cultured" and "international" Lebanese. At the same time, the trilingual singing requires the audience at home to have these abilities. Many rural and urban lower income Lebanese would not.[13] But through consumption of the glitzy images of the, sexy, successful (because) televised contestants, they were made to want to acquire those skills.

The ability to switch languages is revealing of the show's intensions. If the producers would have wanted to create all-inclusive entertainment or even "equal opportunities" like the producers stated with reference to the female team taking on their male counterparts, they would have made all the songs in Arabic in order for all walks of life to enjoy the show and be able to compete. Instead, the show's content and aesthetics reproduce symbolic class barriers that can be found across the board in Lebanese public culture. The setting, personnel and language of YLYA are geared towards a young, relatively "with it" and "hip" audience, probably single and well-educated, who are familiar with Lebanese and international pop music and Beiruti night life. The familiarity with clubbing is accentuated by the contestants' outfits which could appear in any nightclub or discotheque in Beirut: the men mostly dress in suits, while the women wear long, tight trousers and glitzy tops. By promoting this lifestyle, the show communicates familiarity with particular consumption habits and, as mentioned, their implicit relation to both class and (Christian) sect. Of course, this is an idealized image which does not correspond to Lebanese reality,

[12] The tendency to avoid sectarian issues also had a legal dimension, in that a media law passed in 1994 outlawed any "matter seeking to inflame or incite sectarian or religious chauvinism or seeking to push society, and especially children, to physical and moral violence, moral deviance, terrorism, or racial and religious segregation." See www.hrw.org/reports/1997/lebanon.

[13] It is a well known fact that Christians are the most adept at trilingualism due to their long-established French education system, but high-income classes from all sects share the skills and the ethos.

where language, sect and class are not as inexorably linked. Rather, YLYA represents an idealized package of Lebanese youths who are not veiled, familiar with pop music and nightclubbing, sexy (some to the point of promiscuous) looking, "Westernised" and hence "modern." The totality of this vision produces what Sturken and Cartwright call "scopophilia," pleasure derived from looking at a visual image – a pleasure that may also translate into voyeurism or exhibitionism, i.e. the pleasure of seeing without being seen or the pleasure of being looked at, respectively.[14] However, the dark side of this seduction is the implicit "otherfication" of the excluded viewer, the less-educated, less-moneyed Lebanese probably living outside Beirut or in its suburbs. It is worth noting that nightclubs only exist in East and West Beirut as well as the northern, Christian suburbs. At the same time, this does not mean that no attempt to emulate the sophistication and style of YLYA took place outside of Beirut. I will return to this point later.

The most glaring illustration of the social exclusion in YLYA is the *ma'lab*, or practical joke at the end of each programme. A *ma'lab* in Lebanese colloquial can be either gentle fun or more malicious forms of piss-taking, depending on the context. In the episodes of YLYA that I have watched and read about, the joke invariably put the losing team in compromising situations which were meant to accentuate the mutual exclusivity of Lebanese modernity of the contestants, on one hand, and traditional, urban lower-class or rural traditionalism on the other. According to Lebanese friends and fans of YLYA, the *ma'lab* got cornier and cornier towards the end of the shows lifespan in 2002, culminating in a racist and eventually compromising joke about Sri Lankan migrant workers, which LBC later had to renounce. As Nadya Sbaiti describes this *ma'lab*, it consisted in the members of the men's team all "darkening their faces with makeup, and dressing and speaking as Sri Lankans, holding brooms and cleaning supplies, 'cleaning' the stage in an imitation that was clearly indicative of the subordinate role that these domestic workers were playing in the social, cultural, and racial landscape of Lebanon. One of the contestants, an energetic guy, said in an accent, "we Sri Lankans like 'meaty' Lebanese women, not like ours, too skinny" – in English. Although the host Tony made clear that they were not making fun of Sri Lankans and that YLYA "send greetings from everyone on the show to all the people of Sri Lanka," (many of whom were no doubt watching), it is difficult to see the joke as anything but an affirmation of deeply ingrained racist stereotypes about migrant workers."[15]

In another episode, aired on 9 December 2001, a woman from the losing team had to dig out ten diamonds in less than a minute from a bowl of lentils. As she is about to begin, the host Tony hands her an apron with the words, "*tan saru haqqiqiya*" – "to make it more realistic." To the sounds of the guffawing crowd the woman digs frantically away at the lentils, managing only to recover a few before

[14] Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 76.

[15] Nadya Jeanne Sbaiti, "Game Shows, Reality TV, and the New Public S'fears'," paper given at the conference *Visual Practices and Public Subjects*, AUB, Lebanon, April 21–23, 2005.

the time is up. This elaborate staging of a woman dressed to kill wearing an apron and looking for diamonds in a bowl of lentils is remarkable. Not only does it seem to encourage – or comment on – stereotypes about women's materialistic love for diamonds (diamond jewellery is a key export of Lebanon, often with diamonds supplied from West Africa), it also advances an image of a traditional, "*haqiqiya*," Lebanese women working in the kitchen. This conflation could be seen to imply that a woman has to be traditional in order to get the material rewards. As Sbaiti notes, if we look at it that way, the *ma'lab* seems to cement traditional gender roles.[16] Yet the *ma'lab* must also be seen in connection with the very act of losing and punishment that triggers it, and triggers the laughter from the crowd. If we follow Henri Bergson's classic definition of humour as the imposition of the mechanical upon the living or natural,[17] then the mechanical or artificial here is the enacting of domestic work by people who can afford, who own, Sri Lankan domestic workers, and would not normally have to don an apron. An even greater hilarity is produced when in another episode the men's team is made to fix sandwiches and set the table for the women's team. Not only are the sophisticated night clubbers doing Sri Lankan work, they are essentially doing the job of women – *quelle horreur*!

The *'adas* and diamonds, and the men and sandwiches, bring to mind Timothy Mitchell's definition of modernity as a performance of "distinction between the modern and the non-modern, the West and the non-West."[18] Losing, being a loser, here is associated with stooping to manual work which is degrading and therefore hilarious. But it is also associated with traditionalism of the sort that the modern contestants, representing the young successful Beiruti (primarily Christian) middle and upper middle-class, are supposed to be far removed from. The most revealing *ma'lab* in this regard came at the end of the January12, 2001, episode of YLYA. The songs and frolics have come to an end and it is time for the humiliation of the losers. A young boy in his early teens wearing casual sweat pants and shirt and plastic flip-flops walks onto the center-stage of the show, surrounded by the hosts and flanked by the two teams and the audience – pulling a goat by the lead. As the men have lost, a representative from their team has to kneel down and milk the goat in 90 s. While men *could* potentially be goat-herders, in rural areas such as the Bekaa Valley, goat milking in Lebanon is strictly rural women's work, so we see here again the subversion of a male's traditional role as the centrepiece of the *ma'lab*. But more important is the contrast between the milking man and the goat boy, or more generally between the boy and the whole setting. To the sound of roaring laughter from the audience, he looks painfully out of place, humiliated, and aware that the joke is very much on him. The contrast between the rural scene which he is made the exponent for, and the brightly-lit, modern discotheque setting that is the studio with its technology, camera and popular music and stardom, is glaring and almost

[16] Nadya Jeanne Sbaiti, *Ya Layl Ya 'Ayn: Singin' Along in Lebanon*, unpublished paper (2001).

[17] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, New York: Wildside press, 2008.

[18] Timothy Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (2000), p. 26.

painful to watch. The boy and YLYA are made to seem worlds apart. Yet practically everywhere in Lebanon, probably also not more than 5 min away from the LBC studio, there are plenty of sweatpants boys in flip-flops to be found. They perform some of the most menial jobs, often in the informal sector or in agriculture, but they are not included in the imagined community here. Or, to be precise, they are the necessary counterpoint that makes the definition of a Lebanese middle class possible.

Media and Class in Lebanon

A caveat is necessary at this point. Although the goat boy is visibly humiliated, he is far from the only one on YLYA to exhibit insecurity. The performances of professional singers and dancers obviously put the amateurs who try to emulate them in an awkward position too. Contestants try their best to look confident and happy, but often appear stiff and uncertain as the camera exposes their bodies and talents. The camera's focus constantly changes from the perfectly sculpted YLYA dancers to the contestants. These ordinary Lebanese are merely trying to live up to the ideals incorporated by singers and dancers, and their failure to do so is part of the fun and attraction of the show.

The discrepancy between the idols of pop culture and reality may seem trivial, but at the same time it is crucial for understanding the role of media vis-à-vis class. The enactment of emulation – their eyes glued to every move of the professional singers and dancers – which contestants in YLYA participate in is re-enacted across society. The main carrier for this enactment of emulation is the music industry, which YLYA became a major exponent for. Most of the stars appearing on YLYA in 1999–2002 had made a name for themselves through LBC's *Studio al-fann* ("the arts studio") song competition show – a kind of early and less reality TV infused version of *American Idol* or *X-Factor* which did not "invent" pop stars like in *Superstar* or *Star Academy*, but could make or break the careers of aspiring Lebanese singers and other performing artists in the 1990s. YLYA's role in relation to these singers was to advertise them and promote their stardom. After guest performances, hosts Marianna and Tony would always display their CDs. In this way they became the examples to be followed by the amateur contestants, who were beautiful, but also cast as ordinary people, the incarnation of the broad public. YLYA promoted a lifestyle product by including everyone involved in the production and viewing of the show – hosts, contestants, stars, viewers – in the same community of consumption and potential (re)production of the glitzy image and sound. The show did so by building on a certain segment of the youth's knowledge and experience of types of music that would appear only in certain social settings, hence promoting a lifestyle that requires an amount of capital only available to a minority. For example, entry tickets to real nightclubs easily run in 20–50 dollars, making it quite out of reach for even many middle classes. The living expense to income rate in Lebanon is one of the steepest in the world with average salaries for professionals in 2009 not much

higher than 800 dollars per month. This means that many people are forced to struggle if they want to maintain an outwards image of participation in the consumer-based aspects of middle and upper class culture. An expensive looking car is necessary. Flashy clothes are essential. And some degree of being seen in cafés or the Beirut nightlife helps. Nice flats and interior are less important, as the life strived for is very much oriented towards the outwards, public appearance. All this to say that mass mediated images of the good life and emulation of pop culture through consumption is serious business: it is financially demanding, and close to impossible for many who would otherwise count themselves part of the middle class.

Of course, pop culture is not an all-pervasive hegemonic system. It does not just generate emulation but also different kinds of reactions, rejections and subversions. Sometimes pop culture is indeed emulated, but in surprising ways. In the final part of this article, I will focus on reactions to pop culture and media, to the extent that it is possible to gauge it. Having carried out no structured research on this topic myself, I am forced to rely on an impressionistic approach, based on 2 years spent in Beirut on and off between 1998 and 2004. The first thing to note about glitzy nightclubbing culture and pop music is that it penetrates well beyond inner Beirut. In all parts of Lebanon, people buy cheap CDs, cassettes, download MP3s from the internet, and listen to the radio. YLYA's very high viewer ratings and its general popularity also indicate that much of Lebanon's population was drawn to it, just like they were later drawn to *Miss Lebanon*, *Superstar*, or the notorious *al-Wadi* ("the Valley") where contestants were invited to get their hands dirty on a farm with sex symbol Hayfa Wahba. Going back to my own first exposure to the show, the basic fact is that my friends – all male students at the American University of Beirut, some relatively well-off, one of them less so – simply found it entertaining. It was a case of "scopophilia" – they just liked what they saw. They enjoyed the atmosphere, the "typically Lebanese" banter and jokes between hosts and contestants, the clothes, the good-looking girls (especially the host Marianne), and of course the music, although some of it seemed to be appreciated more for its tackiness, a bit like camp appreciation of the Eurovision song contests. But they clearly didn't feel threatened or excluded by these representations. I have little knowledge of how lower income groups received YLYA. But judging from the popularity and the wide availability of pop music stalls, and "pop clothes," or rather cheap copies of current fashions, in lower-income neighbourhoods in West Beirut where I have lived and worked, some of the biggest fans of pop culture can be found here. These are the typical *shabab* (young guys) of the Arab youth, grease in hair, tight jeans, and scooters. And on the girls' side (some of the biggest fans of Hayfa and Nancy are young girls of all denominations), a combination of poppy clothes and veiling. This combination of sexy pop and pious signifiers has become a salient and noticeable (witness books such as Allegra Staton's *Muhajababes*[19]) feature of Arab youth culture, which forces us to question whether icons like Hayfa Wahbe only reify male sexist stereotypes of objectified female bodies, as the feminist approach would stress. Perhaps there is a

[19] Straton, Allegra, *Muhajababes*, London: Constable, 2006.

libratory potential too for young so-called pious women in seeing a young singer who enjoys her body shamelessly. In a class perspective, the attraction of pop culture here could perhaps be explained by the fact that the desire to appear sexy and hip is often biggest among those seen to be the most unsexy and unhip, and who as a result end up trying too hard and emulating too closely the look of their idols. The ease with which moneyed upper-income classes live the ideal packaged life simply depends on capital which few have access to in areas like Basta and Bashoura in West Beirut. For both groups counts that the consumption of musical culture flatters the purchaser's "individual" sense of taste, presenting life as a status game in which distinctions are achieved via the purchase of goods. This is of course an illusion that glosses over the real distinctions in the capacity to consume, and ignores the low-paid, unemployed, and the old. For the less-moneyed, the consumption of images, of dreams and "expectations of modernity," to quote James Ferguson,[20] – or, alternatively, of cheap copies of the real thing – is the only form of participation in the cultural market available. The cheap copies (like hopelessly low-quality ripped jeans or "Adibas" sneakers) effectively reaffirm their subordinate class position, while the celluloid dreams – the music, TV programmes, in short the media – are theirs to keep.

There are of course also those who reject pop culture. Youth counter-cultures based on identification with indie, rap and electronic music, are encompassing phenomena among particularly the well-off college kids of Beirut. They often adopt the same condescending attitude towards pop culture a la YLYA found among cultural critics and artists, who simply view it as various shades of trash, in the same way as elite culture and alternative youth culture mock talent shows in Europe and the USA. Alternatively, counter-culture youngsters may play with pop culture in ironic appreciation of its kitschiness. However, they rarely reject consumption and commoditization as such. On the contrary, commoditization of particular emblems of counter-culture is just as important as in mainstream pop culture. Islamists represent a different counter-reaction, although it appears, at least in Lebanon, that it is more the older religious establishment who refuse it, while the younger generation tends to engage with it in some form.

The discrepancies between consumption patterns and worldviews of those who encode Arab media and those who de-code and consume it, needs a lot more primary research to be documented and better understood. But at a minimum we can say that such discrepancies do exist and that they participate in no small measure to the construction of class. Interesting parallels to pop music can be found in another widely popular genre of mass mediated culture, the musalsal, or telenovela. In her examination of the rural audience of Egyptian soap operas, Lila Abu-Lughod writes: "TV programs are produced by people of different social status than viewers, professionals of a different class, cultural ties, urban not rural…who are working within structures of power and organization tied to and doing the work of national

[20] Ferguson, James, *Expectations of Modernity – Myths and the Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

or commercial interests."[21] The producers of the show in Egypt are "approaching and inflecting Western discourses and construct themselves as guides to modernity and assume the responsibility of producing, through their television programmes," an idea of the modern citizen. State elites in the cultural sector here are seen as the gatekeepers of modernization, as they have effectively been since the introduction of Arab television in the 1960s. In the Lebanese case, LBC(I) is a private channel, as are many other satellite channels inside and outside Lebanon. Through these channels and elsewhere in the Arab media sector, new elites have appeared in the last 20 years with a much sharper focus on profit rather than merely on the public service motivation of creating modern citizens. Their focus is not completely disconnected from state interest and state capital, but the intimate link of previous decades has certainly been severed. What I have tried to show in this article is that in fact, privatization (private ownership and profit making) and modernization (the performance of distinction between the modern and the non-modern) go hand in hand in the new Arab media.[22]

Conclusion

The production of Arab media is dominated by a middle class, who has, since the late Ottoman period, been closely associated with modernising, secular professions like education, trade, media and culture. Their relation to cultural production is directly linked to their socio-economic position as the middle-tier connecting national elites with the vast majorities of subalterns. For much of the twentieth century, the Lebanese middle class was exceptionally strong and broad, unlike in many other Arab countries where state centralisation undermined the economic base of the traditional middle classes while creating new, less bourgeois middle sectors of society such as bureaucrats in the developmental state and, later, exponents and beneficiaries of global economic flows. However, the economic base of the Lebanese middle class declined steadily during and after the Lebanese Civil War. More crucially, its role as the economic, social and ideological pillar of political liberalism eroded. The middle class shrunk in the 1990s, and post-war Lebanon witnessed a growing divide between a wealthy, spending minority that saw itself as at par with the globalised world elite, and a pauperized, expanding majority, many of whom, as mentioned earlier, lived in absolute poverty. The receding middle class reflected

[21] Lila Abu-(s) after Lughod, "The Interpretations of Culture Television," in S.B. Ortner, ed., *The Fate of "Culture": Geertz and Beyond*, Berkely: University of California Press, 1999, p. 114.

[22] As Sbaiti (2001) mentions, YLYA was, and is, intermarried with the music industry through the persona of Simon Asmar, a music industry baron in Lebanon who controlled *Studio al-fann* and had great influence on the production side of YLYA. The whole phenomenon of "videoclips" and MTV-like music channels like Rotana present further material for investigating the thesis of privatization and modernisation. See *Arab Media and Society*, http://www.arabmediasociety.com/topics/index.php?topic=13.

Lebanon's failure to re-establish itself as banking, tourism and trade hub in the region, but was also a direct consequence of ultra-liberalist policies spearheaded by Rafiq al-Hariri.

Held together, the gap between wealthy and poor, and the dominance of agents of modernization in the media sector, can perhaps begin to explain the crass representations of class on a show like *Ya layl ya 'ayn*. Pop culture, with its emphasis on looks, snappy remarks, glossy images and – never too far below the surface, and in the case of Hayfa/Nancy well above – sex, is linked to a basic desire to posses, to own qualities and commodities and potentially even other people (such as Asian migrant workers), which drives a capitalist media market. For established middle and upper classes, YLYA is produced by their own kind and is dressed in their own cultural codes and therefore confirms their class position and allows them a space for identification and demarcation of that position. For low income and rural Lebanese (although my conclusions here admittedly are tentative due to limited research), the attraction appears to lie in the aspiration to a certain consumption pattern, an aspiration which may ultimately be frustrating, or forge "copycat consumption" of ripped jeans and cheapsy tops *shabab* style, which eventually reaffirms their class position rather than transcending it. This libido is primarily marketed through the music industry and advertised by satellite TV. With regard to the popularity of the Lebanese formula of Arab television in other, more conservative Arab countries, the attraction is easy to see, and has less to do with class than with sexiness. It is worth exploring the creation of a Lebanese brand of Arab modernity more closely, both in relation to other Arab countries and to Lebanese communities abroad, who may use it more as a way to maintain a cultural link to their home country. But most importantly, much more ethnographic work is needed in order to understand the reception of Arab media. As I have suggested here, class should be a central category for such a research agenda.

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Part III
Qualitative Research Techniques and Methodological Issues

ITZ BIDAH BRO!!!!! GT ME?? – YouTube Mawlid and Voices of Praise and Blame

Jonas Svensson

Introduction

The celebration the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, mawlid al-nabi,[1] on the 12th (or 17th in the Shiite tradition) of the Islamic month of Rabi'al-awwal is a widespread, albeit understudied, Muslim religious festival.[2] Classic outlines by Muslim religious scholars present the celebration as an occasion of showing gratitude to God for sending his 'beloved' messenger and of praising 'the best of creation'. It forms part of an 'economy of salvation' (Katz 2007, 87) and divine rewards (thawab) for ritual participation can be expected, rewards that can outweigh sins on the day of reckoning.

Celebrating mawlid is, however, a matter for intra-Muslim religious controversy. While it is a public holiday in most countries with a Muslim majority population, opponents claim that mawlid is a religiously illegitimate 'innovation', bid'a. It lacks scriptural foundations and challenges the notion of God's uniqueness, tawhid, through ascribing to Muhammad a more-than-human status, and even a central cosmological role.

Debates over mawlid and its religious legitimacy have a long history. In the contemporary world, Internet has provided these debates with new channels for

[1] In the following I will use the term 'mawlid' exclusively for the annual celebration of the Prophet's birthday. For other uses of the term, see Fuchs and Knappert 2011.

[2] Scholarly works on mawlid have included works on the origin of the celebration (e.g. Kaptein 1993), the history of mawlid texts (e.g. Katz 2007, 6–62), contemporary Muslim legal debate on mawlid (e.g. Schussman 1998) and ethnographical accounts (e.g. Tapper and Tapper 1987) Marion Holmes Katz' book *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad* (2007) is so far the most detailed and most comprehensive account of the historical development of mawlid texts, of the religious ideology underlying the celebration, and of contemporary debates.

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T. Hoffmann and G. Larsson (eds.), *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies*, Muslims in Global Societies Series 7,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7247-2_6, © Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

articulation. Moreover, the celebration itself has gone on-line. On the video-sharing platform YouTube, excerpts or visual 'quotes' (Burgess and Green 2009, 49) from mawlid celebrations worldwide can be viewed and not least commented upon. The following should be seen as a first attempt at exploring, through a sample of videos and comments, the features of this example of religious on-line 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2006, 3). It is done against the background of existing off-line discourses, attitudes and practices. Does the YouTube platform provide a new forum for Islamic religious expression on the Internet, and if so, how does this compare to other forms of Islam on-line?

The material on which the following is based was collected through two processes of sampling. In the first of these 324 clips were randomly selected on 13 May 2010 from a total of 2,000 hits retrieved by two 'worldwide' searches on the word combinations 'mawlid nabi' and 'milad nabi' respectively, ordered by relevance. Information on for example content, duration, number of views, number of comments, uploader, type, year or upload, etc., was gathered with the purpose of providing comparative material for the second sampling. Given the restricted nature of this sample, the reliance on intra-YouTube metrics for ordering results and limitation in the number of hits possible to retrieve from each search (1,000), the following cannot be deemed representative of the total mawlid material available on YouTube. I chose only two search term combinations. Others are possible and yield results (albeit not to the same extent).[3] Hence, the results of this first sampling was only used to provide a background for the second sampling, not to generalise concerning YouTube mawlid content at large.

The second sampling was not random, but purposive. Fifty clips, 25 each from the two searches, of quotes from mawlid celebrations with comments attached were selected. The text of comments, which is the main focus for analysis below, were entered into the software Nvivo 8 for further coding and analysis.

In both samples basic data on the user names was gathered. Some information of this character may be retrieved from the users' channel (i.e. profile) pages. In order both to upload content and comment on clips, a user must register and a channel page is automatically created. Using channel pages to retrieve information on the users has its limitations. First, there is no guarantee that the information is authentic. A YouTube user may opt to provide false information. Second, the information is often limited. The level of user's 'self-disclosure' (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 63) can be kept at a minimum. There are, however, ways in which some information not displayed on channel pages on the web, but nevertheless provided by the user at the time of registration, may be accessed. Using the software LexiURL Searcher developed by the Statistical Cybermetrics Research Group at the University of Wolverhampton, UK,[4] I was able to retrieve such information.

[3] Mawlid is a common rendering in Arabic, and the term used in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Fuchs and Knappert 2011). There are however several alternative terms. Apart from *milad,* these are for example *mulud, mevlid, maulidi* and *meeladu.* For a fairly comprehensive lists of terms and their connection to different geographical regions, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mawlid

[4] I would here like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewer who provided me with the link to this free, and useful software. For information and download, see http://lexiurl.wlv.ac.uk/index.html

YouTube Mawlid in Context

The majority of Muslims around the world do not have easy access to the Internet, let alone use it.[5] This chapter, however, concerns a subset among those who do, more specifically those who consume religious information, participate in religious discourse and express themselves religiously through this and other digital media, i.e. what religious studies scholar Gary Bunt has termed 'iMuslims' (Bunt 2009, 280). Scholarly attention has been directed e.g. to the on-line publication of religious content and use of particular websites (Gräf 2008), to Muslim religious discussion groups (Larsson 2005, 12) and to how the Internet is used for such diverse religious activities as jihadist (militant Islamist) networking and propaganda (Halldén 2007), searching for religious information, establishing and nurturing trans-national social relations (Mishra and Semaan 2010) and matchmaking (Lo and Aziz 2009). Of particular note are Bunt's mapping what he terms 'Cyber Islamic Environments', CIEs (Bunt 2000, 2003, 2009). The term denotes the sum total of 'places' on the World Wide Web where 'Islamic beliefs form an identity reference point' for producers and users (Bunt 2000, 7). The plural form is used to indicate the wide diversity of understandings and the ongoing debates and conflicts among iMuslims (Bunt 2009) concerning the content of such Islamic beliefs. In Bunt's use, CIEs mainly refer to home pages, discussion groups, on-line resources et cetera administered, controlled and mainly visited by iMuslims.

Studies as those mentioned above often raise important theoretical questions. In addition, theoretically inclined works on contemporary Islam, modernity and globalisation often make references to the Internet as an important factor in contemporary religious change (Cesari 2004; Eickelman and Anderson 2003b; Mandaville 2001b, 2007; Roy 2004). I want to highlight a few themes from such considerations to be further addressed in this chapter. One theme concerns how increased knowledge of global Muslim religious diversity in thought and practice influence the understanding of Islam among believers in diverse geographical locations. In the contemporary world adherents to religious traditions are faced with what sociologist of religion Peter Berger has termed the 'heretical imperative' (Berger 1979, 26), where religious affiliation becomes a matter of reflection and choice. Anthropologist Dale Eickelman and political scientist James Piscatori have introduced the notion of an 'objectification of Islam' (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004, 37–45; Roy 2004, 21–22) as a characteristic of religious thinking the modern Muslim world. 'Islam' has increasingly become a delimitated object for individual reflection and positioning. The available material to be used in religious identity construction has expanded. In line with sociologist Roland Robertson's note on globalisation and identity formation (1992, 98–105), it can be claimed that for an increasing number of individuals the formation of religious identities takes place not only in relation to traditions prevalent in the immediate local setting, but also to a global

[5] For the global 'digital divide' in access to the Internet with particular focus on Muslims, see Bunt 2009, 55–64.

whole characterised by diversity. For regular iMuslims, the global diversity of the 'many Islams' could be expected to be even more apparent.

While CIEs may increase awareness of intra-Muslim religious diversity, they are also part to another important process, what Eickelman and Piscatori refer to as the 'fragmentation of religious authority' (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004, 70). Since at least the end of the nineteenth century, the authority of formally trained religious scholars, 'ulama and of local religious leaders, have been challenged by new groups of literate and activist 'lay' Muslims, often utilising new media for geographically wide dissemination of diverse versions of Islam. The expansion of print technology and translations of sacred texts gave new, and expanded sections of the Muslim populace during the twentieth century direct access to the authoritative scriptures. Also in this sense, the emergence of the Internet has proved to be an intensification of processes of religious change. It has provided a wider section of religious groups and committed individuals with even more inexpensive and faster means for worldwide distribution of ideas; even easier access to basic authoritative scriptures and new avenues for expressing claims to 'speak for Islam' (Mandaville 2007, 324). Through changes in the media landscape, Islamic discourse has moved 'into the vernacular and become accessible to significantly wider publics' (Eickelman and Anderson 2003a, 12).

In the pre-Internet, print-media period of particularly the 1970s and 1980s the production and dissemination of new versions of 'objectified' Islam was dominated what can be termed a Salafi-tendency, morally and financially backed by oil-rich Gulf states. The tendency is characterised by a sola scriptura emphasis with religious authenticity located mainly in the Qur'an, the Sunna and the beliefs and practices of the first generation of Muslims, combined with a zeal to cleanse Islam from local 'innovations', including mawlid.[6] Mapping the CIEs in the year 2000 Gary Bunt likewise found Salafi dominance, but he also noted that the Internet provided some voices previously marginalised in the print-media period with inexpensive means to distribute non-Salafi, counter versions of religious 'authenticity' (Bunt 2000, 37–65). All that was needed was a computer, relevant software or basic knowledge of HTML-coding, an Internet connection and a web-host.

A third theme worth addressing is connected to the first. Increased awareness of intra-Muslim diversity challenge the widely held notion of a unified Muslim umma, a worldwide religious community characterised by shared beliefs and practices. At the same time, however, the emergence of the Internet has seen the expansion of possibilities for networking and facilitating communication. Internet makes it easier for individuals to identify, establish contact and keep in touch with like-minded the world over, and in that sense foster a sense of community across large geographical distances. While challenging the notion of the worldwide umma, Internet may foster 'sub-ummas' among iMuslims, i.e. worldwide communities of 'true' believers distinguished both from non-Muslims and from Muslims adhering to other beliefs and practices.

[6] The term is a self-designation, and refers to the championing of the Islam of the 'pious forefathers', *al-salaf al-salih.*

So far, I have focussed the role of Internet in general. However, recent development in web applications and subsequent changes in Internet due to the emergence of what has been termed Web 2.0 technology, particularly the phenomenon of 'social media', has changed the situation somewhat. YouTube is part of this change.

Since its establishment in February 2005 the video sharing platform YouTube has seen a remarkable expansion. Media studies scholars Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009, 60), terms YouTube (or rather Google, who owns YouTube) a '"patron" of collective creativity', providing an arena for a 'participatory culture', but also determining its framework. YouTube provides possibilities for anyone to register an account, and through a relatively easy process publish a video clip that almost immediately becomes accessible worldwide (unless of course access is blocked e.g. by authorities or employers). No evaluation of the quality or content is made upon upload. Through a system of 'flagging' other users may notify administrators of content that may run counter to the YouTube code for suitable content. The guidelines for what constitutes unsuitable content are rather vague: e.g. 'pornography', 'bad stuff', 'animal abuse' and 'bomb making', and of course copyright infringement.[7]

An uploader may or may not allow viewers to comment on the clip. Originally intended as an area for 'artistic' feedback, the comments section also functions as a 'playspace for the audience' (Burgess and Green 2009, 96) featuring discussions and debates.[8] The possibility for comments is important part of what makes YouTube, alongside with other social media, different from the bulk of earlier web applications: the interactivity, and blurring of boundaries between producer and user of web content.[9] Uploading a video to YouTube is many ways just a new, easier way to publish material on the web. It lowers the threshold and hence invites a wider range of publishers. However, it is the process starting after publication when others view, rate, subscribe, link, embed and comment that forms the main participatory aspect of YouTube (Burgess and Green 2009, 57).

The emergence of social media, of which YouTube is a part, poses interesting questions as for a theoretical distinction of old within the study of religion and the Internet: that between religion on-line and on-line religion, developed mainly in relation to earlier web technology. Sociologist of religion Christopher Helland, who first made the distinction in 1999, writes in 2005 how it, because of new technological developments, has become problematic to uphold. In the initial distinction religion on-line referred to web sites providing information on religious issues, produced by someone and consumed by others, but with no on-line interaction. On-line religion, on the other hand, denoted web sites (and similar virtual spaces) where such interaction was the main feature, e.g. discussion boards and on-line ritual

[7] For the community guidelines, see www.youtube.com/static?template=community_guidelines&hl=en&gl=US

[8] It should be noted that it is not ideal for this. It is often difficult to follow a discussion that takes place in the comments section. Comments, especially those made more than a year ago, are not ordered chronologically. Threaded responses are limited to one level.

[9] For discussions on diverse aspects of YouTube from the perspective mainly of media studies, see Snickars and Vonderau 2009 and Lovink and Niederer 2008.

sessions.[10] The defining feature of 'on-line religion' according to sociologists of religion Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan is that it 'invites Internet visitors to participate in religious practices' (Dawson and Cowan 2004, 7). This is exactly what YouTube does, but only if the whole complex of publishing, rating and commenting, etc., is taken into account. The published clip in itself can be seen as an example of religion on-line, with a producer making a particular content available on the web, but what happens after publication, in the same virtual place, may rather be construed as on-line religion. This possibility of offering ways for the visitors to a web site to interact and give responses is part of the blurring of the initial distinction noted by Helland (2005, 4), but also falls well within the framework of what he in 2005 present as the 'ideal on-line religious environment' where one section provides 'information' and one section provides a space for users' interaction related to this information, (Helland 2005, 13) a standard feature of social media based on Web 2.0 technology. Helland envisages a future development where religious institutions provide such ideal environments. What he does not envisage, however, is what YouTube also exemplifies. Parts of the practice of both religion on-line (providing information) and on-line religion (participation) has, due to new technology facilitating both processes and due to the emergence of new virtual places for the publication of user generated content, moved outside of the framework of web sites constructed primarily for these purposes, and hence also outside of the control of the religious groups, institutions or individuals that previously were the ones gate-keeping and administrating such sites.

YouTube has so far not received much attention in scholarly work on Islam and the Internet. In a recent article criminologist A. Aaron Weisburd makes a comparative analysis the content of a selection of jihadist and choro (Latin American street gangs) videos on YouTube and notes similarities and differences in visual motifs (Weisburd 2009). Maura Conway and Lisa McInerney at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, likewise focus jihadist videos, but mainly analyse viewers comments and discuss the role these videos may have in radicalisation among young Muslims in the US and Europe (Conway and McInerney 2008). Connecting YouTube publishing to religious identity formation and access to public discourse, Liesbet van Zoonen, Farida Vis, and Sabina Mihelj, at the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University, investigate video responses to Dutch politician Geert Wilders islamophobic film *Fitna*. In the article 'Performing citizenship on YouTube: activism, satire and online debate around the anti-Islam video Fitna' (2010), which is part of the larger project *Fitna, the video battle: How YouTube enables the young to perform their religious and public identities*,[11] they note that the combination of diverse responses to Wilder's film, within the framework of

[10] Elaboration of this distinction has involved, for example, adding the dimension of relationship to off-line traditions and practices, reserving 'on-line religion' for web practices that refer mainly to activities taking place on-line, and 'religion on-line' for those that refer to off-line religious traditions (see Young 2004, 93).

[11] The final report of the project is available on-line (http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/research/FITNA/pdfs/FINAL_REPORT_Fitna.pdf).

YouTube testifies to the potential of the platform as an easily accessible forum for participation in public debate but also as a space for individuals to publicly and with little effort 'perform' personal identities, including religious identities.

The reasons why YouTube so far has received comparably little attention in the study of Islam and the Internet, and to my knowledge none from scholars within the field of the study of religion, may partly be related to the fact of its novelty. However there may be other reasons as well. First, YouTube is not a platform created, administered or controlled or even mainly visited by iMuslims, and hence does not readily fall within the definition of CIEs. Second, the material with connection to Islam on YouTube is enormous, highly diverse and difficult to systematise. A search on the term 'Islam' on YouTube renders 'millions' of hits. These include the whole of the film The message from 1977, uploaded in 18 parts; live exorcism of spirits (jinns); a cow bellowing 'Allah'; Qur'an recitations and footage from the annual pilgrimage to Makka, hajj. The diversity is conspicuous and there is no religious central controlling instance and no particular unifying agenda. It is a mixture of high and low and of amateur and professional material.

There are, however, 'halal'-versions of YouTube, established by iMuslims, that falls more readily within the framework of CIEs. IslamicTube is an alternative that, in line with other video-sharing platforms, clearly mimics the idea and the form of YouTube (Burgess and Green 2009, 106). A browsing and searching for key terms indicates that the material here conforms to the Sunni, Salafi-tendency that Bunt identified as dominating the web in 2000.[12] In 2009, a 'filtering service' for YouTube was established in the Salafi heartland of Saudi Arabia, the NaqaTube. Naqa means 'pure' and the site provides viewers with a 'purified' (i.e. censored) selection of Islamic material collected from YouTube (Sandels 2009). On 23 June 2010 a search for the term 'milad nabi' returned three hits on IslamicTube, all featuring lectures stating that the celebration is bid'a. The search term 'mawlid nabi' did not yield any result at all. On NaqaTube, there was one hit on 'mawlid nabi' (likewise negative) and none on 'milad nabi'. On YouTube the result was different. The searches on 13 May for 'milad nabi' and 'mawlid nabi' yielded 6,930 and 1,860 hits respectively.

A Background Survey

Of the total 324 clips in the random sample 235 clips (73 %), were deemed directly relevant for the topic at hand. These included footage from mawlid celebrations such as processions, recitations, dhikr sessions and other performances, public speeches, lectures and debates on mawlid, advertisements and still images or slide shows with sound, clearly addressing mawlid. The remaining videos had either

[12] In January 2011 I attempted to get access to the uploading feature of *IslamicTube* in order to upload a mawlid quote, and observe whether it would be removed from the site. Unfortunately, I never received the promised activation mail for my account, neither did I receive any response to my queries sent to the administrators.

Table 1 Top five locations of uploaders (n = 118)

Country	%
Great Britain	38
Pakistan	18
United States	13
India	4
Canada	3

unclear connections to mawlid, or did not address the issue at all. These were excluded from further analysis. 118 unique users (judging from user names) had uploaded the 235 directly relevant clips. Forty users had uploaded two or more clips, and four had made ten or more uploads. These four were NFIE1 (19), minhanjorg (14) lonelystarr100 (12) and shadpurshareef (10). Organisations are clearly behind the first two: the US based Sufi[13] organisation Naqshbandiyya Foundation for Islamic Education, and the Pakistani based Minhaj-ul-Qur'an International. The latter is an organisation with roots in the Barelwi-movement in South Asia, strongly attached to 'folk-Islam', and under the charismatic leadership of Dr Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri (Roy 2004, 230).[14] Shadpursharef at first glance also appears to be an organisation, the Naqshbandiyya Mujaddidiyya Aslamiyya Sufi order based in the UK and under the leadership of Shaykh Muhammad Aslam. The user name, however, also appears in comments to others' uploads as an individual engaged in discourse. Lonelystarr100 appears to be an individual user without organisational affiliation. At large, it proved difficult to determine from the channel pages whether the uploader represented her-or himself or an organisation. One quarter of the cases had to be coded as 'uncertain' in this respect, and among the remainder, the distribution between organisations and individuals was equal.

Publishing material related to mawlid on YouTube appears to be a mainly male activity. In those cases where information on gender could be retrieved, 4.5 % of the uploaders of videos were registered as women, and 85 % as men. No information was retrievable for the remaining 10.5 %. The median age was 29. The gender difference may be a more general feature on YouTube. Among the uploaders of video responses to Wilders Fitna video analysed by van Zoonen et al., 82.5 % were registered as men and 9 % as women.

The top five stated locations of uploaders are displayed in Table 1.

Europe (except Turkey) and North America combined hosted 64 % of the 112 uploaders for which this information was retrievable. This figure was expected and may partly be related to the global digital divide.

The geographical distribution of locations featuring in the videos (this was possible to determine in approximately three quarters of the cases) was slightly

[13] Sufism is often defined as 'Islamic mysticism'. Here, however, I refer to a form of 'popular Islam' focussing on the loyalty to the leader of a religious order, *tariqa,* (a *shaykh* or *pir*), on performance of the collective worship of 'remembrance', *dhikr,* on miracles and on the channelling of divine blessings (*baraka*).

[14] Browsing the web for mawlid content suggests that this organisation and its leader have chosen to make mawlid an important part of their propagation machinery.

Table 2 Distribution of content of relevant videos in the random sample (n = 235)

Category	Description	%
1. Mawlid quotes	Footage from mawlid celebrations including performance of songs or recitals of classical panegyric poems, collective praising of the Prophet, 'standing', *qiyama,* in honour of the Prophet and public processions (*zaffa*)	82
2. Discourses on mawlid	Speeches, sermons and lectures	12
3. Other	E.g. advertisements and slide shows	6

different, with Pakistan equalling the UK, and the US on third position.[15] The median number of views was 653, ranging from 10 (street footage from public celebration in Pakistan) to 33,903 (a recitation at a mawlid celebration by Muhammad Milad Raza Qadri, a well known performer of naats [recitations or songs in praise of the Prophet] from Glasgow, and affiliated with the above mentioned Minhaj-ul-Qur'an).

The clips were further categorised according to content, with the purposive sampling in view. The wide range of categories used in the beginning of the coding were finally reduced to three major ones, as displayed in Table 2:

In coding the clips as either in support of or rejecting mawlid, I included the mawlid quotes in the first category, and thereby reached a total of 95 % of the clips as displaying a positive attitude to mawlid.

Most of the material in the mawlid quotes category appeared to be amateur 'live material' (Burgess and Green 2009, 43), low quality video-recordings of events with little or no editing. Several clips focussed particular individuals including above mentioned Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri and Sufi leaders such as Hisham Kabbani and Nazim al-Haqqani of the Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya order.

Commenting YouTube Mawlid

As mentioned above, the selection of 50 clips with comments was not random but purposive. I actively sought only for clips within the major category of mawlid quotes. This choice was made from considering these clips as first level visual mawlid representations. The clips in the second category and third categories are second level representations. The first category clips are representations of mawlid, the latter of discourses about mawlid. The comments attached particularly to the second category could be expected to continue and elaborate the discourse already present in the clip. While debates on mawlid could be expected in the

[15] Figures of both location of uploader and location featuring in the clip probably mirror a bias in the choice of search terms and the use of the Latin alphabet. The term 'milad' is particularly common in a South Asian context, and a majority of Muslims in the UK are of South Asian decent.

Table 3 Top five locations of commentators (n = 1,028)

Country	%
Great Britain	32
United States	15
Canada	5
Pakistan	5
India	3

comments to clips in the first category, these debates would be generated in the participatory process.

The initial intention was to include only clips that had more than 20 comments attached. That, however, turned out to be an overestimation of the willingness among viewers to comment. In the directly relevant group within the random sample the total number of comments were 1,145 and less than 5 % of the clips had 20 or more comments attached. In the end I had to settle for a median of 21 comments in the purposive sample. The clip with most comments attached had 464. This featured a celebration in Pakistan involving a 'miracle', and will be discussed below. The total number of comments finally included in the coding process was 2,056.

The number of unique commentators was 1,028. The gender distribution was different compared to that of uploaders noted above. 19 % stated female gender, 67 % male (information was not available in the rest of the cases).[16] The median age was 28. The percentages of top five locations are displayed in Table 3.

As can be seen, a dominance for commentators from Great Britain and the US is evident. Excluding those users for whom no information on location was provided, North America and Europe combined hosted 70 % of the total number.[17]

Some comments are obviously from 'trolls'[18] (e.g. 'Muhammad is a peado! Why celebrate a peado'). Others are questions from apparently casual surfers what the clip is all about (e.g. 'Why are these people protesting?'). Such comments testify to the openness of YouTube, but are not relevant to the topic at hand. Determining relevance was however a problem. A series of comments may start off with a direct reference to the clip but develop into something else, e.g. discussions on the 'war on terror' or the legitimacy or non-legitimacy of music in Islam. A content coding resulted in a total number of 1,476 (i.e. 73 % of the total) of comments relating to mawlid, either as direct comments on the clip, or as part of a discussion on mawlid. Among those excluded were also 24 comments in languages that I am not familiar with (i.e. Urdu, Malay and Indonesian).

[16] At this time, I choose not to speculate on this difference between the two samples concerning gender.

[17] Conway and McInerney reach similar results regarding regional geographical distribution in their sample of comments to jihadi videos. They also found a mean age of 27.9 (compared to the median in my sample of 28) (Conway and McInerney 2008, 112–113). Unfortunately, they did not collect data on stated gender of the commentators.

[18] In Internet slang, a 'troll' is a person who posts comments with the intention to provoke emotional reactions.

The language style merits some comment. There is abundant use of multiple exclamation marks, capital letters for emphasis, chat acronyms and 'textese'. The text is at times difficult to decode for someone who is not familiar with net lingo, e.g. 'how wud uno dah dey dnt fulfill der salaah…and stil go 2 celebrate milad sharif…yu lost it m8'.[19] The particular religious character of parts of the discourse is accentuated by the extensive use of an Islamic-Arabic 'sacred terminology', i.e. single words or standard expressions of Arabic origin, often with a Qur'anic connection. There are also examples of the opposite to such religious 'spicing' of the language, albeit not to the same extent. In a series of comments to a clip featuring a mawlid procession in Preston, UK, a critical posting citing 'innovation' spurs the following reaction: 'if you think this is bidah, why the fuck are you watching it then? dumb fuck!'. Another posting adds to this: 'Bida!!!…AS ADEELAUB SAID…YOU DUMB FUCK..Do you know this is Eid milad u Nabi, if it was not for this Eid there would be no Eids..Abs you dickhead'. Offensive name calling such as 'crazy', 'asshole', 'asses', 'stupid', 'moron', 'chimpanzee' occur, but also more specifically Islamic-Arabic terms with strong negative connotations: munafiq (hypocrite), mushrik (polyteist), kafir (unbeliever). Nevertheless, in the sample, some users obviously found such 'on-line hostility' (Lange 2007, 1) problematic from a religious point of view, indicating a notion of the arena as a 'sacred place' where an 'Islamic netiquette' should be observed: 'Please dont [sic] swear/use abusive language. ("YOU DUMB FUCK.)" This is not the way Muslims debate about the Prophet Mohammed PBUH'. Another commentator invokes the normative role of the Sunna, i.e. the manners of the Prophet that should be emulated: 'That's not really the way to address the issue of someone disagreeing with us. We respond with love, tolerance and explanation, like the Messenger (S) responded'.

As mentioned above, the comments section on YouTube was originally meant as a forum for feedback on the featured video. One-third of the analysed comments constitute such feedback on either the clip itself or on the act of uploading. These include short, positive 'expressive comments' such as 'Tnx for uploading', 'Nice video', 'I love this naat', 'I wish I was there' or 'I was there!'. Positive remarks are seven times more common than negative, e.g. 'What rubbish is this?', 'Why are women and men jumping up and down like animals?'. The use of specifically religious expressions of praise such as 'subhanallah' (Praise be to God), 'mashaallah' (loosely translated:[this is] what God wills) and of blame such as 'astaghfurulla' (I take refuge in God) mirrors an off-line use in everyday speech, even by non-Arabic speakers, around the Muslim world. By far the most common word of praise is 'subhanallah', used in more than 100 comments.

Of particular note are expressive comments of gratitude directed at the uploader that take the form of invocations of divine blessings. A total of 37 comments contain such invocations, attached to 23 of the 50 clips. The invocations include the standard expression 'jazakallah' (May God reward you) and equivalents such as 'may allah

[19] In the following, I will quote comments in an exact manner, as I deem this important in displaying their character of 'written speech'.

reward you for your efforts…ameen'. These invocations of blessings on the uploader may cast some light on the question why mawlid videos are produced, edited and published on YouTube in the first place. Bunt notes that among those active on the Internet as producers of Islamic religious content some view this as a form of religious obligation, 'ibada, or at least as a religiously meritorious (Bunt 2009, 11). In classical theological discourses of mawlid, the financing and staging mawlid celebrations, large public or small private, merits divine compensation (Katz 2007, 83). The question arises whether, in a Web 2.0 environment, new forms of on-line activity may fit into these representations of effects of particular acts within a mawlid ritual complex.

In classical outlines by religious scholars on the purpose and meaning of mawlid, there is the notion that rewards in the form of divine blessings can be expected from participation. Listening to songs and recitation of panegyric poems, dressing up for the occasion, expressing joy, thankfulness and festivity and partaking in the communal meal establishes a transactional relation where God rewards the devotional acts performed out of love for his 'beloved'(cf. Katz 2007, 63–103). There is no indication in the comments that watching a mawlid celebration on YouTube is represented as a substitute for participation in the real event. Several commentators, on the contrary, express regret that they could not attend the event depicted. However, one ritual element central to off-line celebrations does occur. Invoking blessings upon the Prophet and loudly proclaiming ones love for him is a traditionally important 'participatory element' in mawlid (Katz 2007, 75–82). Comments such as 'Ya Muhammad Rasulullah Sallallhu'alai hi wasallam! U are the King! You are the Hero! You have saved 1.4 billion lives!', 'Love you Ya Rasool Allah … SAW' or 'Ya nabi salaam alayka [Oh Prophet, peace be upon you]' could indicate an element of ritual participation. Such expressions of praise directed to the Prophet are present in 59 comments, attached to 20 clips.

The expressive comments noted in this section, and in particular the comments that invoke blessings on the uploader and on Muhammad could be construed as a form of performative speech-acts in John Austin's sense (Austin 1975).[20] In the first case, the writing down of invocations constitutes a ritual act in the sense that they directed not merely to the uploader but also, at least in their form, to God. In the second case, the ritual element is further accentuated by the use of the same invocations in off-line ritual contexts. Positive exclamations, such as 'subhanallah' could furthermore be interpreted as ritually appropriate expressions of joy in the context of mawlid (Katz 2007, 104–117). A word of caution is necessary however. The same positive exclamations are to be found in comments to other clips on YouTube, especially popular ones featuring 'miracles' of one or the other kind.

There is thus a possibility that the participatory aspect of YouTube provided by the fact that viewers can give feedback to videos could inspire individuals to on-line

[20] See e.g. Young 2004 for a similar use of Austin's notion in relation to religious participation on-line.

Table 4 Comparison between attitudes to mawlid between all relevant comments and argumentative comments

Attitude to mawlid	All relevant comments (n = 1,476) (%)	Argumentative comments (n = 598) (%)
Positive	64	55
Negative	21	39
Neither/indeterminable	15	6

performances of religiously meaningful ritual acts. In such cases the YouTube platform would fulfil the criteria for on-line religion in that it 'invites Internet visitors to participate in religious practices'. However, this role of YouTube is user and not platform generated. The platform only provides the structure, a structure that is shared with other social media. While not initially created as a virtual space for on-line religious activity, it is made such a space through the activities of the users.

The participatory aspects in terms of ritual hinted at above must be left at speculation, awaiting off-line ethnographic research. There is no possibility at the moment to access how the commentator her-or himself views the act of writing a comment containing praises or invocations.[21] Participation is more accessible when it takes the form of debating the religious legitimacy of mawlid. First a note: Although comments are the main area for such debates, and the focus in the following, the very publishing of clips in itself may also be interpreted as taking part in a debate that is wider, and connected to off-line discourses. There is a wide spread claim among opponents to mawlid that only two religious festivals exist in Islam: the feast of fast breaking after Ramadan, and the feast of sacrifice during the hajj. Mawlid quotes testify otherwise. The activities of the uploader Lonelystarr100, mentioned above, may be noted. He was in May 2010 responsible for uploading 137 quotes from mawlid celebrations from all over the world, apparently gathered from a diversity of sources (private recordings, TV-broadcasts and documentaries). A particular category of quotes feature clips from private and secret mawlid gatherings in the Salafi heartland of Saudi Arabia, until recently the geographical centre for public anti-mawlid activism.

Five hundred and ninety eight comments (i.e. 41 % of the total number of relevant comments) address the religious legitimacy of mawlid. I will term these comments 'argumentative'. As can be noted from Table 4, the distribution between comments displaying a positive or a negative attitude to mawlid is here slightly different from in the total number of relevant comments. There is a larger proportion of negative attitudes, although the positive attitudes still dominate. Those argumentative comments coded as neither/indeterminable include those few comments that are reconciliatory in character, e.g.: 'why cant we all just get along as Muslims' or 'Let everyone have their views on mawlid, and respect the ones of others [translated from Arabic]'.

[21] See Helland 2005 for a methodological elaboration on the problem of determining what constitute religious actions on-line.

Table 5 Prevalence in comments of some arguments for the legitimacy of mawlid

Arguments	%
Affirmation or non-rejection in Qur'an, Sunna, and among the earliest generation of Muslims	38
Intentions of those participating	35
Affirmation from scholars, traditional and contemporary	23
Differentiation between 'good' and 'bad' forms of *bid'a or* reference to other 'innovations' generally considered legitimate	16
Supernatural events or 'facts' e.g. miracles, the cosmological role of the Prophet, dreams	9
Traditional and global prevalence of mawlid celebrations	5

Table 6 Prevalence in comments of some arguments for the illegitimacy of mawlid

Arguments	%
Bid'a. No basis in Qur'an, Sunna nor in the practice of the first generation of Muslims	80
Rejection among scholars, traditional and contemporary	12
Derivate rejection: Mawlid involves performing illegitimate acts, e.g. mixing of the sexes, music, dancing or overindulgence (*israf*)	10
Imitation of practices in other religions	8
Shirk, i.e. worshipping someone besides God	2

Some of the main lines of argumentation and the percentage of comments in which they appear, within each of the groups (negative argumentative comments [n = 231] and positive argumentative comments [n = 329]) are displayed in Tables 5 and 6. It should be noted that more than one line of argumentation may be present in the same comment.

As expected, the totally dominating paradigm among those who reject mawlid is that religious authenticity is located in the Qur'an, the Sunna and in the practices of the earliest generation of Muslims. This mirrors a larger modern off-line discourse as mentioned above. One-third of the comments (25 % of the pro-mawlid and 39 % of the anti-mawlid) cites the notion of bid'a.[22] In those comments rejecting mawlid shorter ones will merely state e.g. 'This is bida. have a goog [sic] time in hell you kafir' or 'This is bed3a aka innovation'. Longer comments elaborate lack of clear scriptural foundation. It is noteworthy that few comments rejecting mawlid directly refer to the notion of shirk, 'polytheism' and challenges to the notion of God's uniqueness, tawhid. A highly speculative interpretation of this is that while the accusation of shirk may be relevant in principle when criticising mawlid, believing Muslims often construe it as morally wrong to lightly direct the accusation of shirk, and hence also unbelief, kufr, at a particular individual (Lewis 1988, 85–86). As one commentator, who opposes mawlid celebrations, states in the context of a heated discussion :'i would like to say that if you call another person a kafir [unbeliever] one of you will be the kafir on the day of judgement'.

[22] A word frequency search showed that the words bid'a (in different spellings), 'innovation' and 'innovate' taken together appear 436 times in the comments. This can be compared to the words 'islam' and 'islamic' (415) and mawlid with different spellings (435).

The 'scripturalist' paradigm is evident also in pro-mawlid comments. The Qur'an, Sunna and practices of the first generation of Muslims provide direct or indirect support for mawlid, or for particular practices involved in celebration. This includes Hadiths where the Prophet states that he fasts on Mondays because that is the day he was born and certain events during his lifetime such as his entering into Madina during the hijra, or emigration, and the welcoming he received from the inhabitants in form of singing and drumming. Qur'anic verses are put forward that command the believers to 'rejoice' (10:58), and references are made to the marking off of the birthdays of the Prophets Yahya and 'Isa in Sura 19, verses 15 and 33.

Another line of argumentation, still within the same paradigm, claims that although the celebration, or distinctive elements in it, is not specifically mentioned in the scriptures, there is no scriptural evidence clearly rejecting it. This latter way of reasoning highlights an important difference in notions within the discourse of how norms should be derived: a narrow view that whatever is not explicitly sanctioned in the scriptures should be rejected as constituting bid'a, and a broad view that whatever is not specifically rejected in the scriptures is religiously legitimate. The second view is clearly connected to the line of argumentation were supporters of mawlid claim a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' bid'a, a distinction with some, but not general, support in Islamic legal tradition (Katz 2007, 189–191; Robson 2011).

Foremost among arguments in favour of mawlid, but not within the dominant paradigm, are thus those citing the intentions in celebrating mawlid. These arguments often relate to a traditional 'devotionalist model' (Katz 2007, 188), with a stress on the loyalty to and love and respect for the Prophet displayed, and the happiness among participants. Accusations are levelled against detractors of lacking the same devotion or even hating the Prophet. However, there are also defensive attempts at downplaying the devotional aspect. Katz has noted a defensive trait in modern pro-mawlid voices with a focus on mawlid as a religiously harmless or even secular event of edifying 'commemoration' (Katz 2007, 189–190, 202). In a few comments, the ritual aspects of mawlid are clearly downplayed in a similar manner: 'this is just a gathering of commemoration of the Prophet. What is wrong with that?'.

The difference between the two groups of comments regarding references to contemporary of historical Islamic scholars corresponds to a difference noted also in off-line discourses. Those who adhere to a Salafi tendency in contemporary Islam often downplay the authority of the interpretational tradition of established scholars, in favour of a literalist reading of the basic scriptures (Cesari 2004, 95). In the comments in support of mawlid, references to scholars, contemporary or in history, together with statements that Muslims have celebrated mawlid for a long time and that it is of worldwide occurrence may be collectively seen as references to ijma', consensus, an important principle in Islamic legal tradition. Furthermore, a note can be made of those few comments that in support of mawlid cite mythical or legendary aspects of the Prophetic tradition. Some comments within this category are firmly rooted in classic panegyric texts: 'we celebrate the Prophet [sic](SAW) birthday because without him existing this whole world would not exist', 'Even Allah

celebrated the birth of his beloved Mohammad pbuh by giving sons to all the morthers [sic] on prophet's birthday'. To this category also added comments that refer to the Prophet appearing in dreams telling believers to celebrate his birthday, and miraculous events, historical and contemporary, justifying mawlid.

None of the above lines of argumentation are peculiar to the on-line character of the debate. On the contrary, the comments collected through the purposive sample display wide range of arguments to be found also in the off-line discourse. That the on-line environment of the discourse nevertheless influences it is evident in the fact that some comments utilise intra-web and intra-YouTube references to strengthen their case. The comment 'Any proof for doing this?' is met by the response 'Any proof to go on YouTube?' Computers, Internet and YouTube are cited in some comments as examples of 'good' bid'a, however most often rejected through a distinction between 'secular' and 'religious' innovations, where only the latter constitute bida'(plural of bid'a) proper. The reference to ijma' is particularly relevant in the very environment in which it is made, i.e. YouTube. The claim that Muslims over the world celebrate mawlid is substantiated by the very existence of YouTube mawlid quotes. The user ahlulsunnahwaljammah provide an identical short posting attached to three clips containing a YouTube-link: 'Mawlid celebrations:/watch?v=jh01qGnqcRY'. This links to a recorded radio broadcast of the well-known Salafi scholar Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani (d.1999) refuting mawlid. Similarly, pro-mawlid commentators will provide links to YouTube clips where off-line authorities defend mawlid and both sides refer to diverse home pages for support. One of the clips included in the purposive sampling, and the one with most views, feature a miracle occurring during a mawlid staged in Pakistan by the above-mentioned organisation Minhaj-ul-Qur'an. The clip where the name 'Muhammad' mysteriously appears in a cloud formation over the heads of the celebrating masses has been published in several versions on YouTube, and feature as a reference in comments attached to other clips as well.

While there are examples of lengthy argumentation for or against mawlid, stretching over several comments and containing detailed references to or quotations from the Qur'an, Hadiths or opinions of religious scholars, the argumentative comments are often short and provide more general references e.g. 'there is no support for mawlid in the sunna', or 'the Qur'an itself praises the Prophet'. This may be due to the form of the comments section. Threaded discussions are limited to one level, and the number of characters allowed in one post is limited to 500 (although some commentators solve this by posting several consecutive comments). However, it is also possible to interpret the short form of argumentative comments differently, and place them also within a third category, that of 'positioning comments' of a performative character. Their main role is not to debate the issue or to convince an opponent, but to be part of the commentator's personal positioning in a global controversy over mawlid, and hence of personal identity formation.

There are also ample examples of comments that more directly contain overt positioning in relation to tendencies, groups, organisations and movements present on-line as well as off-line. These include a number of comments that refer to the long standing conflict in the South Asian Muslim context between the Barelwi

(also rendered as e.g. Barelvi, Brlvi) and the Deobandi movements, a conflict that is highly relevant also in contemporary Great Britain (Behuria 2008; Cesari 2004, 93–95; Metcalf 1995; Sanyal 1995). The former is characterised by a strong focus on loyalty to a spiritual leader (pir), on miracles and especially on veneration of the Prophet, and the latter with a stress on the need for 'purification' of Islam from 'innovations'.

Even more common are references to a corresponding, but more 'global' division between scripturalist Salafism and Sufi oriented 'popular' Islam.[23] In the comments, those who attach themselves to the latter often refer to themselves as 'Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama'a', 'Ahl al-Sunna' or for 'Sunnis' for short, indicating a self-perception of orthodoxy and authenticity. The terms 'Wahhabi', 'Najdi' or 'Kharaji' are common and appear in 170 comments attached to 30 clips. The use is strictly derogatory. The terms refer to proponents of a Salafi understanding of Islam as followers of the reformer Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d.1792), from the region Najd in contemporary Saudi Arabia. 'Kharaji', referring to the khawarij splinter group in early Islamic history, is at times used as a synonym for 'extremist' or 'terrorist'. There are also examples of combinations such as 'stupid wahhabi dogs' or 'najdi pig'. The use of name calling in the comments signalise rejection and opposition, and as such play a part in positioning. Some comments such as 'In your face you wahhabis' and 'Wabiyoon.. i know ur blood boils when you see the lovers of RasoolAllah… no problem, even your leader iblees [the Devil] feels the same' involves the clip, and in extension its uploading, as part of a contemporary intra-Muslim polarisation. In a few comments, positioning also takes the form of affirming loyalty and allegiance to a specific movement or religious leader featuring in the clip: 'Long Live Mawlana Shaykh Hisham Kabbani! Long Live Mawlana Shaykh Nazim Haqqani!', 'Salaams, May Allah bless you. We are lovers of Allah, Rasulullah, and the Ahle bayt. We do practice the Qadri Tariqa under the guidance of our beloved Murshid Kamil El Sheikh Mubarik Ali Sha Gilani El Hashmi wal Husaini'.

Choosing a particular user name may also be part of positioning. Both among uploaders and commentators some user names indicate affiliation or opposition, for example naqshbandi84, ahlesunnat34, sufi92, exposingnifaq and wahabihater1. Others stress a particular relationship to the Prophet appropriate in the devotionalist model of mawlid: eshqerasool (Lover of the Messenger), belovedNABI and love4muhammad. Still others express a more general religious engagement: serviceofallah, servantofallah786, islamisourwayoflife. User names may however be deceptive, as the example of ahlulsunnahwaljammah mentioned above, where the user name indicates support for mawlid and anti-'wahhabi' affiliation, but the link provided in comments lead to a YouTube video opposing the practice. It should be mentioned, however, that the majority of user names in the comments analysed does not have such evident religious connotations.

[23] In *Globalized Islam* Olivier Roy terms the opposition between Sufism and Salafism an Islamological 'cliché' that obscures the similarities between trends in contemporary Islam (Roy 2004, 229). However, in the comments here under analysis, this opposition is emically highly relevant.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the limited character of the material used in this chapter, I deem it possible to draw some general conclusions. The continuous accumulation of user generated religious content through the process of commenting on clips makes YouTube mawlid content part of an increasing display of global, or rather trans-local, intra-Muslim religious diversity on the web, such as has been noted in previous research. In line with the notion of a 'heretical imperative', experience of diversity spurs religious reflection, and adds to the 'objectification of Islam'. The question 'what is really Islam' becomes immediate for a committed believer faced with this diversity as does the question of religious authority. As Peter Mandaville notes: 'the encounters between the Muslim and his of her Muslim "other" give rise to competing discourses as to what Islam is and who may speak on its behalf' (2001a, 171). YouTube provides an easy means for externalising the answers reached, which further contributes to diversity. Social media in general, of which YouTube is part, hence makes diversity and its role in the objectification of Islam even more conspicuous. This is because the interface of YouTube and similar social media lowers the threshold for active participation in the externalisation of individual representations of Islamic authenticity and hence invites wider segments of iMuslims into public religious discourse compared to earlier forms of web publishing.

Diversity is of course also a feature of CIEs, as Bunt stresses. However, in CIEs, diversity is mainly noticeable between web sites. Taken one by one, these virtual spaces are mostly more uniform, each claiming to represent religious authenticity and opposing the same claim made off-line or on-line in other virtual spaces. Here then is an important difference compared to Muslim religious expressions on YouTube. In the latter, intra-Muslim diversity and conflict are played out under 'the same roof', in clips and in comments. This is done in an environment that is not established, controlled or dominated by groups or individuals with particular religious agendas. A shared system of references and the extensive use of a 'sacred terminology' bind the participants together, exclude outsiders and create a Muslim discursive subspace on YouTube, another type of Cyber Islamic Environment than the ones analysed by Bunt and others, a network-like Cyber Islamic sub-Environment within a larger environment not specifically related to Islam and outside of the direct control of off-line religious authorities: censorship on YouTube does not involve theological considerations. A multitude of voices championing different Islams may converge in one comment section. Similarly, while it is true that heresy and blasphemy and is only a few mouse clicks away when surfing CIEs, on YouTube they may even be automatically generated and suggested or recommended to the surfer on the side bars.

Unlike most virtual spaces within CIEs, sought out by individuals looking for and expecting Islamic religious content, YouTube provides an environment were even a religiously lukewarm or 'cultural' Muslim surfer may accidently stumble upon material which trigger religious reflection, and instigate on-line religious participation. A clip and its comments may prompt the viewer to take a stand

('others have') on the question 'What is Islam?', adding to a general 'objectification of Islam'. The form and language used in many comments in the purposive sample do suggest that participation is not limited to those individuals that usually partake in written religious discourse, on-line or off-line. Rather, many comments could be seen as examples of a casual, spontaneous and immediate 'vernacular theology', not necessarily in line with the 'theological correctness' (Barrett 2004; Slone 2004) and elaborated dogmas championed by religious activists and scholars. The style is often hasty, short and emotional, akin to everyday conversations, especially digitally mediated forms of such conversations. In the argumentative comments, voices for and against mawlid bring forth the same arguments present in the off-line discourse, but here they are often in direct interaction with one another and not always as well articulated.

The debate takes place in an environment that does not provide much possibility for the individual to claim religious authority. Users are anonymous, and statements on personal background, experience and qualifications can easily be questioned. The 'fragmentation of authority', characteristic of contemporary religious discourse, is evident in diverse references to on-line and off-line scholars, to other websites, and in particular to the scriptures. The dominance for a paradigm oriented towards the scriptures, albeit not total, may be related to the fact that on YouTube, as in many other on-line contexts, the identity of the participating individual is stripped from off-line potential sources of personal authority such as gender, age or ethnicity.

The fact that the comment sections of YouTube mawlid quotes do not overflow with lengthy pro and con argumentation indicates that the main role it serves is not as an arena for theological debates, but for identity politics. Media scholar Henry Jenkins (2009, 116) notes that YouTube, due to the low threshold for participation in terms of publishing clips, favours articulation of cultural self-reflection. van Zoonen et al. (2010) makes the same observation. What is true for publishing videos can be so to an even larger extent considering the comments section, where the threshold for participation is even lower. Much argumentative comments are better construed as statements of the commentator's position on mawlid, than well thought through arguments in order to convince an opponent.

Short 'expressive' comments similarly display affiliation, with the uploader or with the people featuring in the video, or rejection. In an article from 2008, anthropologist Patricia Lange discusses a particular type of YouTube clips as 'videos of affiliation'. The main role of these videos is not to communicate information, but to establish or strengthen social relations between the producer and the audience or among audiences. Such videos may to the outsider appear amateurish and nonsensical. They often focus a particular moment and a particular place, contain internal references not noted by a general audience and are often, but not always, stereotypical, spontaneous and intimate (Lange 2008). While Lange mostly discusses amateur footage of a private character (e.g. of birthday celebrations and weddings) in this context, some of the features characteristic of 'videos of affinity' can be noted in the context of YouTube mawlid quotes. Some are internal in the sense that they focus on a particular person or a particular social grouping at a particular place and at a particular moment. All are internal in the sense that they relate to particular celebration

not well known among non-Muslims, and not necessarily among all Muslims either. They appear strange to outsiders ('Why are these people protesting?'). However, the main similarity lies in the role of the clip in relation to the audience, which becomes evident in the comments. Commentators display affiliation in different directions and on different levels. In videos featuring gatherings of a particular religious group or particular charismatic personalities some commentators express direct affiliation with these. Many of the comments, however, display a less specific affiliation with 'imagined communities' (Anderson 2006) of either those who support mawlid or those who oppose it. A YouTube clip, and the comments section attached to it, provides both impetus and opportunity to do so. YouTube thus provides a platform for the establishment of virtual 'sub-ummas' at the same time as it challenges the notion of a unified umma. These 'sub-ummas' may or may not have direct correspondence in the off-line social relations of the individual commentator.

As noted in the statistics on both uploads and comments in the samples, there is dominance for North America and Europe as the user's location. This may be a result of the global digital divide, but it may also, in part, relate to YouTube as an arena where individuals may easily, and without much at stake, perform their 'religious selves' (van Zoonen et al. 2010). In the context of a religious minority situation, the reflective and personal character of religious identity formation can be presumed to be more accentuated than in a context where such an identity is widely shared by the people with which one has everyday, face-to-face social interaction (Mandaville 2001a, 172; McGuire 2002, 52–59).

Further studies are needed to ascertain whether some of the findings from the limited samples used in this chapter holds true for mawlid material on YouTube in general. Awaiting such, a few questions of importance for further research can be highlighted. The results suggest that publishing quotes from mawlid celebrations is not merely a result of individuals' need for religious self-expression or for displaying artistic 'creativity'. Organisations and movements with a global outreach appear to utilise the medium to provide exposure (besides having their own web sites) for themselves of the leaders.[24] Here, mawlid serves as a prop, a framework in which followers' loyalty and devotion, usually expressed in private settings, can be publicly displayed, internal ties strengthened and maybe even new followers recruited. As Lange points out, interest groups may use the form of 'videos of affiliation' to target specific audiences and hence generate affiliation (Lange 2008, 83). The role of YouTube in this context could constitute one theme in further research, as could the potential of the medium in providing a means for geographically dispersed followers of diverse movements to display loyalty and to establish and nourish trans-national networks. The role of system internal features such as friend tagging and channel subscription could prove to form an important part of the latter.

The results suggest a clear dominance for pro-mawlid voices in both the uploaded material and in the comments, and furthermore for quotes connected to a devotionalist model in understandings of mawlid. This was fairly unexpected. I had expected more clips featuring speeches and lectures, and a more even distribution between

[24] Weisburd postulates such a role for the jihadi videos he analyses (Weisburd 2009, 1070).

positive and negative attitudes. According to Katz, devotionalist aspects of mawlid have been downplayed and marginalised in modern Muslim discourse in favour of either total rejection or reformation stressing the commemorative, non-ritual aspects. This appears not to be the case on YouTube. One reason may be the medium itself. Live recordings of devotional practices make better on-line TV than speeches, lectures or educational slide shows. YouTube is particularly suitable for immediate, intense and attention grabbing expressions of religiosity, close to important features in what anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse has termed an 'imagistic' mode of religiosity, as opposed to a 'doctrinal' mode where the focus is on established dogma and theological elaboration (Whitehouse 2004). An analysis of a larger sample of YouTube videos with Islamic religious content in general could provide an interesting comparative material as for the type of material published. Could YouTube prove to be a platform where highly localised forms of Islamic 'folk-religiosity' are provided with a new means for global exposure?

Mawlid quotes on YouTube and their comments exemplify both religion on-line and on-line religion. The clips and comments are religion on-line since they display diverse views and reactions as well as a visual representation of a ritual. This content is at the same time a result of on-line religion, of on-line externalisation of views on mawlid, of display of loyalties and preferences, of religious creativity and maybe also of ritual participation. It could not be otherwise. YouTube not only invites user participation, it is dependent upon it.

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The Qur'ān on the Internet: Implications and Future Possibilities

Andrew Rippin

The Qur'ān prominently proclaims its status as a "book", *kitāb*, throughout the text and the Muslim definition of the scriptural codex, *muṣḥaf*, as that which is "between two covers" is a firm legal and theological doctrine. Of course, that textual sense of the Qur'ān is always balanced by a strong sense of the orality of the scripture and its ultimate definition as the "speech" of God. That is so not only in discussions of the transmission of the text but also in daily piety. Still, it remains the case that the Qur'ān's textuality stands as a prominent trait. Thus, the transition of the text to a digital format and the increasing reliance on electronic distribution that we are witnessing in the current generation are significant events for Muslims in many ways.

The overall aim of this chapter is to place the Qur'ān within considerations of the impact on the mode of Muslim religious practice that the development of information and communication technologies of production and consumption has had. With the Qur'ān, the question of the authority of technology-mediated materials has become absolutely central. Consideration of the impact on the text itself, on the practice of translation and the traditions of recitation, and on the development of exegetical material must all draw our attention. There is a good deal of straightforward documentation that is needed in order to define precisely the area of concern related to the study of the online Qur'ān and related aspects.[1] This chapter will thus survey some prominent, successful and worthwhile websites as representative of this online presence. My final aim, however, will be to assess the impact of the change in medium and also to consider some potential future directions. The latter will especially be viewed in light of some trends in digital humanities where we see the development of perspectives and sets of tools for the analysis of texts

[1] One source of documentation is Lohlker 2004, although that is now outdated.

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T. Hoffmann and G. Larsson (eds.), *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies*, Muslims in Global Societies Series 7,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7247-2_7,

(and other media) in their digital form.[2] Using some of those perspectives we can gain a sense of both the impact and the limitations of the emerging religious modes of expression.

The Text of the Qur'ān

For a number of years now, a substantial amount of work has gone into making the text of the Qur'ān available in a format for general electronic distribution and, more recently, specifically for use on the Internet. By the mid-1980s the Qur'ān was readily available digitally in a rudimentary character set (minus the vowels), as was supplementary material such as an electronic version of ʿAbd al-Bāqī's concordance.[3] Gradual technological improvements led to the production of vowelled texts. However, concerns over the maintenance of the integrity of the text – early fears emerged that suggested that an electronic text could be too easily altered into something that was a travesty of the Qur'ān – also led to the emergence of graphic representations of the printed text as the best way of ensuring that what was being distributed really "was" the Qur'ān. This immediately suggests that the function of the electronic text was not seen to be for any purpose other than reading (or even just as a religious symbol); certainly, textual manipulation in the sense of analysis via digital means was far from people's minds at the time. What was clear, however, was that electronic production enabled free and wide distribution of the text, an ideal upheld by Muslims for the Qur'ān from a very early time.[4]

The emergence of vast quantities of religious texts in digital format was stimulated especially by the production of the CD-ROM as an appropriate vehicle for inexpensive distribution of massive amounts of data. My survey of such products (Rippin 1999–2000), reflective of the situation of in the late 1990s, appeared at a time during which texts were also starting to become available on the Internet, especially on the Egyptian Sakhr software site (a company which has since evolved into a major software force in the Middle East).[5] The graphic representation of the Qur'ānic text was particularly prominent at this time with some beginnings of tagging through those graphic elements providing a particularly valuable advance.

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[2] On the notion of "digital humanities" see, for example, Schreibman et al. 2004.

[3] Also see some of my early reviews of attempts to Arabize personal computing: Rippin 1990a, b, 1991.

[4] For some traditional legal opinions on selling copies of the Qur'ān see the fourteenth century work Nawawī 2003: 117–118.

[5] I made reference in my article to the errors in many of the available texts at the time which, given their character, I speculated were due to OCR rendering of the texts. This thought was stimulated by the association of one of the major and early producers of the texts – Sahkr/Harf technologies – also being behind the development of Arabic OCR in 1993. Milo 2008 seems to consider Arabic OCR something of an elusive development but, to me, his peculiar adherence to a notion of "authentic Arabic" that needs to be represented as typography (and not through a simple approach to script) colours his views.

The more recent widespread implementation of Unicode has rendered graphic representations of the Qur'ān obsolete for the most part, given the ability of that encoding standard to allow for a greater level of subtlety in displaying the Arabic script. What is somewhat hidden in this transformation, however, is a clear change in attitude towards the digital text itself. Concerns about maintaining the integrity of the text seem to have dissipated as digital versions have become prevalent. This domination of electronic distribution may certainly be witnessed in the current popularity of the Qur'ān in formats designed for mobile devices, a trend that started at least 15 years ago with the text, recitations and commentaries all available as an integrated package for Palm or Windows Mobile operating systems in the late 1990s; such packages are now abundant in all mobile operating systems (iOS, Android, BlackBerry, Windows Phone 8).[6] Not all concerns about maintaining the integrity of the text have disappeared, however. For example, on the comments page of an i-Phone Qur'ān application, al-Mubin, a concerned user expressed the worry that, for those not comfortable with electronic devices, inadvertently deleting a chapter of the Qur'ān was too easy. The care with which Muslims have always treated the text of the Qur'ān – in its disposal in protected storehouses, in washing off the written text in running water – is well known in history.[7] An incomplete text of the Qur'ān is not a valid text and disposing of the text is a process to be guarded carefully. Similar to concerns that "only the purified may touch" the *muṣḥaf*, the implications of the digital existence of the text for its ritual status gain new significance, but it is far from clear that all such questions have been fully considered (for example, the deletion of digital pages of other texts that might happen to contain a verse of the Qur'ān could conceivably raise difficult issues).[8]

The question of why concerns about the text may have lessened can probably be explained in a number of ways. Of course, many of the same points arose during the transition from manuscript to lithograph to typeset books, especially as that transition applied to the Qur'ān. Again, the problem of what to do with the actual type that had been set to print the Qur'ān provides an obvious example of the dilemma. Was it lawful to destroy the type? In what way should it be dissembled? Those problems have, by today, totally disappeared, it would seem (see Robinson 1993). Today, it is likely that the main factor in the lessening expression of concerns about digital texts is simply the general dominance of electronic communications in the modern world. As e-texts in general have become a standard part of many people's lives, previous concerns have waned. Developments in technology may also have something to do with it. The increased ability to represent the text of the Qur'ān in its traditional

[6] For a recent overview see Bunt 2010.

[7] For a general overview, see Sadan 1986.

[8] Many online *fatwā* sites address issues related to purity in handling the Qur'ān and have discussed the various implications that arise, starting with issues, for example, of whether listening to a digital recitation of the Qur'ān in the bathroom is permissible. See, for example, the *fatwā*s at http://qurancomplex.com/default.asp?l=eng under Qur'ān Fatwas>Fatwas by Subject>General manners regarding the Holy Qur'ān. Accessed February 8, 2013. For further discussion of some of these issues and the impact on religious scholars, see Larsson 2011: 167–192.

form through a digital character set has undoubtedly helped this process of acceptance. This aspect also raises some other points of shifting values. In a detailed article dealing with the intricacies of the Arabic script, Thomas Milo has lamented (from his perspective) the inability of standard Unicode to represent the text of the Qur'ān. "[I]t is impossible to encode the Qur'ān without tampering with the text" (Milo 2008: 505) is his final judgment. While such an attitude is reflective of the professional judgment of a designer of fonts and character sets and thus may be deemed "a statement of fact", it does also reflect an attitude that results from the impact of the production of technology-mediated texts. Milo's point of reference for this evaluation is the 1924 printed Egyptian "Royal" edition of the Qur'ān: that is what Unicode cannot properly encode, along with certain segments of the earlier manuscript traditions (also see Milo 2003). What this reaction represents, therefore, is an assertion of that particular edition as the "real" Qur'ān, something which certainly was the goal of the producers of the printed edition at the time in an effort to affirm the place of Cairo as the focal point of Muslim heritage and learning. The production of the Royal edition also implemented (and shows the influence of) certain aspects of contemporary Ottoman typography and calligraphy. Overall, therefore, what we witness (and Milo only represents an academic side of this trend) is the emergence of a newly standardized Qur'ān which takes on an authority that goes well beyond what anyone may have tried to assert for a Qur'ān manuscript where the individuality of expression was accommodated and even prized.[9] Some of this trend may be seen in various websites that are available today – many of them highly sophisticated and laudable on many levels – devoted to the text of the Qur'ān. Most notable here is Zekr.org. The site (and downloadable programs) features extensive documentation of translations and recitations (aspects that will be examined below), but its centerpiece is the text of the Qur'ān and the emergence of an "error-free," technically "correct" version. Warnings are conveyed on the site about the need to download the latest version of the text if the text that is on one's computer contains a certain set of attributes ("errors"). The text behind the Zekr application comes from the Tanzil.net project and, there, the idea of ensuring the correct text is available is central to its declared mandate. Extensive details are provided on how the people behind the project have gone about verifying their text, basing it ultimately around a print version from the King Fahd Complex for Printing of the Holy Quran in Medina. The Tanzil site, tanzil.net/wiki/Tanzil_Project, justifies the need for a coordinated and concerted effort to refine the text as follows:

> Why Tanzil? Since the appearance of the first digital copy of the holy Quran, there had been substantial effort to produce an accurate Quran text, but due to some difficulties …, these efforts were unsuccessful in many of the cases, and unfortunately, the Quran texts appeared in a majority of Quranic websites and applications were suffering from lots of errors and typos.
>
> These erroneous Quran texts were so rapidly spread over the Internet that finding the correct form of Quranic verses had become almost impossible without referring to a verified printed manuscript….

[9] This is conveyed well by the chapters in Suleman 2007. Also see the observations in Déroche 2009 concerning the way ancient manuscripts of the Qur'ān underwent a continual process of change as they were adapted to contemporary standards of spelling and orthography.

> This terrible situation made us to launch the Tanzil project to produce a highly verified error-free Quran text, and make this text available to the Quranic websites and applications to prevent further spreading of the erroneous Quran texts.[10]

Among the issues related to the inaccuracies of the text of the Qur'ān that are pointed to are missing diacritics, inconsistencies in the representation of the text due to the change from "Uthmani" script to a simple digital format, and technical difficulties related to the representation of Arabic characters for which some of the essential diacritics and symbols are lacking. Underlying this, however, is a suggestion that there is such a thing as a singular "verified printed manuscript" to which one might appeal for the minute details. That is illusory.

Another site worthy of attention is www.quranflash.com/en/. It has a very visually appealing display of the text of the Qur'ān using Adobe Flash and the "page turning" visual metaphor. The collection of 12 texts is described on the site as follows:

> The two holy Cities – new copy (the default)
> The two holy Cities – old copy
> The two holy Cities – coloured version (names of/references to God in red type)
> Scripture with *tajwīd* markings
> Scripture with *tafsīr* – with *asbāb al-nuzūl* and *Kalimāt al-Qur'ān* (1997)
> Scripture of Shamarly[11]
> Scripture in 12 lines (per page)
> English transliteration (with Arabic)
> Scripture in Urdu writing
> Scripture in Urdu writing 12 lines (per page)
> Scripture in "narration" of Qālūn ʿan Nāfiʿ
> Scripture in "narration" of Warsh ʿan Nāfiʿ

Such a collection may counter the sense of a canonization of a single text although the amount of variation between them (with the exception of the obvious example of the variant "narrations" [*riwāya*]) would need further investigation to assess its true significance. The other obvious point with a site such as this, as compared to Zekr for example, is its very literal maintenance of a "book" metaphor for the presentation.

Of course, it is not immediately apparent how much use such sites get or what impact they truly have. In medieval times individuals would work to produce a copy of the Qur'ān and view it as a religious act; persons of influence would hire professional calligraphers to produce copies as a legacy of the patron.[12] The entire approach to the text of the Qur'ān, seen in every interaction with it – memorization, recitation, writing – was viewed as an act of devotion. Some websites are best interpreted in this manner, as personal (or political) statements of devotion and the creation of a legacy in the modern mode. This may be especially so for those developers who consider themselves particularly devout and also who are involved professionally in

[10] This text was accessed February 8, 2013. It is notable that this text was updated recently to put the critique in the past tense; the developers now appear to feel that the problems have been overcome due to their efforts.

[11] A handwritten text published in Cairo by Sharkat al-Shamarlī.

[12] See, for example, the survey of the Qur'ān in (and as) art in Blair 2007.

technology. So, one might conclude that, while the mode of expression has changed, the religious sentiment underneath remains identical with the past. The ease of access and the portability of the digital text make such versions much like the tiny amulets that modern printing processes have facilitated the proliferation of. Such texts are essentially unreadable (because of their small format) and so, too, it might be suggested, is that the case for the digital text: readability is not the main issue.[13] One point that makes this clear is the tendency towards attempting to reproduce the modern book format and appearance in an electronic guise; that has become standard especially in versions that are anticipated to be accessed through mobile devices. Overall, this suggests that the physical possession of the text itself and the ability to have it in close proximity at all times is the critical factor in having created the ultimate success of the electronic representations of the text.

Recitation and Translation of the Qur'ān

Many of the sites devoted to the Qur'ān focus on two particular manifestations of the text: its form in translation and recitation. There is a multitude of such sites whose emphasis appears to be devoted to maximizing the number of translation target languages and documenting as many recitations (including the various *riwāya* and styles of recitation of the text) as possible. Probably among the most impressive is Zekr.org again, which features an extensive list of texts, all available as plugins for the basic program (zekr.org/resources.html). One hundred and six translations are available, covering 43 languages, along with 30 recitations. Some sites allow for a parallel search between the Arabic text and a translation, as at al-quran.info (a site constructed by Iman Mohammad Kashi and Uwe Hideki Matzen, of the Online Qur'ān Project of Copenhagen). The site uses the font and text from Tanzil.net project. It contains at least 145 translations (many being clear copyright violations of major publishers' works, I should add, but also displaying a surprising ecumenical attitude in having texts from "Orientalists", Sunnis, Shiʿis, Ahmadis, and even Rashad Khalifa).

A more rudimentary site with interesting features is qibla.appspot.com, "Surfin' the Quran", programmed by Kai Borrmann and Peer Janssen in Berlin. It allows searching in the English version by Pickthall, German (by "Abu-r-Rida Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Rassoul"), transliteration, and the Arabic text. One can click on any word (Arabic or translation) and then get all the other occurrences in the text. In Arabic this is limited in its usefulness because it includes the specific vowels of any given word, although it is possible to edit the word in Arabic in the search box (and thus eliminate the final vowel and increase the results, for example). The Arabic text at this site was also derived from the Tanzil.net project.

[13] This is certainly apparent with some mobile application in which the Arabic text of the Qur'ān can be extremely small.

Worthy of attention and monitoring on a number of levels is the Saudi site www.qurancomplex.org, especially for what it suggests about shifting Salafi attitudes. This site, the King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Qur'ān, features an interface in seven languages, the text of Arabic Qur'ān, translations in six languages, and four recitations, but it also has a vast store of manuscript illustrations and an impressive index of writers of exegetical works (*tafsir*) searchable under name of author or name of book (accessible in the Arabic version only).

These sites provide a valuable insight into changing religious attitudes. Given the traditional Muslim reluctance to see translations of the Qur'ān given any status (see Poonawala 1990) the potential value of the Internet for missionizing appears to be overcoming those qualms. While those traditional attitudes towards translation have been more theoretical than real for much of Muslim history (see Zadeh 2012), the reluctance to legitimate translations had gained some additional strength in modern times, probably as a negative reaction primarily directed towards the Ahmadiyya's early adoption of the Protestant Christian emphasis on spreading the Gospel through translation. This angst now appears to have subsided in the wake of the Internet's potential. There may also be a sense of the presence of multiple translation languages countering the emerging sense of English (and thus the United States) as the dominant language of the Internet. At the same time, the extent to which one can speak of a single translation gaining authority is limited; the easy accessibility to multiple versions would seem to render this difficult for anyone to accomplish.[14] Copyright appears to have been the only constraining factor in producing an early dominance of English translations by Shakir and Yusuf Ali, but such concerns appear to be fading in the face of the inability of publishers to do much about piracy.

The matter of the availability of online recitations needs specific attention. Versions mediated by technology became an issue early on with the well-known project from the 1930s by Labīb al-Sa'īd to create phonographic records of recitations (as-Said 1975). The immense popularity of the use of radio (and, later, television) to broadcast recitations (whether live or pre-recorded) has also been noted in the past. The dominance of cassette tapes in the 1970s as a way of transmitting revolutionary messages in Iran and elsewhere – and as a way of spreading religious messages – has also frequently been commented upon (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994). The use of the Internet to distribute recitations, therefore, is hardly surprising and stands perhaps as the most obvious example of the progression of religious expression through different technological means that has characterized the Muslim world in the twentieth century especially.[15]

The popularity of Qur'ān recitations, along with the access to the text and translations, reflects a mode of independent study that potentially represents a significant shift away from the traditional mode of learning in front of a master through rote

[14] This point would be worthy of a full research project. In Turkey, for example, the emergence of translations has been a very public act by being published in newspapers during Ramadan in the 1980s, for example.

[15] It is worthy of note that the move of recitation to recorded media parallels the use of moveable type in the printing of the Qur'an. For some details, see Albin 2004.

repetition (often reinforced by physical punishment of youthful pupils[16]). Still, the question must be posed of how to determine what use these recitations are actually put to. Are they used to learn how to recite the text (the emergence of "red letter" printed texts of the Qur'ān with the signs of recitation indicated and much technical information conveyed provides a notable context here and these texts are likewise available on the Internet through sites such as Quranflash.com)? Or are they to listen to in a meditative type of religious practice? Or are they sometimes thought of simply as "background noise" to fill the space that might otherwise be dominated in the home, office, car or public by popular music and the like (or to counter those influences and sounds)?[17]

The Exegetical Dimension

A final area to document in the presence of the Qur'ān on the Internet relates to the question of whether the Internet is pushing the Qur'ān into a new exegetical dimension. With one click readers can now reach more volumes of exegesis than most people would ever be able to accumulate in personal libraries in a lifetime. The Internet also seems to be a prime mover when it comes to the transition to English as an Islamic language (even if Muslims read the Qur'ān in Arabic, they often consider and comment on it in the lingua franca of English) by the emergence of highly technical Arabic commentaries on the Qur'ān being translated into English.

The prime example here is altafsir.com. According to its self-description (accessed February 8, 2013), the site was

> begun in 2001 by the *Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought*, Jordan. Today the website is fully operational in Arabic and English and provides the original Arabic texts of 150 or more books of Qur'anic Commentary, Interpretation and Explanation (*tafsir or tafseer*), recitation (*tajwid*) tutorials and *hadith* collections, and other fields, pertaining to the study of Qur'ānanic exegesis. Translations of the meanings of the Qur'an are currently available in 24 different languages, and in several cases more than one translation is available. The site also includes audio Qur'an recitations; resources on Qur'an syntax; resources on the Contexts of Revelation (*asbâb al-nuzûl*); resources on the meanings of words found in the Qur'an, and other works on the Qur'anic sciences. It contains over a million pages of Qur'anic Commentary and translation. Some of the texts presented here exist only as manuscripts and have never previously been published in book form despite their historical importance and influence. Altafsir.com is thus a complete website for the study of the Qur'anic Sciences.

The works on altafsir.com are all available for online consulting and searching. Many other highly developed sites exist which allow for downloading of masses of data composed primarily of classical texts. For example, al-Mawsūʿa al-Shāmila,

[16] See, e.g., the references to this in Günther 2005; a vivid modern Arab expression is found in Husayn 1970.

[17] Others have commented on the way in which religious sermons and Qur'ān recitations engage with audiences in both active and passive ways; see Hirshkind 2006: 67–104; Nelson 1985: 153–187.

www.islamport.com, provides 15 gigabytes of downloadable and online texts covering all areas of the Islamic heritage including *tafsīr*. Likewise, almeshkat.net (al-Mishkāt al-Islāmiyya) allows simple download of PDF or DOC files in enormous quantity.

The overall situation is one of amassing of data, therefore. This is often extolled on the basis of a frequently invoked notion, the "democratization" of access to primary materials. This notion of democratization is a common theme in proclaiming the benefits of the Internet in general; such was obvious to see during the discussions of the "Arab Spring" and the role of sites such as Facebook in mobilizing people, existing as they do (in theory) outside the control of those in power. In the study of Islam this democratization of access is connected to a notion such as making it much easier to have the original manuscripts available for all to see so that the work of constructing critical editions becomes transparent, for example.[18] However, some caution is needed in the use of this concept of "democratization" in the context of Islamic studies. Democracy in the Muslim world has become, as we are all very aware, a matter of ideological contestation that cannot be detached in the twenty-first century from the American presence and mission in the Middle Eastern and African contexts. That the availability of texts should become caught in this situation would be unfortunate, to say the least. More critically, there is another, perhaps more internal Muslim dispute that we are potentially witnessing as well, and that is the ownership and promulgation of the Muslim cultural and intellectual heritage. Vested in this amassing of data is that core sense of the definition of the Islamic heritage and of Islam itself. In some ways, the competing sites which bring Qur'ānic exegetical material together – I would suggest a comparison of the King Fahd Centre and the Aal al-Bayt Foundation – are the places in which the future of Islam is being staked, at least symbolically (in terms of cultural heritage). This is even further apparent in the work that is also taking place in Iran where the collections of *tafsir* texts (often on DVDs) are not limited to the Shiʿi standard works but include masses of Sunni works as well, in an effort which can only be interpreted as a Shiʿi effort to have their own works included in the general Muslim canon.[19] The struggle for control of

[18] See the considerations in Smith 2005: "In the case of humanities knowledge production, which has for the last five hundred years depended on printed books to transmit the fruits of intellectual labor, crucial parts of the process of knowledge building and bookmaking have been hidden from public view." … "Democratizing access to primary materials is the most obvious value that multimedia research archives bring to humanities education."… "Though all of this viewing is of digital surrogates, such access is a big deal. Readers can make their own judgments about worth and literary legacy. Art viewers can avail themselves of sustained periods of study not possible when the works of art are received via a slide show during class time. Twenty-first-century teachers would be well served to take advantage of these resources, critiquing their limitations as well as their possibilities, just as they would for any bookbound resource."… "The humanities are vital to the educational system Thomas Jefferson saw as necessary for achieving democracy. In fact, the 'pursuit of happiness,' one of the inalienable rights of people enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, depends on knowledge."

[19] This is a point made in Mandaville 1999, although he seems to present this mainly in economic terms ("capturing a larger share of the market for digital Islam").

what Gary Bunt (2009: 276) has called the Islamic knowledge economy may be viewed as being constructed through such sites.

While our interest as scholars is in the "cultural record" of a society, increasingly we also witness the increasing value of heritage as a commercial product. As a result, scholars are potentially losing control over the source of their work; the commercialization of scholarly tools and texts results in the surrender of control especially when compared to the situation of scholars of past generations (in the nineteenth century for Islamic studies). I pointed to this factor in the production of CD-ROMs in my earlier article (Rippin 1999–2000), and it could be suggested that the current availability of the material freely on the Internet might serve to counteract this. However, I continue to feel that there are grounds for concern in this direction,[20] and new issues of a slightly different nature are also becoming clear. It is absolutely true that scholars have, for the most part, been captives of the commercial system for many years, in the form of book publishers. Those publishers dictate what we have access to. The boom in book publishing in the Arab world over the past 25 years especially has benefitted all of us in Islamic studies tremendously. The worry must be that the current availability on one's computer at no cost of material which has previously only been available in printed form may render the economic model of publishing – even in the relatively inexpensive but highly competitive environment of Beirut – commercially impossible.

A further danger that is a corollary to the previous point resides in the way in which a set "library" of works becomes available and essentially a canon of the genre emerges online.[21] The "canonization" of works of *tafsīr* and the transition from manuscript to print to digital format has various implications.[22] This probably can be valuably viewed in conjunction with understandings about the transition from scribe to print. V. V. Izmirlieva (2008: 141) suggests as follows:

> The new printed books [in the early 16th century] were easier to read, more accessible, less mysterious – and so was the information they revealed. The printing revolution thus put an end to medieval elitism in book culture, an end to the cultural monopoly of the clergy. … [I]f the old scribal culture was an oligarchy of the enlightened few, the compilers and copyists of books, then the culture of print shifted power to the majority, the consumers, and laid the ground for the future tyranny of book buyers.

By what will the "tyranny of book buyers" be replaced? And, for that matter, how long will the metaphor of the book continue to be used online?

The above discussion documents the emergence of technologically mediated texts of the Qur'ān, translations, recitations, and *tafsīr*. Overall, matters have changed for Muslims in this particular area primarily on the symbolic level and on the level of interaction with authority. That is, a common factor in all these elements is the sense of the emergence of an individualistic faith based in texts and elicited

[20] Also see the comments in McGann 2009.

[21] The impact of translating a select group of *tafsīr*s, as has happened over the past decade, could also have a significant impact on this formation of a "canon" of works.

[22] For a treatment of this theme in general see Vandendorpe 2009.

through personal study.[23] The modern sense of individualism is mirrored (and reinforced) in one of the apparent purposes of the distribution of this Qur'ānic material. Some of this sense of individualism is illusory, however, especially for the collections of exegetical works, and perhaps also for the recitations. Mere access to the material does not make it any easier to understand – it seems incontrovertible that there will still be a need for a "scholarly" class.[24] One might more accurately say that what we are witnessing primarily is individualized access rather than individualized interpretation.

Directions for the Future?

Some Internet sites devoted to the Qur'ān display levels of additional functionality that suggest a potential for significant developments in the future that will move us away from the limits inherent in the printed book (and the handwritten manuscript). Two sites of interest provide a sample illustration. What began as "The CRESCENT Corpus Tagset: Syntactic and Morphological Tagging of the Holy Quran in Classical Arabic" is now corpus.quran.com, an "international collaborative linguistic project" developed by Kais Dukes of the School of Computing, University of Leeds. The site provides access to the Qur'ān along with complete concordance function, dictionary access, seven translations and a recitation; but it also adds syntactical and morphological tagging for the Arabic text of the Qur'ān (using the text from the Tanzil.net project). The tagging is particularly detailed with 44 categories differentiating fine points of Arabic grammar, especially in the way particles are employed (see corpus.quran.com/documentation/tagset.jsp; the tagged text is available for free download). The truly ambitious parts of the project, however, are the graphic syntactic treebanks which illustrate the grammatical relationships between words and the pages dedicated to the "Ontology of Quranic concepts", described as using "knowledge representation to define the key concepts in the Quran, and shows the relationships between these concepts using predicate logic."[25] So far, 12 categories

[23] See e.g., Peter 2006: 105–116. This is a clear theme of the books of Oliver Roy, e.g., Roy 2004: especially chapter 4, "The triumph of the religious self". The emphasis of Tariq Ramadan on individualism is also notable.

[24] At the same time I do not wish to minimize the number of knowledgeable people or claim that understanding of this material solely resides with the traditionally trained scholars (and academic specialists). For a useful discussion of the way texts are used in online argumentation and discussion see Becker 2009: "Salafi activists taking part in an online forum are not expected to have a huge corpus of Islamic knowledge learned or memorized-in contrast to established religious scholars. However, they establish their authority by knowing where to access this knowledge when needed. The *ulama'* have not become superfluous. To the contrary, they are still of great importance for Salafi activists as hadith scholars. However, they have lost their role as sole mediators between the sources and the believer since Salafi activists do not only go back to the now digitized sources with the help of online forums. They have also appropriated 'Islamic argumentation' from the monopoly of the religious scholars." Also see Becker 2011; Mandaville 1999, 2007; Turner 2007.

[25] See http://corpus.quran.com/ontology.jsp

of concepts have been mapped: Artifact, Astronomical Body, Event, False Deity, Holy Book, Language, Living Creation, Location, Physical Attribute, Physical Substance, Religion, and Weather Phenomena. As an example, the word "bee" (*naḥla*) is mapped as follows: Living Creation > Organic Object > Biological Organism > Insect > Bee. This then allows a visual mapping of all "insects" in the Qur'ān under the category of "Biological organism" (which then has the additional sub-categories Bird, Plant, Fish, Animals). A "topic index" allows one to access these representations directly but they may also be accessed from the tagged text of the Qur'ān itself. The overall mapped ontology consists of a network of 300 linked concepts with 350 relations. The visualization of this creates knowledge representation of the Qur'ānic world that is vivid and insightful, and well beyond what a thematic index can achieve.

A similar effort at morphological tagging was led at the University of Haifa in the early 2000s, and is now found at cl.haifa.ac.il/projects/quran/index.shtml. The system facilitates a variety of queries on the Qur'ānic text that make reference not only to the words but also to their linguistic attributes. The core of the system is a set of finite-state based rules which describe the morpho-phonological and morpho-syntactic aspects of Qur'ānic language. The program, running under Java, may be downloaded, as may the tagged text of the Qur'ān.

Both of these projects provide a detailed and systematic analysis of the text of the Qur'ān in ways that have not been possible previously. They do remain approaches that appear to have had limited impact thus far, however, and there is no evidence of a change in the way in which most individuals deal with the actual text itself. The potential is there and it is illustrated in such developments, but we are still in the process of witnessing the transformation in our approach to the potential of advanced computer-aided analysis. As may be seen in so many other sites that allow access to the Qur'ān, in many cases nothing has changed in terms of the approach to textual study and analysis from when texts were available solely as printed books or manuscripts. In general, digital forms of these texts do not provide refined indexing, additional editing documentation, anything that would suggest advances in synthesizing the available material, any evidence of the emergence of new super-commentaries (annotations that advance analysis as compared to provide sources – most of which are missing in the available online versions anyway and thus we have generally lost information rather than gaining it[26]), or tools for collaborative research and thinking.[27] The beginnings of some of this in the work on the text of the Qur'ān may be seen where instances of collaboration are evident (the grammar aspect of corpus.quran.com), but that displays only limited impact so far.

[26] In a recent discussion with a translator of one work of *tafsīr* that appears online as well as in printed form, it was pointed out that the online version, because it is devoid of notes and other textual annotations, does not actually make sense when compared to the Arabic text available on the same site because the process of translation required considerable work on the source text itself (including consulting additional manuscripts). Only the printed work is truly meaningful. It is not as though the technology does not exist that would facilitate the incorporation of linked annotations.

[27] Some of these themes of digital humanities are developed in Juoal 2008.

The question of how the Muslim world makes use of the information and communication technologies to religious ends, and what impact that has on Muslim modes of religious practice through these processes of production and consumption is well illustrated by the Qur'ān on the Internet. The above observations do suggest some significant shifts in Muslim attitudes towards the sources and the way in which Islam is promulgated. That said, it must be recognized that there is a limited correlation between the existence of masses of classical texts online and the sorts of questions that humanist scholars like to ask about the actual analyses of texts. The future holds many possibilities, of course, and charting their emergence will be a complex but fascinating task.

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Part IV
Narratives of Inclusion and Exclusion

"Little Mosque on the Prairie" and Modern Convivencia: An Intervention into Canadian Muslim Identities

Franz Volker Greifenhagen

Introduction

Little Mosque on the Prairie, a television comedy series featuring Muslim characters and a Muslim minority community on the Canadian prairies, was a novel and groundbreaking undertaking when it was launched in 2007. Appearing in the context of a growing Canadian Muslim population, and of ambivalent attitudes towards Muslims among Canadians in general, the series is here analyzed as a cultural intervention into the contested field of Canadian Muslim identities. First, however, the scene is set by evoking Lessing's interfaith parable of the three rings, and by searching through past Muslim-Christian-Jewish coexistence in al Andalus, or Muslim Spain, for categories of religio-cultural interaction. Second, the Canadian context of increasing religious diversity and ambivalent attitudes vis-à-vis Muslims is explored. Selected episodes form the first two seasons of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* are then analyzed to reveal its dynamic intervention in the Canadian cultural imaginary by confounding simple "Muslim versus Canadian" binaries, normalizing visible Canadian Muslim identities, de-homogenizing *and* circumscribing Canadian Muslim-ness, and longing for a utopic interfaith convivencia. In the end, it is argued that *Little Mosque on the Prairie* attempts to show how Canadian Muslims can be authentic, not despite, but because of having to interact with a wider non-Muslim context.

The text of this article was originally delivered orally on October 19 and 21, 2009 in Camrose and Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, as part of the Augustana Distinguished Lecture series sponsored by the Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life at the University of Alberta, and was issued as part of a booklet, *On the Way to Muslim-Christian Understanding*, by the Chester Ronning Centre in 2010. My thanks to the director of the Chester Ronning Centre, David J. Goa, for permission to reuse this material for this edited and updated version.

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T. Hoffmann and G. Larsson (eds.), *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies*, Muslims in Global Societies Series 7,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7247-2_8,

The Ring

Once upon a time long ago, there lived a man who owned a ring of endless worth. Not only was it beautiful beyond compare but it also possessed the virtue of making the wearer beloved of both God and people. The man bequeathed this ring, not to his eldest, but to the most favorite and beloved of his children. And so it continued to be passed down – always to the dearest and most beloved child, who would then become the head of the household and eminent over the other siblings.

At length the ring was inherited by a father who had three children, whom he loved equally. The overflowing generosity of his heart made it impossible for him to promise the ring to only one, and so, in private, he promised the ring to each of the three. But eventually death approached, and the father wondered what to do. Finally, he secretly contracted with a jeweler to make exact copies of the ring. Taking leave of each of his children separately, he bestowed on each his blessing and a ring.

Scarcely had the father died, when each of the three children claimed to be the head of the household, each brandishing the ring received from the father. Not being able to distinguish which ring was genuine, they took their complaint to a judge.

The judge was stumped. The father was dead and could not be called upon to testify, and the true ring itself could not be expected to announce its identity. Perhaps all three rings were replicas, the original one having been lost! But then the judge reminded the three children that the most valuable quality of the real ring is its power to make the wearer beloved of God and people. So let that decide, he declared. Let each believe that they possess the real ring and feel honoured by this inestimable gift; and let each vie with the others in demonstrating the virtue of the ring – in gentleness, benevolence and forbearance. And if the virtues of the ring continue to show themselves in their children's children after a thousand thousand years, well, then, their complaints will be resolved and their suit settled.

This story appears in a play entitled *Nathan der Weise/Nathan the Wise*, written by the German writer and dramatist, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), and published in 1779 (Schecter 2004). The story is an allegory pleading for religious tolerance – each of the three rings symbolizes one of the triad of western monotheistic traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The play in which the story is embedded is a response by Lessing to the vicious attacks made against him by Johann Melchior Goeze (1717–1786), chief pastor in Hamburg and vigourous defender of Lutheran Christian dogmatic orthodoxy, as well as campaigner against the theatre as an immoral institution.[1] But the story of the ring is not original to

[1] The ire of Pastor Goeze and other Christian leaders had been provoked when Lessing published posthumous fragments of the work of the radical enlightenment biblical critic H.S. Reimarus. Lessing responded with a series of virulent polemical pamphlets, *Anti-Goeze*, The duke of Brunswick intervened by banning any further of these publications. Lessing thus took the more indirect artistic route of writing the play *Nathan the Wise* in order to continue his argument for religious tolerance against the strictures of rigid religious dogmatism. Some reviewers of the play decried the portrayal of a Jew as the hero, and the play was condemned by government censors and banned by the Catholic authorities who saw it as an attack on the church. Not surprisingly, much later the play was also banned by the Nazis.

Lessing. He likely got it from a version that appeared in *The Decameron*, a collection of stories written by the Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) in the 1300s, the century of the infamous Black Death, when the bubonic plague decimated Europe's population, resulting in a surge of intolerant scapegoating and persecution of minority groups. Boccaccino himself got the story from other sources; the story, or motifs from it, have circulated in many versions (Poorthuis 2005).

Convivencia

I tell this story to introduce yet another story – the story of a time and place in which these three children – Jews, Christians, and Muslims – lived together in a type of mutuality that was remarkable for its time. The place is the Iberian peninsula, the location of modern Spain and Portugal. The time is the Middle Ages – stereotypically still regarded by some as a time of barbarism and darkness in Europe, a sort of regrettable stepping stone from the lost glories of Greece and Rome to the advancements of the modern age. The Iberian peninsula, however, was different. Called al-Andalus by Muslims, for some 700 years significant populations of Jews, Christians and Muslims lived together there, clashing, collaborating, intermingling, and creating a vibrant civilization that was looked to by northern Europeans as the intellectual and artistic centre of the continent. Hroswitha, the tenth century abbess of Gandersheim in Saxony, hearing of the wonders of Cordoba, then a city of up to half a million inhabitants, the largest in Europe, with running water, public baths, paved streets, and some 70 libraries, exclaimed it to be the "ornament of the world" (Menocal 2002:32–35).

The Spanish term "convivencia" has come into vogue to describe this "'coexistence' of Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities in medieval Spain and by extension the cultural interaction and exchange fostered by such proximity" (Wolf 2009:72). It's a great word – derived from the Latin *convivere*, to live (*vivere*) together (*con-*), it shares etymological roots with the word "convivial", denoting the festive and jovial companionship befitting a banquet. In her wonderful book *The Ornament of the World*, Yale professor of Spanish and Portuguese, Maria Rosa Menocal, argues that medieval Iberian or Andalusian Jews, Christians and Muslims were able, "despite their intractable differences and enduring hostilities", to nourish "a complex culture of tolerance" (Menocal 2002:11). Why? Because they lived together. Because they benefited from Islam's explicit recognition of Judaism and Christianity as valid revelations and religions.[2] But these factors alone do not necessarily lead to convivencia. Rather, in Menocal's view, there was an additional factor: the ability to hold two or more contrary ideas at the same time, the often

[2] Menocal recognizes that the Muslim institution of *dhimma*, a pact or covenant between ruling Muslims and other communities of the Book, could be enacted in either genuinely tolerant or culturally repressive arrangements. She argues that the Umayyad rulers of al-Andalus set a pattern for a relatively liberal and open enactment of *dhimma* (2002:72–73).

unconscious acceptance within one's culture of incongruities as enriching and productive (2002:10–11).

Examples of such creative tensions include Hasdai ibn Shaprut (ca. 915–975), Jewish right-hand man in Cordoba to the Muslim caliph Abd al-Rahman III (891–961), or Rabi ibn Zayd (tenth century), Christian bishop of Elvira, who served in the caliph's foreign envoys, or the legendary Rodrigo Diaz or El-Cid (1043–1099), who fought in the service of both Muslim and Christian monarchs, or Samuel the Nagid (993–1055), the powerful Jewish vizier of the Muslim kingdom of Granada. They include philosophers and theologians such as the Jew Maimonides (1135–1204), and the Muslim Ibn Rushd or Averroes (1126–1198), who saw no contradiction in pursuing truth across confessional lines, an openness that influenced also the Christian Abelard (1079–1142). They include the massive translation efforts of the Toledo "school" in which Arab manuscripts, among them translations of the Greek classics as well as various Muslim, Jewish and Christian works, were rendered into Latin and disseminated north and east into Europe helping to fuel the Renaissance. And they include artistic and architectural productions such as the tomb of the Christian King Fernando III (1199–1252), built in the re-consecrated mosque-cathedral of Seville and inscribed in Latin, Hebrew, Arabic and Castilian, or the Jewish synagogue in Toledo built in the Muslim Alhambra style, or Christian churches, such as San Roman in Toledo, built to emulate characteristic features of Andalusian mosques.[3]

Convivencia seems a fairly positive and compelling concept. In fact, it has been romanticized and idealized today for political and ideological purposes – often to construct a nostalgic version of the past so as to de-legitimize disturbing crusading and/or puritanical fundamentalist currents today. But lest we begin to imagine medieval Spain as some sort of modern multicultural interfaith utopia, we need to remember this age was also characterized by violence and conflict. Jewish communities in al-Andalus on occasion suffered from riots, expulsions or massacres. Christians nourished a cult of martyrs lamenting the loss of their hegemony. Violent confrontations took place between armies or in ritualized forms.[4] Crusading Christians from the north and fanatical Muslims from the south "made religious-ideological warfare a reality, religious orthodoxy a real possibility, and monochromatic identity a realizable ideal" (Menocal 2002:268). Convivencia thus describes not just the cooperative, but also the conflicting co-existence of Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities.

Even if individuals crossed cultural boundaries regularly, their religious and political leaders were inclined to zealously maintain boundaries between traditions, and allowed for convivencia and interfaith accommodation, not out of some ideal of

[3] These examples are selected from Menocal 2002.

[4] According to David Nirenberg's study of Jews and Muslims in the Christian kingdom of Aragon, "not only were ritualized outbursts of inter-communal violence a normal and expected part of coexistence, but also they made the continued toleration for non-Christian minorities possible by delineating their place within the majority society" (Soifer 2009:22).

tolerance, but arguably for pragmatic, usually economic, reasons.[5] According to Canadian scholar, Brian Catlos, instead of convivencia, with its overtones of convivial exchange, we should probably think in terms of "a system of overlapping reciprocal interests and negotiated, utilitarian arrangements" – not covivencia, but "conveniencia" (Soifer 2009:24). Some historians of Spain prefer to go even further and speak only of "coexistencia", that is, a physical coexistence of the three communities in the same cities and neighborhoods, a coexistence, which, in their opinion, did not necessarily lead to a social integration between Jews, Christians and Muslims (Soifer 2009:23).

While these arguments may have merit on empirical historical grounds, I am not yet willing to abandon the ideal types that a term like convivencia potentially offers for analyzing and understanding and fostering contemporary interfaith relationships. Even if the term does not correspond directly to what is really out there, it can function powerfully as an ideal imaginative construct, not only to organize and pattern what we experience and see and hear, but, perhaps as important, to spur us to action so that *what is* becomes, or at least begins to approach, what, ethically, according to our ideals, *should be*.

Our foray into al-Andalus has left us with three terms: convivencia, conveniencia, or mere coexistencia – these are the options that the Andalusian story offers to the children who inherited the father's ring, each believing fundamentally that they alone have received the only genuine one:

- Coexistencia: the mere occupation side-by-side of the same physical space with only the minimal interaction required to sustain life; the creation of silos and ghettos; the goal of cultural and religious purists.
- Conveniencia: living together in the same space and interacting insofar as it is deemed practical and advantageous for group and personal gain; a marriage of convenience; usually controlled by religious and cultural elites who act as gatekeepers and determine the extent to which community boundaries may be breached.
- Convivencia: a living together that extends the circle of trust beyond family and friends; the sharing of activities and daily life across religious and cultural boundaries such that differences are accepted and become positive and productive sources of cross-fertilization and creativity.

To these three perhaps we should add a fourth term, one that makes its shrill voice heard also today, especially on internet blogs and comments:

- Conquista: the process of acquiring or overcoming by force; to subdue and subjugate, to assimilate and absorb and, if necessary, to expel whatever resists incorporation.

It is with conquista that the Andalusion experiment ended in 1492. That year, so triumphalistically obscured by the western myth of the "discovery" of the "new

[5] This is the argument of Chris Lowney's *A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain* (2005) (Wolf 2009:79–80).

world" by Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), should rather stand out in the annals of world history for the ignomious expulsion of the Jews from Spain by the newly triumphant Christian monarchs, the fall of Grenada, the last Muslim principality on the peninsula, and the shameful abrogation by the same monarchs, under pressure of the church, of the terms of the treaty giving Muslims under their rule the right to continue to live as Muslims. Forced conversion or expulsion became the only legal options; many Jews and Muslims went through the motions of conversion in order to preserve their lives and property, only later to face the horrors of the Inquisition, mandated precisely to root out such pseudo-Christians.

Convivencia, conveniencia, coexistencia and conquista – these terms, with all their convoluted permutations, seem to me to designate fruitful categories with which, finally, to arrive at our present time and space, and to examine a modern day story, the portrayal of Muslim-Christian relations in Canada offered by the sit-com *Little Mosque on the Prairie*.

The Canadian Context

But before we consider *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, let us set the stage by considering the Canadian context. While Canadians still identify overwhelmingly as Christians,[6] Muslims, along with practitioners of other non-Christian religions and those claiming no religious allegiance at all, have become a demographically significant element of the Canadian population.[7] What is the Canadian mood about this rapidly increasing religious diversity?

Opinion polls seem to offer divergent views. First the good news: A survey carried out by Ipsos-Reid in April and May of 2003, and reported in a major series, *The New Canada* in Canada's *Globe and Mail* newspaper in June of the same year, led researchers to announce that Canada was increasingly moving toward an identity shaped by diversity. Canadians as a whole were revealed to be remarkably accepting of diversity and open to including people of different ethnic backgrounds into their communities and even into their immediate families by

[6] According to the 2001 census, over three quarters of Canadians still identify themselves as Christians (*Religions in Canada* 2003). Unfortunately, this was the last year that the Canadian census asked about religious affiliation; this question was dropped for the 2011 census. It is now included only on the voluntary National Household Survey, sent to about a third of Canadian households; results from the question about religious affiliation in the 2011 National Household Survey will not be released until later in 2013.

[7] Muslims constitute about 2 % of the Canadian population according to the 2001 census, and are the fastest growing religious group in Canada. Some 6 % of Canadians claim adherence to a non-Christian religion, while over 16 % claim no religious affiliation at all (*Religions in Canada* 2003). According to statistical projections, Muslims will constitute over 7 % of the Canadian population by 2031, as part of the projected 15 % of Canadians claiming adherence to non-Christian religions by this time; those claiming no religion are projected at 20 % of the Canadian population by 2031 (Malenfant et al. 2010:25).

intermarriage. But, even then, younger Canadians, those between the ages of 18 and 30, the future movers and shakers of the nation, were more likely than their older counterparts to give responses supportive of diversity. For example, while on average 67 % of Canadians were comfortable with a close relative marrying a Muslim, among younger Canadians this percentage shot up to 81 % (Parkin and Mendelsohn 2003:3).

The researchers concluded:

> In the first decade of the 21st century, tolerance is no longer a dream or a policy; it is a fait accompli for a rising generation that has never known a Canada that did not celebrate multiculturalism or constitutionally guaranteed equality rights… There is no evidence of any looming backlash against immigrants or minority groups. Indeed, the remarkable achievement is this: multiculturalism has become a source of pride for most Canadians – not only for immigrants or visible minorities. Rather than undermining Canadian's sense of identity, immigration and multiculturalism are solidifying it. (Parkin and Mendelsohn 2003:18).

However, it is notable that discomfort with a close relative marrying a Muslim was relatively high – 31 % in the general population, but that just as many Canadians on average felt uncomfortable with the idea of a close relative marrying an atheist, and even more, 36 %, expressed discomfort at the thought of a close relative marrying a Christian fundamentalist.[8] The researchers attributed the dis-ease with such marriages to anxiety that they might require changes to the usual religious or non-religious practices of the respondent's families (Parkin and Mendelsohn 2003:17). One further caveat: for all its measurement of diversity, this particular poll did not consider attitudes to First Nations peoples at all – the results might then have been somewhat different.

Now the bad news: An Angus Reid poll conducted in April of 2009, and reported as the headline story of *Maclean's* in May, found that only 39 % of Canadians would find it acceptable for one of their children to marry a Muslim. Furthermore, 45 % asserted that the mainstream beliefs of Islam encourage violence, and only 28 % reported having a favorable opinion of the religion. While Muslims fare rather poorly in this poll, followers of non-Christian religions in general are not given much leeway. Opposition to public funding for non-Christian faith-based schools, opposition to the modification of laws and norms to accommodate minorities, and opposition to allowing employees to miss work on religious holidays that are not already days off, was rather high among respondents (Angus Reid Strategies 2009).

This second poll seems to belie the image of most Canadians as tolerant accommodating multiculturalists. Even those Canadian who are younger or who have a higher education level, while displaying less intolerant attitudes, are still overwhelmingly negative about certain religious minorities, especially Muslims.

[8] Those who identified religion as important to their identity or regularly attended religious services were more likely to feel uncomfortable with a close relative marrying a Muslim (42 %, 42 %) or an atheist (51 %, 47 %), while those who responded that religion and religious observances were not important to them were more likely to feel discomfort at the thought of a close relative marrying a Christian fundamentalist (39 %, 41 %) (Parkin and Mendelsohn 2003:17).

The results of these polls could be disputed on methodological grounds,[9] but nonetheless a rather mixed picture emerges, somewhat like the mixed and ambiguous image of convivencia in medieval al-Andalus.

The second poll did provide two important glimmers of hope. First, those who have friends who practice other religions are more likely to have a positive outlook on those religions (Todd 2009a), and those who are younger Canadians tend more to have friends who practice other religions, which bodes well for the future. "Overall, the data suggests familiarity with the basic teachings and beliefs of Canada's diverse religions, combined with having friends who hold these beliefs leads to greater tolerance and appreciation of different faiths" (Wiseman 2009).

The second glimmer of hope concerns the western Canadian province of Alberta. Often stereotyped as the intolerant red neck Bible belt of Canada, the Angus Reid poll found Albertans to score higher than inhabitants of any other province in Canada on having a favorable view of Muslims and viewing mainstream Islam as peaceful (although the percentages are still below half). Albertans scored second highest on having Muslim friends and claiming a basic understanding of the teachings and beliefs of Islam (Wiseman 2009).

What seems to be a shift in Canadian attitudes towards a more negative view of Muslims between 2003 and 2009 may reflect a similar phenomenon noted among Americans. Christopher Smith (2013) attributes the shift towards a more negative attitude among Americans to media framing: while in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, media focused on critiquing stereotypes of Muslims as violent, in the years following, partisan right-wing media in particular, increasingly emphasized portrayals of Islam, not as a violent but as a cultural threat. Conservative commentators began to raise concerns about Muslim immigration, the construction of mosques, and the threat of the "Islamization" of western society. While such strident views are far more muted in the Canadian context, the Canadian polls may indicate that, while most Canadians might act or respond publicly in more-or-less multiculturally appropriate ways, many still harbour grave doubts, anxious fears and sometimes downright intolerant or hateful views privately, views that come to expression especially through the anonymity of the internet.[10] Thus interventions into the public media that can spark reconsiderations and positive transformations in the imaginations of Canadians, that is, in how they imagine their own identity as Canadians and the identity of Canadians other than themselves, are vital. One such intervention is *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, to which, after all these preliminaries, we finally turn,

[9] For example, the sample size was 2,000 in the 2003 poll, which was conducted by telephone interviews, while the sample size was only 1,007 in the 2009 poll, which took place on-line.

[10] For example, Douglas Todd published a descriptive objective report in his blog *The Search* on a public prayer by some 1,000 Muslims in downtown Vancouver on August 14, 2009b. Some of the comments the readers attached to his report are quite revealing of fairly negative views towards Muslims. For example: "Let's round 'em up and burn them at the stake, to save ourselves!" or "Muslims will occupy Canada soon. This is the first step. Canadians need to think about kicking terrorists out before it's too late. It's more likely too late because muslims already every where [sic] in Canada".

asking whether the series constructs a sense of Canadian convivencia, or whether it alternately encourages only conveniencia, mere coexistencia, or, most drastically, conquista or assimilation.

Little Mosque on the Prairie

The original "Little Mosque on the Prairie" is actually the al-Rashid mosque which now resides in Fort Edmonton Park in Edmonton, and was the first mosque built in Canada.[11] But our subject today is the television comedy series, created by Zarqa Nawaz (1968–), a Muslim filmmaker living in Regina, Saskatchewan. The series was launched in January of 2007, by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canada's public radio and television broadcaster. The first episode garnered over two million viewers, an achievement that the CBC had not managed to attain since airing *Anne of Avonlea* in 1990. The show has subsequently continued through six seasons; the final episode of the sixth season aired in April, 2012. In addition to its Canadian exposure, the series has garnered unprecedented international attention, and distribution deals have been struck with broadcasters in countries ranging from France to the United Arab Emirates.

What is ground breaking about the show is that it is the first comedy series in North America, based on the ideas of a Muslim writer and filmmaker, with Muslims as its main characters. Unlike Muslim characters in Hollywood films, often stereotypically cast as violent terrorists and/or oppressors of women,[12] these Muslims, in the fictitious town of Mercy on the prairies of Saskatchewan, are rather ordinary people trying to maintain a community and live their lives peacefully as part of the wider Canadian society. It is in the prosaic daily lives of these Muslims, and their interactions both among themselves and with the non-Muslim population, that the show's humour is found.

So where does this show fit? Convivencia? Just conveniencia? Mere coexistencia? Or even – conquista? In the remainder of this presentation, we will consider several excerpts from the first two seasons of the series,[13] when it was at its most popular, and discuss how Muslims are portrayed in the midst of the heavily christianized context of Canada. The excerpts and discussion are not meant to be comprehensive but rather to serve as entry points into the consideration of possible spaces of convivencia in Canada.

Our first example, from *Jihad on Ice*, the 12th episode from the second season, which first aired on January 9, 2009, is not overtly about religion at all. In this

[11] The mosque was built in 1938. See Saddy 2008 and Hamdani 2010.

[12] Ramji (2003) traces the negative portrayal of Muslims in Hollywood films.

[13] The first two seasons (January–March, 2007, and October 2007–March, 2008) garnered the highest ratings for the series, and also contain the most interesting episodes of the show for the analysis in this article. Ratings in subsequent seasons declined sharply to one fifth of the original audience.

episode, Fred Tupper, the local radio talk show host who delights in stirring up Islamophobic sentiments, is dismissive about any Muslim interest in what he considers a quintessentially Canadian sport, namely curling: "Curling isn't Muslim", he smirks. "It's like freedom and pork". Putting aside the underhanded slight in his remark, let us take Fred's question seriously for a moment: what does curling have to do with Muslims? On the one hand – nothing. Curling is an aspect of Canadian culture that has nothing to do with the core practices and beliefs of the religion of Islam, or of Christianity or Judaism or any other religion, for that matter. Thus, whether Muslims curl or not, or even express any interest in the sport, is irrelevant to their identity as Muslims in Canada. On the other hand, curling has everything to do with Muslim Canadians – in the sense that curling becomes a test in this episode to see whether Muslims can be authentically culturally Canadian. The participation of at least some Canadian Muslims in curling validates an image of Muslims belonging, as opposed to the more common images of Muslims as exotically different and isolated from mainstream culture. Furthermore, the experience of religious rivalry is displaced from the field of religion, where many Canadians tend to see it as distasteful, to a field where rivalry is allowed and encouraged, the field of sport.[14]

Rising to the bait, Amaar Rashid, the young imam of the local Muslim community, decides to enter a Muslim team in the town's curling bonspiel to challenge Fred's team, the reigning champions. Rayyan Hamoudi, the hijab-wearing Muslim doctor, turns out to be an excellent competitive curler and the Muslim team appears set to win the bonspiel. But then Rayyan, seeking to exercise her talent among persons more committed to the sport, switches to Fred's team, eventually displacing Fred as leader of his own team! In revenge, Fred, drawing on some obscure rule regarding player's clothing, manages to get Rayyan banned from the game for wearing the hijab. His action clearly alludes to a number of incidents in 2007 in which hijab-wearing Muslim women were banned from participating in various sporting competitions in Canada.[15]

The local Anglican priest, Rev. Duncan Magee, comes to the rescue by joining the Muslim team. But it's not enough; it looks like Fred's team has won. At the last minute, however, another member of the Muslim team, the conservative traditionalist Baber Siddiqui, who has spent hours perusing the rule book for curling, is able to invoke another rule regarding a mis-measured line on the ice sheet. As a result, in the end the Muslim team wins. Multiculturalism trumps bigotry both despite and because of the rules. And the Canadian cultural imagination[16] is enriched by the possibility of Canadian Muslims who curl and Canadian curlers who are Muslim.

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[14] The most commonly shared Canadian cultural space is amateur sports (Habacon 2008:153).

[15] Bakht (2008) describes these incidents, which involved soccer and taekwondo competitions. She sees in them a transformation of the stereotypical discourse about the Muslim veil in western society from the need to protect veiled Muslim women from their oppressive men/culture/religion into the need to protect them from the physical dangers of the veil itself (contrary to any hard evidence that the wearing of hijab has physically endangered any player).

[16] I use the notion of a cultural imagination in the sense of the French historiographical notion of the *imaginaire*, a set of interwoven meanings and representations occupying an intermediary role between societal mentalities/individual subjectivities, and actual material circumstances.

What is intriguing about this episode is how it plays with notions of identity, destabilizing and potentially transforming them. Rayyan switches allegiances from the Muslim to the non-Muslim team for selfish pragmatic reasons. Fred, the Islamaphobe, is unexpectedly displaced as leader by a Muslim woman. Amaar, the Muslim religious leader, is ambivalent about the value of curling. And Rev. Magee, the Christian religious leader, does not hesitate to play on the Muslim team. These shifts are all symptomatic of fluid identity positions.

Conquista, in the sense of coerced assimilation into one religious group or the other, does not take place. Neither is mere coexistence portrayed, for interaction between the different groups is central to the story. Is this episode then a case of conveniencia? Perhaps, since the interaction concerns curling, which has no ultimate religious value – although such an assertion may be offensive and inaccurate to some esteemed fans of the sport! But I propose that in this episode we are being persuaded to buy into a particularly Canadian mode of convivencia, a mode that does not blur community boundaries but overlaps them,[17] and that firmly insists on following the rules, even when they are interpreted at times exclusively.

Normalizing Discourse?

Little Mosque on the Prairie revolves around the life of a small Muslim community that meets in a mosque set up in the parish hall of the local Anglican church – a metaphor for the situation of Muslims living as a minority within a larger Christianized context.[18] Sandra Cañas has described the series as the "irruption into the public imaginary of the Muslim presence… which seeks to expose western viewers to the everyday lives of Muslims living in the West" (2008:198) – as if Canadian Muslims were saying "Here we are! This is what we are like – and it's probably not what you expect". That the show has a pedagogical aspect is therefore undeniable and understandable. In the first two seasons alone, non – Muslim viewers are introduced to Muslim behaviours such as prayer (1.1, 1.5), fasting, eid celebrations (1.1, 2.10), burial practices (2.1) and Islamic verbal expressions, as well as Muslim beliefs or attitudes about, for example, gambling (1.5, 2.4, 2.17), alcohol (2.11), figural art (2.14) and courtship (1.7, 2.17, 2.18). While sometimes these beliefs and practices are contested on the show, they are often presented as normative.

[17] The term "imbrication" can be used to describe such a close overlapping so as to form an intricate regular pattern, The elements of the pattern are not fixed but so closely conjoined that the pattern would otherwise not exist.

[18] Note, however, that the other major public space in which the series takes place is Fatima's café, perhaps a metaphor for the public commons in which Muslims and non-Muslims alike can freely mix and meet.

Zarqa Nawaz insists that the show has no political or other agenda beyond trying to be funny and entertaining.[19] But she also has said, "I want the broader society to look at us as normal, with the same issues and concerns as anyone else… We're just as much a part of the Canadian fabric as anyone else" (quoted in Mason 2007). While perhaps not a conscious intention of its writers, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* can be seen as deliberately portraying Muslims, not as exotic "others" but as neighbours living in a "normal", albeit fictitious, Canadian context.

Many of the negative descriptions of the series come from commentators who object to this normalizing discourse, claiming that it distorts the truth about the negative aspects of Muslim communities in Canada, and their presumed threat to western civilization. Michael Coren (2007) complains that the show covers up what he sees as the homicidal tendencies of Muslims. Margaret Wente (2007) finds the show's portrayal of a liberal, young and beardless imam totally unbelievable and misleading. Barbara Kay (2009) finds the series to be an intelligence-insulting promotion of unjustified Islamophilia that covers up the dangers of Islamism. Tarek Fatah and Farzana Hassan (2007) of the Muslim Canadian Congress accuse the series of forcing a "completely false" picture of the Muslim community into the homes of non-Muslim Canadians, ostensibly in order to promote an Islamist agenda that conceals the problems in Canadian mosques and ignores secular Muslims. So, on the one hand, hostile non-Muslims wonder where the terrorists and extremist imams are, and non-practicing Muslims do not see any secular Muslim characters.

However, the series is, after all, a fictitious comedy, not a documentary. It seems that such commentators are resisting a shift in the Canadian imaginary towards inclusion of Canadian Muslims who maintain a visible religious identity. They also discount the possibility that a show such as *Little Mosque on the Prairie* functions less to reflect Muslim Canadian reality in all its aspects than it does to participate actively in the construction of Muslim Canadian identities.

While thus providing viewers a light-hearted entrée into the foibles of Canadian Muslim life and thereby into the process of constructing a Muslim identity in Canada, the show also conversely provides opportunities to unmask what many Canadians take for granted as obvious about being Canadian – that is, the implicit assumption that Canadians are normatively white and Christian in experience and background. Seeing this assumption interrogated provides a counter balance to the experience of Muslims (and other persons who do not fit the assumed norm) who find themselves continually in the position of having to explain or justify themselves.

This de-familiarizing dynamic comes to humorous expression in the sixth episode of the first season, *The Archdeacon Cometh*. In this episode, the Muslim mosque community comes to the rescue of the Anglican priest, Rev. Magee, who is

[19] "My biggest hope is it is treated as a comedy, like any other comedy… a comedy that people of all ages, faiths, and backgrounds watch… We want them to watch because it's a funny, entertaining show that just happens to have Muslims in it. We hope the viewers will be able to relate to the characters and the situations because they're all very universal" (quoted in DeDekker 2007).

dreading the impending visit of the Archdeacon,[20] whom he fears will close down the church because of its low membership. The Muslims agree to show up in church pretending to be Anglicans so that the Archdeacon will be fooled into believing that the church is full. Of course, when the Archdeacon comes, earlier than expected, he soon sees through the ruse but decides to keep the church open because of the lucrative rent revenue it receives from the Muslim mosque on its premises.

For our purposes, the segment of this episode that is of most interest is when the Muslim community must be coached into how to be passable Christians in church. Sarah, a convert to Islam from the Anglican church, who was not much of a Christian before and struggles rather half-heartedly to be a good Muslim now, does a totally inadequate job of instructing the Muslims. For instance, the way she explains Holy Communion leads to accusations of cannibalism. Only in the matter of standing and singing hymns does the Muslim community excel, but even this is inadequate, according to Rev. Magee, because it does not mimic the slower and less robust behaviour of the elderly Anglicans.

Anglicans in particular, and Christians in general, might find the humorous misrepresentation of their tradition annoying – some commentators on the internet have even made accusations of Christian-baiting against the series. However, this episode reflects the misunderstanding and misrepresentation that minority communities frequently experience, except that here it is turned back against the dominant community that usually takes its way of life for granted. This comic inversion de-familiarizes the dominant community while normalizing the minority Muslim community. Such a process can only take place in a space of convivencia where persons from different groups are safe to amicably and equally poke fun at each other.

Internal Conflicts

One effect of stereotyping is that the ones being stereotyped are portrayed as a homogenous group. Thus all Muslims, for instance, purely by virtue of being Muslims are popularly stereotyped as potential extremists. *Little Mosque on the Prairie* debunks the notion of a monolithic Muslim community by portraying internal conflict between different perspectives in the community. For example, one finds a conflict between a more conservative or traditional Muslim perspective, exemplified by Baber, an economics professor, and Fatima, who runs a café, and a more liberal or progressive perspective, embodied by the young hip imam, Amaar and the hijab wearing doctor Rayyan. These find their analogues in the world outside the Muslim community: on the one hand, the conservative perspective portrayed by Fred Tupper, who regularly castigates Muslims in his inflammatory radio show, and

[20] Of course, in the Anglican church, a Bishop would likely be in this role. The writers of the series regularly make such gaffes, probably due to a lack of real familiarity with the communities that they are writing about. These slips, in my opinion, add to the displacing humour of the series.

Joe, the stereotypical redneck; and, on the other hand, the liberal orientation portrayed by Rev. Duncan Magee, the Anglican priest, who accepts the Muslim community, actively helps it out, and mentors its new imam.

Yet these positions on the conservative-liberal spectrum are fluid, and we often find conservative characters acting or speaking consonant with more liberal attitudes, and vice versa. For example, the liberal Amaar acknowledges the desire of the conservative members of the Muslim community to erect a barrier between men and women in the mosque and compromises by allowing a barrier in half the mosque (1.2). The liberal feminist Rayyan is nonetheless amenable to an arranged marriage, to the consternation of her mother (2.17, 2.20). The conservative Baber is actually quite flexible when it comes to his beloved daughter Layla (1.2, 1.5, 2.2). The conservative Fred Tupper is actually only a pretend Islamophobe, since he regularly eats at Fatima's café, goes to a Muslim doctor (Rayyan), and develops a soft spot for Layla, Baber's daughter, when she works for him as an intern (2.17). Even Joe, the redneck, reveals a tender side when Sarah shares the news of her daughter's engagement with him (3.1).

Overall, however, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* favors the liberal end of the spectrum. It thus combats the tendency for the more conservative voices in the Muslim community to capture public attention (Syed 2004; Moghissi et al. 2009:16). It also more closely reflects the prevailing attitudes among Muslim youth in Canada, who "overwhelmingly accept and endorse Canadian values of political and cultural tolerance" (Moghissi et al. 2009:142).

Extremism does come to expression in the series in the fifth episode of the first season, *The Convert*. Marlin, a new convert to Islam, is somewhat over-zealous, to the consternation of the rest of the Muslim community. In this episode, he is presented in sharp contrast with Sarah, who converted long ago when she married Yasir, and has been challenged by her more devout daughter Rayyan to pray all five daily prayers. Caught in the middle is Baber who finds his conservative views uncomfortably mirrored in Marlin's obnoxious behaviour.

This episode establishes some clear boundaries for Muslim identity in Canada. Marlin encapsulates attitudes and practices that disturb the Canadian Muslim identities which the show attempts to construct, and so he must eventually be ousted from the community. His ranting about western decadence and his adoption of Pakistani dress at first pleases the Muslim conservative Baber until Marlin calls into question Baber's control over his daughter Layla. Similarly, Marlin offends by questioning whether the food at Fatima's café is halal, and by suggesting that Rayyan would be an obedient wife. While the concerns that Marlin raises are not necessarily invalid or irrelevant to Muslims living in Canada, it is the rigid and arrogant manner in which he raises them that are portrayed as objectionable.

At the same time, this episode lampoons the pathetic attempts of the other convert, Sarah, to be a better Muslim by regularly praying. While non-Muslim viewers may sympathize with her frantic inability to get it right, practicing Muslims will pick up on her mistakes, such as neglecting *wudhu*, the ritual ablution before prayer, and may also wonder at a depiction of daily prayer as so disruptive. But in the end, Sarah's behaviour is tolerated and she remains part of the Muslim

community, whereas Marlin must be tricked into leaving – even Baber fumes "You can't talk to fanatics!".

What message does the viewer take from all of this? Perhaps it is that to be authentically Canadian and Muslim is to be moderate, somewhere between the extremes of Marlin and Sarah in one's religious observances. Yet Sarah, for all her laxity, and her admission that she is a bad Muslim, is still counted as part of the Muslim community while Marlin is counted out. According to the Canadian Muslim identities constructed in *Little Mosque on the Prairie,* Muslims who do not practice or are infrequent in their religious observances can be included in a Canadian Muslim identity, but extremism, even its nascent form, is suspect.[21] Ironically, Marlin ends up being recycled back into the Christian community, signaling not only the reality of the circulation of people between Muslim and Christian communities, but also subtly hinting that arrogance and extremism find their home also in non-Muslim religious communities. Perhaps the message being conveyed here is that a true convivencia needs to recognize and make room for such people in ways that minimize the harm that they can inflict.

Interfaith Activities

In our modern context, interaction with other religious communities is often understood in terms of some sort of formal events or dialogues. From the highest levels down to the grassroots, Muslim, Christian, Jewish and other religious groups have organized such formal events. They tend to be highly intellectual and theological, and voices have been raised questioning their efficacy. Rather than focusing on a meeting of minds alone, dialogues that focus more on working together for the common good of society seem to be more effective.

Two final segments from *Little Mosque on the Prairie* engage the issue of interfaith dialogue and interaction. In the first episode of the second season, as an experiment Sarah is given the job of reading the community announcements at the mosque – this is a risky step since traditionally this job is always done by a man. Sarah's daughter Rayyan is upset because she knows that she can do a much better job of the announcements than her mother. So the imam appoints her as the mosque's representative to the interfaith council, obviously a more acceptable position for a woman to occupy.

[21] The series thus excludes Muslims who energetically reject the western society within which they are living, understanding it through a paradigm of resistance. Muslims who understand their situation through the other three paradigms identified by Mattson (2003) among Muslim immigrants – embrace, selective engagement, and engagement without compromise – would be included. It is unclear whether *Little Mosque on the Prairie* would include the *Salafists* that Ramji (2008) identified as one of the categories of Canadian Muslim youth in its construction of Canadian Muslim identities. This group, Ramji discovered, while highly critical of aspects of Canadian society, still feels at home in Canada.

Rayyan enthusiastically takes up this new responsibility and eagerly attends her first meeting of the interfaith council. She is chagrined to find that the council, consisting entirely of women, spends all its time deciding who will provide baking for their next event. When Rayyan suggests, "As women, shouldn't we be challenging the status quo", the other women look at her quizzically and the chair responds, "If you don't know how to bake, just say so". Not only does the episode tie into gender dynamics in the mosque and on local interfaith committees, but it also lampoons interfaith activity that never gets to any serious dialogue or social action.

A final example illustrates the kind of interfaith interaction that provides a real basis for convivencia. The women on the interfaith council had it partially right – the sharing of food is an important bridge between communities. Yet this sharing needs to be genuine and not contrived, and so it often happens as the outgrowth of activities in which the religious groups, in this case Muslims and Christians, are already involved.

The tenth episode of the second season aired in December of 2007, a year in which the great Islamic festival of Eid al-Adha happened to coincide closely with Christmas. When, due to a dispute over decorations, no food was prepared for the mosque's big Eid dinner, the Anglican priest shares the food prepared for the annual Anglican "Ring Ding-a Sing-along" choir festival scheduled on the same night. Meanwhile, conservative traditionalist Baber learns to his surprise that it is actually possible for his daughter Layla to participate in a spiritually edifying way in her school's Christmas holiday program without compromising her Muslim beliefs.[22] The circumstance of coinciding religious holidays enables a spontaneous and genuine interfaith interaction to take place between the Muslim and Christian communities.

Making Space for Convivencia

It should be clear by now that I interpret *Little Mosque on the Prairie* as participating in the formation of spaces of convivencia between Muslims and non-Muslims, particularly Christians, in the Canadian context. The series is a work of the imagination, and, as such, it certainly is not representative of all the realities of Muslim life in Canada – for instance, one gets no sense of the large number of Shi'i Muslims in Canada, or of the Ahmadiyyas or Isma'ilis. Nor does it cover all the possible nuances in interfaith relations – there is little mention of Judaism and none of other religions, and the reality of interfaith intermarriage, in which one spouse remains Christian and the other remains Muslim, is not touched. However, the series opens

[22] Playing in the background of these interfaith epiphanies is Cat Stevens singing "Peace Train", itself a multi-layered invocation of the complexity of religious identities and inter-religious interaction. Cat Stevens, as is well known, converted to Islam, changed his name to Yusuf Islam, and shunned his music entirely for some time, until recently coming full circle back to singing and recording under the name Yusuf.

up new capacities for the cultural imagination of Canadians such that Muslims can become a recognizable and accepted part of the Canadian reality. It shows how a religious community can be itself authentically, not *despite* having to interact with non-members in both conflictual and cooperative ways but *because* of such interaction. Most importantly, it allows us to laugh, not really at each other, but with each other across religious boundaries. Such convivencia is very fragile; one need only to look at the experience of al-Andalus or, more recently, Bosnia, to see how rapidly it can collapse. The nurturing of these spaces of convivencia is thus important, and, in this, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* is doing its part.

To return to the story with which I began: which of the three children possesses the authentic ring? The one who can force the others to follow his or her way – the path of conquista? The one who is indifferent to others – coexistencia – or who interacts only for pragmatic reasons – conveniencia? Or does the question itself get transformed in the space of convivencia such that its anxiety is dissipated in mutual deeds of righteousness, and in peals of laughter at our all too human forgetfulness of our mortal limitations. In this space, the final answers are productively deferred, or as the Qur'an expresses it in religious terms: "For to God shall be your return, and God will inform you of all that in which you had differed" (Surah al-Mā'idah 5:48).

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Geert Wilders and the Anti-Muslim Movie Fitna

Göran Larsson

This chapter consists of an analysis of Geert Wilders' controversial anti-"Islamisation" film *Fitna,* and of the polemics that both preceded and followed its release. To do justice to this debate, both Wilders' criticism of Islam and the response it generated will be described, contextualised and assessed. In addition, the chapter will present a more broad discussion about the important role played by new information and communication technologies in the discourse on Muslims in Europe, with both detractors and defenders of Islam increasingly turning from the older print medias to the high-speed, and sometimes volatile, discussion-climate of the Internet (cf., for example, Poohl 2007; Larsson 2007). Clearly this relatively new development must be taken into account in any attempt to comprehend the public debate about Muslims, Islam and religion in European politics and identity formation. This includes not only the documentation and assessment of such online activities as blogs, websites and discussion lists, but also the development of new theoretical and methodological tools for the analysis of the complex relationship between these new media and religion. However, before going into these topics, beginning with my analysis of *Fitna,* it is necessary to make a few preliminary comments about the rise of anti-Muslim politics in Europe, and Geert Wilders' role and significance in this regard.

The research for this paper was kindly funded by *The Linnaeus Centre for Research on Learning, Interaction and Mediated Communication in Contemporary Society* (LinCS), University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

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T. Hoffmann and G. Larsson (eds.), *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies*, Muslims in Global Societies Series 7,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7247-2_9,

Anti-Muslim Politics in Europe

Dutch politician Geert Wilders (b. 1963) is the leader of the *Party for Freedom* (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, hereinafter PVV), a populist political organization that is dedicated to preserving the dominance of Judeo-Christianity and humanism in the Netherlands, meaning that it strongly promotes the assimilation of immigrants into Dutch society and fiercely opposes what it calls the "Islamisation" of Dutch culture. Wilders, of course, is not the first European politician to have made immigration, Islam and Muslims the focus of his activism (cf., for example, Bunzl 2007; Nachmani 2009; Malik 2009). Since the beginning of the 1990s, a growing number of right-leaning politicians, journalists and academics have begun to question the ideal of multiculturalism and to conclude that Islam and Muslims are a problem for Europe (cf. Poohl 2007). And like many of its European counterparts (e.g., France's *Front National*, Italy's *Leganord* and Denmark's *Dansk Folkeparti*), Wilders' *Party for Freedom* has been quite successful in terms of mobilizing public support. As evidence one need only cite the results of the more recent general elections: in 2006, the PVV won 9 out of 150 House of Representative seats, making it the Netherlands' fifth largest party and its third largest opposition party; in 2009, it won 4 out of 25 European Parliament seats, garnering 17 % of the votes and making it the Netherlands' second party[1]; and, in the 2010 general election, it won 24 out of 150 House of Representative seats, garnering 15.5 % of the votes and making the PVV a force to be reckoned with by other Dutch political parties.[2]

The political stance of the PVV involves a severe scepticism of both the European Union and Islam; and its political imperatives can be summarised as a call for the reduction of both—i.e., *less Europe, less Islam.*[3] In keeping with this position, the PVV is naturally opposed to the enlargement of the EU, especially when it comes to the inclusion of countries such as Turkey. Indeed it was Wilders' strong opposition to Turkey's EU membership that drove him to terminate his relationship with the Liberal People's Party in 2004—a party that he had joined in 1998 as a member of parliament (Derlagen 2009).

Wilders, however, has become internationally known not for his opposition to EU enlargement, but rather for his outspoken criticism of Islam and Muslims in Europe. In this regard, Wilders claims that while he himself is not opposed to Muslims per se, he *is* opposed to what he describes as the dangerously anti-democratic, anti-humanistic ideology of Islam, particularly as embodied in the *Qur'ān*. In a *De Volkskrant*

[1] This information is taken from the http://www.parties-and-elections.de/netherlands.html (printed 2009-10-12). General information about the party is also posted on its homepage (http://pvv.nl/) as well as in Wikipedia, see 'Party for Freedom', http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Party_for_Freedom (printed 2009-10-12).

[2] For the election in 2010, see, for example The European election database, http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/country/netherlands/parties.html

[3] For a more detailed presentation of Geert Wilders' political views, see his manifesto *'Klare Wijn'* (published on the PVV homepage on March 31, 2006, retrieved from http://www.pvv.nl/index.php?option=com_deeppockets&task=contShow&id=362&Itemid=22 (printed 2009-10-23)).

article, for example, Wilders describes the *Qur'ān* as a "fascist book" that should be banned and characterises Islam as being at war with Christianity and Western civilisation. He even goes so far as to equate the *Qur'ān* with Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, calling for an end to the "Islamification" of Europe[4]—a call that he sounded during a parliamentary debate on Islamic activism:

> Islam is the Trojan Horse in Europe. If we do not stop Islamification now, Eurabia and Netherabia will just be a matter of time. One century ago, there were approximately 50 Muslims in the Netherlands. Today, there are about 1 million Muslims in this country. Where will it end? We are heading for the end of European and Dutch civilisation as we know it.[5]

Wilders evidently believes that since the *Qur'ān* is presented as the divine and eternally binding word of God, Muslims have not, and will never, subject this scripture to interpretation and/or reform. He thus concludes that there can be no such a thing as a moderate or modern interpretation of the *Qur'ān*.[6] In this scenario, Islam is reduced to a monolithic, static system of religion and Muslims are reduced to robotic followers with no agency or interpretive capacity of their own. Such a conclusion, however, is only made possible by turning a blind eye to the long history of theological interpretations that exists within Islamic traditions and neglecting the long-established social scientific understanding that all interpretations of religion depend upon a number of complex processes, involving macro (social), meso (group) and micro (individual) levels of influence.

Turning to the more populist strain in Wilders' message, he is apparently convinced that the indigenous peoples of the Netherlands and Europe have been severely betrayed by "establishment politicians", who, for their own purposes, are attempting to downplay, hide or misrepresent the way that most Europeans actually feel about Muslims and Islamic religious culture. This sort of negative perspective on Islam finds expression in other European right-of-centre parties as well. And while the matter of how such negativity has arisen and why it continues to grow is a highly complex question, involving a number of historical, political, economic, global and local factors (cf. Vellenga 2008), the 1989–1991 implosion of the USSR has been identified as having been particularly significant, as has Samuel Huntington's 1998 treatise concerning the "clash" between Western and non-Western (especially Islamic) civilisations. According to Huntington, although the post-USSR world no longer lives under the threat of catastrophic war between capitalist/liberal and socialist/communist ideologies, these times are no

[4] Wilder, Geert (2007) 'Genoeg is genoeg: verbied de Koran', *De Volkskrant*, 2007-01-27, retrieved from http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/article451338.ece/Genoeg_is_genoeg_verbied_de_Koran (printed 2009-10-22).

[5] This text is published on the PVV homepage, see 'Mr Wilders contribution to the parliamentary debate on Islamic activism', retrieved from http://www.groepwilders.com/website/details.aspx?ID=44 (printed 2009-10-23).

[6] See, for example, "Mr. Wilders Contribution to the Parliamentary Debate on Islamic Activism", retrieved from http://www.groepwilders.com/website/details.aspx?ID=44 (printed 2009-10-23).

less dangerous and insecure for the West, primarily because of the threat now posed not merely by Islamic fundamentalism, but by Islam itself. Huntington writes:

> The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization, whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. (Huntington 1998:217)

Under the influence of this view, Muslim immigrants that hold Islamic (or "non-Western") attitudes, values and beliefs tend to be lumped together and generally perceived as a disloyal and dangerous class, more or less bent upon the destruction of the Western world. Huntington's critics, however, have been quick to point out that this way of conceiving "the other" carries the potential of creating a new type of racism, based upon cultural instead of racial differences. And to some degree, it appears that this is exactly what has taken place among certain of those involved in the European discourse on the integration of immigrants, mostly representing the populist and right-of-centre political movements mentioned above. For them, culture appears to be the prime determinant of human opinion and action, and the Muslim population appears to be a homogenous group that is fundamentally at odds with and incapable of participating in European civilisation. What this view seems to suffer from most is a lack of nuance: an inability to recognise the vast diversity of beliefs, practices, cultural norms and religious approaches that exist among the Muslim populations of Europe, which differ from individual to individual not only in *kind*, but also, and most importantly, in *degree*—from the many that are wholly secularised to the handful of fanatical few. As a consequence of this monolithic understanding of the Islamic faith, any Muslim that appears intent upon maintaining and expressing Islamic beliefs, traditions and practices tends to be seen by certain sectors as an opponent of Western civilisation and a potential problem. This suspicion of "the other" has, of course, been fuelled and reinforced by the international rise of radical Islamist terrorism, briefly discussed below.

The shock of 9/11 was, understandably, a watershed event that served to foment and further solidify anti-Muslim attitudes throughout the Western world. In Europe, and especially in the Netherlands, such sentiments were additionally inflamed by the rhetoric of populist Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn (1948–2002), who was murdered in 2002 by an animal rights activist. In his book *Tegen de islamisering van onze cultuur: Nederlandse identiteit als fundament* (*Against the Islamisation of Our Culture: The Netherland identity as a fundament*), Fortuyn provides a detailed explanation of his opposition to Islam, which largely presents Muslims as a backward and anti-Western diasporic minority. These sort of opinions were echoed by controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh (1957–2004), who was assassinated in 2004 by Mohammed Bouyeri, a Dutch-Moroccan, in reaction to the film *Submission,* which concerned the mistreatment of Muslim women and its purported justification in the *Qur'ān* (Buruma 2006). The film was developed in collaboration with Somali-born Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali (b. 1969).

Today, as a result of their assassinations, both Fortuyn and van Gogh are viewed by Wilders as heroes and martyrs: courageous figures who sacrificed their lives to protect Western freedoms and values from the onslaught of "Islamification", and who were unafraid to tell the "truth" about Islam, Muslims and immigration. As for

the opposition, those more inclined towards the left-wing of the political spectrum, Wilders generally sees them as naïve multiculturalists, apologists and/or just plain cowards, who prefer to sentimentally close their eyes and remain oblivious to the "reality" of Europe's "plight". He also sees them as being more concerned with pushing their progressive agenda than they are with preserving the democratic values and freedoms of the West. As opposed to this, the PVV portrays itself as the voice of the Dutch (and, perhaps, the European) people: the political party that has understood the danger to ordinary citizens posed by Islamic ideology and the growing presence of Muslims in Europe, "tak[ing] those citizens seriously and com[ing] to their defence".[7] In analysing the content of most populist arguments, however, the understanding of Islam and Muslims that emerges appears to be extremely narrow, rigid and monochromatic. The following section consists of a detailed presentation of the content of Wilders' film.

Fitna on the Internet

In modern standard Arabic, the word *fitna* is used to convey a wide variety of meanings, ranging from riot, discord, strife and sedition to trial, temptation, attractiveness and fascination (Wehr 1979: 815, *s.v.* f-t-n). Judging from his script, Wilders must have had the former group of meanings in mind when he selected this word as the title for his film—i.e., something along the lines of "strife", perhaps, which is synonymous with such words as struggle, conflict and contention. Certainly it is this notion of *struggle* between the so-called Western and Islamic models that has been at the heart of Wilders' message, both before and after the Internet release of his 17-min film, which occurred on March 27th, 2008.[8] This can be ascertained by examining the content of his interviews with various international newspaper and television outlets. In a February 26th, 2009 interview with CNN's Jim Clancy, for example, Wilders explains his opposition to the *Qur'ān* and Islam in clear and unequivocal terms:

> The Quran to me is a fascist book, and so my aim is to attack and expose the real nature of the Quran… The point I really want to make is that the Islamic ideology is [posing] a real threat to our freedom, to our Western societies, to the values in our society that are based on Christianity, on Judaism, on Humanism… I want to open the eyes of the political elite in Europe… that Islam is not just another religion… [It] is more like a totalitarian ideology. It rules all aspects of life and wants to rule all aspects of society. It doesn't want to integrate into society. So I think it needs to be compared to other ideologies like communism or fascism.[9]

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[7] See, for example, 'Mr Wilders contribution to the parliamentary debate on Islamic activism', retrieved from http://www.groepwilders.com/website/details.aspx?ID=44 (printed 2009-10-23).

[8] The free online encyclopedia Wikipedia provides a number of excellent entries regarding *Fitna*, the reaction it received and Geert Wilders himself. See, for example, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fitna_(film) (printed 2009-10-13).

[9] This quotation is taken from a 2008 FOX News interview with Geert Wilders, uploaded on January 25th on YouTube under the heading, "Geert Wilders Speaks: Anti-Koran Film *'Fitna'* (Part 1 of 2)", see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0jUuzdfqfc (last accessed on September 27, 2011).

Later in the same interview, Wilders makes an attempt to differentiate between the threat of Islamic ideology and the Muslim peoples themselves:

> And of course I make a distinction between the people and the ideology. I have nothing against Muslims. I hate nobody. The majority of Muslims in our societies are law abiding people like you and me… Of course, it would be ridiculous to say that all Muslims are terrorists. This is nonsense.[10]

The sincerity of this sentiment, however, is somewhat undercut by the fact that Wilders' continues to unrelentingly oppose further Muslim immigration, as is evident from the following statement, made during a 2010 *Russia Today* interview:

> The majority of the Muslims in our societies are law abiding people, like you, like me. Still I want a stop [to] the immigration of people from Islamic countries because they still bring along a culture that is not ours… And for the Muslims that are in our society, I have a very clear message: [if] you adopt our values and our laws and our constitution… then you are [as] equal as anybody else and we will even help you to integrate; but if you don't, if you cross the red line [to] violence, or wanting to implement the sharia or any other terrible thing, then we either have to put you in jail or expel you out of our countries.[11]

Judging from these and other statements, made both before and after the release of *Fitna,* the primary aim of the film is to demonstrate that the *Qur'ān* expounds a fascistic, anti-democratic ideology that: (1) threatens Western values and freedoms; (2) encourages Islamic extremism, terrorism and violence; and, (3) seeks to rule the world. Due to the sensational, potentially explosive, nature of this sort of polemic, even the film's *impending* release became a global media event that involved contesting voices from around the world, including that of Wilders himself, who repeatedly spoke out in defence of his stance.[12] It is also significant that *Fitna's* eventual release occurred via the Internet, as opposed to one of the more standard media outlets.

Fearing reprisal and the high cost of tightening security, neither the Dutch Press Centre (Niuwspoort) nor Dutch television had been willing to broadcast the film.[13] In addition, Wilders had been asked to reconsider its release by Dutch Prime Minister (at the time) Jan Peter Balkenende, who feared that the film's inflammatory style might place both the Netherlands and worldwide Dutch interests at retaliatory risk.[14]

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[10] This quotation is taken from a FOX News interview with Geert Wilders, uploaded on YouTube on January 25, 2008 under the heading, "Geert Wilders Speaks: Anti-Koran Film *'Fitna'* (Part 1 of 2)", see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0jUuzdfqfc (last accessed on September 27, 2011).

[11] This quotation is taken from a Russia Today interview with Geert Wilders, uploaded on YouTube on March 7, 2010 under the heading, "Geert Wilders Speaks Out on His Radical Views", see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GanFV4b1wvk (last accessed on September 27, 2011).

[12] The free online encyclopedia Wikipedia provides a number of excellent entries on the movie *Fitna*, the reaction it received and Geert Wilders himself. See, for example, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fitna_(film) (printed 2009-10-13).

[13] 'Film Wilders niet in Niewspoort', *DePers.nl*, dinsdag 11 maart 2008 (retrieved from http://www.depers.nl/binnenland/180969/Film-Wilders-niet-in-Nieuwspoort.html, printed 2009-10-13).

[14] 'Dutch TV stations refuse anti-Muslim film', *The Washington Times*, Friday, March 7, 2008 (retrieved from http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/mar/07/dutch-tv-stations-refuse-anti-muslim-film/, printed 2009-10-13).

Wilders' refused this request, considering it to be a sign of Balkenende's cowardly leadership, and also refused the offer of the Dutch Muslim Broadcasting Association (MOA), who had agreed to air the film so long as they would be allowed to preview it and remove possibly illegal content.[15] After declining this offer, Wilders went ahead and released both an English and a Dutch version of his film via a video-sharing Website known as *LiveLeak*, where it remains easily accessible for viewing and/or downloading (at least up to the time of this writing), as it is on any number of BitTorrent, video-sharing and "anti-Muslim" websites (e.g., *Jihad Watch*).

The dramaturgy of the film's first 9.5 min centres around a selection of Quranic passages, each of which is presented with a video clip that purports to show how the ideology of the *Qur'ān* fosters hatred and incites extremism, terrorism and violence. The clips include news footage from such events as 9/11, the Madrid and London bombings and the beheading of Eugene Armstrong, as well as several highly charged representations of Muslims delivering anti-Semitic speeches and proclaiming that Islam will dominate the world. The box below contains a list of the Quranic verses that are used, along with the theme to which each appears to be intentionally related.

Verses as Quoted in *Fitna*	Related Themes
8:60: "Prepare for them whatever force and cavalry ye are able of gathering… to strike terror… to strike terror into the hearts of the enemies of Allah and your enemies."	The Quran inspires gruesome, pitiless acts of terrorism and calls for "death" to the enemies of Islam.
4:56: "Those who have disbelieved our signs, we shall roast them in fire… whenever their skins are cooked to a turn, we shall substitute new skins for them that they may feel the punishment: verily Allah is sublime and wise."	The Quran encourages Jihad and the merciless death of Jews and other non-believers, with Muslim leaders adopting a decidedly Hitlerian rhetorical tone.
47:4: "Therefore, when ye meet the unbelievers, smite at their necks and when ye have caused a bloodbath among them bind a bond firmly on them."	The Quran calls for the death of anyone who even speaks against Islam and inspires savage acts of ultimate retribution against those who do.
4:89: "They but wish that ye should reject faith as they do, and thus be on the same footing as they; so take not friends from their ranks until they flee in the way of Allah."	The Quran encourages Muslims to view Islam as being vastly superior to (and destined to triumph over) all other religions—e.g., Christianity and Judaism; it also calls for the destruction of all apostates and critics of Islam.
8:39: "Fight them until there is no dissension and the religion is entirely Allah's."	The Quran inspires Muslims with the notion that Islam will one day dominate the globe and impose its values, laws and forms of "draconian" justice upon the free and democratic peoples of the world.

[15] Karadarevic, Ana (2008) 'Moslimomroep kandidaat voor Fitna', *DePers.nl*, Zaterdag 22 maart 2008 (retrieved from http://www.depers.nl/binnenland/184963/Moslimomroep-wil-Fitna-uitzenden.html, printed 2009-10-13).

Throughout this first half of the film, the above quotations are supplemented not only with graphic images of death and destruction, but also with the highly inflammatory rhetoric of certain Muslim leaders and clerics. In one such segment, an unnamed cleric declares that, "Allah is happy when non-Muslims are killed", and another exhorts Allah to "count" and "kill" the enemies of Islam "to the last one…" Other segments of Muslim speeches and interviews are then included to indicate that Muslims are anti-Semitic and that both the *Qur'ān* and the *Ḥadīth*-literature support the killing of Jews. In one such segment an inflamed cleric asserts:

> If Allah permits us, oh Nation of Mohammed. Even the stone will say, 'Oh Muslim, A Jew is hiding behind me, come and cut off his head. And we shall cut off his head! By Allah, we shall cut it off! Oh Jews! [here the cleric unsheathes his sword] Allahu Abkar (Allah is great!) Jihad for the sake of Allah. Victory for Allah.

And in another segment, a young Muslim girl is seen answering questions about the Jews as follows:

– What is your name?
– Basmallah
– Basmallah, how old are you?
– Three and a half.
– Are you a Muslim?
– Yes
– Basmallah, are you familiar with the Jews?
– Yes
– Because they are what?
– They're apes and pigs.
– Because they are apes and pigs?
– Who said they are so?
– Allah
– Where did he say this?
– In the Koran

These and other such inflammatory statements are punctuated by crowds holding signs that read: "Be Prepared for the Real Holocaust" and "God Bless Hitler". This is followed by the unsettling remarks of the van Gogh assassin and the gruesome depiction of the Armstrong beheading. Shortly thereafter, snippets from various Muslim talks and speeches are presented in support of the notion that Islam intends to dominate the world and subject its populations to theocratic rule, ending with a young Muslim cleric who is seen convincingly exhorting his congregation as follows:

> You will take over the USA! You will take over the UK! You will take over Europe! You will defeat them all! You will get victory! You will take over Egypt. We trust in Allah!

Part One ends with what appears to be a display of picketing European Muslims holding English placards reading, "Islam will Dominate the World", and, "Freedom Go To Hell".

The film's second part is named *The Netherlands Under the Spell of Islam.* It is approximately 6 min in length and more or less similar in approach, beginning with a composite of Muslim images overlaid by charts indicating the rising number of Muslims living in the Netherlands and Europe. Then comes several interview clips indicating that Muslims are strongly (even violently) opposed to adultery and same-sex relationships as well as audio clips of two apparent sermons, said to have been delivered in Dutch mosques. In these, the speakers are seen calling for the denouncement of worldly concepts such as liberalism and democracy as well as the stoning of women that commit adultery. The last 3 min of the film consist of numerous Dutch photographs, video clips and newspaper headlines—all shown in rapid succession and most subtitled with English translations. The following examples should provide some sense of their content: "Islamist Seek Takeover", "We Do Not Agree With Freedom of Speech…", "Explosive Increase in Honour Killings", "Jihad Lessons in Elementary School", "Almost Half of Young Moroccans Anti-Western", "Mosques Under the Spell of Radical Muslim Group", "Hamas Gathers in Rotterdam", "Imam Legalizes Violence Against Gays". These and other such headlines leave the distinct impression that *Muslims in general* are against freedom of speech, democracy, same-sex relationships and gender equality, that they are seeking to introduce (or impose) Islamic thinking, values, laws and cultural forms, and that their rigidly intolerant presence constitutes a growing threat to the Netherland's peace, security and liberal democratic society. The film ends with a brief video clip of a person reading the *Qur'ān*. As the screen darkens, one hears the sound of a page being ripped from a book (presumably the same *Qur'ān*). This, however, is clarified by the following printed quotation, which draws *Fitna* to its close:

> The sound you heard was a page being removed from the phonebook. For it is not up to me, but to Muslims themselves to tear out the hateful verses from the Quran. Muslims want you to make way for Islam, but Islam does not make way for you. The Government insists that you respect Islam, but Islam has no respect for you. Islam wants to rule, submit and seeks to destroy our western civilization. In 1945, Nazism was defeated in Europe. In 1989, communism was defeated in Europe. Now, the Islamic ideology has to be defeated. Stop Islamisation. Defend our freedom.

The film's final image consists of the lighting of a bomb nestled in the top of a turban—a scenario that bares a striking resemblance to the one found in the provocative Danish cartoons.

While *Fitna's* critique is almost entirely directed at Islam, Muslims and the *Qur'ān*, Wilders, as noted above, is also a strong opponent of "political correctness" and the "naïve" multicultural system that prevails in Europe. He argues, for example, that providing generous, easy to obtain social security and unemployment allotments removes the incentive for immigrants to work for their livelihood and encourages an unproductive and parasitic life of living on the State's (meaning the taxpayer's) largesse. He also thinks that the European countries are currently losing ground to "Islamification" due to their strong focus on integration, as opposed to assimilation. As Wilders sees it, Europe has erred by being far too accommodating—i.e., too willing to adjust and make room for the inclusion of non-European cultures and

values. As such, it is now time to redress the imbalance by emphasising immigrants' responsibilities relative to their new homes, meaning that it is *they* who should adapt to the democratic, humanistic, Judeo-Christian values, rules and laws of Europe, and not the other way around. As Wilders himself puts it in a January, 2008 FOX News interview:

> Stop! It is our country. We are the bosses. It is our values and if you want to come and stay here that is okay, but only if you adhere to our values, to our principles and our law and constitution; and unfortunately that is not happening.[16]

According to Wilders, while it is not yet too late, the clock is ticking and it is "five minutes to midnight" in terms of stopping this "negative" trend and putting a halt to the influx of non-Europeans (and especially Muslims) who are unwilling to adapt to Judeo-Christian, humanistic European culture, which he sees as both the historical foundation and the guarantee for the future survival of Europe.[17] In Part 2 of the FOX News interview referenced above, Wilders strikes a note of pessimism in this regard:

> To be honest, if you take the majority of the politicians in the Netherlands, and unfortunately in many countries in my continent, I'm very pessimistic, in a way, [because] I believe that the political elite is not waking up, is putting their head under the carpet, that the distinction and the gap between the vox populi and the political leaders is only growing more, which will be also a destabilizing factor in many European countries. And as long as the political elite doesn't take the questions and the threats… the problems of large parts of their constituents seriously, I'm very negative.[18]

In closing this section, it should be remembered that Wilders is not the only political figure in Europe to hold these sorts of attitudes and beliefs. The voices of opposition and criticism relative to the concept of "integration" are growing stronger in many European countries (including Sweden), and even include more mainstream political figures such as Germany's Angela Merkel and Denmark's Pia Kjeersgard, both of whom have stressed that immigrants must learn to adapt, conform and assimilate to the dominant culture and that multiculturalism has failed (Weaver 2010).

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[16] This quotation is taken from a 2008 FOX News interview with Geert Wilders, uploaded on January 25th on YouTube under the heading, "Geert Wilders Speaks: Anti-Koran Film *'Fitna'* (Part 1 of 2)", see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0jUuzdfqfc (last accessed on September 27, 2011).

[17] This quotation is taken from a 2009 CNN interview with Geert Wilders, uploaded on YouTube on February 26, 2009 under the heading, "Geert Wilders Interview on CNN about FITNA (HDQUALITY)&FreedomofSpeech",seehttp://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lMkwH9ODCU&hl=sv (last accessed on September 27, 2011). Wilders also voiced this view in a March 31, 2008 *Spiegel Online International* interview with Gerald Traufetter entitled, "SPIEGEL Interview with Dutch Populist Geert Wilders" (printed), see http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,544347,00.html (last accessed on September 27, 2011).

[18] This quotation is taken from a 2008 FOX News interview with Geert Wilders, uploaded on YouTube on January 24, 2008 under the heading, "Geert Wilders Speaks: Muslims & Tolerance (Part 2 of 2)", see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0W6twYw4E8w (last accessed on September 27, 2011).

Reactions to the Film

When the Dutch media first made mention of *Fitna,* the government, the secret police and even NATO's secretary general feared that its release would create both national and international protests that could jeopardise the security of Dutch citizens, placing the Netherlands in a position similar to that of Denmark's after the publication of the "Muhammad cartoons". Consequently, an attempt was made by the State to forestall the release of the film and Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende made a conscious effort to distance both himself and the government from the views expressed therein (Tran 2008). Fear of reprisal upon *Fitna's* release caused a raising of the country's security level, and Dutch embassies in places dominated by Islam and Muslims took the precaution of working out evacuation plans for the protection of Dutch citizens living in those regions.[19] According to Wilders, the response of Balkenende and the Dutch government exemplifies the cowardice, weakness and bankrupt political correctness that prevails among the politicians in the Netherlands and explains why films such as *Fitna* were needed to create an "objective" discussion about Islam.[20] Apart from the negative reaction to the film's release by the Dutch government, anti-*Fitna* protests were organized in countries dominated by Islam and the governments of Indonesia and Pakistan attempted to block public access to video streaming sites such as YouTube, which were likely places for such a film to appear.[21] It was also reported that Geert Wilders had received death threats from a number of international Muslims groups, most particularly from individuals connected with the so-called al-Qaida network.[22]

When the film was finally released, however, the expected storm of protest and retributive action never really occurred and several Muslim leaders even expressed relief after having seen the film, which was being viewed online by a growing number of Internet users:

> It took a bit of time before the movie, released on the Internet Thursday, picked up attention. An hour after its release about 75,000 people had watched the movie, but soon afterward the online traffic numbers jumped to over 700,000 for the Dutch version and 200,000 for the English version.[23]

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[19] 'Dutch Raise Terror Threat Level After Film Stokes Muslim Hostility', Deutsche Welle 07.03.2008 (retrieved from http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,3175532,00.html, printed 2009-10-19).

[20] Dikkman, Anna and Marike Stellinga (2008) 'Wilders: Premier is beroepslafaard', *Elsevier.nl*, Zaterdag 23 februari (retrieved from http://www.elsevier.nl/web/Nieuws/Laatste-24-uur/159395/Wilders-Premier-is-beroepslafaard.htm, printed 2009-10-19).

[21] 'Pakistan blocks YouTube website', *BBC News*, Sunday, 24 February 2008 (retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7261727.stm, printed 2009-10-19).

[22] 'Al Qaeda Fatwa against MP Wilders', retrieved from http://www.nisnews.nl/public/280208_5.htm (printed 2009-10-26).

[23] 'First Reactions to Dutch Anti-Quran Film Are Muted', *FoxNews.com*, Thursday , March 27, 2008 (retrieved from http://www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,342470,00.html, printed 2009-10-19).

Thus, in contrast to what had happened in Demark after the appearance of the "Muhammad cartoons", the Dutch government's management of the affair seems to have successfully prevented the outbreak of violence and the disruption of civil society, both in the Netherlands and abroad. To be sure, numerous Muslims had been upset and angered by Wilders' film; nonetheless, the vast majority understood that the leadership of the Netherlands was against the showing of the film and in utter disagreement with its message. In a press release issued by the Ministry of General Affairs, Prime Minister Balkenende expressed the position of the Dutch government as follows:

> On behalf of the Dutch government, I would like to respond to the online film by Mr Wilders. The film shows images of violent acts and holds Islam and the Koran responsible for them. The government condemns such acts and those who commit them. The film equates Islam with violence. We reject this interpretation. The vast majority of Muslims reject extremism and violence. In fact, the victims are often also Muslims. We therefore regret that Mr Wilders has released this film. We believe it serves no purpose other than to cause offence. But feeling offended must never be used as an excuse for aggression and threats. The government is heartened by the initial restrained reactions of Dutch Muslim organisations. Muslims, Christians and people of other convictions can easily live together in peace. The problem is not religion, but misuse of religion to sow hatred and intolerance. That is why we are calling for respect for everyone's deepest convictions. We are aware of the concerns and the sentiments about this film in the international Muslim community. We have recently spoken with many people at home and abroad to promote mutual understanding. We will continue to follow this course. The Dutch government stands for a society in which freedom and respect go hand in hand. Such a society demands dedication and commitment. We oppose extremism. Anyone who breaks the law is dealt with firmly. Let us solve problems by working together. Let us reach out to others and build confidence and trust. Let us conquer prejudice. We shall surely succeed.[24]

Borrowing a page from the approach taken by Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt in the aftermath of the 2007 publication of Lars Vilkes' so-called "Muhammad as a Dog" drawings, Balkenende entered into open dialogue with the Netherlands' Muslim community and sent a strong message to the greater Muslim world that the Dutch government was not in support of Wilders' point of view, although it respected his right to express it (cf. Larsson and Lindekilde 2009). This position was largely endorsed by the country's political majority, with the Central Jewish Committee condemning the film for its generalized, stereotypical depictions of Muslims as terrorists.[25] Because of these various measures, the situation in the Netherlands remained relatively calm and stable despite the fact that the film's

[24] 'Government's Reaction to Wilders' Film', retrieved from http://www.minaz.nl/english/News/Press_releases_and_news_items/2008/Maart/Government_s_reaction_to_Wilders_film (printed 2009-10-19).

[25] On the political debate that followed in the Netherlands after the release of the film, see, for example, 'Fel Kamerdebat over film Wilders', *Niews.nl*, Dinsdag 01 april 2008; retrieved from http://www.nieuws.nl/505080 (printed 2009-10-21). See also 'Het Centraal Joods Overleg, platform van Joodse organisaties in Nederland, heeft met verontrusting kennis genomen van de inhoud van Fitna, de film van Geert Wilders', issued by the Central Jewish Committee on 28 March 2008; retrieved from http://www.cjo.nl/ (printed 2009-10-21).

release had increased tensions and occasioned protests from numerous Muslim leaders throughout the world.[26]

For example, upon *Fitna's* release, the Muslim Editorial Desk of *Islam Online*, a leading Muslim webportal managed at the time from Egypt and Qatar, created a portal that was dedicated to the provision of information about the film, as well as the controversy and debate that had surrounded its release. This portal contained articles, reviews, video files, interviews and a variety of opinions, with the aim of providing visitors with a wide range of Islamic viewpoints concerning Wilders and his film. The compilation of material contained text that was written both before and after the release, with several contributors focusing on the question of how to respond to Wilders' provocations and defend Islam against his accusations and attacks.[27] Among these was the voice of Sheikh al-Qaradawi, who called upon Islamic scholars to produce learned refutations that according to his understanding clarify Islam's intentions and demonstrate that Wilders' conclusions are wrong. He also suggested that these refutations be translated into several different languages and made available to both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Other of al-Qaradawi's suggestions were for Muslims to: (1) pressure governments to take a stand against discrimination and hateful speech; (2) use media as well as film to counter Wilders' perspective and show that he presents a distorted image of Islam and the *Qur'ān*; and, (3) boycott products that originate from countries that permit their citizens to berate or condemn Islam. He also noted that the best way to avoid violent national and international protests was for the government to promptly express regret over Wilders' film and explain that its release could not be prevented due to the matter of freedom of speech. But *Islam Online* was not the only media that contained responses to Wilders' film.

For example, on March 28th, 2008—just 1 day after *Fitna's* Internet release—the *Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe* issued an official statement, containing the following conclusions and recommendations about the film:

1. Condemn, in the strongest of terms, this clear attempt to target Islam and its sanctities, and which abuses the values of tolerance on which modern Europe is established.
2. We value and applaud the position adopted by the Dutch government, in rejecting this naked aggression, and call upon European politicians to act responsibly to put an end to this wave of hatred and animosity, which has been aimed at Muslims in particular.
3. We call upon wise and responsible people in European societies to stand up to those who abuse the freedom of expression, treating it as a vehicle of convenience to publicize and promote their message of hate.

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[26] For a general overview of the international conflicts and protests that followed the release of *Fitna* see, 'International Reactions to Fitna'; retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_reaction_to_Fitna (printed 2009-10-21).

[27] See 'Fitna Movie: Releasing Hatred & Testing Wisdom', retrieved from http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1203758483235&pagename=Zone-English-Euro_Muslims%2FEMELayout.

4. Furthermore, we call upon Muslims to adopt a wise position in defending their religion, and not be provoked into the reaction that serves the aims of these malicious few, and to follow a civilized approach, that embodies the tolerance of Islam, in confronting this campaign.
5. We emphasize that we are partners in all wise initiatives, and shall support all responsible actions, aimed at putting an end to this tide of rising hatred against Muslims, expressing our cherishing of all that achieves peaceful coexistence between the adherents of diverse cultures and religions.[28]

In keeping with the above suggestion of al-Qaradawi, a number of individuals have attempted to produce anti-*Fitna* films and/or video statements that they have then uploaded on streaming sites such as *YouTube* and *LiveLeak*. An example is *de Tegenfilm,* produced by Ersin Kiris (a Dutch Muslim of Turkish origin) and Vincent van der Lem (a self-professed Dutch atheist). Using similar rhetorical and multimedia devises, their aim was to demonstrate that it is actually Wilders who is the threat to European and Dutch democracy, and that his views on Islam are not representative of those held by most Europeans. In an *Islam Online* interview they explain that their film "seeks the borders of freedom of expression and attacks Wilders with his own weapons."[29] There are some examples of how both Muslims and non-Muslims have used the latest information and communication technologies in an attempt to refute and criticise Wilders' message.

Some Concluding Remarks

The online release of *Fitna* provides an important example of how a non-mainstream political figure can employ the latest Internet and communications technologies to convey a particular perspective to a global audience. The film also provides an illustration of how the modern media is being currently used to question the multicultural, pluralistic model that has dominated several European countries throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (e.g., Britain, the Netherlands and, beginning in the 1970s, the Nordic countries). In the case of *Fitna*, the Internet has made it possible for a relatively small group of pro-assimilation proponents to effectively produce and globally disseminate a low-budget film challenging Europe's established political order and calling instead for a restoration of what Ian Buruma has referred to as "the glorious past".

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[28] 'Statement by the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe, regarding the film by the leader of the Dutch Freedom party aimed at defaming the Noble Quran', retrieved from http://www.euro-muslim.com/ (printed 2010-10-18).

[29] Devre, Gulsen (without year) 'A Counter Movie Against Wilders", retrieved from http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1203758395455&pagename=Zone-English-Euro_Muslims%2FEMELayout (printed 2009-10-23). More information about this movie can also be found on http://tegenfilm.hyves.nl/address/ and at this site it is also possible to watch the movie in Dutch.

Here it must be emphasised that those who promote "nostalgia for the past" (to use Buruma's analytical phrase) can be found on the extreme sides of both the Muslim and the Western "divide" that has been discussed in this chapter. In other words, it appears that both the proponents of European populism and Islamist radicalism are today vigorously attempting to call forth and implement an idealized version of a bygone time, whether it be the period before the more recent migrations of Muslims to Europe or the period in which the Prophet walked the earth. No matter what we think or how we position ourselves, it is evident that this sort of naïve, rose-coloured nostalgia has little value when it comes to solving the contemporary challenges that currently face European societies.

Judging strictly from its content, the film *Fitna* pays little heed to the overarching premises, empirical discoveries and historical understandings that have informed the academic study of religions. As a consequence, the narrow, fanatical and violent portrait that it paints of Islam, its scripture and its followers appears to be highly selective, stereotypical and devoid of subtlety and nuance. It should here also be mentioned that certain segments of the Muslim population view "the other" in similarly highly selective and stereotypical ways, as do many on the progressive, multicultural and politically correct side of the equation, who tend to paint an oversimplified and utterly invalidating portrait of the "right-wing, xenophobic Islamophobes" that they fiercely oppose. In my view, such narrow, uninformed portrayals of the "other", no matter where they originate from or who they are directed against, contribute little in terms of resolving Europe's current sociocultural-political crisis and forging a positive way forward.

It is here important to highlight an interesting bit of irony in this regard: while, on the one hand, *Fitna* characterizes Islam (and the *Qur'ān*) as being insightful of violence, hatred and extreme reaction, this depiction has been more or less contradicted by the measured responses of various online Muslim forums, which have called for peaceful reactions and protests against the film, as well as various Muslim leaders, who successfully worked to calm reactions throughout the greater Muslim world. It should also be mentioned that this peaceful response was greatly enabled by the strong opposition of the Dutch parliament and Prime Minster to both the content and the release of the film. In my view, this example of cooperation and sensitivity could potentially serve as a model for the future. While there is clearly no excuse for the violence and loss of life that resulted internationally from Muslim reactions to the Danish cartoons, there is equally no excuse for deliberately insightful deeds that lack a basic sensitivity to the beliefs and feelings of a significant segment of today's European family.

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Friend or Foe? Contemporary Debates on Islam and Muslim Immigrants Among Swedish Identitarians

Niklas Bernsand

Swedish debates on immigration, integration policies and cultural diversity have during the last few years grown increasingly salient, and simultaneously gone through important changes. This reflects important moments in Swedish and Scandinavian recent political and social history that have transformed the context of those debates, such as the entrance into the Swedish parliament of the anti-immigrationist Sweden Democrats in September 2010 and the Breivik terrorist attack on a Social Democratic youth camp in Norway in 2011 – although the latter event a few years later seem to have had much less effect on the public debates than what was expected by many observers immediately after the massacre. A crucial context for the debates is the historically high level of immigration that simultaneously has characterised Swedish society, both in terms of an increase in the influx of migrant workers from outside of the EU as a consequence of the liberalisation of the legislation on work migration, and of the continuously large-scale influx of asylum seekers and close relatives to persons already living in Sweden. Not the least the latter types of immigration have during 2012 provoked intense debates in national news media as well as in mainstream local politics in several towns and municipalities. As support for Sweden Democrats in opinion polls increased rapidly in late 2012, surveys showed that immigration-related issues have become perceived as increasingly salient by Swedish citizens. A further factor making Swedish debates on migration and cultural diversity in 2012–2013 different from those debates in 2009 is the growing importance and indeed large-scale communicational breakthrough of Internet-based news media taking a highly critical stance to official immigration policies and to the coverage of immigration-related issues in traditional media outlets.

Since this chapter focuses on ideological debates on Islam and Muslim immigration on a Swedish radical right-wing blog portal, the communicational technologies that have opened up for new and increasingly salient media outlets challenging the

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T. Hoffmann and G. Larsson (eds.), *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies*, Muslims in Global Societies Series 7,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7247-2_10,

opinion-shaping predominance of traditional news media are crucial. Among the most successful Swedish web-based media outlets are sites for news and current events that seek to challenge the traditional media in political, cultural and ideological terms, since "old" media channels are looked upon as biased in terms of issues, frames and perspectives. The rapid emergence of first and foremost anti-immigrationist news sites, blogs and communities with various focus, political affiliation and popularity has during the 2000s enabled both right-wing populists like the Sweden Democrats and various currents of right-wing radicals to reach out to a much wider audience than what was possible only a decade ago. Highly profiled and controversial news sites such as the two most popular and frequently visited, avpixlat.info or friatider.se focus – although with important differences between themselves each other – on what they see as a harmful politically correct hegemony on issues such as immigration, feminism, "cultural marxism", and, at least in the case of avpixlat.info, Islam and Muslim immigration. These subjects are also widely and critically discussed, often anonymously, on popular debate forums, most prominently flashback.info, where adherents of competing anti-immigrationist ideas meet, transform and spread. The growing importance of new media focusing on anti-immigrationist themes was arguably crucial for the entering into parliament of the Sweden Democrats in the 2010 elections.

In the context of and in interplay with political and social change and economic crisis, Swedish debates on immigration and cultural diversity in the last few years have become more pluralistic, providing citizens with alternative sources of information and interpretations. The other side to this is that debates have also become increasingly polarised. As debates between pro- and anti-immigrationist positions are concerned, some would even go as far as to argue that what we see in Sweden in fact are parallel subjective realities (Bosetta 2012) – the starting points for participants often differ so widely that it is difficult to achieve a reasoned debate.

Also the interaction between e.g. pro-immigrationist adherents of normative multiculturalism and its liberal critics on cultural recognition and individual autonomy are often highly politically and morally charged. Some researchers have argued that mainstream Swedish political and media discourse on immigration and cultural diversity long remained inside the framework of a hegemonic multiculturalism (Carlbom 2003), while others have pointed to the comparatively low level of actual institutionalisation in Swedish society of multiculturalist policies (e.g. Johansson Heinö 2012; see Triandafyllidou et al. for a comparative discussion on policies in various European countries). Johansson Heinö convincingly argues that tolerant Swedish political and media discourse celebrating cultural diversity and the cultural contributions of immigrants to Swedish society and fighting to keep xenophobic rhetorics out of public space to a large extent has masked expectations that immigrants eventually will succumb to progressive and modern Swedish norms and values. In this view, the Swedish self-image of tolerance while not being outright false is a serious distortion that prevents a better understanding of the changes Swedish society is going through. For Hellström (2010) the 'moral panic' in the political and media fields that followed the Sweden Democrats entrance into parliament resulted from the party's perceived challenge to this self-image. The increased

polarisation and partial fragmentation of the debates might be seen as a reflection of the difficulties of upholding such a self-image in an increasingly complex and culturally diverse society.

This chapter focuses on two debates on Islam and Muslim immigration on the identitarian blog portal *motpol.nu* that belongs to the radical right blogosphere. The blog portal, which will be presented in detail below, does not and did not count among the most frequently visited right-wing web sites, but has rather sought to perform the role of a think tank and source of ideological inspiration for a segment of the Swedish radical right. The debates between prominent bloggers of this environment that are studied in this chapter took place in 2009 – before the important political events mentioned above, and at an earlier stage of the rise of alternative media.

Islam and Muslim Immigration in Sweden

Depending on different definitional approaches, estimates of the number of Muslims in Sweden vary from approximately 110,000 members of officially recognised Islamic communities (www.sst.a.se/statistik.htm) to maybe 400,000 individuals from predominantly Muslim countries, in a general population of about 9.5 million. The number of Muslims (by any definition) in Sweden has significantly increased since immigration of asylum seekers and their relatives to Sweden in the 1990s and the 2000s has been largely provoked by the wars and turbulence in the Balkans, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan. In the context of increased attention to Islam and Muslim immigrants in the wake of the attacks of 9/11 2001 and the "wars on terror" that have since then been fought by various regimes, this influx of Muslims has triggered at times intensive debates on the present state and future outlook of Swedish society. Notably, as in many European countries a critical stance towards what are deemed to be illiberal and radical strands of Islam has become increasingly present in public debates. Offering a critique of certain religious practices and interpretations deemed inacceptable for individuals being raised in a modern and secularised society, this liberal tendency argues that normative multiculturalism's encouraging of stable collective identities for immigrant communities blocks integration of Muslims into Swedish society.

This chapter, though, focuses on ideological developments among the anti-immigrationist currents. Among Swedish radical rightists debates on Islam and Muslims have revealed sharp divisions in crucial ideological matters pertaining to national identity and the state of modern Swedish culture. While for some nationalists, most notably centred around the Sweden Democrats and web sites such as avpixlat.info, Islam represents the ultimate Other and is perceived as a key threat to Swedish culture and society, other currents inspired by European identitarian and traditionalist thought sometimes find communalities with conservative Islamic strands of thought in their critique of key aspects of modern Swedish and Western society. Our examination is specifically devoted to the views on Islam and Muslim immigrants developed

among Swedish identitarians, adherents of a far right current with ideological ties to the French and wider European New Right (see Wegierski 1993–1994).

In this chapter we will throw light on internal debates among identitarians on Islam and Muslim immigrants. Seeing the ethnic heritage of the indigenous European peoples as a fundamental value and a key to spiritual renovation, European identitarians are critical to non-European immigration. Preferring ethnopluralism to assimilation, their views differ, however, on the future of non-European immigrant communities in Europe. Some, like Alain de Benoist, argues that for the foreseeable future most immigrants are in Europe to stay and advocate a communitarian solution of various native and non-assimilating immigrant communities living side by side, each respecting the others 'right to difference' (e.g. de Benoist 2003). Others, like Guillaume Faye, call for a European 'reconquista' liberating Europe first and foremost from what he sees as an 'Islamic colonisation' by immigrants from Muslim countries (Faye 2003). Against this background, how do Swedish identitarians conceptually deal with the increased presence of Muslim immigrants in Sweden? Since identitarianism is a transnational phenomenon we will look into how Swedish identitarian discourse on these questions is affected by the debates within the international New Right. Simultaneously, identitarians belong to an intellectual tradition inspired by traditionalist skepticism to the modern world, which in contemporary conditions translates into a critique of what is perceived as a homogenising global capitalism recognising only material values and attacking native traditions under the banners of individual freedom, self-expression and consumption. How does the defence of specific traditions facing pressures from a late modern Swedish society that identitarians fundamentally detest affect their attitudes to the presence of large-scale immigrant communities in Sweden? In such a context, what is the stand of Swedish identitarians in relation to the expressed concern of some liberals and populist anti-immigrationists about the influence of conservative or 'fundamentalist' Islamic currents among Muslim immigrant groups?

The Motpol Blogs

Motpol ('opposite pole') is a blog portal where identitarian bloggers seek to provide an alternative forum for 'cultural struggle, civic education and public debate' among intellectuals proclaiming to defend Nordic traditions and culture. Motpol.nu was set up as part of a network of websites tied to the now defunct Nordiska Förbundet (Nordic Alliance), a self-described civic educational society that sought 'to uphold the interests of Northerners and secure their survival'.[1] Nordiska Förbundet grew out of a network of activists engaged in the white power music scene in the early

[1] http://www.nordiskaforbundet.se/artikel.asp?aID=1 (April 28th 2010). Although the website is now defunct, the YouTube channel of Nordiska Förbundet is still accessible at http://www.youtube.com/user/Nordiskaforbundet).

1990s, and later came to gather a wider community involved in popularising an identitarian agenda (Wåg 2010). Apart from the blogs at motpol.nu, the network included sites such as the wiki metapedia.org ('an alternative encyclopaedia on culture, philosophy, science and politics') and the broader web portal and forum Nordisk.nu which in 2010 had more than 19,000 registered users (Wåg 2010: 97). Those sites, including motpol.nu, are still actively updated in 2013 even though Nordiska Förbundet ceased its activities in 2010. Tied to the network was also Nordiska Förlaget (The Nordic Publishing House), described as 'the largest retailer and producer of ethnically conscious literature and music in the Nordic countries' (http://en.metapedia.org/wiki/Nordiska_forbundet), which is now defunct, but has been replaced by arktos.com.

Notably, a view of the existence of common interests between ethnically conscious Swedes and pious Muslims revolting against a hedonist and consumerist late modern Swedish culture has been promoted by the self-described 'Indo-European pagan, identitarian traditionalist and right-wing radical' Motpol blogger Oskorei (oskorei.motpol.nu). Arguably the most important Motpol blog, Oskorei is a widely quoted source of inspiration for far rightists seeking an arena for discussing matters of identity and ideology in connections with current political, economical, cultural and intellectual trends. The positions taken by Oskorei on Islam in two specific debates in 2009 shaping attitudes to Islam and Muslim on motpol.nu stirred controversy among fellow identitarian bloggers and nationalists of other persuasions, and triggered multi-faceted and contradictory discussions.

This chapter mainly draws on material published on motpol.nu, including blog posts of varying length and elaboration and comments to the blog posts made by fellow bloggers or other visitors. Although we have no possibility to study the reception of ideas expressed, we focus on material available to a wider audience having a potential impact on the minds of readers. It is important in this regard to take comments to blog posts into account, since readers there can express their sympathy or disagreement with the particular points of a blog post, which in our case makes them a good additional source for the study of differing positions on Islam and Muslim immigrants on the portal. Since commenting on debates on current issues in the mainstream media can be considered a particular feature of identitarian metapolitics we also take into account the intertextual links between blog posts on motpol.nu and the wider discussions on Islam and immigration in mainstream newspapers, journals and news sites. While positions on Islam expressed on the various Motpol blogs are rooted in interpretations of different intellectual currents and traditions, they are often shaped and elaborated in critical analyses of mainstream media and political discourse, a strategy which forms part of a metapolitical struggle to achieve what Silverstein and Urban (1996: 11) call authoritative entextualisation, i.e. 'to fix certain metadiscursive perspectives on texts and discursive practices' with the ultimate goal of achieving 'the acceptance of a metadiscourse by a community'. Particular blog posts therefore must be interpreted in this wider framework of intertextual references, which limits the empirical scope of this study to a smaller number of important posts.

While the blogs forming the backbone of motpol.nu have been active for several years, new blogs are sometimes added while old ones disappear. The individual, in most cases anonymous[2] Motpol bloggers do not represent a fully coherent and consistent belief system shared to an equal extent by all bloggers. One could perhaps say that bloggers share many similarities in formulating their critique, but show more internal variation in formulating a positive program. While some notions are shared by all, or virtually all, bloggers, other notions are shared by some bloggers but rejected or not emphasised by others. Anti-Semitic themes might occur on a few Motpol blogs, relating to support for the Palestinian cause, but this is occasionally mixed up with Holocaust denial and theories of Jewish media and financial control. It should be emphasised that this is not a common theme characteristic of all Motpol identitarians. A further category of notions can be regarded as idiosyncratic, i.e. expressed only by a single blogger. Among the latter were in 2009 e.g. the conservative Catholicism of Jonas de Geer and the Orthodox Christianity of FAS.

The Influence from the French New Right

Although the ideological content of the Motpol blogs cannot be deduced from a single source of influence, many of their key common notions and themes can be traced to the ideas of the French New Right that emerged in 1968 with the establishment of the think tank GRECE (*Groupement de Recherche et d'Etudes pour la Civilisation Européenne*) under the intellectual leadership of Alain de Benoist (1943–).[3] While some of these notions originally stem from thinkers from the French New Right, much older currents, such as the interest in the Indo-European cultural heritage as a source of spiritual renovation, are inspired by the elaborations of these ideas by *Grécistes* in the 1970s and 1980s.[4]

[2] Anonymity has been chosen partly because of perceived difficulties in combining identitarian blogging with pursuing a professional career, and partly because of fears for personal security. In May 2010 many Motpol bloggers claimed to have received letters threatening to reveal their identities to Anti-Fascist Action. As a result, two previously anonymous bloggers decided to publish their real names on their blogs, while one blogger, FAS, decided to close down his blog because of the threats (see Motpolsredaktionen 2010).

[3] One should be aware that the term "the new right" was coined by French mainstream press in the late 1970s, and is not particularly well received by de Benoist, who grudgingly accepts this denomination as *fait accompli*, and rather seeks to dispend with the whole notion of 'left' and 'right' politics as an obsolete artefact of modernity.

[4] Like de Benoist and the *Grécistes*, Oskorei draws frequently on Dumezil and the idea of a three-partite division in Indo-European culture between sages, warriors and producers. Since this, however, is not the place for an elaborate discussion of the significance and interpretations of Indo-Europeanism on motpol.nu, see Lundquist (2010: 133–138) for a brief account of Oskorei's use of these terms.

A basic notion inherited from the French New Right is *metapolitics*, which for de Benoist implies an appropriation of the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony in order to launch a 'cultural revolution from the right'. Metapolitics thus involves influencing society in a long-term perspective by the diffusion of ideas and values. The term metapolitics is frequently used on Motpol (see e.g. FAS: *Metapolitik 2010*), although sometimes the Swedish word *folkbildning* (civic education), associated with the large twentieth century educational projects of the worker's movements is preferred. Metapolitics embrace all activities on Motpol and can indeed be seen as its main *raison d'etre*. It is thus no coincidence that the identitarian equivalent of Wikipedia is called Metapedia.

Another important common feature of French and Swedish identitarians is their identificational eco-system by which identitarians diverge considerably from nationalists in a more traditional sense. While the significance of Swedish and Nordic ethnic identities is emphasised, they are placed in the framework of a wider (Indo)European heritage, which is also valued as an authentic larger circle of identities for Northerners. Oskorei thus rather refers to himself as ethnically conscious (*etniskt medveten*) than as a Swedish nationalist, since nationalism is viewed as too dependent on the modern concept of the nation-state. This preference is clearly influenced by de Benoist's critique of Jacobinism, in which the nation-state is regarded as an artefact of modernity guilty of eradicating organic regional cultures in the name of national uniformity and progress. de Benoist's identificational system therefore tends to put (Indo)European, regional and local identities above national identities (*European Son. An Interview with Alain de Benoist* 2005). While Swedish identitarians and nationalists share a common ground in the critique of immigration and the defence of what is seen as the country's autochthonous culture, the former camp cannot be reduced to being just a sub-category of the latter.

Another important common theme in Motpol discourse is the critique of modern society, a critique which profoundly influences identitarian discourse on Islam and Muslim immigrants. Motpol identitarians here are certainly not influenced by a single ideological tradition, but draw inspiration from several sources, e.g. traditionalist thinkers such as Julius Evola (1898–1974), identitarians such as de Benoist, communitarians such as Christopher Lasch (1932–1994) and paleo-conservatives such as Paul Gottfried (1941–). At the centre of the critique is a neo-liberal exploitative economic order that in the framework of globalisation seeks to subjugate all bearers of authentic traditions and erase collective loyalties and values standing between individuals and various markets (financial markets, labour markets, sexual and personal relations markets, identity markets etc.). As globalisation and the breakdown of traditional collective ties convert citizens into consumerists and individualists incapable of and uninterested in collective resistance, a politically correct, 'therapeutic' form of liberalism supervised by an emergent new class controls political discourse and the formation of opinions. Identitarians thus conceptualise power as divided between beneficiaries of neo-liberal economic policies and the civil servants administrating state-supported identity politics encouraged by media professionals. For many identitarians, this is the main threat to the common cultural heritage, and identitarian metapolitics

is conceived of as a form of resistance to this late modern state of society and culture (see e.g. the interview with Oskorei by Swedish (then) Islamist writer Mohamed Omar (2009b)).

The Right to Difference: Identitarian Critique of Immigration and Multiculturalism

In the Swedish identitarian framework, discourse on immigration should be seen in the light of its general critique of contemporary society, but it is also influenced by ethnopluralism, a notion introduced by the German historian and New Rightist Henning Eichberg (1942–), defined on Metapedia as "an anti-racist and political counterpoint to multiculturalism's efforts to eradicate the differences between peoples and cultures and standardise all ethnic groups". With obvious inspiration from ecologist preservation discourse, identitarians see the various ethnic groups as guarantors of human cultural diversity and thus promote "the right to continuous existence and preservation of every ethnic group", including "the right to a territory, land, area or region which can be traditionally claimed by the respective peoples". It is further argued that "every single people is believed to be the best experts and bearers of its own culture and various traditions" (all quotes from http://sv.metapedia.org/wiki/Etnopluralism).

French identitarian ethnopluralism, developed around the concepts of 'the cause of the peoples' and 'the right to difference', can be considered a major influence on Swedish identitarians, and disagreements that emerged in the late 1980s and the 1990s between leading French New Rightists on how to come to terms with the large-scale presence of non-European immigrants in European countries have had repercussions for the debates on Muslim immigrants on motpol.nu. Ethnopluralism is controversial, although for different reasons, both among European New Rightists and their critics. The ethnopluralism of the French New Right took form as *Gréciste* thinking on ethnicity and ethnic relations in the 1970s moved from biological racism to an emphasis on the importance of preserving cultural differences, just as de Benoist developed from advocating a French Algeria in the 1960s to supporting the anti-colonial struggle in the 1970s (Taguieff 1993–1994). In a famous and frequently quoted critique of the *Gréciste* notion of the right to difference, liberal French thinker Pierre-André Taguieff (1946–) has argued that it amounts to a form of differentiational or cultural racism, since "racism can be expressed both in the rejection and in the praise of difference, in terms of races or culture, intellect, tradition and belief. But it is fundamentally mixophobic" (Taguieff 1993–1994: 124).[5]

[5] Taguieff's article was originally published in French in 1987. De Benoist rejects this criticism arguing that "racism based on culture rather than biology would be racism without races. And without any commitment to a hierarchical view of cultures, there would be no racism (*Three interviews with Alain de Benoist* 1993–1994: 195).

Taguieff further argued that the right to difference, equally applied to the native European populations and immigrant groups, was a way of rendering the difference between us and them absolute as "the basis for the prescription: exclusion/expulsion" (Taguieff 1993–1994: 124). In other words, for Taguieff the right to difference was a way of justifying the separation of ethno-cultural groups and the future cleansing of European countries of recently arrived immigrant populations on the basis not of social Darwinist racism but of a non-hierarchical cult of absolute differences between communities.

Taguieff's argument about the identitarian right to difference as a soft-spoken form of ethnic exclusion and ultimately expulsion of foreigners corresponds with the views of Guillaume Faye (1949–), a former key thinker of GRECE that broke with the group in the late 1980s not the least because of disagreements about issues of immigration, but less obviously so in the case of de Benoist. A look into de Benoist's ideas on immigration, the right to difference and ethnic relations in contemporary Europe expressed in interviews and texts from between the early 1990s to this day show that de Benoist, setting himself apart from some former *Gréciste* colleagues, argues that European identities are threatened not mainly by immigrants but by global processes of eradication of difference evident in individualism, consumerism and global mass culture leading to the breaking up of social ties (de Benoist 2003: 106).[6] Europeans are thus killing their own cultures by succumbing to a global levelling of differences. He further expresses his concern about generalisations about Islam and the use of immigrants as scapegoats in populist discourse profiting from the native population's loss of orientation. This said, de Benoist sees immigration as a negative by-product of global capitalism that is bad for the receiving countries threatened with social unrest and even worse for the immigrants who risk being uprooted and lose their identities. Immigration should therefore be slowed down, since resettling large numbers of people from the Third World to Europe does not solve the problems lying behind the migration flows (de Benoist 2003: 127). On the other hand, de Benoist argues that the bulk of the immigrants at least for the foreseeable future will stay in Europe, and that Europeans should stay away from fantasies of mass expulsions. Safeguarding both the native European populations and the immigrants' right to difference here means that the French model of assimilation should be avoided to the benefit of a rather vaguely defined communitarian approach where immigrant communities have the right to keep their distinct way of life while accepting a common law (see *Three Interviews with Alain de Benoist* 1993–1994; *The Sunic Journal: Interview with Alain de Benoist* 2010). When pressed

[6] See interviews made for French *Le Monde*, the American journal for critical thought *Telos*, the German New Right journal *Junge Freiheit* (all included in *Three Interviews with Alain de Benoist* (1993–1994), the Danish conservative journal *NOMOS* (Interview med Alain de Benoist 2005) the Far Right American journal The Occidental Quarterly (2005) and most recently the Croatian-American New Rightist Tomislav Sunic's radio show on Voice of Reason Broadcast Network (*The Sunic Journal: Interview with Alain de Benoist* 2010). For a collection of de Benoist own writings on the issue see de Benoist (2003).

on the issue of intercultural contacts between natives and immigrants (termed as 'race mixing') in a radio interview for Croatian-American New Rightist Tomislav Sunic, de Benoist adds that he is not in favour of such mixing, and that he would have preferred a Europe without such a large-scale presence of immigrants, but that a communitarian right to difference approach is the most suitable for the time being (*The Sunic Journal: Interview with Alain de Benoist* 2010).

For other New Rightist the right to difference approach have grown increasingly controversial, since it is considered to have become inseparable from mainstream multiculturalism (see e.g. American New Rightist Michael O'Meara (2004: 77, 2005), who explicitly targets de Benoist on this matter). In an article from 2003 in the French identitarian journal *Terre et Peuple*, Faye wrote that ethnopluralism and the concept of a right to difference was as a failed strategy for making it possible to argue for the preservation of European identities without accusations of racism, and that the concept no longer is relevant for Europe "threatened, as it is, by a massive non-European invasion and by a conquering Islam abetted by our ethno-masochistic elites" (Faye 2003). Faye now rather prefers to emphasise the *capacity* for difference, and argues for 'the combat of the peoples' rather than 'the cause of the peoples'. He further warns, clearly referring to de Benoist, about ethnopluralism leading to "an ethnic communitarianism – sanctioning the existence of non-European enclaves in our lands", enclaves whose population will grow demographically more significant (Faye 2003). Faye is famous for his fiery warnings about the dangers of Islam and Muslim immigrants for European identities, a question were he takes an opposite view to de Benoist's and favours a European '*reconquista*' driving out non-European immigrants as Moors and Jews were expelled from Spain in the late fifteenth century (see e.g. Faye 2003).

Rather than forming a coherent and soft-spoken, tactically masked expulsionism, New Right thinking on ethnopluralism in connection with non-European immigrants can thus be said to have developed into two positions: a communitarian, identified with de Benoist, and an expulsionist, although by no means masked, identified with Faye.

Repercussions of the International New Right Debates Among Swedish Identitarians

Repercussions of this debate among international New Rightists are detectable in the discourse of Swedish identitarians. The small newspaper *Folkets Nyheter*, connected to Nordiska Förbundet, in 2007 published translations to Swedish of both the above-mentioned article by Faye (2003) and an interview with de Benoist for *Terre et Peuple*, as well as a piece by O'Meara commenting on the split between the French identitarians. The conflict has also been discussed on motpol.nu, e.g. by Oskorei (2007a, b), on the defunct blog Ratatosk (2007), and by Solguru (2008). Motpol bloggers commenting on the conflict within the New Right do not seem to make a definite choice, drawing on what they see as valuable contributions of

identitarians on both sides. Solguru, an identitarian blogger drawing on "perennialism and tradition", in a theoretical post about the 'principles and objections' to ethnopluralism argues, without explicitly mentioning Faye, that de Benoist has 'abandoned the thought of an exclusively European Europe and began to propose a kind of segregation theory that recognises the massive non-European immigration that already has taken place as a "fact"' (Solguru 2008). Solguru understands de Benoist's position as a way of 'developing the identity of his own people within the same state', which he considers to be 'exactly what one has to do until one can deal with the situation in a serious matter' (Solguru 2008).

Neo-paganist blogger Ratatosk rather came out in favour of Faye's reconquista as "both realistic and necessary", while recognising de Benoist's view that the main problem is 'the loss of identity of the European peoples', without which 'neither mass immigration nor the widespread ethnic mixing and cultural dissolution would have been able to occur' (Ratatosk 2007). Oskorei, in a blog post on de Benoist's interview for the American New Rightist journal *The Occidental Quarterly*, interprets the latter's view of immigration as 'a fact one cannot fully influence', which for Oskorei is a conclusion with which 'one can disagree" (Oskorei 2007b). He seeks to explain de Benoist's position with the author's choice of staying away from formal politics, and quotes approvingly O'Meara's critique of de Benoist in that regard. In an answer to a comment to the blog post from a reader, Oskorei asserts that O'Meara's position on immigrant populations in European countries is closer to him than de Benoist's, and that the latter's view should be regarded as "a temporary solution limiting the effects of mass immigration for the moment" (Oskorei 2007b). He argues that both positions are useful, but in his view for tactical reasons, since O'Meara is 'more read by activists, while de Benoist not the least reaches the politically correct who through him can become receptive to certain parts of our world view" (Oskorei 2007b). He also assumes that it is hard to decide whether de Benoist's position is a matter of philosophical conviction or shrewd tactics, since "his vision seems to be a peaceful apartheid, but it is possible that this is intended to buy time until Europeans regain their will to live" (Oskorei 2007b).

Motpol identitarians at the time of the debates in 2009 thus seemed to interpret de Benoists' communitarianism, as do some of his critics from outside the New Right, as a way of seeking to uphold segregation allowing native Europeans to safeguard their right to difference under new circumstances. While it for them is unclear what is de Benoist's intention with this approach in the long run, Oskorei and Ratatosk indicates a position closer to New Right position explicitly advocating a future Europe without large-scale non-European immigrant populations. Oskorei's blog posts here play on the difference between what is conceived as possible and what is deemed principally desirable.

What is desirable is, however, not only connected to the future of immigrant populations in Europe but also to the metapolitical struggle against liberal hegemony and for the possible resurgence of traditional values, which make the discourse specifically on Muslim immigrants much more complex, and seems to have pushed some bloggers a few steps closer to de Benoist ethnopluralist communitarianism.

Debates on Islam and Muslim Immigrants on motpol.nu

> *The opening of a fast-food outlet or a supermarket is a greater threat to our identity than the building of a mosque! (de Benoist 2003: 128)*

We will now take a closer look at two debates that took place in 2009 and came to shape Motpol discourse on Islam and Muslim immigrants. Both debates emanated from the activities of Oskorei as an identitarian blogger and networker, and can be seen as examples both of how Motpol bloggers in their media critique metapolitically draw on debates in mainstream media, and of how mainstream debates simultaneously can provoke harsh internal debates among ideologically sometimes quite disparate identitarians. The first discussion, centred on the so-called 'Mohamed Omar affair', earned bloggers Oskorei and Autonom a perhaps not entirely justified reputation as pro-Muslim identitarians, which became a cause for controversy for some fellow bloggers and even more so for other readers leaving comments on the blogs. The second discussion emerged as a critique of mainstream debates on expressions of Muslim faith in Swedish public space.

Debate I: The Mohamed Omar Debate

In the beginning of 2009 an intense debate emerged in Swedish mass media when Mohamed Omar, a young poet and journalist of mixed Swedish-Iranian ancestry previously well established in Swedish mainstream medial and cultural discourse, in connection with the Israeli bombings against civilian targets in the Gaza war 2008–2009 in the Swedish tabloid *Expressen* articulated his support for Hamas, Hizbollah and Iran, and came out strongly against Israel- and USA-inspired 'demonising of Muslims' and the alleged hypocrisy of Western support for corrupt regimes against genuinely popular Islamic movements in Arab countries (Omar 2009a). In the article he retracted his previously oft-expressed critique of Islamism and the leading role of religion in society, a critique which had rendered him support and the possibility to frequently publish himself in mainstream media outlets. From now on, he stated, he would proudly consider himself a radical Muslim in support of the 'world-wide Islamic movement' (Omar 2009a). Many liberal voices reacting to this text and to other later statements of Omar, who in connection with the debate's rhetorical escalation tended to distance himself further and further from mainstream positions on subjects such as Islam and politics, Islam and gender relations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, homosexuality, Holocaust revisionism, and the political situation in Iran, tended to argue that Omar by taking extreme political positions deliberately had excluded himself from the public venues he earlier had access to, and, implicitly, that his subsequent marginalisation therefore was legitimate and well-deserved.

After a few years of publishing and networking in the political and media margins, Omar in 2012 chose to reject his previous turn to political Islamism and subsequent

self-radicalisation. He pointed to the perceived futility of trying to convince Swedish society of the positive merits of Islamism, and argued that he no longer believes in the subordination of politics to religion (see e.g. Omar 2012). He thus in 2012 refuted many of the views that he expressed in the discussions with Oskorei in 2009 analysed below. Although Omar now thus is seeking to reconcile with Swedish mainstream positions after a few years in the shadow, there are persistent features of Omar's thinking throughout the years such as his interest in Sufism and resistance to Salafism.

It is not possible here to take into account the whole complexity of the 'Mohamed Omar debate' of 2009. Significant for us are rather the repercussions of the debate among Swedish identitarians on motpol.nu. Lundquist (2010: 147–151) briefly analyses the discussion of the 'Omar affair' on motpol.nu mainly from the perspective of the metapolitical strategy of bloggers to undermine the legitimacy of traditional mass media by criticising them for political correctness, hypocrisy and lack of commitment to the ideals of free speech. Although blog posts, mostly written by Oskorei, drawing on this discursive meta-perspective clearly had a prominent place in the discussions on motpol.nu, we will instead focus on how the affair triggered discussions that became formative in shaping Motpol positions on Islam and Muslim immigrants in Sweden. Beginning with a blog post by Oskorei in mid-January 2009 called "Sympathy for Mohamed Omar" (Oskorei 2009a), the debate soon grew to incorporate a wide variety of interrelated themes, including (a) the future of Muslims in Sweden, (b) the relative perils of Islam vs. liberalism as the main ideological enemy for identitarians, (c) the advantages and hazards with possible cooperation of identitarians with Muslims in Sweden, (d) the nature of Islam (e.g. unitary and intrinsically expansionist vs. diverse and multi-functional, or Islam's perceived compatibility with historical or contemporary Swedish cultural forms), and (e) to a lesser extent, the merits of using terms that in identitarian discourse are associated with political correctness, such as Islamophobia, on motpol.nu.

This analysis will seek to structure the main positions and contradictions in the debates focusing on blog posts by bloggers Oskorei, Autonom, Atland, and Solguru from between January and April 2009, Oskorei's interview for Mohamed Omar published in March 2009 and the intense debates in the comment sections to Oskorei's blog posts.

Oskorei: Liberalism as the Main Enemy

> *If you believe you can use the threat from "extreme Islamism" at home as an argument against multicultural society, you will just end up legitimising the liberal order that ultimately lies behind the crisis of Europe (Oskorei 2009a).*

In the blog post that became the starting point for Motpol debates on the 'Omar affair', Oskorei describes Omar's mixed background and early search for his roots in Islam (presented as similar to identitarians' trajectories), his career and positive qualities as a writer and publicist, and his previous status as a loyalist

"folkhemsmuslim"[7] fighting politicised Islam and being perceptive to the written and unwritten rules of liberal opinion (Oskorei 2009a). Referring to Omar's recent public expression of support for Hamas against Israel, Oskorei stressed the similarities between his position and Omar's, claiming that "every traditionalist and anti-liberal can recognise himself" in the latter's arguments, and furthermore, that the writer now faces the same isolation or misrepresentation in mainstream or politically correct discourse as have long been suffered by the ethnically conscious, since "mediocre" liberals now use the Omar case to show where the line is drawn in a "decayed" public debate (Oskorei 2009a).

In this post, as in all related debates on the portal, Oskorei advocated a view of liberalism as the chief ideological enemy of identitarians and traditionalists regardless of cultural background, and that identitarians should not participate in liberal or populist attacks on Islamism or conservative Muslims. He therefore warned critics of immigration not to act as tools for what essentially is a liberal agenda by stressing the dangers of political Islam. In comments to the post, some readers, however, remained sceptical to this argument and argued for an identitarian anti-liberalism that can fight Islam and Sionism as well as liberalism (Oskorei 2009a; comment 1 Boddhisattva), to which Oskorei answered that

> Islam is not necessarily a religion that belongs in Northern Europe, but many attacks see the main problem in Islam not being a liberal religion. Such attacks legitimate the liberal order/…/This might seem as an appealing strategy, since Islam is the aspect of "multiculture" that many Swedes are most fed up with, but in the long run it is suicidal if you seriously want to question the system (Oskorei 2009a; comment 4 Oskorei).

Oskorei thus maintained his view of the primacy of the struggle against liberalism in spite of the populist potential of drawing on anti-Islamic sentiments. He also relates this, with ambivalent phrasing, to the presence of Islam and by extension Muslim immigrants in Sweden, a theme that was developed in later posts when the legitimacy of that presence was questioned in some comments. Furthermore, other readers expressed concern over the political agenda of Omar allegedly seeking the Islamisation of Sweden, which Oskorei regarded as a minor problem, since "Swedes will not convert to Islam, so if the share of the Muslim population increases this would be due to mass immigration" (Oskorei 2009a; comment 6 Oskorei).

The debate entered a new stage when a few months later Mohamed Omar, moving further away from the mainstream debate, published an interview with Oskorei on his blog (Omar 2009b). In the interview, characteristically headlined "Liberalism is the greatest threat – interview with Oskorei", Omar and Oskorei, apart from sharing similar positions on political themes such as the war in Afghanistan and sympathy for Hamas and Hizbollah, underlined the commonalities between their respective positions, focusing on the need for traditionalist values and the common struggle against liberalism. Referring to traditionalist thinker Julius Evola, Oskorei argued that the greatest divide is to be found not between different historical civilisations but

[7] "*Folkhemsmuslim*" refers to the term *folkhemmet* (lit. "the people's home") that implies a unitary and egalitarian Swedish community of destiny finding a middle-way between capitalism and socialism, and is often in the public debate used as a short-hand for Swedish society between the 1930s and the early 1990s, and sometimes to this day.

between today's West and all other historical civilisations, and that there are more similarities between Islam and the Northern European tradition than between Islam and the attitudes of modern, secularised Swedes. Modern values that liberals portray as Swedish are in this view not seen as Swedish at all, and Oskorei lamented the lack of understanding among many Swedes for more traditional values of other groups, as when expressions of "cultures of honour" among immigrants are condemned as oppressive when they instead could be read as signs of communal solidarity which for Oskorei is fundamentally lacking among contemporary Swedes. In this reading 'cultures of honour' are rather preferable to the apathy and carelessness of a Swedish society that has lost its roots and therefore is unable to understand traditional concepts. Liberals and populist were criticised for seeking "to make these shortcomings universal", while many Swedes were said to act 'like a small child who has lost its freedom and therefore wants everyone else to be unfree too". As for his own intellectual heritage, Oskorei pointed to the interest in Islam among older far right and traditionalist European thinkers, as well as to attempts to seek understanding between contemporary European far rightists and various Muslim actors. In a passage touching on the rootedness of Islam in Europe, Oskorei mentions the old communities of Muslim Tatars in Poland and Lithuania and refers to individual Muslim Bosnians and Albanians who understand the "precarious predicament of Europe". For Oskorei such people "will not cease to be Europeans just because they are Muslims", which is why "pure Islamophobia is a blind alley leading right into the embraces of USA and liberalism, however tempting it might seem in the short run". Finally, he advised Muslims how to avoid assimilation into liberal society, recommending them to build institutions, develop academic credentials, and build alliances with other groups on particular issues.

The short blog post by Oskorei introducing his interview for Mohamed Omar (Oskorei 2009b) resulted in a large number of comments of varying length, elaboration and style, and also triggered Motpol bloggers Autonom, Atland and Solguru to publish texts explaining their positions. In line with his previous post Oskorei presented Omar as 'one of the most interesting voices in Swedish public life', who had been "subjected to various more or less concealed threats from the politically correct establishment". The discussion in the comments came to encompass all the main aspects of the Motpol debate on Islam and Muslim immigrants. Many comments were sceptical to the positions taken by Oskorei, which pointed to the limits of many readers' and some bloggers' willingness to engage in a dialogue with traditionalist Muslims.

Oskorei's use of the term Islamophobia in the interview as well as in his introduction to it on his blog met objections from some bloggers and readers who associated this word with politically correct efforts to stifle discussions on sensitive issues. One reader wrote that "Islamophobia" is a pejorative term "invented to conduct anti-Swedish propaganda", and that it is "analytically worthless" and "should not be legitimised" on Motpol (Oskorei 2009b; comment 16 Tabula Vergilii). Fellow Motpol blogger Rimfaxe was also critical in similar terms to the use of a politically correct term in Motpol discourse (Oskorei 2009b; comment 28 Rimfaxe).

Commenting on remarks from his readers about whether he would view Islam as a part of Europe even after a traditionalist resurgence, Oskorei argued that "one only has to go to the Balkans" to see that Islam indeed has a historical place in Europe,

since there "some European peoples are Muslims", and that developments in that region refute notions of a unified Islam striving to conquer Europe" (Oskorei 2009b; comment 20 Oskorei).[8] As for the place of Islam in Sweden Oskorei stated in terms similar to de Benoist's that "it will be somewhat cumbersome to expel every Bosnian, convert and whoever it might be". In his view there would thus be Muslims in a future, more identitarian Sweden, albeit fewer than today, "since we ought to have a policy of emigration based on "last in, first out", and many of the lately arrived immigrant groups happen to be Muslims", but that attacks on Muslims because of their religion "is neither honourable nor well-conceived". Notwithstanding the extent of the permanent Muslim presence in Oskorei's Sweden, his ethnopluralism thus looked much more communitarian than versions denying Muslims any right to existence in Sweden. Communitarian in de Benoist's sense is also his rejection of assimilation. When readers objected that without assimilation Muslims might become stronger as a group, Oskorei argued that even that would be "preferable to their assimilation into the non-culture that is Swedish consumerist society" (Oskorei 2009b; comment 68 Oskorei).

This view restated Oskorei's argument about the greater threat constituted by liberalism. Some comments, however, explicitly took terms with this view, and argued that for introvert Northerners a certain degree of individualism is quite characteristic unlike "conformism" and "clan mentality" (Oskorei 2009b; comment 28 Rimfaxe), or downplayed the similarities between traditional Nordic and Islamic cultures, since "the *burqa*, ritual slaughter and female circumcision were never Nordic" (Oskorei 2009b, comment 1 Boddhisattva). Similar to the views of Faye some readers clearly saw Muslim "ethnic and cultural colonisation" as the greater threat, and called for solidarity with Northerners suffering from it. Other readers believed that although liberalism indeed is a major threat to all cultures, an "American liberal consumerist culture" at least allows for "building cultural enclaves, which will not be tolerated in a Muslim society" (Oskorei 2009b, comment Boddhisattva).

A further controversy arose over the perception of some readers that Oskorei argued for cooperation with radical Islamists, which he however argued was a misreading of the interview. Whatever Oskorei's intentions, however, the issue of cooperation, understood in a variety of ways, became a frequent theme both in blog posts and comments following the interview. Most comments on the issue spoke out against such cooperation, in some cases revealing a remarkably monolithic view of Islam as a faith and of Muslims as a community of believers, as when Motpol blogger Lakedaemon stated that in Islam "there are no nuances, no synthesis, there are only Muslims and the unfaithful (*kuffar*)", and that identitarians have "nothing to gain here if one does not accept subjugation" (Oskorei 2009b; comment 56 Lakedaemon). Other readers argued that it is possible to cooperate with Muslims in the Middle East, but that Moslems would have to recognise in ethnopluralist terms that the Nordic countries and Europe is not their territory.

[8] Some comments pointed to Islam's late arrival on the Balkans in the context of Ottoman expansion, and that Bosnians and Albanians are "the descendants of traitors or colonisers" (Oskorei 2009b; comment 26 Lakedaemon).

Autonom: Holy and Unholy Alliances

> *Radical traditionalists have to mercilessly and uncompromisingly attack the materialist world view, because if it is not destroyed, we will all be destroyed as peoples and cultures. Muslim traditionalists, Christian traditionalists and Nordic-Indo-European traditionalist are united in this. I will always respect a man who believes in ideals higher than his ego a thousand times more than I would respect a man without faith (Autonom 2009)*

The view of liberalism as the most fundamental threat to traditionalist values and "all ethnic and religious identities globally" was emphatically restated by neo-pagan blogger Autonom (2009). His blog post, entitled "Holy and unholy alliance", was the first on motpol.nu that commented on Oskorei's interview for Omar. It largely took a sympathetic view to the interview and expressed concern over the "tabloid thinking" and crude anti–Islamic rhetoric of some comments made by readers on Oskorei's blog. Autonom pointed to the heterogeneity of Muslim ways of life and emphasised alien ethno-demographics rather than values, religion or culture as the main danger with Islam on European soil. Islam itself thus presents no real problem, and the increasing demographic weight of Muslim ethno-cultural immigrant groups is not caused by the fierce expansionism of a religious monolith, but – in an analysis identical to de Benoist's – ultimately by the European peoples' preceding loss of their own identities and traditions.

Autonom, who from April 2010 is no longer represented on the motpol.nu blog portal as a result of internal conflicts, further argued that joining secular and materialist forces against conservative Muslim immigrants will not result in a rebirth of traditional Nordic values, but to "Brazilianisation and Americanisation", i.e. to the emergence in Europe of multi-ethnic immigrant societies where newcomers are expected to be "as degenerated as "we" are" (Autonom 2009; comment 10 Autonom). Although Autonom declared himself not to be in favour of alliances with radical Islamists, he underlined that it is inconceivable to cooperate with the secular forces that have both undermined traditional values and opened up for mass immigration. A victory for such an "unholy alliance" against Islam would be "Pyrrhic", since it would mean the "final dissolution of Europe's culture and traditions" (Autonom 2009; comment 10 Autonom).

For Autonom contacts between Nordic and Muslim traditionalists are a good thing that can solve inevitable future multi-ethnic conflicts, and does not imply that identitarians must accept mass immigration or Muslim presence "as a larger group" in the Nordic countries and in Europe. Like Oskorei he spoke out against assimilation and argues that if Muslims are encouraged to keep their identities it will be possible to repatriate them in the future "if political conditions allow it", which necessitates that the Western occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan ceases and Muslim sovereignty in Muslim lands is respected. Autonom like Oskorei thus preferred repatriation of many or even most Muslim immigrants in the long run if circumstances allow it, but accepts a certain permanent presence of Muslims encouraged to maintain their own identities and traditions. This would again mainly point to a communitarian version of ethnopluralism where the expulsionist alternative is regarded as a possible partial solution in a distant future.

In this way Autonom was open for "unholy alliances" with Muslims on the global level ("and in some situations nationally"), while the only "holy alliance" would be between "Nordic and European peoples, cultures and traditions, from here to eternity".

Atland: Islam and the Rightful Inhabitants of the Land

> *Every new generation of ethnically conscious Northerners has to learn with their mother's milk that they and only they are the rightful inhabitants of the Nordic lands (Atland 2009)*

A different perspective was offered by fellow Motpol blogger Atland (see Lundquist 2010 for a brief presentation) in a post called "Ethnically conscious Northerners and Islamic activists – a short comment" (Atland 2009). Starting from the premise that Muslims in the Nordic countries and native Northerners "from a biological perspective" have "opposite interests", he claimed that Muslims have no natural right to be present in the Nordic lands, and that Muslim immigrants, irrespective of any practical difficulties, should be sent back to their home countries.

He admitted that Islam should not be attacked for the traits that make it viable and potent from an identitarian perspective and furthermore renders it irreconcilable to liberalism ("family bonds, breeding, fanaticism, resistance to (female) sexual liberty, intolerance towards other religions and world views"), since Northerners would have to develop similar traits to survive in a multiethnic society. In the framework of a radically segregationist ethnopluralism he hoped that such traits among Muslim immigrants will hinder contacts between ethnic groups, and that this is an internal matter for Muslims anyway. Like Oskorei, he anticipated future conflicts between conservative Muslims and groups like feminists or queer activists, which might be useful in the struggle against the present order.

Writing from a sociobiological perspective Atland saw the danger with Islam not in any religious or cultural content, but in Islam's function as "a belief system with a potential for uniting and organising population groups who do not have any right to live in the Nordic countries". So while conservative Muslim culture should not be attacked, Atland refuted "some kind of alliance or other heartily contacts" between identitarians and Islamic activists, since this would make the ethnically conscious activists less legitimate among the Northern population in a situation where Muslims immigrants grow more numerous and powerful in social competition. He also argued that such a cooperation, which theoretically would presuppose recognition on the part of Muslims of "the exclusive right of Northerners to populate the North", would be detrimental also for conservative Muslims, since it would render activists less legitimate among Muslims who would rather support a strategy "favourable to the adherents' biological interests".

In Atland's view, cooperation between ethnically conscious Swedes and conservative Muslim immigrants would therefore be detrimental to both parties, although it might be possible to establish short-term alliances on particular issues such as the establishment of religious schools.

Solguru: The Ethno-Political Perspective

Some month later, when Oskorei mainly commented on the "Omar affair" as a case showing the hypocrisy and mediocrity of the mainstream intellectual climate, Solguru published a blog post entitled "A political-ethnic perspective on Islam" in which he, like most Motpol bloggers, presented Muslims as an ethno-demographic rather than religious problem. On the one hand he criticised simplistic notions in mainstream media on Muslims being religious in a similar way to Swedish Lutherans, rhetorically pointing to the lack of Muslims calling for tolerance to homosexuality and claiming Muslims allegedly "in general view Islam as a unity". On the other hand, like Oskorei and Autonom he warned against an ignorant view of Islam as a gruesome and "homogenous monster", which is hard to recognise for "hundreds of thousands of Swedes who have contact with Muslims who do not cut off peoples' hands or beat their wives". He also expressed his sympathies for some concepts such as *shariah* banking, and associated *jihad* more with "an inner struggle against sin than with suicide bombs and expansionist wars".

Although the building of a mosque in a neighbourhood with a growing Muslim population for the native population might become a symbol for unwanted changes, it is the ethno-demographic changes that are the real issue:

> [I]f the ethnic groups now identifying as Muslims were good secularists with all American TV channels and a swamp culture of their own with emancipated lesbians dancing on the streets, this would still not very much facilitate coexistence in Sweden. Culture, tradition, language and in fact pure physical appearance would be enough to fuel ethnic rivalries and continuously cause conflict. Swedes would still be replaced in their own country, which is something one entirely misses if one spends all the time comparing Islamic notions to a global-universal political yardstick and denounce it for its view on women, for homophobia and jingoism (Solguru 2009).

The irrelevance of Islam as a religion for Solguru also implied that the commonalities between the world-views of Nordic and Muslim traditionalists highlighted in Oskorei's interview with Omar would not help to solve conflicts between Northerners and Muslim immigrants, since "analogies/…/do not equal common interests". This is even more so as radical Islamists for Solguru are hardly traditionalists at all, but modernists fighting rather than protecting local ethnic traditions, and sharing moral or political rather than spiritual notions of God.

Although Solguru welcomed the interview as a "pleasant change in the brain-dead consensual climate of Swedish debate", the basic ethnic problem with immigration for him thus left few meaningful possibilities for cooperation.

None of the bloggers that published their own posts in the debate on motpol.nu took the opposite view to Oskorei's and Autonom's argument that liberalism constitutes a greater threat to identitarian values than Islam, although this theme was not really stressed by Solguru and Atland. All rejected the notion of Islam threatening Nordic identities as a religion or set of cultural traditions, emphasising instead the destructive impact of mass immigration by Muslims or other non-Europeans as an ethno-demographic factor radically changing the outlook of Swedish, Nordic and European societies. The ethnic factor was particularly stressed by Atland and

Solguru, who made it the major thrust of their argument. Oskorei and Autonom pointed in this regard, echoing de Benoist, to the loss of identity among Northerners following their acceptance of the liberal order as creating the preconditions for mass immigration. They also most clearly spoke out against joining liberals and populists in scoring easy points at the expense of Muslims criticising 'cultures of honour' or conservative moral values. Oskorei and Autonom were also more inclined to seek commonalities with traditionalist Muslims than Atland or Solguru, who argued that too close contact with Muslim traditionalists was either unrealistic or detrimental to Nordic or even Muslim interests. Oskorei's interview for Mohamed Omar, which served as the main trigger for the debate, was however well received or in the case of Atland at least not criticised, by these bloggers. All views were expressed within an ethnopluralist framework and stressed the at least principal importance of larger or smaller future repatriations of Muslim immigrants, although there were differences here between basically expulsionist Atland and the more communitarian discourses of Oskorei and Autonom. The latter bloggers stated their expectation of a continuous Muslim presence also in an identitarian Sweden, while Atland's ethnopluralism refused Muslims any right to live as a group in the Northern lands.

Many comments by readers as well as other Motpol bloggers to Oskorei's blog posts were much more sceptical or outright hostile to the open attitudes to Islam and Muslim cultures presented by Oskorei and Autonom, which was expressed in sometimes very harsh and unconditional statements on Islam as a religion or Muslims as a (allegedly monolithic) religious community.

Debate II: The 'Post-liberal' Debate on the Veil

The second debate under scrutiny in this chapter was significantly smaller in scope than the preceding one, encompassing only two blog posts (by Oskorei and identitarian convert to Orthodox Christianity FAS), and much fewer comments. The major positions on Islam and Muslim immigrants on motpol.nu had already been stated in the 'Mohamed Omar debate', although FAS would now formulate his Christian perspective in the debate. The second debate started with a blog post by Oskorei called *Post-liberal slöjdebatt* (*Post-liberal debate on the veil*) from October 14th 2009 (Oskorei 2009c). In the post Oskorei argues that debates in the media on the veil can serve as an illustration of the state of Swedish society in terms of "free speech, the multi-ethnic situation, post-liberal totalitarianism and the new lines of conflict". He would also develop here some of the themes from the interview for Mohamed Omar, not the least his views on the undesirability of Muslim assimilation into Swedish consumerist society and the disorientation of many Swedes compensating their lack of roots and confusion over changes in the ethnic make-up of their cities with secularist anti-Islamic rabble-rousing.

The post was triggered by debates in the media about an incident in the Stockholm suburb Rinkeby (mainly populated by Muslim immigrants) when what was portrayed

as "Muslim religious extremists" tried to convince girls not to enter a disco arguably because it was frequented by both boys and girls. In connection with the incident, the chairwomen of Social Democratic Women in Sweden, Nalin Pekgul, a practising Muslim of Kurdish origin, argued on public service radio that 'no one in this country should be able to limit women's freedom in the name of religion'. This view was supported on the editorial pages of the liberal daily *Dagens Nyheter* that condemned "religious fundamentalists – of whatever faith – when they limit other people's right to live their life as they wish to", and asked public and private owners of housing facilities to consider if they really should "provide premises for organisations and persons that encourage the oppression of women" (Westerberg 2009). Oskorei's comments on the debate were, however, immediately caused by reactions to another article that took a critical stand to the views expressed by Pekgul and *Dagens Nyheter*. That article was written by a Swedish Muslim student of Iranian origin and published on Newsmill, a website for social and media debates. In the article the author reacted strongly against what he believed was a bias against pious Muslims in Swedish media that ultimately seek to deny Muslims the same right to exerting influence on Swedish society that they grant to secular forces, liberals and feminists. Why should public space, the author asks, not be open for pious Muslims striving to convince people to live a righteous life as they see it, when it is open to secular activists trying to change the behaviour of Muslims in Sweden in accordance with their views? Why is it only considered a problem when local Muslims are encouraged by pious believers to dress decently, but not when parents and relatives force young girls not to wear the veil? (Zahedi 2009). The article was followed by comments questioning the main arguments of the author with an often fiercely anti-Islamic rhetoric.

In his post Oskorei expressed sympathy for Zahedi's criticism of mainstream media's double standards when they celebrated the free life-choices of young disco-dancers of mainly Muslim background, but did not respect the rights of young Muslims to chose and propagate a pious life-style, and that the pressure on young people to conform to the demands of consumer society is as strong as any religious propaganda. Oskorei saw the commentaries to the Newsmill article as an illustration of a deteriorating quality of public reasoning after "decades of curbed public debate on questions of "multiculture", Islam and immigration":

> A large part of the public is ideologically confused, and confounds its resistance to a demographic/ethnic change of the public space with support for the liberal values that caused the change. Then partly the Muslims, partly the veil become the problem. To be "Swedish" then is to be liberal, atheist, and to be upset when women don't show their necks. (Oskorei 2009c)

Demands of suppressing the expression of religious allegiances in the name of liberal values for Oskorei showcased the latent totalitarianism of a public opinion caught between globalisation, the celebration of the free choice of individuals and the compulsory sensibilities imposed by a therapeutic new class. Expressions of Swedish identity and public debates on immigration had under such conditions become distorted. For Oskorei the questioning in mainstream media by politicians and journalists of the rights of pious Muslims to influence society meant that the

mechanisms of suppression that have been applied previously to dissident Swedes now have been extended to non-conformist immigrant groups.

Oskorei then proceeded to take a stand on the veil itself, drawing on the ethno-pluralist framework as well as on his critique of the values governing contemporary society:

> It is objectively good that e.g. Somali women wear the veil and preserve their culture. This is partly because it will be helpful the day when some Somalis return to their homeland, and partly because the "Swedish" culture they are offered is an unworthy mixture of political correctness and the consumer society's and the media's reduction of the human being into a monkey controlled by his instincts. The lesser people who voluntarily become slaves under the markets the better. (Oskorei 2009c)

Oskorei thus considered Muslim immigrants' wearing the veil a more humane and noble option than its abandonment in favour of Swedish society in its present state and the assimilation into a host population having lost touch with its own traditional values. Oskorei's belief that wearing the veil might facilitate the return of some (*ett antal*) Somalis to their homeland echoes his previously expressed acceptance of a reality where groups of non-European immigrants remain in Sweden, and also suggests that such groups might in fact be quite large.

The final words of the post show that for Oskorei the importance of the debate lied first and foremost in what it revealed about a Swedish population that arguably only expresses its real attitudes to the demographic changes in the name of values that have undermined their own culture:

> This does not mean that as a right-wing radical you automatically must support the right to wear the veil, but one should be aware of how a contorted debate and ideological confusion encourage many Swedes to support and identify themselves with the system that made them into slaves and wants their children to be degenerates. (Oskorei 2009c)

FAS – A Christian Identitarian Perspective

A blog post replying to Oskorei's was published by FAS,[9] an Orthodox Christian convert claiming to seek a dualist national-libertarian synthesis of religious and ethno-cultural identity and individual freedom. The post, entitled 'A third perspective on Islam and veils' was illustrated by a large photo of a woman and three girls from a Russian-Orthodox family all wearing head scarves. FAS pointed to the tradition of women covering their heads in traditional Christian cultures, including Lutheran Swedish society not so long ago, and to similar contemporary practices in Orthodox and Catholic churches. For FAS the veil represents an 'inspiring piety', and he claimed to fully respect when Muslim women wear the veil, and found it sad when

[9] In May 2010 many Motpol bloggers claimed to have received letters threatening to reveal their identities to Anti-Fascist Action. In connection with this FAS shut down his blog on motpol.nu in May 2010 (see Motpolsredaktionen 2010). Prints of the relevant posts are in the possession of the author of this article.

they choose not to. If the first perspective on the veil referred to in the title was the critical liberal or populist position questioned by Oskorei and the second Oskorei's rather communitarian ethnopluralism, FAS' third position took a positive view on the veil but criticised Islam from his Christian point of view. Since unlike most other identitarian bloggers FAS argued that Islam is not only an ethno-demographic but also a religious problem, his objection was Christian rather than anti-liberal:

> The liberal argument only says that Muslim women are not hedonists and that it is a bad thing. If hedonism was the only alternative to Islam we ought to become Muslims. Fortunately we have a better alternative to both hedonism and Islam. We find this alternative in our own European tradition most beautifully expressed in the authentic Christian spirituality, mystique and traditionalism. And it is because of my belief in Christ that I do not want Europe to be islamised. (FAS 2010)

In an answer to a comment from a reader FAS somewhat qualified, however, his argument in agreement with Oskorei's (or for that matter de Benoist's) view of the main culprit being liberalism seeking to eradicate all traditional cultures:

> Europeans who invoke the veil as an argument against Islam show to the rest of the world that they have lost contact with their own culture and identity. How does such a person relate to his great grandmother who wore the veil in everyday life? Which cultural values does such a person share with this woman? The ethnic death of those critics of Islam is a logic consequence of their spiritual state. (FAS 2010)

Still, for FAS, the main problem with Islam clearly concerns the religious sphere. Thus, wearing the veil is a good thing, as are traditional values or strong family ties. Islam, however, is another faith than the Orthodox Christianity of FAS, and "radical Muslims" in his view seeks to dominate Europe, and Muslims "historically have occupied and enslaved Christian populations" and inflicted destruction in Catholic and Orthodox Europe "during the invasions". Furthermore, the shariah judicial system "has an inhuman view on rape cases and female testimonies in courts".

Proposing a Christian critique of Islam FAS thus nonetheless draws on frequent tropes of secularist or atheist anti-Islamic discourse such as its alleged expansionism and treatment of women and minorities. The expansionist theme is stated, though, in a religious context and does not explicitly draw on socio-biology like Atland or inter-ethnic relations, like Solguru. Although FAS did not exclude the ethnic perspective, his emphasis on arguments rooted in his Christian faith made him stand out among the identitarian bloggers who posted texts on Islam and Muslim immigrants in the two debates.

Conclusions

The emergence of the Internet with its widely increased potential for communicating ideas and strategies through websites, forums and blogs has considerably facilitated the emergence and growth of currents focused on metapolitics and counterdiscourses such as the identitarians. The communication technologies greatly facilitate the diffusion of views and interpretations of daily events through the Motpol blogs

(as well as through the web community *nordisk.nu* and the wiki *metapedia.org*) among a much larger audience than was conceivable before the advent of the Internet. Although motpol.nu in terms of popularity cannot be compared to the most frequently visited anti-immigrationist web sites, it remains important as a forum for expressing ideas and comments on current affairs for a part of the radical right scene. The ideational exchange and diffusion from European or American right-wing discourses has also become significantly enhanced by the new technologies, allowing Swedish identitarians better access to intellectual trends, social networks and organisational structures on the international scene.

The analysis in this chapter of two debates on Islam and Muslim immigrants on motpol.nu shows how such discourse is informed by two major components of identitarian ideology – a variously conceptualised ethnopluralism and anti-liberal traditionalism. This sets identitarians apart from other anti-immigrationists such as the Sweden Democrats, who focus on problems of immigration, perceived PC hegemony and immigration while appealing to rather than criticising dominant norms of contemporary Swedish or Western society. For many identitarian bloggers such a critique frames their understanding of immigration and ethnic relations. Starting from anti-liberal positions, much, if not all, identitarian discourse on motpol.nu is framed as more open to Islam and the various religious and ethnic traditions of immigrants Muslim communities than the (conceptually somewhat different) assimilationist discourses of populists and some liberals. Some Motpol bloggers tend to sympathise with conservative Muslims when the latter are attacked from liberal positions in the media or the political sphere, since identitarians do not recognise the modernist constructs of Swedish national identity in the name of which the attacks ultimately are made.[10]

Ethnopluralism, however, frames identitarian attitudes not to Islam as a religious faith but to Muslim immigrants in a less amiable fashion. In an ideal identitarian world there would not be any significant numbers of Muslim immigrants, or other non-Europeans, in Sweden or Europe, since everyone would have the privilege of developing their own culture in their home countries. The problem with Muslim immigration for most identitarians is thus not Islam or the specific ethnic traditions of Muslim immigrants, but the very fact of people living *en masse* in the wrong country. With the emergence of large-scale non-European immigrant communities in Europe ethnopluralism, however, have developed into two branches. While Alain de Benoist's communitarian variety emphasises the need for a non-assimilationist right to difference for both natives and immigrant communities being here to stay for

[10] See e.g. identitarian blogger Wodinaz's (2010) defence of conservative Muslims who attacked the Swedish artist Lars Vilks during the latter's public lecture at Uppsala University (a lecture that included the display of a Dutch film portraying the prophet Muhammad as a homosexual). Wodinaz argued that Muslim reactions show a community that is able to draw the line in a situation where hardly anyone in Swedish society is ever provoked by anything since there are no values left to cherish. While he was supported by Oskorei, other bloggers commenting on the post took a different view to Wodinaz's, emphasising the need for everyone to calmly present one's position by real arguments without resorting to violence.

the foreseeable future, Guillaume Faye's current does not recognise any significant presence of non-Europeans in Europe and therefore calls for a 'reconquista' sending immigrants back to their home countries. Among Swedish identitarian bloggers both tendencies can be found, sometimes expressed by the same blogger with varying emphasis in different contexts. In the debates analysed in this chapter bloggers Oskorei and Autonom tended to express positions somewhat closer to the communitarians, where possibly quite large Muslim communities would be allowed to remain also in an identitarian Sweden, while Atland ultimately comes forward as an expulsionist. Sweden Democrats argue here, on the contrary, for the assimilation of Muslims (and other) immigrants into the Swedish national community. For this the pace of immigration has to be significantly slowed down and the public showcasing of Muslim identity (e.g. in terms of dress or the building of mosques) has to be disencouraged.

On a concluding note one could perhaps see an implicit conflict between striving to preserve traditional values and authentic cultures and accepting that such preservation would in fact in contemporary urban Western European contexts in most cases rely on typical late modern identity choices. Furthermore, such a conflict would seem to be as relevant for identitarians themselves as proponents of a collectivist minority faith in a society encouraging individual identity projects, as it would for Muslim immigrants of a traditionalist persuasion. Other differences notwithstanding, in that particular sense identitarians and Muslim traditionalists find themselves in a somewhat similar situation in contemporary Sweden.

Acknowledgements The author would like to express his gratitude to the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University that generously provided the funds for the presentation of his research findings at the WOCMES conference in Barcelona, 19–24 July 2010, as well as to the Centre for European Studies at Lund University that gave him the opportunity to present a previous version of this study at the conference 'Far Right Networks in Northern and Eastern Europe", Uppsala University 24–25 March 2010.

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