

## Islam in the Digital Age: Counselling and Fatwas at the Click of a Mouse

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**Abstract.** “Online fatwas” and “Virtual Counselling” are a major concern for the global community. The introduction, growth, and utilization of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have created new public spheres where different concepts of coexistence between Islam and the State are discussed. With respect to cyberspace, the Internet brings *ijtihad* – related issues into sharp focus, when any individuals can proclaim themselves as an authority on Islam, qualified to make pronouncements and issue fatwas. Online religious forums are not exclusively to provide Islamic advice, but also allow Internet users to meet and interact with others who share their faith, beliefs, and values from the privacy of their homes. Whilst this advantage for petitioners has been overemphasized in cyber studies in general, in relation to Cyber Islamic Environments some unique themes are raised. These include issues linked to whether online Islamic advice is binding or not, and the implications on Internet users asking the question. Should advice ignoring the traditional Islamic models endorsed by al – Azhar or solicited by email be followed? Is the moral dimension the same as receiving a fatwa from a scholar in non electronic context? This article approaches some of these issues and examines how the Islamic sites change the process of decision making and construction of Islamic knowledge within Muslims.

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### 1 Introduction

“Be conscious of God,  
And speak always the truth”<sup>1</sup>

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks have focused on the Internet’s connection with religion. Two things became clear: the first was that the terrorists had used the Internet to plan and commit the terror attacks (McKenna et al., 2007); the second was that millions of Muslim people turned to online religious forums to send and receive comfort *fatwas*<sup>2</sup> and to learn more about Islam<sup>3</sup> (*Ibid*).

Most of the books that have appeared since this incident, on bin Ladin have placed him in the framework of rival civilizations and global power politics (Gwynne, 2006). No one has placed a spotlight on the religious content of his declarations, interviews and legal opinions which were studded with allusions to and quotations from the Qur’an<sup>4</sup> and *Hadith*<sup>5</sup> (*Ibid*). Bin Laden’s *fatwa* entitled: *Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places*<sup>6</sup> contains a number of references to works of Muslim scholars that echo the tone and content of work that appears to have inspired bin Ladin’s various declarations: the important militant Islamist manifesto *al – Farida al-Gha’iba*, by Muhammad’ Abd al – Salam Faraj (*Ibid*). On a different note, research by Hoover, Clark and Rainie shows that people of all faiths are increasingly using the Internet for spiritually – related activities (Hoover et al., 2007). Perhaps the most popular activity is seeking out information about religious beliefs, practices, and how to celebrate religious holidays (Hoover et al., 2007). The survey also found that (38%) of the 128 million Internet users have sent and received emails with spiritual content (*Ibid*).

One of the questions posed by the growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is how this will affect the sphere of religion. The emergence of this new media ecology is particularly relevant to European Muslim communities, where experiences of cultural displacement and negotiations on authenticity are at the heart of contemporary life (Sisler, 2009). There, the Internet has become an important adjunct to traditional means of communication about Islam and is facilitating a new form of Islamic discourse (*Ibid*).

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<sup>1</sup> Qur’an, 33 :70

<sup>2</sup> The opinions of specific contemporary imams , pl. *fatawa*.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Submission’ to God.

<sup>4</sup> Revelation received by the Prophet Muhammed, via the Angel Gabriel.

<sup>5</sup> A traditional saying and/or report of the actions of Muhammad, pl. *ahadith*.

<sup>6</sup> Available at < [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa\\_1996.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html)> , [viewed 14 August, 2010].

There are thousands of sites providing specific “Islamic” content, ranging from *fatwas*, sermons, and religious treatises; through audio lectures, podcasting, and videos on YouTube; to social networking sites, and the vibrant blogosphere (Sisler, 2009). In Morocco, a virtual *fatwa* by a *Salafi*<sup>7</sup> sheikh was published permitting the wedding of a nine – year – old girl (Kutscher, 2009). A private mufti in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was quoted to the effect that he would prefer Mickey Mouse to be killed along with other mice (*Ibid*). In Malaysia, an Imam<sup>8</sup> issued a *fatwa* expressing concern over the impact of computer games on children, saying the portrayal of gods as well as heaven and hell in these games could potentially confuse them about the concept of the hereafter.<sup>9</sup> In Pakistan, the political wing of the Lashkar – e – Tayiba issued an online *fatwa* calling upon Muslims to kill Pope Benedict XVI for his September 12, 2006 speech, which has projected as anti-Islam by Al Qaeda and other *jihadi*<sup>10</sup> terrorist organizations.<sup>11</sup> The issue of the *fatwa* came a few days before a video message by Ayman al-Zawahiri,<sup>12</sup> in which he made a severe attack on the Pope.<sup>13</sup>

In another *fatwa*, Sheikh Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī allowed suicide bombing by Palestinians in self – defense and in defense of their homeland against Israeli occupation (Kamali, 2008). Al – Qaradawi justified the loss of the innocent life of a person who is not at all involved in military activities by repeating that “ *he gave verdict on the permissibility of the acts of sacrifice against the occupation forces and those who assist them in their atrocities*” (Kamali, 2008 ). This development of online religious forums and *sunni*<sup>14</sup> websites brings *ijtihad*<sup>15</sup> – related issues into sharp focus, when individuals can proclaim themselves as an authority on Islam, qualified to make pronouncements and issue *fatwas* (Bunt, 2003).

In Western Europe, due to the general non-existence of official Islamic authorities *fatwas* became the primary mechanism in dealing with normative issues (Sisler, 2009). The qualifications for this activity may ignore the traditional Islamic models approved by Al – Azhar or not be scholarly (*Ibid*).

Accordingly, this paper seeks to address and analyse the following issues: Firstly, the relevance of *fatwas* and the competition between and among government-affiliated *fatwa* authorities and private muftis, who make their voices heard through the Internet. Furthermore, the paper focuses on the Internet and its role in promoting Islamic knowledge. Secondly, an analysis of some Sunni *fatwa* – issuing websites will be provided taking IslamOnline, Fatwa – Online & Ask – Imam as a case study. Finally, the paper examines the ways in which the Internet functions as a mediator of religious practice, specifically religious ritual. It concludes by discussing how ICTs can empower non-literate communities, if they are made available.

## 2. THE RELEVANCE OF FATWAS

*“When they ask you for a pronouncement [yastaftunaka]...  
Say: God pronounces to you [yuftikum]...”<sup>16</sup>*

A *fatwa* (plural *fatawa*) is a legal opinion given by a mufti in response to a question posed by an individual or a court of law (Esposito, 2003). A *fatwa* is typically requested in cases not covered by the *fiqh*<sup>17</sup> literature, and is neither binding nor enforceable. Its authority is based on the mufti’s education and status within the community (*Ibid*). In the Qur’an, the term is used in two verbal forms meaning “asking for a definitive answer,” and “giving a definitive answer” (4.127, 176). After the Prophet’s death, when direct access to divine revelation was no longer available, Muslims turned to the Prophet’s closest Companions for guidance (Shaukat, 2009). *Fatawa* at this point in Islamic history took the form of the Companions commenting on how the Prophet approached a certain issue (*Ibid*). When the generation of the Companions died out, Muslims came to rely on *hadith*, which were linked to the

<sup>7</sup>(i) ‘Pious ancestors’, applied in terms of Muhammad’s companions and the ‘early’ Muslim community, representing an exemplum to follow; (ii) used by Muslim ‘reformist’ movement(s), such as *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*; (iii) applied by a number of platforms, indicating their intention to ‘return’ to the principles of Muhammad and his community.

<sup>8</sup> The term imam [pl. *a’imma*] usually refers to one who leads the prayers, not necessarily ‘qualified’ in the sense of trained clergy. In Shi’a Islam imam has associations with religious leadership and continuity of spiritual authority.

<sup>9</sup> See “A *Fatwa* on Final Fantasy”, available at <www.softwaretime.com>, visited 10 June, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> An advocate of *jihad*.

<sup>11</sup> See “Kill Pope, says Lashkar *fatwa*”, available at <www.rediff.com>, visited 10 June, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> For more information about him, please visit <http://www.fbi.gov/wanted/terrorists/teralzawahiri.htm>, [accessed 14 August, 2010].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> « Orthodox » Islam, based on the customary practice of Muhammed.

<sup>15</sup> Independent judgment based on Islamic sources, a striving for the pragmatic interpretation of Islamic primary sources in the light of contemporary conditions, the term can be synonymous with ‘renewal’ and ‘reform’.

<sup>16</sup> Quran, 4 :126

<sup>17</sup> Islamic ‘jurisprudence’.

Prophet through their isnad.<sup>18</sup> Ulama,<sup>19</sup> became in the second Islamic century the means by which to receive religious guidance on specific issues (Ibid). As the Islamic Empire expanded, legal scholarship as the basis of state legitimacy took on a similarly bureaucratic nature. Whereas fatwa began as a private activity that was independent of state control, it became increasingly formalized, culminating in the creation of the four Sunni madhabs<sup>20</sup> and Shi'i Jafari madhhab, each of which compiled its own fatwa collections (Ibid). Over the centuries, hundreds of thousands of fatawas have been produced.<sup>21</sup> They came to the attention of many Westerners in 1989 when Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for the death of author Salman Rushdie whom he accused of blasphemy.<sup>22</sup>

Although fatwas are used to reply to questions in a relatively unique and particular situation, the development in the mass media communication allowed them to widespread and may therefore even be doctrinal in nature (Kutscher, 2009). Therefore, fatwas are not only about individual cases anymore, but about fundamental issues such as questions regarding the integration of Muslims into predominantly European societies (Ibid).

Today, with the existence of modern independent States, each with its own legislative system, and/or its own body of Ulama, each country develops and applies its own rules, based on its own interpretation of religious prescriptions (Shaukat, 2009). Many Muslim countries have an official Mufti position to issue fatwas justifying government policy.<sup>23</sup> This practice has been a major criticism by reformist contemporary Muslim movements.<sup>24</sup> However, many of the latter often allow individuals without the requisite legal training to issue fatwas. Such edicts may be considered by their followers as binding, but they are not recognized by the jurists or the rest of the Muslim community as legitimate juristic opinions.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND CONFLICT BETWEEN PRIVATE AND STATE MUFTIS

*"O Ye who believe! Obey God, and obey the Apostle,  
and those charged with authority among you"*<sup>26</sup>

The "suicide attacks" fatwa or "martyrdom operations" against Israel provides an example of one offline discourse between muftis of various backgrounds and reveal their interdependence. Some Muslim scholars and other commentators justify them on political, moral, and religious grounds.<sup>27</sup> Even those attackers who bomb and kill women and children are hailed as martyrs for their heroism in confronting the enemy.<sup>28</sup> In this case Sheikh Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, acknowledged suicide bombing by Palestinians in self – defense and in defense of their homeland against Israeli occupation (Kamali, 2008). He told the BBC program in an interview that "Through his Allah <sup>29</sup> infinite wisdom he has given the weak a weapon the strong do not have and that is their ability to turn their bodies into bombs as Palestinians do".<sup>30</sup> He argued that "An Israeli woman is not like women in our societies; because she is a soldier...I consider this type of martyrdom operation as an evidence of God's justice".<sup>31</sup> Although al-Qaradāwī studied at Al-Azhar <sup>32</sup> University, and is described by his website as the most prominent voice of moderation in Islam (wasatiyya), his opinion must not be mistaken to represent government policies. At the same time, one must be aware of the potential impact such an announcement by a public figure nevertheless has. His

<sup>18</sup> Citation.

<sup>19</sup> Scholars.

<sup>20</sup> A "school" of Islamic interpretation, such as the broad *Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi'i*.

<sup>21</sup> See fatwa, available at < <http://www.answers.com/topic/fatwa>>, visited 17 July, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> This fatwa reads "In the name of God the Almighty. We belong to God and to Him we shall return. I would like to inform all intrepid Muslims in the world that the author of the book *Satanic Verses*, which has been compiled, printed, and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Qur'an, and those publishers who were aware of its contents, are sentenced to death. I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, where they find them, so that no one will dare to insult the Islamic sanctity. Whoever is killed on this path will be regarded as a martyr, God-willing". See P. Nielson, *What are the Satanic Verses?*, available at <[www.islam.suite101.com](http://www.islam.suite101.com)>, visited [ 14 August, 2010].

<sup>23</sup> See fatwa, available at < <http://www.answers.com/topic/fatwa>>, visited 17 July, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Qur'an, 4:49

<sup>27</sup> See Haim Malka, *Must Innocents Die ? The Islamic Debate over Suicide Attacks*, The Middle East Quarterly, spring 2003, no. 2, pp. 19 – 28.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> God.

<sup>30</sup> See Magdi Abdelhadi, *Controversial Preacher with Star Status*, BBC News Website, available at: <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/3874893.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3874893.stm)>, [visited 17 July, 2010].

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> University located in Cairo.

opinion was supported by Abd al-'Azim al-Mit'ani, a lecturer at Al-Azhar University, who rejected arguments differentiating between Israeli civilian and military targets claiming "They should not make any difference between civilians and military."<sup>33</sup> It is a fact that Israel is one big military camp. There is no real civilian there. It is the Palestinians' rights to hit all the inhabitants of Israel as they can."<sup>34</sup> Al-Mit'ani continued by claiming that the Prophet's words prohibiting the killing of children, elderly, or women did not apply in the case of Palestinian suicide bombers, stating, "He was talking about an ordinary war, between two armies. The situation in occupied Arab Palestine is different. We are faced with an enemy that attacks indiscriminately. The Palestinians have every right to return the treatment."<sup>35</sup>

Three years later, a concerned user inquired about these *fatwas* and their background at Islam Q&A forum. Dr. Jamal Badawi former professor at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada and well-known author, activist, preacher and speaker on Islam agreed with them and stated:

[D]efense against unprovoked aggression and resistance to reduce oppression are legitimate causes for combative jihad provided that all other conditions, qualifiers and ethics of war are strictly observed. It should also be noted that in all nations and according to the UN charter and international law, the Islamic causes are basically the same. Also, it should be noted that all nations and peoples have lots of praises for those who not only put their lives on the line but also sacrifice their lives for what they consider as defense for their country or people.<sup>36</sup>

The previous fatwa shows how Islamic radicals have no difficulty in validating assertions such as this by quoting a number of supplementary Qur'anic extracts of their own (Aylett, 2008). Martyrdom operations are defended by maintaining that there is one crucial difference between acts of suicide and acts of self-martyrdom, namely the intention behind the individual's behaviour. If they are pure and directed solely by glorification of God, then a deliberate act resulting in the termination of a believer's life is not considered suicide, but martyrdom (Ibid). It is in this way that followers of radical Islam justify the intensive use of martyrdom operations to further their cause (Ibid). An action that to the ignorant, sceptical outsider might appear fanatical and fuelled by pathological instability is advocated as the greatest duty a committed believer may ever undertake; the final and ultimate sacrifice to God of his or her own life (Ibid). On the other hand Sheikh Muhammad Sa'id Tantawi, head of Egypt's Al-Azhar mosque and University, had been equivocal about the issue in past declarations.<sup>37</sup> He stated that "Islamic law rejects all attempts on human life, and in the name of Islam we condemn all attacks on civilians, whatever their community or state responsible for such an attack".<sup>38</sup> Echoing Tantawi's ruling, Sheikh Muhammad bin 'Abdallah as-Sabil, member of the Saudi Council of Senior Ulama and imam at the grand mosque in Mecca, decried the suicide attacks.<sup>39</sup> He announced "Any attack on innocent people is unlawful and contrary to the shari'a<sup>40</sup> (...) Muslims must safeguard the lives, honor, and property of Christians and Jews, attacking them contradicts the shari'a".<sup>41</sup>

Another quite recent case of competition between private and State Muftis is that of the status of Jews and Christians in Islam. There are clear guidelines in the Qur'an and Sunna for Muslim relations with Jews and Christians, providing for the protection of their lives and property.<sup>42</sup> But as one preacher and speaker on Islam argued, preserving the life of non-Muslims is conditional on their living under Muslim rule in a Muslim state.<sup>43</sup> This rule will not be applied to non-Muslims living abroad, since they are living in their own state that has usurped the rights of Muslims and occupied their lands. He stated "Jews and Christians are protected under Islam, but only when they live under Muslim rule; outside the boundaries of Islamic rule, they are no longer protected".<sup>44</sup> This conflict between private and state Muftis serves well to show that official Islam is really struggling for attention and conclusive authority (Kutscher, 2009). The adversary is the Islamic Research Council at al-Azhar University, to many believers the highest authority in Sunni Islam (Ibid). After the Jabhat 'Ulamā' al-Azhar's official dissolution in 1999, its muftis resumed their activities in mid-2008 with an online presence only (Ibid).

<sup>33</sup> See Haim Malka, *op. cit*

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> See "Jamal Badawi justifies suicide bombings on Islam Q&A forum – Martyrdom in Islam: Let's discuss it 7/29/06", available at <<http://www.militantislammonitor.org/article/id/2074>>, [visited 17 July, 2010].

<sup>37</sup> See Haim Malka, *op. cit*

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> The body of Islamic law based on the « source » of the Qur'an (and other Islamic sources) ; divine « law », as revealed to Muhammed.

<sup>41</sup> See Haim Malka, *op. cit*

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

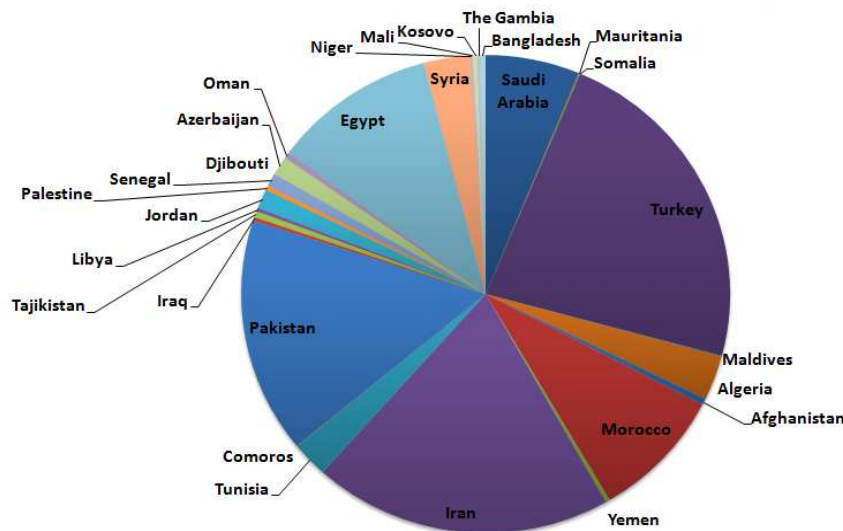
#### 4. THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN PROMOTING ISLAMIC KNOWLEDGE

*“On a daily basis, more people use the Internet for spiritual purposes than for gambling, banking, finding a date, trading stocks, or buying and selling.”*

- The Pew Internet & American Life Project

The Internet has established itself with remarkable, unprecedented, speed as an integral part of everyday life for many people all over the world in the home or at work (Kung et al., 2008).

The presence of Islam on the Internet is impressive, and reflects one area where Muslims are keen to adopt a new technology in order to spread the message of their religion (Adamu, 2002). Around 15 million Muslims all over the world surf the Net. This is a little above one percent of the total world Muslim population, and only a fraction of those who watch TV channels (Hameed, 2004).



World Internet Users by Muslim Majority Countries, June 2009 <sup>45</sup>

The Internet and ICTs have also created new space in which traditionally educated *muftis* compete with new popular preachers over audiences. The article by Riexinger (2008) on propagating Islamic creationism on the Internet demonstrates as well how the combination of a neglected subject with the innovative use of new media can establish opinion leadership, particularly in a Muslim minority context (Riexinger, 2008).

Some scholars argue that the ability of the Islamic community online to give instant access to Islamic teachings has accelerated the information delivery of major issues, and has created new discourses, where the power of the traditional sources of religious authority could be decentralized and contested by the general public (Nawawy et al., 2009). In this respect, Bunt (2003) has stated:

[T]he development of online *khutbahs*,<sup>46</sup> or sermons, either transmitted ‘live’ or recorded and uploaded onto websites, has extended the audiences for several imams. Specific interpretations of Islam, justifying political and religious actions, can also be located online and are frequently updated. They can contain news, chat and networking opportunities that go beyond the traditional ideological and religious frames of reference of many organisations. Frequently, these are networked to other platforms operating similar sites on related issues.

<sup>45</sup> The Top Five Volume of Internet Users in Muslim majority countries are: 1. Turkey (26,500,000), 2. Iran (23,000,000), 3. Pakistan (18,500,000), 4. Egypt (12,568,900), 5. Morocco (10,300,000).

<sup>46</sup> Sermon, provided by a *khatib*.



Since a long time ago the Internet was considered as a subversive medium which promotes democracy, direct participation and generally contests established and traditional authorities, especially in non-democratic environments (Sisler, 2007). A major change in the organization of society was predicted to occur by some thinkers of the techno avant-garde scene (*Ibid*). After the fall of the communist authoritarian regimes in the Eastern Europe, the connection between this process and information and communication technologies has taken on a powerful, implicit veracity (*Ibid*).

The Internet offers greater access to source materials through bibliographical databases, retailers, and file exchange, presenting a cost – effective model for diffusion of opinions (Clarke, 2009). For some, a sense of an online Islamic community or identity can be enhanced through the Internet, in particular websites operating religious “product” placements, special elements for subscribers, interaction with fellow adherents, and an interface with other forms of religious media (*Ibid*). Bibliographical databases may lead to other materials: the provision of digital books, with key content providers such as Google and Amazon developing in this area, is likely to increase further and shift perceptions and methods of knowledge retrieval in association with the study of religions (*Ibid*). Online collaboratively edited resources such as Wikipedia can be another significant source; such sources may not be academically refereed, and can contain content that, in some cases, has been deemed contentious or inaccurate by critics. But this has not stopped Wikipedia being cited in academic discourse (*Ibid*).

#### *4.1 The Emergence of Islam in Cyberspace*

According to Jon Anderson (2001), the emergence of Islam in cyberspace went through three phases. The first one was started in the 1980s by Muslim students who were working in the high-tech precincts that spawned the Internet (Anderson, 2001). Texts of the Holy Quran and Hadith of the Prophet came on-line detached from conventional interpretive apparatus, which was replaced by another “intellectual techniques” that came with the expansion of modern higher education and the rising numbers who receive it in Muslim countries (*Ibid*). Many of those students were members of Muslim Associations at European and American universities, and had a great interest in pushing for a “global Islamic consciousness” (Nawawy et al., 2009). Utilizing science-based training, they produced in electronic discussion groups a sort of creolized discourse of and about Islam. It mixed styles of reasoning and terminology from the separate languages of science and religion in an “inter-language” that is not so much a combination as it is sociologically a link between two realms of discourse (Anderson, 2001). Those fluent in different parts of the continuum could join and communicate, not in a new super community, but through intermediate communities (*Ibid*).

The second phase of Islam’s cyber – evolution emerged in the mid – to late 1990s, in response to the opportunities for forging alternative channels of communication and thus publics. According to Anderson (2001) this phase is marked by officializing strategies and frequently radical activists. For both, the Internet is less a medium of interactive communication than for publication of views, which analytically break down into two kinds of projects (Anderson, 2001).

Anderson characterizes the third and current phase of the emergence of Islam in cyberspace by moderation in both terms of a broader middle range of opinion coming on-line, and a shift to discourse and connections to harmonizing religion and life, particularly modern life (Anderson, 2001). Most of the websites in this phase have become more interactive, rather than just educational or informational, and have developed portals in multiple languages, marking a tremendous increase in the number of Internet users who can access these sites (Nawawy et al., 2009).

#### *4.2 Representing Islam in Cyberspace*

The representation of Islam in cyberspace may take several forms, ranging from the purely textual to the multimedia. The popularity of Second Life saw a further development requiring the monitoring of scholars (Clarke, 2009). ‘Second Life’ is often referred to an online computer game.<sup>47</sup> ‘Avatars’<sup>48</sup> are frequently called ‘players’ and the conditions set up by Linden Lab<sup>49</sup> are considered the ‘rules of the game’ (Hoeren, 2009). There is the possibility of events and activities that go beyond simple “chat”; inevitably, there are commercial ramifications to some of these elements, with the establishment of Second Life representation of online shops (Clarke, 2009).

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<sup>47</sup> See <[www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)>.

<sup>48</sup> An avatar is a computer user’s representation of himself/herself or alter ego, whether in the form of a three dimensional model used in computer games, a two – dimensional icon used on Internet forums and other communities. It is an “object” representing the embodiment of the user. The term can also refer to personality connected with the screen name, or handle, of an Internet user. See <[www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)>, [retrieved 21 June, 2010]

<sup>49</sup> Founder of Second Life.

Religions have established virtual places of worship, such as churches, a synagogue, and a mosque (*Ibid*). In the following paragraphs we shall provide a brief overview of the main sources of information about Islam online.

#### *4.2.1 Websites*

Islam is being reshaped, and the Internet, in particular the World Wide Web, has had an increasing impact on Muslims in diverse contexts (Bunt, 2009). A broad spectrum of Islamic websites can be located in cyberspace, created by Muslims seeking to present dimensions of Islam, spiritual, and / or political lives online (*Ibid*). A web site was created by the Forum on Religion and Ecology under the Harvard Center for the Environment<sup>50</sup> to assist in fostering research, education and outreach in the area of religion and ecology (Clarke, 2009). To enhance teaching, the website contains introductory essays to each of the world's religious traditions and their environmental contributions (*Ibid*). Other sites focus on brining other Muslims towards into the suburbs of Cairo (Bunt, 2009). Learners don't sleep on reed mats in the open air, but in air –conditioned modern dorms. They study computer technology and tourism, access the Koran on CD – ROM and communicate via email (Bunt, 2009).

#### *4.2.2 Forums*

In 2001 muslimvillage.com forum was launched to provide a focal point for Muslims living in Australia and bind the community together as well as being an extensive source of information for locals and visitors.<sup>51</sup> The forum focuses on three strategic objectives: guidance, online discussion and life style.<sup>52</sup> It provides a good example of the range of discussions between Sunni and Shi'a<sup>53</sup> Muslims regarding their practices and interpretations of Islam. Participants in such discussions come from a variety of countries and cultures. While some posters are academics, there appears to be few postings from individuals occupying explicit roles of leadership in larger communities. The following exchange is between a Jew and a Muslim in muslimvillage.com:<sup>54</sup>

***Yehudit:*** I have many questions about Islam. The Quran claims that Abraham is a Muslim, based on the meaning of Muslim as submitting to God, and denies that Abraham is a Jew. If Abraham is a Muslim, then why aren't all Jews considered Muslims, as we also are under God, not as slaves but as servants. According to the Muslim definition a Muslim is one who believes in God, Muhammad as the messenger, in angels, end times etc, then Abraham wasn't a Muslim as he didn't believe in Muhammad as Muhammad didn't exist at that time. If taking Islam and being a Muslim means submitting to God, then aren't all Christians, Jews, Baha'is, Sikhs also Muslims, by this definition?

***Ibn Tarek:*** To be a Muslim today you need to believe in God alone and the fundamentals of belief he has given us through the Prophet Mohammad. Jews now have to believe in the tawhid (unity) of Allah, the Shariah and basic beliefs and the Prophet Mohammad (saw) to be considered Muslims. Abraham (as) believed in the unity of God and perhaps knew about the Messenger and he did not go astray and adhered to whatever shariah he was given by God. Technically, before the time of Mohammad (saw), all peoples that followed the correct shariah according to their nation and believed in the one God were submitting to Allah, and were therefore Muslims. This goes for all the Prophets essentially.

Not everyone savours such challenges to their faith. A Christian participant in the same forum posted the following question:

***Riggitt:*** This is my first post and had to start at the top so here goes. Why follow Islam or any religion for that matter? I was christened as Church of England so Anglican, however I do not follow any religion although for 30 yrs. I thought about it, asked questions, read and was genuinely looking for answers but got none that satisfied me. In the end I had to conclude and believe this very strongly that religion is 100% man made stories and rules. These stories and rules were passed down over time and more rules were added. I believe the original messages and teachings of many religions get distorted over time or distorted when it suits people and

<sup>50</sup> <<http://www.environment.harvard.edu/religion>>.

<sup>51</sup> See <[www.muslimvillage.com](http://www.muslimvillage.com)>

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>53</sup> 'Party' or 'sect', the followers of the line of 'Ali ibn Abu Talib.

<sup>54</sup> See <[www.muslimvillage.com](http://www.muslimvillage.com)>

people are gullible, uneducated, alone, angry enough to blindly listen and follow these individuals.

**Mango:** Most atheists are the well off. Most religious people are the poorer. You may find that ironic. But when your blessings are limited or indeed taken away from you realize that none can help you except God. What's even more ironic is the poorer more religious people tend to have less suicide in their part of the world than the well-to-do atheist/agnostic side of the world (...) Sometimes Allah gives atheists more material gains and an easier life than religious people and indeed there is a manifest wisdom in that. Atheists do lots of good in this world, but they do it for self-gratitude, and Allah will reward them for the good that they do in this life. But they have not done anything for Him nor have they worked towards attaining Heaven so they get nothing in the hereafter. All their rewards lie in this life and if you tell them this they are content with it. But Muslims on the other hand, who pray 5 times a day and worship Allah to the letter yet live in war torn countries and are mostly starving have an even greater reward in the hereafter, where it is a lasting abode and the pleasure of their Lord is bestowed upon them where after they won't grieve ever nor feel pain or sadness. And this is what we are content with.

Another Forum on Islam was formed by Shaykh Faisal Hamid Abdur – Razak from Toronto in 1992.<sup>55</sup> The Islamic Forum of Canada is engaged in exploring religious worldviews, and educating the Muslim families and helping them in all facets of their lives.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, it has the authority to perform Islamic marriages and make arrangements of Islamic Funerals as well as providing the religious and social needs of the community.<sup>57</sup>

#### *4.2.3 Publications*

Online religious resources have been growing rapidly, and interest among Internet users has been robust. Oxford Islamic Studies Online<sup>58</sup> features articles, biographies, primary texts, Qur'anic materials, and books by scholars in areas such as global Islamic history, concepts, people, practices, politics, and culture.<sup>59</sup> Articles come from The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Islamic World, The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World, The Islamic World: Past and Present, The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, The Oxford History of Islam, and What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam.<sup>60</sup> Another extensive reference is The Encyclopedia of Islam Online.<sup>61</sup> This is an online encyclopaedia with over 13,000 articles on topics in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies. The Encyclopedia of Islam Online represents a major resource in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, with the online version bringing remote access to over 13,000 articles.<sup>62</sup>

## **5. CASE STUDIES**

### *5. 1 Islam – Online*

IslamOnline.net was launched on June 24, 1997.<sup>63</sup> It is mainly financed by donations of the Qatari government and by selling its technical know – how to other Islamic institutions.<sup>64</sup> According to its mission statement, IslamOnline aims to “present the unified and lively nature of Islam that is keeping up with modern times in all areas”.<sup>65</sup> The website's objective is to “expand the circle of introducing Islam; present its comprehensiveness and the way its system and laws complement each other; to affirm its balance, fairness and applicability in all places and times; and present the tolerance and the humanity of its laws as well as to strengthen the ties of unity and affiliation

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<sup>55</sup> See <<http://www.islamicforumonline.com/>>

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> See <[www.oxfordislamicstudies.com](http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com)>

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>63</sup> See Wikipedia.org

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>65</sup> See <[www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net)>, [accessed 20 July, 2010].



between the members of the Islamic community and support informational and cultural exchange”.<sup>66</sup> Islam-Online invested heavily in the notion of the online *fatwa* as part of its site content (Bunt, 2003).<sup>67</sup> According to Alexa Internet, IslamOnline is one of the two most visited Islam-related websites on the Internet. In September 2007 most hits came from Egypt (21.4%), followed by the Palestinian Territories (11%), the United Arab Emirates (10.3%), Saudi Arabia (8.7%), Morocco (8.7%), USA (2.1%), finally Germany and the UK (0.9%).<sup>68</sup>

IslamOnline is classified into four main categories. Ask the Scholar, Cyber Counselling, questions related to *Hajj*<sup>69</sup> & *Umrah*, asking about Islam and Live *fatwa* dialogues between scholars and site visitors where questions are submitted immediately to an online scholar and an answer posted back instantly.<sup>70</sup>

IslamOnline Cyber Counseling Section covers a broad range of real life issues. The following select list is indicative of the range of topics (3787 in July 2010) that the counsellors have had to deal with:<sup>71</sup>

- A non-Muslim touching a translation of the Qur'an.
- The use of body scanners for security in US airports.
- Mixing between men & women.
- Celebrating the Prophet's birthday.
- Relying on Christian witnesses in Islamic marriages.
- Same sex attraction, and porn addiction problems.
- A Muslim mother of a Christian child.
- Married since two years but still virgin.

Another question tackles the theme of divorce by email:

“Hello, I’m a Christian girl, but I married a Muslim man because I love him so much. I was living with him for one year, and then he told me he wanted to go to my country to see my family. I was happy. I followed him to my country, then after one week he sent me an email to give me a divorce. He wrote divorce... divorce... divorce. He wrote that he doesn’t want to live with me because I don’t want to accept Islam, but it was not true because I told him I would accept Islam, but I don’t know anything! First I would have to study about Islam then I can become a Muslim. I did want the divorce, but I’m not accepting the divorce because I still love him. He said he can’t do anything because he gave me a divorce. Can you tell me please if there is any chance that I can live with him or what I have to do for us to be together?”<sup>72</sup>

Answer:

“Sister, there is no easy way to say it, but this brother is playing with you. I do not know in what manner you got married, but there is no such thing as divorce by e-mail. The same way he married you, is the same way he should divorce you. In Islam, the marriage requires witnesses and a registrar, whether that registrar is from the secular world, or is a Muslim cleric. Do you know if your marriage is registered or not? Secondly, if he was serious about you accepting Islam, he would teach you or better still Islamically, ensure that you are taught by a sister, which is the Islamically correct way. In addition he would have no relations with you until you are both married. This brother from what you have said has only one intention, and that is to live with you. In Islam, premarital relations, and extra-marital relations are not allowed. Families are approached in terms of marriage, and if one is mature in age, then the woman herself can be asked, but there are no ‘relationships’ until after the marriage. In addition it is preferable that there is at least a small marriage banquet, so that members of the community know that you are married to each other. Sister, this brother has taken advantage of your love for him, and as difficult as it may seem right now you can get over it, and move on with your life”<sup>73</sup>

Oppositely, an Islamic court in Malaysia declared that a Muslim man had legally ended his marriage by sending

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>67</sup> See Wikipedia.org

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>69</sup> The major pilgrimage to Mecca.

<sup>70</sup> See <www.islamonline.net>, [accessed 20 July, 2010].

<sup>71</sup> See <www.islamonline.net>, [accessed 20 July, 2010].

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>73</sup> See <www.islamonline.net>, [accessed 20 July, 2010].

his wife a mobile telephone text message.<sup>74</sup> That ruling had been endorsed by the prime minister's religious affairs adviser. In another affair, a sharia court declared that a text message sent by a man to his wife reading "if you don't leave your parents house, you'll be divorced", had legal force.<sup>75</sup> This reflects a long-standing dispute on the nature of religious authority in Islam and resentment at the status of some scholars on the Muslim world, particularly those from traditional institutions.

Some Muftis sets out the ways in which they believe knowledge can be acquired and religious authority observed (Bunt, 2003). Accordingly, the status of a Mufti trained in non – Azhari institutions outside of the Arab Muslim world is justified, particularly as he seeks to present his opinions and influence in English –language fatwa website (Ibid).

## 5. 2 Fatwa – Online

Fatwa-Online is an English – language website registered in Saudi Arabia and is closely connected with a range of explicitly *salafi* websites (Sisler, 2009). There are major sections for Cyber Counselling, About Islam, Publications, News, Useful Links & Free Downloads.<sup>76</sup> A special section labelled "Muslim minorities" is advertised on the main page of the site where *fatawas* directly addressed to Muslims living in the West are published. Scholars utilise their knowledge on a broad range of questions which have been sent in by surfers. These include mainly *fatwas* issued by Abdul – Azeez ibn Baaz (former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia); Hammad Ibn Mohamed Al-Ansari; Mohamed Nasiruddin al-Albani (influential Islamic scholar of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) and Muhammad ibn al Uthaymeen (one of the most prominent Islamic scholars of the latter half of the twentieth century).

Unlike Islam Online, Fatwa – Online does not provide Live *fatwa* where petitioners can interact directly with Muftis.

It is difficult to determine the origins of petitioners, given that the website just publishes the questions that have been sent in, and that conditions of anonymity apply. Cyber counselling areas indicate that there is a clear demand for information on marriage and sexual relations. Examples of the type of advice and questions that appear on the site (drawn from the Categories section of Fatwa – Online) are discussed below, in order to approach the counselling methodology and type of language applied by petitioner and counsellor.<sup>77</sup> The nature of some of the questions suggests that these are some issues that individuals do not wish to discuss with local religious authorities or with families. In the first case, a 'new Muslim sister' was concerned about performing oral sex on her husband:<sup>78</sup>

Q: "One of the sisters is asking, saying that she is a practicing young woman who got married six months ago. She says her husband demands she performs oral sex on him, and she asks if this is permissible or not?"

The answer from Fatwa – Online advised the women not to do this practice. Their response included an appropriate saying from *Tafseer al – Qurtubee* as well as Kerstin Rosenquist, Professor at the Faculty of Odontology in southern Sweden:<sup>79</sup>

A: "All praise is due to Allah (alone). There is no doubt that the request of this practice from the husband of the questioner is a disgusting practice and obviously disliked. It also undermines the good manners between the husband and wife, and could possibly be a cause for (each partner) disliking (the other) and leading to divorce".<sup>80</sup> They continued "Aaishah, was one of the wives of the Messenger of Allah and it has narrated on her authority that he did not see this of her and she did not see of him (private parts)".<sup>81</sup>

"The basic ruling regarding the wife seeking pleasure of her husband's private part is that of permissibility, however, that which is feared is that this act may lead to possible oral intake of sperm or prostatic fluids. The Hanaabillah have indicated the permissibility of a wife kissing her husband's tool, as is mentioned in (al –Insaaf) of Maardeenee, and this is the opinion of Ibn'Aqeel and other than him. However, people who contract a high – risk variety of the human papilloma virus, HPV, during oral sex are more likely to fall ill with

<sup>74</sup> See *Malaysia Reviews Texting Divorce*, available at <[www.news.bbc.co.uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk)>, [accessed 1 August, 2010].

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>76</sup> See <[www.fatwa-online.com](http://www.fatwa-online.com)>, [accessed 1 August, 2010].

<sup>77</sup> See <<http://www.fatwa-online.com/marriage/sexualrelations/sre003/index.htm>>, [accessed 1 August, 2010].

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*

mouth cancer, according to a study conducted at the Malmö University, Faculty of Odontology in southern Sweden”.<sup>82</sup>

The issue of polygamy is brought into another stark question on the Fatwa – Online site:

Q: “Some people say that marrying more than one wife is not allowed unless a person has orphans under his care and he fears that he will not do justice between them. Then he may marry their mother or one of her daughters. For evidence, Qur’an says: *And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphan –girls, then marry women of your choice, two, three or four.*”<sup>83</sup>

A: “The meaning of the verse is that if a person has under his care an orphan and he fears that he will not give her the proper amount of dower, then he should marry other women, for there are many women and Allah will not make things difficult for him.”<sup>84</sup> The verse points to the legality of marrying two, three or four wives. This is allowed because it leads to more chastity, lowering of eyesight and guarding of the private parts (...) However, one must meet the condition of justice among the wives and the ability to take care of and tend to the wives.<sup>85</sup> If a person fears that he will not do justice, then he may only marry one wife in addition to having slaves. The practice of the Prophet indicates and stresses that. When he died, he had nine wives. Allah says about him in Soorah Ahzaab: *Indeed in the Messenger of Allah you have a good example to follow.* The Prophet made it clear to his nation that it was allowed for him to have more than four wives. Therefore, following his example on this point would mean taking four wives or less. Beyond four wives is something that is specific for the Prophet only”.<sup>86</sup>

Not having access to petitioners, it is difficult for the author to gauge the impact of the advice provided by *Fawta Online*. It is a comprehensive and regularly augmented resource, covering a broad range of questions. Consideration might have to be given to the implications of such advice being placed online, and the ways in which the information is accessed and processed by the Mufti. This would require the establishment of monitored reader groups and is a subject that could be the focus of future research.

### 5. 3 Ask – Imam

Askimam.org is an online Islamic website founded by Ebrahim Dessai, a Muslim Deobandi mufti and teacher of Islamic law in Camperdown, South Africa.<sup>87</sup> The aim of this site is “to provide easy access to common Islamic questions and answers to anyone using the World Wide Web”.<sup>88</sup> Essentially, Dessai studied Islamic education for nine years, as well as the principles of issuing fatwas for two years in India.<sup>89</sup> Some Islamic websites present a searchable listing of fatwas, and a key word search should bring the surfer to the subject of interest within this site. The influence of Indian scholars is evident on Ask - Imam. If success can be measured in the growth of content, then Ask - Imam has proved to be popular, with new content being added to the site on a regular basis. The domain name was registered in 2004 to an address in Alexandria, USA.<sup>90</sup>

Ask – Imam is searchable, with an interface containing fatwas by categories and a database that has been classified by topic in alphabetical order. Some of the features that have been added to the site include: “Ask a New Question”, “Fatwa Search” with a drop – down menu, and “Random Picked Fatwas”. All the materials are in English, and there are no images or graphic image files on the site, accelerating its download time. Petitioners can be updated of new topics on fatwas or hadith via an e-mailing list. The breadth of topics included on the site is indicated in the “Fatwa’s by Categories”. The range of questions features answers drawn from a variety of sources, including Quran and Hadith, and indicates the concerns of the readers. A selection includes:

“Bombings in London, justified?”

“I am 15 years old and I have been wearing the headscarf for just over a year. I hate it. Can I take it off and wear it when I am really ready?”

<sup>82</sup> See <<http://www.fatwa-online.com/marriage/sexualrelations/sre003/index.htm>>, [accessed 1 August, 2010].

<sup>83</sup> Soorah an-Nisaa : 3

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>87</sup> See <[www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)>, [accessed 2 August, 2010].

<sup>88</sup> See About Us – AskImam.org

<sup>89</sup> See <[www.askimam.org](http://www.askimam.org)>, [accessed 2 August, 2010].

<sup>90</sup> See <[www.whois.net](http://www.whois.net)>, [accessed 2 August, 2010].

“Is it right to destroy posters which kuffar<sup>91</sup> advertise on boards, although it is not a Muslim land?”

“Is jihad fardh<sup>92</sup> on every single Muslim in the U.K., considering the fact that the majority of Muslims don’t even perform their 5 times daily prayers?”

“Can I join the U.S. army?”

“Salaams. I’m American. Who do you think I should vote for, Al – Gore or Bush?”

“Is it permissible for my wife to have an abortion?”

Ask – Imam also contains many fatwas associated with Islamic Politics and Muslim Minorities. Working in non-Muslim countries & following their politics, especially for Muslims, raises cultural and religious concerns. Western Muslims, because they are undergoing the experience of becoming established in new societies, have no choice but to go back to the beginning and study their points of reference in order to delineate and distinguish what, in their religion, is unchangeable from what is subject to change, and to measure, from the inside, what they have achieved and what they have lost by being in the West (Ramadan, 2004). The views of Ulama differ in those areas where there is no clear cut evidence hence they would judge the situation based upon the Quran and Sunnah.<sup>93</sup> Two examples of fatwas, representing the online formulation of petition and response, are provided below. The first, a good example of a contemporary issue relating to Muslim minorities in the UK, and seeking a solution via an electronic fatwa, comes from Mufti Dessai:<sup>94</sup>

Q: “What are Muslims supposed to do if they are called up to fight for Britain against Muslim countries? ”

A: “It is not permissible for any Muslim living in a non-Muslim country to fight for his country if he believes that his country's involvement in the war is incorrect. I understand that every citizen in a democratic state has a legitimate right to raise his concerns against any wrong perpetrated by his government. Muslims living in a democratic state should use that privilege to address their concerns (...) and Allah Ta'ala Knows Best ”.

The question of embryo – transfer and its legitimacy in Islam emerged:<sup>95</sup>

Q: “ Is embryo – transfer can be permissible in Islam?

A: “In reality, the embryo is the product of another man and woman. The lady in whom the embryo is implanted is the surrogate mother. Surrogacy would not be permissible as the source of the embryo is of another man who is not the husband of the surrogate mother. ”

Ask-Imam represents a Muslim institution/individual in a minority context, which has acquired a broad global audience for its opinions, which are sought from a variety of religious perspectives (Bunt, 2003). Several new fatwas emerge on the site every day, making it likely to receive substantial return visits from interested petitioners (Ibid). The questions themselves indicate some of the challenges facing Muslims today, although it is not possible to quantify the effect or influence that this information has on communities (Ibid).

## **6. Religious Ritual: The Practice of Faith**

In the light of the foregoing, it would appear that there are three countervailing tendencies in terms of the Net’s impact on religious ideologies (Kinney, 1995). The first is the pull of petitioners away from organizational enclosure and the potential for boundary – crossing contact between individuals of different faiths and world views (Ibid). This has led to the creation of religious hybrids and informal liaisons between strange bedfellows and increased the opportunity for cyber conflict between religious individuals (Ibid).

Second, the culture of the Internet, with its individualistic, neo-anarchistic and iconoclastic tendencies, does appear to be somewhat antagonistic to the traditional expression of religiosity, and to favour alternative approaches like those suggested by the thoughts and activities of techno paganism (Hojsgaard et al.,2005). Third , new technologies have often been referred to as “sacred” in their own right – it is therefore appropriate to explore this dimension in computer mediated communication (Casey, 2006).

<sup>91</sup> Non believers.

<sup>92</sup> Obligatory.

<sup>93</sup> See Imam Habeeb, *Living in Non-Muslim Countries*, available at: <<http://en.allexperts.com>>, [accessed 4 August, 2010].

<sup>94</sup> See <[www.askimam.org](http://www.askimam.org)>, [accessed 2 August, 2010].

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

An important area where Internet has significant potential for religious impact is that of virtual ritual. Those undertaking studies of religion and the Internet argue that as religion moves into the online environment, it is critical to examine the ways in which the Internet functions as a mediator of religious practice, specifically religious ritual – for a change in the experience of ritual hold potential change for religious sensibilities (Casey, 2006).

Some varieties, such as the Islamic Research Association's website contains detailed information of religious activities, and employs online prayers and burial.<sup>96</sup> What all forms share is the felt experience for the participant of being part of a group whose attention is directed beyond itself to Shi'a community.<sup>97</sup> Among the activities was a Commemoration of Ayatollah Khomeini (Bunt, 2003). The Council of Shia Ulama of North America is represented online on the site, with photographs and reproduced letters, but little in the way of decision – making (Ibid).

As videoconferencing and other forms of networked contact evolve in cyberspace, it is likely that virtual networked forms of ritual will develop (Kinney, 1995). The recent release of Second Life lets many Muslims simultaneously choose animated avatars which they can use to navigate through a three – dimensional virtual environment and talk to each other.<sup>98</sup>

As of April 2008, there were eight mosques in Second Life (Derrickson, 2008). In addition to the Mecca complex, which houses both the Masjid<sup>99</sup> al-Haram and the smaller Aisha Bint Abu Bakr Mosque, Second Life has myriad others, most of which are based on famous real life mosques (Ibid). The Chebi mosque, is a replica of Cordoba's Mosque, Spain (Ibid). Decorated with Islamic architecture, the mosque has a minaret and a prayer niche indicating to direction of the Ka'bah.<sup>100</sup> Inside the mosque, there are interactive copies of Qur'an and the English translation of its meanings.<sup>101</sup> Nearly 1,500 surfers are visiting the virtual mosque every month, including non-Muslims.<sup>102</sup> The Hassan II mosque is based on its real life counterpart in Casablanca, Morocco (Ibid). Others copy the real life Blue Mosque of Istanbul, and the Alhambra (Ibid). Mohammed Yusuf, a Sweden-based Saudi psychiatrist announced that the know-Islam campaign he launched along with other Second Life Muslims has attracted non-Muslims.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, hundreds of curious avatars of different nationalities want to know more about Islam, and three Christian visitors have reverted to Islam.<sup>104</sup> "We meet hundreds of avatars every month to explain the pillars and teachings of Islam (...) hundreds of curious avatars of different nationalities want to know more about Islam".<sup>105</sup>

Accordingly, cyberspace can be of great help in issuing fatwas, all of which may enrich people's lives. However, it has also the embryonic potential to grow into a devastating distraction from any form of the inner life where it may prove to be religion's biggest challenge in the days to come (Kinney, 1995).

## 7. Future Trends

In the aftermath of the terrible acts of terrorism on September 11, 2001, which shocked, saddened, and angered people the world over, many people in Western countries began to question the teachings of Islam (O'Connor, 2009). Unfortunately, it is often the case that violent political acts by militant Muslim groups obscure better understanding of Islam (Ibid). That said, most Muslims are peaceful and wish no harm to other people. The problem comes from the belief among extremist Muslims that world conquest is the only strategy acceptable to God (Drummond, 2009). While certain verses in the Quran have been used to claim holy direction for such a bloody plan, many more condemn the unjust and cruel practices of terrorists and Fascist regimes (Ibid). Many of the arguments made by the extremist Muslims are actually based on controversial interpretation of statements alleged to have been made by early Islamic leaders.<sup>106</sup> If kindness and peace are integrated into the faith through

<sup>96</sup> See <<http://www.islamicresearch.org/>>

<sup>97</sup> Ibid

<sup>98</sup> See Second Life, *op. cit.*

<sup>99</sup> Mosque, place of prayer.

<sup>100</sup> See Islam in Second Life, available at <[www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net)>

<sup>101</sup> Ibid

<sup>102</sup> Ibid

<sup>103</sup> See Islam in Second Life, available at <[www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net)>

<sup>104</sup> Ibid

<sup>105</sup> Ibid

<sup>106</sup> Thus the moderate Muslim Sa'id al-Ashmawy, former chief justice of Egypt's supreme court says: "Actually, the Koran's call to arms, or jihad, relates to a specific episode when the Prophet prepared to attack his enemies from the city of Mecca. It was never intended as a prescription for permanent warfare..." Another contemporary Egyptian scholar, Mahmud Shaltut, criticizes the traditional Islamic doctrine of abrogation as a valid principle for Quranic interpretation. The Sudanese scholar, Mahmud Mohamed Taha, has contended that Meccan Islam alone (not Medinan Islam) qualifies to be the substance of a relevant and universal religion today. He understands the Medinan textual abrogations (*naskh*) of Meccan texts to be temporal



plan of Islam, scholars can begin online to construct a foundation upon which Islam can continue its expansion, whilst accomplishing its goals through advancement of the human condition.

Many imams have urged that a simple reading of the Quran guides the true believer to mercy, cure and light.<sup>107</sup> Abandoning violence and focusing on true Islamic traditions through Islamic sites would defang many of the radical groups which have hijacked major sects in the past (Açikgenç, 2002). A number of extremist Muslims have poisoned many schools of theology. Just as there are Christians who have not been to church in years, there are many Muslims who have doubts about what their role is in Islam (Drummond, 2009). A leader who advances the purpose of democracy as service to God may be able to gain a great deal of the public trust. Certainly even within Islam there are Generation-Y people, who demand to be persuaded rather than accept fatwas without good reason.

Second, some of the tensions we are seeing now are related to the impersonal forces of technological globalization.<sup>108</sup> Muslims and non-Muslims used to ignore each other on a daily basis. This is no longer possible, because Muslims see the Western world on TV and via Internet every day.<sup>109</sup> If somebody in, say, France says something “insulting” about Islam — which in the 19th century would have gone unnoticed in Egypt — thanks to ICTs (email, mobile phones and satellite TV), millions of Muslims will know about it within minutes.<sup>110</sup>

And third, the growth in Islam comes from its promise to believers that Allah’s will is made manifest in the faith. “O ye who believe! Shall I show you a commerce that will save you from a painful doom? You should believe in Allah and his messenger, and should strive for the cause of Allah with your wealth and your lives. That is better for you, if ye did but know. He will forgive you your sins and bring you into Gardens underneath which rivers flow, and pleasant dwellings in Gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph”.<sup>111</sup> True leaders and Muslim scholars will bring to mind that for most of history, the duty of imams in the faith has been to help communities, to advance hope and protect the innocent. Conquest has always been the aberration, and it only takes a charismatic leader at the right time to lead Islam to its rightful, peaceful, place in the world (Drummond, 2009).

## 8. Concluding Remarks

This article has sought to demonstrate that decision-making and activism are two principal zones in cyberspace, although there can be a confusion between e-jihad and fatwas. Signs of both zones may be located in the margins of online Islamic activities: whilst the application of new technologies (forums, websites, and newsgroups) remains in the hands of individuals, networks, and dislocated groups, not necessarily associated with one another or formally organized under a single banner, some religious opinions are safer to articulate in cyberspace than in physical space. It is seen that the “digital divide” is a major factor in many Muslim societies, whilst information technology is not accessible to all. When technology for accessing the World Wide Web becomes cheaper, the availability of alternative interfaces (Internet cafés, broadband, dedicated email) will offer better access for marginalized communities.

One a different note, technology is not always the solution: there is the issue of ensuring an equality of Internet access between and within generations, educating users on the medium and developing literacy rates. Mainstream communications, voice – recognition systems and touch – screen technologies are amongst the tools through which computers can empower non-literate communities, if they are made available. Such provision could be encouraged by da’wa,<sup>112</sup> even encouraging people to explore online fatwas in written and audio-visual forms, or even to participate in forms of electronic jihad.

By and large, the websites and perspectives discussed in this article do not follow rigid nation-state boundaries of interest, and at times associate themselves with more globalised concepts associated with specific understandings of Islam and Muslim identity. These websites are currently read and created primarily by an “elite” and for an “elite”, although this does not necessarily negate them as an influence.

Topics which still need to be addressed include how Muslim females are applying cyber Islamic mediums, whether new typologies of female imams are emerging; and are female Muslims being attributors to sections within sites, or being simply content rather than content authors?

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only. Given this understanding, he says, Muslims can develop a new Shari’ah which is based on the morality of Meccan (earlier) Islam and which would abandon the various forms of discrimination that characterize Islam’s present Shari’ah, including discrimination against women. His stance, considered by the Sudanese government as blasphemy, eventually cost him his life. See Ernest Hahn, *Jihad in Islam: Is Islam Peaceful or Militant? And An Initial Christian Response*, available at <[www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org)>, [accessed 11 August, 2010].

<sup>107</sup> See Reading the Qur’an but Practicing Something Else, available at <[www.quranicpath.com](http://www.quranicpath.com)>, accessed [11 August, 2010].

<sup>108</sup> See Why the Future May Not Belong to Islam, available at <[www.globalpolitician.com](http://www.globalpolitician.com)>, [accessed 11 August, 2010].

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>111</sup> Qur’an: Surat As –Saff.

<sup>112</sup> The propagation of Islam.

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