

Virtual Islam: Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments

Gary Bunt

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It is fitting, and an indicator of its qualities, that this survey of Internet sites with Islamic content should have sprung from a study of contemporary *ijtihad*. The cliché that interpretation should have been “closed” by medieval scholarship has always been problematic. The Muslim world is too diverse, too extensive; and evidence is all around today of vigorous interpretation, from the tauhidists in the last century to contemporary “fundamentalists,” so-called, not to say the circles of more liberal opinions on how to interpret Islam within the contexts of the modern, and now post-modern, world. Taking “interpretation” broadly, cassette tapes circulate widely with sermons and other exhortations, often in the vernacular, that draw on social and political experience; but even narrowly as *tafsir*, present interpretations explore liberal and even humanist methods, middle-of-the-road positions between more notorious rigorist ones. It is particularly in this sense that contemporary *ijtihad*, in which more than clerics participate, is opened, if not re-opening, not least by new media technologies.

The Internet is an important site of this activity in a special regard. It is not only the leading technology of the day, but also one that has passed from academic and research hands into public hands within the last decade. Combining aspects of mass media with consumer-level production, its manifestation particularly in the World Wide Web has become a means of publication that almost as accessible as cassette recorders, but with far wider and faster reach. To this new medium has migrated a diverse Islam of many spokespersons, discourses, and focuses whose breadth is not apparent in older, more centralized media. Indeed, the technology positively enables expanding the breadth of opinion and topics of Islamic concern and interpretation between those associated primarily with text and with talk in a medium that singularly, pervasively, and over great distances blurs their privileges and distinction.

Gary Bunt provides a detailed, systematic, and frequently comparative guide to this field that is manifest in “cyberspace,” which he names “virtual” Islam. The Islam is real enough. It includes both official voices speaking for and from established institutional bases, from madrasa to international Sufi *tariqa*, and the pioneers in this medium, concerned and pious Muslims who want, variously, to see their religion represented on the Internet and to make use of it to facilitate Muslim lives in the modern world. Just as the pioneers, who were largely Muslim members of professions that first got access to the Internet but not themselves religious professionals, moved beyond practicalities of networking, such as sharing information about where to find mosques or halal butchers, to sharing interpretations, so too

religious professionals have come on line, but within a context they share with other Muslims as virtual equals. Bunt brings the methods and sensibility of comparative religious studies to describing what Islam and which Muslims get on-line, extended into "cyberspace," which combines the immediacy of local traditions and the systematizing impulses of more detached scholarly traditions in something that only the Internet could provide, worldwide reach for any Muslim opinion, including the opinions of Islam's contemporary and increasingly bourgeois center.

Besides serving as a guide to the range of opinion, concerns, and networks projected by Muslims into "cyberspace," this book is an object lesson in their real diversity and the breadth of their center, where both practical activities and active projects of thinking through Islam to how to live in a modern world get the attention that, say, goes to preachers in other media, where communication is still predominately one-to-many instead of many-to-many on the Internet. Moreover, Bunt discusses these questions in much the same terms as they are issues for believers, with which he is familiar.

In brisk order, Bunt introduces primary forms of Islamic expression and their on-line presences, starting from the primary sources that are available in formats from CDs to the Internet, and then proceeds to describe the diverse explorations of faith and practice, political (particularly party or hizb) Islam, the advent of more conventional authorities of instruction and consultation. Addressing two kinds of readers, he views on-line Islam as an adjunct or complement for the believer, and speculates that "cyber-mediated environments" might after all "affirm a sense of commonality, associated with shared expressions and understandings" (p. 132,) though its practices render authority and control problematic. This book acknowledges epistemological issues that it does not explore in depth, draws up some tentative balances appropriate to the still-early intersections of Islam with the Internet and related technologies, and provides useful lists of Internet sites and sources in addition to a more conventional bibliography on contemporary Islam in English. And it includes a basic glossary for newcomers to Islam.

Jon W. Anderson
Catholic University of America
Washington, DC 20064 / USA