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REIMAGINING ISLAM IN DIASPORA
The Politics of Mediated Community

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Abstract / This article looks at the mediation of one aspect of Middle Eastern culture, Islam, in the context of diasporic Muslim communities in the West. It explores the impact of information and communications technologies on debates relating to the normative boundaries of Islamic identity and community. It is argued that media technologies provide channels for new or previously disenfranchised voices to be heard in the public sphere of Muslim diasporas. Simultaneously, traditional structures of authority are refigured and, to some extent, marginalized in favour of alternative interpretations of religious knowledge perceived as more relevant to contemporary diasporic life in the West.

Keywords / diaspora / Internet / Islam / media / religion and communications

My interest here is in the Middle East – and Islam more particularly – as a form of 'travelling culture'. What happens, I ask, when, through migration and the formation of diasporic communities, the Middle East becomes reconstituted and rearticulated in spaces and societies far removed from the geographic Middle East? More specifically, what role do communication and information technologies play in the formation and, more importantly, the *re*formation of these communities?[1] My aim in this contribution is to demonstrate that diasporic media can and should be understood as much more than simply a means by which information of interest to a given community can be exchanged, or a means for communicating images of that community to the wider society. Indeed, the approach advocated here is distinctly suspicious of the very notion of 'given community'. The line of argument taken suggests that we need to understand these media as spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and reimagined. In this article I explore the discursive politics that surround the articulation of Islam within Muslim communities in Western Europe and North America. Through a discussion of various forms of media – and the Internet in particular – I demonstrate the mechanisms through which dominant discourses of Islam emerge within communities and are then, in turn, challenged by dissenting voices which increasingly turn to the spaces engendered by new information and communication technologies in order to speak their alternatives. These new media are likely to play an increasingly important role among young Muslims born and raised in the West as they search for spaces

and languages in which to shape an Islam that is both relevant to their sociocultural situatedness and free from the hegemony of traditional sources of interpretation and authority. To what extent do information and communication technologies allow for the meaning of diasporic Muslim identities to be contested, negotiated and reformulated? How are new media affecting debates between Muslims about what Islam means today and – more importantly in the context of politics – about who possesses the authority to speak on its behalf?

I begin with a brief discussion of some of the issues related to representations of community and identity.[2] Rather than identifying any single, monovocal source of community definition, my aim here is to draw attention to the importance of stressing the diversity and multiple sites of articulation which define the identities of various diasporic communities. I then proceed to identify several recent transformations in Muslim diasporic discourse and explain how information and communication technologies can be understood as important enabling agents in these changes. This section places particular emphasis on the ways in which the younger generation of Muslims living in the West are using new media to communicate interpretations of Islam suited to the demands and concerns of their particular circumstances. The piece concludes with some reflections on how the 'politics of knowledge' engendered by these technologies is likely to influence the emergence of alternative conceptions of Muslim identity and discourse in diaspora.

The Politics of Identity and Community

Any analysis of 'identity' or 'community' can easily stray into an essentialist mode that involves constructing boundaries around some social phenomenon (person, nation, culture, religious community, etc.) and assigning them certain timeless characteristics or traits. It is, quite literally, to impute an *essence.* According to Pnina Werbner, this sort of analysis

> *. . . obscures the* relational *aspects of group culture or identity, and valorise[s] instead the subject in itself, as autonomous and separate, as if such a subject could be demarcated out of context, unrelated to an external other or discursive purpose. . . . It is to imply an internal sameness. (Werbner, 1997: 228)*

What must be stressed above all is the sense in which the construction of group identity is inherently a socio*political* process, involving as it does dialogue, negotiation and debate as to 'who we are' and, moreover, what it *means* to be 'who we are'.

Seeking to distinguish between essentialist and non-essentialist modes of thought, Gerd Baumann speaks of the difference between 'dominant' and 'demotic' discourses on culture and community. The dominant discourse, he points out, aims towards closure. It seeks to reduce cultural complexity to the simple equation: 'Culture = community = ethnic identity = nature = culture' (Baumann, 1997: 214). The demotic discourse, on the other hand, problematizes the boundaries of culture and community. It sees cultural identity as contingent and negotiable. It should be pointed out that these two modes are not

deployed solely by ethnographers; that is, they are not simply descriptions of how analysts objectify and study culture. Communities and 'cultures' often vacillate in their own self-representations between dominant and demotic modes of identification, and this is usually indicative of the politics within those communities. Werbner summarizes the point nicely:

> *The argument about ethnic naming highlights the fact that it is not only Western representations of the Other which essentialise. In their performative rhetoric the people we study essentialise their imagined communities in order to mobilise for action. Within the spaces of civil society, the politics of ethnicity in Britain are not so much imposed as grounded in essentialist self-imaginings of community. Hence, ethnic leaders essentialise communal identities in their competition for state grants and formal leadership positions. But – equally importantly – such leaders narrate and argue over these identities in the social spaces which they themselves have created, far from the public eye. (Werbner, 1997: 230)*

She is referring here to a politics which takes place not in the public spaces of formal institutions, but within spaces and forums that we do not usually see. Award ceremonies, weddings and mosques are all important instances of such spaces. These places do not relate to activities which we would normally consider to be political, but all are examples of practices which can and often do involve the narration and appropriation of political identity. This is why it has become all the more important to emphasize the dialogic nature of community. As Werbner continues:

> *A moral community is not a unity. It is full of conflict, of internal debate about right and wrong. . . . Such debates . . . involve competition for the right to name: Who are we? What do we stand for? What are we to be called? Are we Muslims? Democrats? Pakistanis? Socialists? Blacks? Asians? (Werbner, 1997: 239)*

The dominant discourse of identity which arises out of such situations is often quite literally the 'dominant' discourse in that it represents the strongest voices within any community: those who have managed in the demotic debate to impose a discursive hegemony which negates dissenting voices of internal difference. 'Instead of seeing the different forms of identity as allegiances to a place or as a property,' argues Chantal Mouffe, 'we ought to realise that they are the stake of a power struggle' (Mouffe, 1994: 108). This becomes apparent later when we go on to look at Islam in translocal spaces. I argue that encounters between the Muslim and his or her Muslim 'other' give rise to competing discourses as to what Islam is and who may speak on its behalf.

According to Lila Abu-Lughod, one method of avoiding essentialist modes of analysing culture is to 'write *against* culture'. By this, she means that we need to move away from conceptions of culture as something that can be fixed, measured off and described – in short, we need to stop using culture as an ascriptive category. Looking at traditional anthropological discourse, Abu-Lughod has noted that culture has often functioned primarily to 'make other'. However, she warns of the dangers inherent in taking the particular situatedness of a few individuals as representative of an entire culture:

> *When one generalizes from experiences and conversations with a number of specific people in a community, one tends to flatten out differences among them and to homogenize them. The*

> *appearance of an absence of internal differentiation makes it easier to conceive of a group of people as a discrete, bounded entity who do this or that and believe such-and-such. . . . The erasure of time and conflict make what is inside the boundary set up by homogenization something essential and fixed. (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 152–3)*

Instead, Abu-Lughod suggests that we might more usefully write what she terms 'ethnographies of the particular'. By this she means that we need to pay close attention not only to people's situatedness in particular sociocultural contexts, but also to their situatedness *inside* these contexts. What power relationships obtain in any given community, and where are individuals positioned vis-a-vis these structures? What individual meanings do subjectivities derive from the signifying practices of a culture?

> *In writing 'against' culture (or ethnicity) we thus seek to discover more hidden forms of identification and to highlight the arguments of identity* within *ethnic collectivities about who 'they' are and thus who may legitimately represent 'them' and 'their' interests or loyalties in the public arena. (Caglar, 1997: 176)*

Incoherence, therefore, needs to be stressed as much as, if not over, coherence. We need to understand the ways in which people 'are confronted with choices, struggle with others, make conflicting statements, argue about points of view on the same events . . . and fail to predict what will happen to them or those around them' (Caglar, 1997: 154). In diaspora, these processes of community and identity articulation become even more pronounced. The estrangement of a community in diaspora – its separation from the 'natural' setting of the homeland – often leads to a particularly intense search for and negotiation of identity: gone are many traditional anchor points of culture; conventional hierarchies of authority can fragment. In short, the condition of diaspora is one in which the multiplicity of identity and community is a key dynamic. Debates about the meanings and boundaries of affiliation are hence a defining characteristic of the diaspora community.

If we draw these insights into the context of Muslim diasporic communities, their relevance becomes clear almost immediately. For example, although there are approximately 7 million Muslims currently living in Western Europe, many of them are only 'nominally' Muslim, belonging to a category which some writers call the 'culturalist' Muslim. This term refers to those whose ethnohistorical roots qualify them as Muslims, but who do not practise their religion or consider it to be a significant component of their self-identities. Felice Dassetto has recently estimated that up to 60 percent of Europe's Muslims fall into this category (Dassetto, 1993). What our preceding discussion has made clear, however, are the dangers involved in trying to label or fix these identities. Because it often changes from context to context, political identity is never an immutable category. Identity always needs to be situated and therefore also understood as a product of particular sociopolitical circumstances. Viewing identity in this way helps us to understand how in Bradford at the height of the Rushdie Affair in 1989 thousands of people who might otherwise have been regarded merely as 'culturalist' Muslims could take to the streets in protest against what they perceived as a grave insult to Islam. It is hence only by placing

forms of behaviour within specific political contexts that we can understand the politicization of Islam. In order to simplify matters somewhat I concentrate here not on people of Muslim 'background', but rather primarily on individuals whose self-descriptions and identities *do* involve Islam (however defined) as a key (and often primary) component. These then are people who conscientiously try to live their lives as 'good' Muslims, seeking whenever possible to make their religion relevant to daily experience.

Living (and Revising) Islam in Diaspora

Up to 40 percent of today's Muslims live in minority situations, many of them as communities within a wider, non-Muslim society (Dassetto, 1993). This status, as discussed later, involves a number of advantages and disadvantages. It means coming to terms with an unfamiliar set of circumstances, a requirement to engage with new cultures and an ability to adjust to inevitable changes in one's own tradition. 'We cannot assume', argues Barbara Metcalf however, 'that the old and new cultures are fixed, and that change results from pieces being added and subtracted. Instead, new cultural and institutional expressions are being created using the symbols and institutions of the received tradition' (Metcalf, 1996: 7). We are therefore not talking about cases of loss and gain, or of aspects of Islam simply 'disappearing' in diaspora. What we see is a far more complex *hybrid* condition, one in which Islamic meanings shift, change and transmutate, where things *become something else*. Likewise Islam becomes represented in new forms and via new media – a phenomenon which is explored in depth in a subsequent section. Much of this involves bringing Islam into the forums of popular culture and making it available via a wide variety of media. Television, the Internet and 'secular' literature now suddenly all become sources of Islamic knowledge. Religion has to be seen to offer something to those young Muslims who find themselves unemployed, alienated or lost in the majority society. Some argue that this can be accomplished by attempting to relate aspects of wider popular culture in, say, the UK to a Muslim identity. In order to appreciate the implications of this shift in the delivery of knowledge, we need to reorient our analysis of Islam to focus on flux and disjunction rather than on stability and continuity. As becomes clear, the spaces of diasporic Islam seem to provide fertile venues for the rethinking and reformulation of tradition and the construction of an Islam for generations to come.

Many young Muslims emphasize the importance of language. There is a perceived need to make Islam widely available to those whose first (and sometimes only) language is English. The importance of diasporic publications such as the popular magazines *Q-News* and *The Muslim News* is therefore difficult to underestimate. *Q-News* 'appeals to young, educated Muslims, impatient of sectarianism, and is able through an international language, English, to access innovative and relevant Islamic scholarship' (Lewis, 1994: 207). This publication has also contributed enormously towards the availability of sound religious advice through a column by the late Dr Syed Mutawalli ad-Darsh, a prominent religious scholar in the UK. Every fortnight in *Q-News* he would dispense *fatwas* (legal opinions) on a vast range of issues relevant to Islam in

modern society. Many of these were answers to questions sent in by readers on marriage, sexuality and contraception – topics which young Muslims often find it difficult to raise with traditional *ulama* in local mosques. Several Islamic publishing houses in the UK have also dedicated themselves to producing useful materials for English-speaking Muslims. Among them are Ta-Ha in London and the publishing wing of the Islamic Foundation in Leicester. This latter organization generates a wide range of literature ranging from children's books to treatises on Islamic economics and the translated works of the late Abu 'Ala Mawdudi, a prominent Pakistani Islamist (and ideologue of the Jama'at-i Islami Party) whose writing often constitutes an important starting point for many young Muslims in the West. 'We try to make our coverage general,' they say, 'so that any tendency or movement – and especially their children – can use our books'.[3] The Foundation also produces literature targeted at non-Muslims in public life in order to help them understand the beliefs and circumstances of their Muslim employees, colleagues, constituents and pupils (McDermott and Ahsan, 1993). Another writer mentions the emergence of what she terms 'Islamic English' within some Muslim communities. She mentions, for example, the Islamically inflected phraseologies specific to African-American Muslims in the USA (Metcalf, 1996: xv).

Muslim communities are also embroiled today in complex debates about the very nature and boundaries of their religion. What does Islam mean to Muslims living in the West? From whom can reliable knowledge about Islam be gained? How can one differentiate reliably between 'good' and 'bad' interpretations of Islam? Such conversations are intensified in western diasporic contexts due to the sheer volume of human traffic that flows through them. Muslims in diaspora come face to face with the myriad shapes and colours of global Islam, forcing their religion to hold a mirror up to its own diversity. These encounters often play an important role in processes of identity formation, prompting Muslims to relativize and compare their self-understandings of Islam. There is now a more general trend towards communication and interaction across sectarian divisions. Much of this is linked to the younger generation's distaste for such differences, as discussed in the previous section. Until the 1990s, many mosques and their leaderships remained introverted, rarely seeking contact with other schools and tendencies. In contrast, the present decade has seen significantly increased interaction between different Muslim movements, particularly in the translocal spaces of more urban and cosmopolitan areas such as London. Mosques have emerged as a particularly salient form of Muslim public sphere in this regard, forming the sites of a growing number of intra-Muslim conversations This is also reflected in the way some mosque associations now organize their leaderships. The Bradford Council of Mosques, for example, has consciously avoided having religious scholars associated with its administration in order to minimize sectarian issues (Lewis, 1997: 109).

Another phenomenon closely related to life in diaspora is the way in which the traditional *ulama* are increasingly finding themselves bypassed in favour of, for instance, Muslim youth workers, in the search for religious knowledge. We find this in the case of one young Muslim in the West, Dilwar Hussain, who

explains that by asking questions in the mosque he only seemed to inflame the tempers of impatient, doctrinally rigid imams. In an organization such as the Young Muslims UK, however, he found a leadership willing to devote the time and effort necessary to answering questions and showing young Muslims how their religion is relevant to contemporary life in the West.[4] Some writers have depicted the traditional religious scholars as purveyors of an internal hegemony, an ahistorical reading of the sources which seeks to posit an essential, immutable Islam. 'They all profess to be upholding the essence of Islam,' argues James Piscatori, 'yet in fact all are reinterpreting doctrine. They establish new, supposedly fixed points while denying that shifts of emphasis, nuance or meaning also occur' (Piscatori, 1990: 778). Thus we find intellectuals such as Shabbir Akhtar arguing for an explicit 'critical Qur'anic scholarship' and also for 'a new theology, responsive to the intellectual pressures and assumptions of a sceptical age' (Akhtar, 1990: 66–7).

Many contemporary thinkers urge Muslims to go back to the sources and read for themselves, exercising good judgement and trusting in their own personal opinions as to what the texts mean for Islam today. The late Fazlur Rahman, for example, argues that Muslims should read the Qur'an and the Hadith without relying on bulky, medieval commentaries. His claim is that these sources 'were misconstrued by Muslim scholars in medieval times, made into rigid and inflexible guides – for all time, as it were – and not recognised as the products of their own times and circumstances' (Denny, 1991: 104; Rahman, 1982). Another prominent religious scholar urges young Muslims in the West to undertake 'a fresh study of the Qur'an . . . not with the aid of commentaries but with the depths of your hearts and minds. . . . You should read it as if it were not an old scripture but one sent down for the present age, or, rather, *one that is being revealed to you directly*' (Nadwi, 1993: 190). Young Muslims are hence told to imagine themselves as Muhammad (a controversial proposition in itself), and to recognize that just as the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet in a particular setting in space and time, so must its message be made to speak to the particular circumstances of diasporic life.

There are indications that this call is being heeded. Young Muslims in the West often meet informally to discuss the Qur'an and other textual sources, attempting to read them anew and 'without the intervention of centuries of Islamic scholarship'. Schooled in a tradition that teaches them not just to blindly accept but to ask questions, young Muslims are deploying this inquisitiveness on the early texts in order to find in them the contours of an Islam for the here and now (Nielsen, 1995: 115). There is hence no reluctance to delve into the *usul al-fiqh* (the core texts of Islamic jurisprudence), but there has been a shift as to what Muslims are hoping to find there. Gone is the obsession with the somatics of prayer and correct bodily practice. The emphasis now is on wider questions concerning Muslim identity and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.

We see, then, the importance that Muslims today are laying on rereading and reassessing the textual sources of Islam in new contexts. Media technologies, I argue in a later section, are playing a key role in making these texts available to a wider constituency. There is also a particular imperative here in the

realm of identity and community. Plurality is of the essence, according to many Muslim thinkers today. They highlight the need for Muslims to increase their '*umma* consciousness', and are developing 'a more open understanding of the notion of the global community of Muslims than many commentators – Muslim and non-Muslim alike – have heretofore proposed' (Vertovec and Peach, 1997: 41). In this regard there would appear to be some degree of discursive overlap between a new *umma* consciousness and recent thinking in western critical theory. The notion of dialogue and some form of 'communicative action' (informed by tradition) within a 'public sphere' seem to be intrinsic to both (Habermas, 1990, 1992). The advent of information and communication technologies – particularly in the spaces of diasporic Islam – has been crucial in creating these public spheres. In the following two sections I want to look more closely at the relationship between various media technologies and some of the transformations in diasporic Islam outlined earlier. I begin with a brief outline of the historical background in which these changes have taken place within the wider Muslim world and examine some of the technologies involved in fragmentation of traditional sources of religious authority. I then go on to look more specifically at the development and emergence of information and communication technologies in Muslim diaspora communities.

'Media Islam': Subverting Genealogies of Religious Knowledge?

The salience of technology in bringing about religious change in Islam has been well documented (Robinson, 1993; Atiyeh, 1995; Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996). In early Islam, oral transmission was the preferred mode for disseminating religious knowledge with each scholar granting their student an *ijaza* (licence) which permitted the student to pass on the texts of their teacher. Literacy among wider populations, even in urban centres, was very low. This state of affairs allowed the *ulama* and their associates (scribes, calligraphers, etc.) to maintain a virtual monopoly over the production of authoritative religious knowledge. We should note here that in a sense it is almost mistaken to speak of Islam's holy book as a form of 'scripture'. The Qur'an is, quite literally, a recitation – the literal word of God as revealed to Muhammad via the archangel Gabriel.[5] It is a collection of words whose message resonates most strongly when read aloud or given voice. Even to this day, the process of learning the Qur'an is first and foremost an exercise in memorization and oral repetition. This goes some way to explaining why the Muslim world hesitated to embrace the technologies of 'print-capitalism' for almost three centuries. It was the experience of European colonialism and the concomitant perceived decline in Muslim civilization which paved the way for the rise of print technology in the 19th century. The book, pamphlet and newsletter were taken up with urgency in order to counter the threat which Europe was posing to the Muslim *umma*. This process heralded the final stage in the transition from an oral to a print-based culture in the context of religious knowledge (Messick, 1993). The *ulama* were initially at the forefront of this revolution, using a newly expanded and more widely distributed literature base to create a much broader constituency. An

inevitable side-effect of this phenomenon, however, was that the religious scholars' stranglehold over religious knowledge was broken. Gradually Muslims found it easier and easier to bypass the *ulama* in the search for authentic Islam and for new ways of thinking about their religion. As Eickelman notes, 'Even when persons in authority [e.g. the *ulama*] thought they were using new technologies to preserve the old, new elements and patterns of thought were introduced with the telegraph, newspapers, magazines and an expanded (even if not mass) educational system' (Eickelman, 1982: 10). The texts were in principle now available to anyone who could read them; and to read is, of course, to *interpret.*

> *Books . . . could now be consulted by any Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad, who could make what they [would] of them. Increasingly from now on any Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad could claim to speak for Islam. No longer was a sheaf of impeccable* ijazas *the buttress of authority; strong Islamic commitment would be enough. (Robinson, 1993: 245)*

The new media opened up new spaces of religious contestation where traditional sources of authority could be challenged by the wider public. As literacy rates began to climb almost exponentially in the 20th century, this effect was amplified even further. The move to print technology meant not only a new method for transmitting texts, but also a new idiom of selecting, writing and presenting works to cater for new kind of reader (Roper, 1995: 210).

We can understand these developments as part of a process through which religious knowledge becomes 'objectified', that is, open to debate within the public sphere. Islam became something which could be represented, its identity now open to negotiation by a constituency previously prohibited from speaking on its behalf (Eickelman, 1989). The fragmentation of traditional sources of authority is hence a key theme with regard to the nexus of Islam and new media. More particularly, these transformations in the status and provenance of religious knowledge have, in the contemporary era, helped to give rise to what Olivier Roy has termed the 'Islamist new intellectuals' (Roy, 1994).

> *The new intellectual has an autodidactic relationship to knowledge. Knowledge is acquired in a fragmented (manuals, excerpts, popular brochures), encyclopedic, and immediate manner: everything is discussed without the mediation of an apprenticeship, a method, or a professor. . . . The new media, such as radio, television, cassettes, and inexpensive offset brochures, make snatches of this content available. The new intellectual is a tinkerer; he [*sic*] creates a montage, as his personal itinerary guides him, of segments of knowledge, using methods that come from a different conceptual universe than the segments he recombines, creating a totality that is more imaginary than theoretical. (Roy, 1994: 96–7)*

The rise of what we might call 'media Islam' or 'soundbite Islam' has thus been a major byproduct of information technology. A new class of 'hybrid' Muslim intellectual (e.g. 'using methods that come from a different conceptual universe than the segments he [*sic*] recombines') has been the chief agent of dissemination for mediatized Islam. With the current world communications infrastructure, ideas and messages now possess the capability to bridge time and space almost effortlessly, and the political implications of this new capacity are not easily overestimated. 'Modern Muslim revitalization movements have been

linked with an early stage of global modernisation,' writes Serif Mardin, 'and one can follow this link through the effect on the revitalization of modern communications' (Mardin, 1989: 24).

What does this mean for the status of Islamic knowledge in the present era? How are these technologies being used by diasporic Muslims today? Let us approach these questions by looking at some of the Islamic software packages currently available. Given the size of most Islamic texts, a technology such as the CD-ROM has provided a medium which can contain the full text of several works. This means that the entire Qur'an, several collections of *hadith*, *tafsir* and various *fiqhi* works can easily fit on a single disc. The director of the Islamic Computing Centre in London, Abdulkadir Barkatulla, sees this development as having the greatest relevance for those Muslims who live in circumstances where access to religious scholars is limited, such as in the West. For him, such CD-ROM selections offer a useful alternative. 'IT [information technology] doesn't change the individual's relationship with [their] religion,' he says, 'but rather it provides knowledge supplements and clarifies the sources of information such that Muslims can verify the things they hear for themselves' (Barkatulla, 1998).[6] Barkatulla sees IT as a useful tool for systematizing religious knowledge, but only those juridical opinions which have already been reached. In his terms, IT is only for working with knowledge that has already been 'cooked', not for making new judgements. To engage in the latter, he believes, one requires certain formal training and knowledge of specific methodologies.

> *These resources are not intended to replace the religious scholars or commentators, but it means that they will not be able to get away with saying just anything. They will be held to account. They will have to check their sources twice because people will be able to go to the sources themselves and check to see if what was said in the pulpit corresponds with what is in the books . . . but IT is not for generating one's own fatwas. (Barkatulla, 1998)*

There are, however, those who disagree with Barkatulla. Sa'ad al-Faqih, for example, the leader of the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia and another keen advocate of IT, believes that the average Muslim *can* now revolutionalize Islam with just a basic understanding of Islamic methodology and a CD-ROM. In his view, the technology goes a long way to bridging the 'knowledge gap' between a classically trained religious scholar (*'alim*) and a lay Muslim by placing all of the relevant texts at the fingertips of the latter. 'I am not an 'alim,' he says, 'but with these tools I can put together something very close to what they would produce when asked for a fatwa' (Al-Faqih, 1998).[7]

The availability of such CD-ROM collections, all hyperlinked and cross-referenced, has created a new constituency for religious texts. Where Muslims would have previously had to rely on the expertise of the *ulama* when dealing with these books, they are now all available in a single medium which can easily be searched by any computer user. According to Ziauddin Sardar:

> *Instead of ploughing through bulky texts, that require a certain expertise to read, a plethora of databases on the* Qur'an *and* hadith *now open up these texts and make them accessible to average, non-expert, users. Increasingly, the* ulama *are being confronted by non-professional theologians who can cite chapter and verse from the fundamental sources, undermining not just their arguments but also the very basis of their authority. (Sardar, 1993: 55–6)*

Sardar then goes on to speculate about how all the *usul al-fiqh* might be placed on a single compact disc, along with an 'expert-system'[8] that would guide the user through the literature and, in effect, allow them to generate their own *fatwas* (Sardar, 1993: 56). This sort of *ijtihad* (free interpretation) toolkit would amount to a 'virtual *'alim*', and hence pose a further challenge to the authority of the traditional religious scholars. 'With this technology I think we are beginning to see a breaking of the monopoly over religious knowledge', says Sa'ad al-Faqih (Al-Faqih, 1998). It is unlikely, however, that such a system will replace the *ulama* any time soon. They still command enormous respect in many communities and would, in any case, surely challenge the claim that their methodologies – the product of centuries of study and exhaustive research – can be reduced to a set of coded computer instructions. According to Barkatulla, a religious scholar himself, many *ulama* see the utility of information technology for the organization of religious knowledge but believe that by becoming overdependent on such 'gadgets', the capacity to internalize and think for oneself decreases (Barkatulla, 1998). At the same time, however, there is still an important sense in which the availability of religious texts on CD-ROM actually *increases* one's capacity to think for oneself.

The existence of such collections on CD-ROM has quickly become a reality in the past few years. The Islamic Computing Centre in London has been at the forefront of producing and distributing Arabic and Islamic materials in electronic format, and one only needs to glance at their product catalogue to confirm the enthusiasm with which Muslims have taken up this technology. In addition to several electronic Qur'ans (with full Arabic text, several English translations and complete oral recitation on a single disc), the Centre also sells titles such as *WinHadith*, *WinBukhari* and *WinSeera* – electronic versions of, respectively, the traditions of the Prophet and his biographies. Also available are several products which begin to approach the system which Sardar has envisaged. The Islamic Law Base, Islamic Scholar and 'Alim Multimedia 6.0 are all vast collections of religious texts such as the Qur'an, Hadith, several volumes of *fiqh* covering all four schools of Sunni jurisprudence, biographies of the Prophet and his Companions and more recent writing by figures such as the aforementioned Mawdudi. All of these databases can be kept open simultaneously and material between them is cross-referenced and fully searchable. In the USA, the Aramedia Group offers a library of Islamic CD-ROM resources with a choice of Arabic, English or Malay interface. Also available are software packages such as SalatBase, a multimedia guide to prayer which covers proper bodily practices, ritual somatics and the particular problems associated with, for example, prayer during travel. Barkatulla also mentions an expert system under development in Kuwait called al-Mawarith. This package enables a user to determine how the assets of a deceased relative should be allocated to his or her heirs according to Islamic law. It can be adjusted to reflect the opinions of the various Sunni legal schools, and will also provide textual evidence from the Qur'an and Hadith in order to 'authorize' its output (Barkatulla, 1992). Also widely available on the Internet are utilities for calculating prayer times, the beginning and ending of the fasting day during Ramadhan at any geographic point in the world and for converting dates between the Hijri and other calendar systems.

Diasporic Muslims and IT: New Translocal Communities?

'Academically, media studies and migration studies tend to function as separate fields', Ulf Hannerz writes. 'Yet in real life migration and mediatization run parallel, not to say that they are continuously intertwined' (Hannerz, 1996: 101). His observation holds particularly true for diasporic Muslims, as they are currently both the subject and the object of considerable mediatization. In what follows, I am mainly concerned with the ways in which Islam makes use of or is rendered in various media for the consumption of other Muslims; in other words, I am interested in how Muslims use information and communication technologies to talk to other Muslims.

Many young Muslims, as has been noted in a previous section, are bypassing traditional *ulama* and imams in order to learn their Islam from pamphlets and books published in English. Diasporic magazines such as *The Muslim News* and *Q-News* are also important in this regard (Lewis, 1994: 206–7). Beyond the various printed literatures, we also find a variety of audiovisual and multimedia material which cater for the specific needs of diasporic Muslims. Many of these are aimed at children, seeking to teach them Islam using imagery and language similar to the western entertainment genres with which they are already familiar. Thus we find a Disney-style animated adventure video, *Fatih – Sultan Muhammad*, which claims to be the world's first Islamic feature animation production. 'In this inspirational adventure,' the advertisement reads, 'your family will see how the Muslims used not only their faith – but also strategic and technological superiority – to be successful.' Another company offers a children's educational series with a format and style similar to the muppets of *Sesame Street*. *Adam's World* 'introduces children to Islamic morals, values, and culture in a manner that's both entertaining and educational. . . . By adopting such a universal approach to video-based education, *Adam's World* has found its niche among children of over forty different ethnic backgrounds.' The various episodes have titles such as 'Happy to be a Muslim', 'Take me to the Kaba', 'Kindness in Islam' and 'Ramadan Mubarak'. A wide variety of Arabic-language learning aids and Islamic quiz games for children on both video-tape and CD-ROM are also available. We have already mentioned the SalatBase prayer guide. The same company also offers a series of video-tapes featuring interviews with prominent Muslims in the West such as the NBA basketball star Hakeem Olajuwon and Yusuf Islam, formerly the pop singer Cat Stevens. One title, 'Holiday Myths', offers advice on how Muslims should approach and deal with western holidays such as Christmas, Hallowe'en, Valentine's Day and Easter.

What about the Internet? Can we meaningfully speak today about the emergence of new forms of Islamic virtual community? Where one much-cited author pointed to the pioneering efforts of New World 'creoles' in the formation of imagined communities (Anderson, 1991), Jon Anderson now speaks of the 'new creoles' of the information superhighway – political actors whose strength lies in their adoption of the enabling technologies of electronic print and information transfer (Anderson, 1995: 13–15). We should not be too quick, though, to declare that the Internet is suddenly going to radically transform Muslim

understandings of political community. We need to look realistically at the number of Muslims who actually have access to this forum, and we need to take careful note of each sociopolitical setting which receives information via this network:

> *Transnational theories, fixated on media and forms of alienated consciousness distinctive of late modernity, tend to overlook the social organization into which new media are brought in a rush to the new in expression. Impressed by what Simmel much earlier called 'cosmopolitanism', we overlook measures of social organization in pursuit of media effects. (Anderson, 1997)*

In addition, we need to make sure that we have a more nuanced understanding of those Muslim identities which use the Internet. We cannot start talking about new forms of diasporic Muslim community simply because many users of the Internet happen to be Muslims. Noting that in many instances Muslim uses of the Internet seem to represent little more than the migration of existing messages and ideas into a new context, Anderson warns that 'New talk has to be distinguished from new people talking about old topics in new settings' (Anderson, 1996: 1). Yet we also have to acknowledge the possibility that the hybrid discursive spaces of the Muslim Internet can give rise, even inadvertently, to new formulations and critical perspectives on Islam, religious knowledge and community. But in order to comprehend the processes by which community is created, we also need to understand the circumstances under which these Muslim identities became diasporic. That is, how do other aspects of identity influence the terms of religious discourse on the Internet? Issues such as culture and religion, for example, are often discussed using methods of reasoning and debate which derive from the natural and technical sciences, rather than using the 'traditional' terms of discourse which one might find 'back home'. This reflects the nature of the professional/student life of many diaspora Muslims who are often technicians, engineers, or research scientists (Anderson, 1996).

There are also those who argue that the Internet has had a moderating effect on Islamist discourse. Sa'ad al-Faqih, for example, believes that Internet chat rooms and discussion forums devoted to the debate of Islam and politics serve to encourage greater tolerance. He believes that in these new arenas one sees a greater convergence in the centre of the Islamist political spectrum and a weakening of the extremes:

> *In these forums it is very important now for the leaders of various tendencies to make strong, reasoned arguments that stand up in debate because their followers are also there and they are listening. Not only that, but the followers are now able to go to the sources themselves in order to verify what their leaders have been saying. Sometimes you get extremists who argue only out of emotion or sensationalism, but do not present arguments with any reasonable methodology or evidence from the sources. Leaders are becoming sensitive to this need. They know that they have to conduct debate according to certain reasonable rules in order to maintain their credibility with the followers. . . . Not just on the Internet, but also on satellite TV and in other media forums. The ulama come on and they take questions from people who corner them and force them to defend themselves. 'The people' force them to come up with stronger arguments. . . . It's like one huge public debate that thousands of people are listening to. (Al-Faqih, 1998)*

Nico Landman has argued that such television discussion programmes are also permitting Muslim women greater access to the public sphere, noting that 'The visibility of headscarved and very self-confident and emancipated Muslim women in the Dutch media has been greatly increased in recent years' (Landman, 1997: 238).

Thus for the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the West the Internet is mainly a forum for the conduct of politics *within* Islam. 'Internet forums permit bypassing traditional gatekeepers and adjudicators of interpretive rights, procedures and adequacy', writes Jon Anderson (1997: 2). Because very few 'official' Muslim organs such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Muslim World League or the various eminent religious schools actually have more than an extremely superficial presence on the Internet, we can characterize many of the Muslim sites which do exist as 'alternatives' (Anderson, 1996: 1). That is, in the absence of sanctioned information from recognized institutions, Muslims are increasingly taking religion into their own hands. The Internet provides them with an extremely useful medium for distributing information about Islam and about the behaviour required of a 'good Muslim'. Through various newsgroups and email discussion lists, Muslims – many of whom are new converts – can solicit information about what 'Islam' says about any particular problem. Responses will be received from, recalling Francis Robinson's phrase, 'any Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad' on the Internet and this represents a further decline in the authority of the *ulama*. Not only that, notes Sa'ad al-Faqih, 'but someone will be given information about what "Islam" says about such and such and then others will write in to correct or comment on this opinion/interpretation' (Al-Faqih, 1998). In this sense, the Internet resembles a publishing forum far more than it does a broadcasting forum because here 'users are producers, or may be producers' (Anderson, 1997: 3). Given that most of this discourse involves diaspora Muslims, much of the conversation on these information networks tends to be about how Muslims should deal with various 'cultural' phenomena which they encounter in, say, Los Angeles, Manchester, or The Hague. Dozens of 'meta-sites', such as IslamiCity and the Islamic Gateway, have sprung up in recent years, offering hundreds or sometimes thousands of links to other areas of the Internet containing information and resources on Islam.[9] The Muslim Students Association network, for example, posts daily collections of news stories on Muslims and Islamic issues from around the world.

There has also been a great effort to make the classic works of religious learning as widely available as possible. Numerous websites offer various translations of the Qur'an and the Hadith, and also articles by prominent contemporary Muslim thinkers. Various Internet forums coordinated by the Muslim Student Associations of North America allow Muslims to discuss and debate the merits of different tendencies within the modern Muslim movement. A recent example of this has been a wide-ranging debate on the merits of the Jama'at al-Tabligh movement. Just as the more marginalized sects of Islam have often found life to be easier in diaspora, so have they also found a new lease on life on the Internet. Power asymmetries are often evened out on-line, and the World Wide Web allows the Ahmaddiya movement to appear as 'mainstream' as any

Sunni site. More traditional Islamic spaces such as the mosque have also not gone untouched by IT. In 1996, for example, the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain recommended that all mosques in the UK be wired up to the network in order to provide 'porn-free access to the Internet and [to] establish places where Muslims can socialise in a *halal* (permissible) environment'.

The Internet has also served to reinforce and reify the impact of print-capitalism on traditional structures and forms of authority. Instead of having to go down to the mosque in order to elicit the advice of the local *mullah*, Muslims can now receive 'authoritative' religious pronouncements via the various email *fatwa* services which have sprung up in recent months. The Sheikhs of al-Azhar are totally absent, but the enterprising young 'alim who sets himself up with a colourful website in Alabama suddenly becomes a high-profile representative of Islam for a particular, disseminated and distantiated constituency (Wax, 1999: C01). Due to the largely anonymous nature of the Internet, one can also never be sure whether the 'authoritative' advice received via these services is coming from a classically trained religious scholar or a hydraulic engineer moonlighting as an amateur religious scholar. As we noted earlier, however, the authority of the traditional scholars is not easily undermined. Barkatulla points out that judgements and rulings associated with IT such as email *fatwas* are not yet considered permissible evidence in *shari'a* courts because no reliable system for the generation of 'digital signatures' that can verify the identity and credentials of religious scholars as yet exists. And again, the impact of these services must be measured realistically based on the number of Muslims who actually make use of them. However, we can perhaps say that they are having a fairly significant effect with regard to those questions that concern the details of daily life for a Muslim in the West. Diaspora Muslims are likely to find it convenient to be able to turn to one of their own, someone who has also lived in western culture, so as to receive a hearing that is more sympathetic and more in tune with local affairs. It is in this context, when responding to a diverse range of social needs, that the plurality of Islam becomes most manifest.

Conclusion

More than anything else the Internet and other information technologies provide spaces where Muslims, who often find themselves to be a marginalized or extreme minority group in many western communities, can go in order to find others 'like them'. It is in this sense that we can speak of the Internet as allowing Muslims to create a new form of imagined community, or a reimagined Islam:

> *It is imagined because the members . . . will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds [and on the screens] of each lies the image of their communion. (Anderson, 1991: 6)*

The various Islams of the Internet hence offer a reassuring set of symbols and terminology which attempt to reproduce familiar settings and terms of discourse

in locations far remote from those in which they were originally embedded. It is inevitable when Islam is reimagined in diasporic contexts that various processes of cultural translation are set in motion. The resulting syncretisms then give rise to new religious interpretations, each of which is redrawn to suit the unique set of sociocultural contingencies into which it enters: a continual remaking of Islam through a politics of mediated community.

Notes

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1. Obviously there is a sense in which, over the course of history, *all* Islam has become diasporic. Indeed, the Middle East has long played a key role in the propagation and 'diasporization' of religious civilization (Islamic, Judaic and Christian). In this piece, my references to diasporic Islam are hence meant to invoke the transnational communities created by recent waves of migration and global labour patterns.
2. The reader should note that I am grounding this study in the social and political theory of identity and community formation (my own 'disciplinary' background), and using media as a lens through which to view related questions in the context of diasporic Islam. Hence the absence of references to the standard literature on media and communications.
3. Personal interview with A. Siddiqui, Leicester, 1998.
4. Personal interview with Dilwar Hussain, Leicester, 1998.
5. *al-qur'an* = 'the recitation'.
6. Citations from Barkatulla (1998) all refer to a personal interview with Abdulkadir Barkatulla, London, 1998.
7. Citations from Al-Faqih (1998) all refer to a personal interview with Sa'ad Al-Faqih, London, 14 August 1998.
8. This is a programme which contains rules and guidelines which tell a computer how to process, 'think' and make decisions with particular sets of data. It is usually written in an artificial intelligence language such as PROLOG.
9. See, for example, sites at www.islam.org or www.ummah.org.uk

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