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IslamiCity Creating an Islamic Cybersociety
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Internet

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Since the mid-1990s, Islamic webcontent has grown considerably. The distribution of fatwas, one of the most booming components of Islamic webcontent, is becoming a must for any Islamic website. In 1999 at least 10,000 fatwas were to be found online. In the year 2000 the number rose to at least 14,000 fatwas, and this year thousands more are sure to be added to the score. Since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the provision of fatwas has been an important social barometer. The interactive component of the internet has made online fatwa services not only possible, but easy and accessible as well. Such virtual services, however, impact certain Islamic beliefs and practices.

The distribution of fatwas via internet can be divided into two major groups: the first group comprises the so-called 'fatwa archives', which are simply compilations of fatwas that are already published in books. The second group, 'fatwa services', involves the process of creating fatwas online. There is usually an online form provided, where users can pose their questions. Through these forms, information is also obtained about the users. The fatwas are then determined by muftis and subsequently published on the website.

IslamiCity¹ (based in the USA) is one of the two main Wahhabi players on the internet – the other being Islam – Question & Answer.² IslamiCity has already published about 5,000 fatwas on the internet, while the Dar al-Ifta al-misriyya,³ for example, has published but 300 fatwas online. The massive interest in IslamiCity's fatwa service, however, has led the founders of the site to slow down the services so as to search for funds to finance the site in the future. In the meantime, fatwas from the Saudi daily, *Arab News*, have been added to the IslamiCity database.

IslamiCity is more than just a fatwa service. It provides information on the Qur'an, the Sunna, the Hajj, and other Islamic topics. It offers radio and television channels, chatrooms, Islamic screensavers and electronic greeting cards. It also offers space for advertising. Users are offered the possibility to play an Islamic quiz, donate *zakat* online, or even order flowers. All services are guided by an Islamic etiquette. In this sense, such Islamic web-programming could be considered comparable to the concept of Islamic banking.

Intercultural settings

IslamiCity is based in the USA and the muftis Muhammed Musri, Dr Ahmed H. Sakr, Dr Muzammil Siddiqui and Dr Yahia Abdul Rahman, currently working and living in the USA, and Dr Dani Doueiri and his 'Imam Team' from Beirut handle the fatwa questions. This demonstrates that virtual fatwas are different from 'normal' fatwas. In cyberspace, it makes no difference where the mufti and the *mustafti* are located. Questions from all around the world can be, and indeed are, posted to IslamiCity. The technical management of the website distributes the questions to the muftis, for example in Beirut. So, *ifta* becomes abstract. The mufti no longer sees the *mustafti*, and the *mustafti* no longer hears his voice. In such a context, the mufti cannot determine the background information of a question, and cannot perceive the potential dubious aspects of a question. He is bound by its textual form. This was the case, for example, for a question (No. 1301)⁴ about *tapai*, a Malaysian dish with fermented cooked rice, which consists of 5-10% alcohol. A religious teacher had told the questioner that it was *halal*, since the alcohol does not come from grapes. But according to IslamiCity's mufti it is *haram*, because it is fermented without

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oxygen and this always produces ethyl alcohol. The thing is, *tapai* might be a common dish in Malaysia, and a mufti based elsewhere can only abstractly solve the problem. He may not know anything about living in Malaysia. To avoid this type of rice might cause serious nutritional problems for Muslims there. Who knows? The following answer to a similar type of question shows more sensibility in terms of local differences (No. 4063):

'In certain countries, Coca Cola does (or used to) include alcohol and in this case, the drink is considered *Haram*. In many Muslim countries, there are Islamic establishments (like Dar al-Fatwa or the highest religious authority) that monitor such drinks and foods to make sure they don't contain alcohol, in which case the drink becomes per-



missible. We don't know the situation in Australia and we suggest that you contact Coca Cola itself to find out about the alcohol content in their drinks. The same should apply with Pepsi Cola. Please update us.'

IslamiCity is also faced with problems of intercultural settings within the USA itself. There was a case involving a Japanese neighbour who adamantly tried to give a box of liquor to a Muslim as a Christmas present. The Muslim got the impression his Japanese neighbour's English was so bad that it was impossible to explain to him that alcohol is not allowed in Islam. Finally, the Japanese left the liquor at the doorstep of the Muslim's house. IslamiCity's solution was to empty the bottles of alcohol into the sink (No. 351).

Cyberfatwas

It seems that some users are confused as to whether IslamiCity actually exists in real geographic space. Though the answers to questions do clarify that it is in cyberspace, they nonetheless call the guests 'tourists' and not 'surfers' (No. 3203, 3677). Other users are obviously more than aware of the cyber-location of the site, as one reader even asked (No. 1754):

'Dearest virtual imam of the esteemed cyber-city, I attended *jumma salat* today, and wanted to merely inquire that since we are living in this hectic hustle bussle life, would it be possible to attend your virtual *khutbas* and maybe even on a virtual Friday, and skip the live Friday sermon. This would greatly aid the conservation of time and energy in our lives. Dearest imam, please write back soon as you can see that I'm desperately in need of guidance. And I feel that your virtual hand will virtually correct my ways. Eagerly awaiting your reply is your brother Abdullah (but my friends call me Charlie).'

To answer this question is a delicate task. Considering its formulation, one might even doubt the sincerity of the questioner. Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyper-reality might

be the best way to explain it: hyper-reality means that the signs no longer hide reality, but hide the absence of reality.⁵ This is expressed by the view of the questioner, who would like to replace reality by virtual reality. According to his question, not only the sermon, but also the Friday itself should be replaced. In this way, a symbiosis between Islam and internet is possible. In the mufti's answer, while the revolutionary component of the internet is acknowledged, he insists on having mosques in physical space. His answer to this question is all the more delicate because the questioner is obviously familiar with new media. The mufti has to prove that he can adequately respond, demonstrating his mastery of the specific vocabulary and its meanings.

Another question raised involves whether

tion, which means that even in the Wahhabi school consensus does not exist.

A multitude of competing Islamic opinions are distributed via internet. In one of its responses, IslamiCity points out that the dynamic change of websites is a limiting factor to the verification of the authenticity of information, stating that IslamiCity does not act as a watchdog over all material (No. 2055). With the possibilities of the internet, IslamiCity builds not only an Islamic institution but also creates a community of virtually connected Muslims.

the internet itself is *haram* (No. 1474). IslamiCity's opinion is that the internet is a tool that can be used for good or for bad purposes (No. 294, 492, 3252, 3468, 3495). This means that the internet in itself is not *haram*. Nonetheless, it is understandable that some question this since, for example, computer images do not fall under the Islamic prohibition of images (No. 829). Thus, developers of computer games are allowed to draw pictures (No. 3606).

The aim of using the internet for good Islamic purposes has resulted in some new topics for fatwas. For example, before reading a digital Qur'an one should perform the ablution, but does not need to (No. 1101, 1880); the recitation in the background of a webpage is not allowed (No. 3343); and *da'wa* via internet is possible (No. 2078). As IslamiCity offers its own chatrooms, it is important to know how to use them: chatroom discussions are allowed as long as Islamic etiquette is taken into account and useful Islamic topics are being discussed (No. 223). For example, one may take a valid *shahada* in the chatroom (No. 752, 2873, 3699). As there is a physical distance, the chatrooms offer an opportunity for conversation with the opposite sex. If people should happen to fall in love as a result, it is not wrong, but they should not from the beginning have the intention to meet someone in cyberspace with a view to marriage (No. 1983). Muftis warn of disappointments when people, who have only chatted on the internet, meet in reality. Therefore, the intention to marry should be a true and sincere one, especially when the two people concerned communicate privately over the internet (No. 824, 1221, 1724, 2774, 3099). In such a case, it is even allowed to exchange photos (No. 1092). It should be noted, however, that Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al-Uthaymeen issued a fatwa via internet in which he forbade the sending of photos to an 'internet fiancée' (Islam – Question & Answer, No. 4027). There are thus two contradictory Wahhabi viewpoints on this ques-

Notes

1. IslamiCity: <http://islam.org>
2. Islam – Question & Answer: <http://www.islam-qa.com>
3. Dar al-Ifta al-misriyya: <http://www.haneen.com.eg/fatwa/fatwapage.html>
4. Numbers refer to those given by IslamiCity. The fatwas can also be found in the forthcoming CD-ROM: Brückner, Matthias (ed.) (2001), *Fatwaindex zum Alkoholverbot, neuen Medien u.a.*, Würzburg, Ergon-Verlag. Further information on the topic can be obtained at <http://www.cyberfatwa.de> or in Brückner, Matthias (2001), *Fatwas zum Alkohol unter dem Einfluss neuer Medien im 20. Jhdt.*, Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag.
5. Gane, Mike (1993), *Baudrillard Live*, London: Routledge, p. 143.

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