ever used before, as now by “Islamists”, as a concrete political text instead of a legal source (pp. 217, 229).

Essay collections run the risk of being repetitive. This is the case here too but only with a grandmother story about the desert as an endless labyrinth; it appears both on p. 19 and p. 134.

Murad Wilfried Hofmann


The multiple ways that Muslims around the world make use of the World Wide Web had been a neglected area of inquiry, with the exception of several short studies by scholars such as Jon Anderson and Bruce Lawrence, until the recent publication of the pioneering work *Virtually Islamic* by Gary Bunt. While *Virtually Islamic* only begins a project that its author quite rightly expects will be a topic of increasing interest and importance, in this work Bunt establishes epistemological foundations that will serve as a useful framework for both contemporary discussion and future inquiry on Islam and the Internet.

Bunt sets out to provide a broad survey of the landscape of Islamic sites on the Web, what he conceptually defines as “Cyber Islamic Environments”. He seeks to explore the degree to which these sites represent different sections of the Muslim community or *ummah*, and the degree to which the Internet might help to create a new unified sense of *umma* in virtual space. Endeavoring to chart the impact of Digital Islam on the lives of Muslims around the world, Bunt makes use of personal interviews and e-mail survey forms to solicit diverse Muslim opinions. He opts to bypass technical discussions of hardware, software and HTML code in order to foreground the human dimension of the subject and the potential real-world influence of virtual presentations of Islam on both Muslims and non-Muslims.

In the first chapter, Bunt seeks to define his terms and clarify the scope of his inquiry. He draws upon recent Internet theory for concepts such as
“computer-mediated communication” and cyber “environments”. The concept of virtuality allows for the theoretical discussion of the interplay between virtual and lived communities. Recognizing that the concept of “Cyber Islamic Environments” implies a working definition of what makes a site “Islamic”, Bunt struggles with the complexities involved in attempting such a definition given the diverse and sometimes antagonistic ways that Muslims themselves define the boundaries of the term. With a general survey in mind, he wisely opts for a broad definition of “Islamic” that encompasses anything that Muslims do or say in the name of their religion. He attempts to circumvent the debate over what constitutes “true Islam” by relying on a description rather than evaluation: “It is not the purpose of this book to make specific judgements as to the validity of information offered on the Internet, merely to delineate the Islamic Internet landscape” (p. 7). Readers should bear in mind that the survey largely focuses upon Web pages (as opposed to other forms of Internet communication), and within this medium to environments that are mainly in English.

Given the incredible pace at which the Internet is changing, any author writing about the Net must bear in mind how quickly her work might be out of date. Bunt confronts this issue by insisting that the book offers a “snapshot” of Islam on the Web up to and including the year 1999. Like an anthropologist Bunt asserts the importance of preserving a record of the contours of twentieth century Cyber Islamic Environments, ostensibly so that future researchers will have a frame of reference through which to study new developments. In a clever use of the medium he is studying, Bunt touts a Web site (www.virtuallyislamic.com) constructed around the book project itself through which the links discussed in the book can continuously be checked and updated, and through which readers can submit suggestions or new material.

The second chapter deals largely with the various types of primary textual material available on the Web. The discussion of online versions of the Qurʾān, as well as online version of key texts such as Bukhārī and Muslim, is informative and helpful. Bunt rightly suggests that texts uploaded to the Internet should not merely reproduce paper editions but should take advantage of the resources that the medium offers such as search engines and hyperlinks. Bunt presents a brief discussion of Muslim music available on the Internet in this chapter, although the section may be a bit too closely associated with his discussion of Qurʾān recitation for some Muslims’ sensibilities, and much more could be said on the topic of music online. The brevity of the latter section brings to mind other types of Internet resources that could have been included in this chapter but were omitted or mentioned
only in passing elsewhere in the book: Islamic art, freeware, teaching tools (such as online Islamic universities, “virtual hajj” sites), etc. While these are not primary sources, these types of resources deserve attention in future broad surveys of Cyber Islamic Environments.

The third chapter of the book addresses the key issue of “Muslim diversity online”, one of the ways in which the Internet has called into question both monolithic representations of Islam as well as traditional networks of Muslim authority. Bunt simplifies the categories of discussion by grouping them as Sunnī, Shi‘ī or Şūfī. This move introduces one of the most problematic sections of the book. Despite his valiant effort to describe rather than evaluate, Bunt assumes a posture that treats conservative Sunnī positions as “orthodox”, implicitly relegating all else to the status of something less than orthodox. The section on Shi‘ism is overly politicized around the subject of Iran (a subject that more properly belongs in the following chapter). The section on Sufism artificially sets Şūfīs apart from the previous two groups, neglecting the fact that despite the attempt of some groups to expel Şūfīs from the fold, the majority of Şūfīs consider themselves either Sunnīs or Shi‘īs. Bunt’s posture leads him to repeatedly make statements such as “this practice might not be seen as Islamic” or “this might seem inappropriate to some Muslims” when discussing both Shi‘ism and Şūfism, disclaimers that may please some “orthodox” Muslims but become tiresome (if not offensive) to other readers. While Bunt does an adequate job of explaining how some groups on the one hand claim to make room for all Muslims while on the other exclude groups that they consider un-Islamic such as the Nation of Islam or the Ahmadiyyah, he does not explain why he himself excludes these “fringe” groups from his discussion. This issue is especially crucial given that the Nation of Islam tends to come up high on the list when users seek general information about Islam in some search engines.

The chapter on politics takes the reader on a tour of the use of Islam on the Internet by political parties in select countries around the world. In such a brief study this type of overview cannot pretend to be exhaustive, and to his credit Bunt does not strive for comprehensiveness. Instead he hopes that the countries he discusses will reflect the scope and breadth of issues that one encounters when examining the political dimensions of Islam online. The largest single section in the chapter discusses Pakistan, and despite the new political atmosphere in Pakistan since his book went to press, the diversity of political parties Bunt discusses in this section give an idea of the sweep of his survey: the Muslim League, the Pakistan People’s Party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Jama’at-i Islami Pakistan, Muttahida Quami Movement and Tanzeem-e-Islami. Flash points in the news generate loci of activity on the Web, and Bunt
devotes a significant number of pages to areas of political tension such as Afghanistan, Kashmir and Palestine. The Web has been used as a tool for organizing oppositional voices, and this chapter amply documents this phenomenon.

Bunt’s fifth and sixth chapters discuss online sermons, advice columns and cyber struggles. The issue of authority and legitimacy correctly receives prominence in these chapters, as does the issue of censorship and filtering technologies. The discussion of the “SuraLikeIt” controversy, in which fabricated Qur’anic verses were posted to the Web, shows how anti-Islamic activism on the Internet has encouraged some Muslims to become more wired. Other types of examples that Bunt provides nicely illustrate the Internet’s potential for allowing the relatively anonymous discussion of otherwise sensitive topics. His discussion of hacking and cyber warfare will probably spark the interest of many readers. Given the transience of Web links and the exponential growth of new pages, knowing how to evaluate the sites one finds becomes almost more important than knowledge of particular sites. Therefore it would have been nice if these chapters had described techniques that one could use to try to determine the positionality of the “authority” sources one encounters on the Web. Despite this lacuna, Bunt deftly outlines in these chapters the parameters of an open and important question, namely how traditional sources of authority will in time be reflected and/or subverted on the Web.

Although overly simplistic in some of its categories, this very simplicity coupled with ample background explanations make *Virtually Islamic* accessible to a wide audience. The work marks a crucial first step toward more specialized study of Islam on the Internet, appropriate for both casual “surfers” and dedicated scholars, technical neophytes and Web-savvy Netziens. Indeed Gary Bunt’s *Virtually Islamic* will remain critical reading for all those interested in examining the future development and expansion of Cyber Islamic Environments. It will serve as a snapshot of online Islam in its youth, with which it will be possible to compare images snapped in later years and to marvel at how much and how quickly it has grown.

Rick Colby

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