

CHAPTER 26

Islamic Spirituality and the Internet

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Introduction

The quest for Islamic spirituality on the Internet can take many forms. Different elements associated with Islamic spirituality and the Internet need to be considered. There is a primary information and education element, where data can be gathered to help inform a reader regarding diffuse elements of spirituality—whether performance, dimensions, words, images, places, spaces, or people. There may also be elements where the use of the Internet goes beyond the informative, to facilitate to some degree a specific spiritual experience. This may be in conjunction with “real-world” analogue experience. This is especially relevant in contexts where there may be no particular separation between the two. The Internet and Islam are “always on.” The Internet is a natural place for “digital natives” or cybernauts to seek information about aspects of Islam, including “spirituality.”

In some contexts, the digital divide has reduced, and technology has facilitated opportunities for religious perspectives and their adherents to become more closely connected through online networks and resources. In 2012, it was estimated that mobile devices would outnumber people by 2017 (Ericsson 2012, 8). The proportion of Muslims within this demographic may be difficult to quantify, but the figures suggest that opportunities for Muslims to access the Internet through different devices and platforms have substantially increased. Within this discussion, the Internet encompasses a multiplicity of computer networks incorporating the worldwide web, social media platforms and networks, mobile Internet communications networks, and e-mail.

There may be different levels of readers and users of these services, and some purveyors of Internet spirituality may be more inclined to present their products online than others. Some may have had difficulties reconciling the demands of the digital age with their own religious perspective, and it is conceivable that the digital divide relates to an inter-generational diversity of approaches to online communication. For cybernauts, utilizing the Internet for the expression of Islamic spirituality may be less problematic, especially for those using an increasing multiplicity of mobile inter-networked digital devices—tablets, cell phones, laptops—not rooted to a desktop machine. This can include expressions of spirituality rendered through 280 characters (previously 140) on Twitter, or “liking” a page or comment on Facebook. It was noted that religious figures—including Muslims—were among the most influential figures on Twitter, in terms of followers and reactions to Tweets (Alarabiya.net 2012; O’Leary 2012).

Spirituality can take many forms; for those seeking knowledge of spirituality, as observers and/or participants, the Internet is a natural medium for inquiry and potential affiliation. It may facilitate help for those on a spiritual pathway, although for those seeking a religious experience, the Internet may not have all the answers in terms of providing the desired experience. Naturally, the measurement of such experiences can be difficult to quantify or define, and each experience is in the eye of the beholder. Such questions, considerations, and conceptualizations of religious experience do, of course, predate the Internet.

The Internet has introduced new challenges within scholarly spheres associated with religion, for example in the Religious Studies and Islamic Studies fields, especially in terms of determining how the many forms and ideas of spirituality are expressed, transmitted, and experienced online (Bunt 2000; Campbell 2013; Cowan and Dawson 2004; Hadden and Cowan, 2000; Højsgaard and Warburg 2005). Not everything is couched in “serious” religious language either. Discussions on spirituality, charity, poverty, and humility are interspersed with comedy in the viral YouTube hit “Diary of a Badman,” performed and directed by Humza Arshad (Humza Productions 2012).

What might be said at this stage is that the Internet can provide a sense of liminal connection between the profane and sacred world, a digital interface which allows some sense of the numinous, and a connection between leaders and followers, revelation and reader, or recitation and listener. In terms of propagating a message of Islamic spirituality, although coverage is not universal, the Internet does offer an impressive global reach for proponents of *da’wa* or the propagation of Islam—whether the intended audience is from a particular Muslim worldview, or a potential convert (from another Muslim perspective, or from outside of Islam).

Considerable investment has been made in order to develop high levels of web interfaces across diverse interfaces, all of which promote forms of Islamic spirituality. The online Islamic marketplace is saturated with products. There is a sense of information overload, across cultures, languages, and continents. In 2012, Sheikh Ali Gomaa, the then Grand Mufti of Egypt, “referred to the difficulties young people face in dealing with what sometimes seems like an overwhelming amount of information, by quoting from an old Arabic poem: ‘It is like throwing someone all tied up into the waters and demanding of them to remain dry’” (Ghazal 2012a).

Messages of Islamic spirituality compete with other kinds of online output, for example from commerce, politics, news, and social networks. They may be integrated into the online activities of individuals, one thread interwoven into a pattern of digital activities. Exploring some of the dimensions of spirituality discussed in this book as they represent themselves online may offer one measure of the relationship between the level of spirituality and the Internet.

The Spirituality of Words and Letters

The Qur'ān: Texts and Interfaces

In the early days of the Internet, one of the first elements of Islamic spirituality to manifest itself online was the Qur'ān. This was usually in the form of an English translation, first presented in the form of a text file, and then, as browsers developed, in the form of a searchable database. This facilitated key word searches of translations, texts being augmented with audio recitations. Market leaders of online Islamic expression, in these proto-cyber Islamic environments, focused on provision of this core platform.

Technological evolution has led to Qur'ānic interfaces now being available on a range of platforms and devices, including smartphones and tablets. The extent to which such devices might facilitate spirituality has been countered by those suggesting that they can be a distraction from prayer and religious life—although some of this opinion may have been influenced by phones going off during congregational *jumu'a* prayers. There are also a number of anecdotes demonstrating that casual surfers have converted to Islam on the basis of encountering the Qur'ān in its online manifestation.

There are numerous options available for accessing the Qur'ān digitally, reflecting diverse political-religious influences and interpretative approaches toward the Revelation. The Qur'ān is not just a text rendered in Arabic, but also a revelation to be heard. The powerful and evocative styles of recitation are reflected online, while the Arabic text is rendered calligraphically in diverse styles and formats (with calligraphic fonts being adapted for computer use). The Qur'ān lends itself to a multimedia environment through the fusion of these elements, augmented with interactive translations and commentaries. Web designers and media specialists have utilized these factors, in conjunction with technological innovation and updates in response to media shifts. As with other sectors of the web, Qur'ān sites do not remain static but evolve, even though their primary revelation content retains consistency in every detail with its original form and origins. There should be no difference in content between an Arabic digital text and its printed or calligraphic equivalent—even if (in the case of the latter) it dates back to the formative phases of Islam. Online, a page from the Qur'ān may contain varied elements, including the Arabic text, audio recitation, translation, searchable options, sharing options, and a commentary.

The Qur'ān “marketplace” has become innovative and diverse in terms of presenting its product to international audiences. As with other media, consideration is given to possible audience demographics, web literacy, and—in the case of the Qur'ān—the

extent to which the audience has prior knowledge of the Qur'ān. This means that the nuanced range of Qur'ān websites stretches from "introductory" to "specialist," Muslim and other, in a multiplicity of languages and formats.

The objective of making the Qur'ān accessible in different languages has been accomplished in a variety of ways. In an example of an introductory Qur'ān resource, The King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'ān produced a comprehensive and accessible resource in Arabic, English, French, Hausa, Indonesian, Spanish, and Urdu. This included a choice of recitations, available for download or playing on site. There were options for memorization and textual display. It was interesting to see that some verses have been translated into German, "Gypsy," Russian, and Chinese. The site also offered a virtual tour of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. The shifting parameters of online content meant that by 2020 a proportion of this content was unavailable through the official website (although archived copies could be located) (King Fahd Complex; Archive.org 2021).

An example of an intermediate level resource is Qur'ān Explorer, which features translations in several languages, recitation "from 6 famous Qaris [specialist and trained reciter]," and "live Qur'ān tutoring" via QuranInteractive.com. Among the innovations are the Qur'ān browser, and the color-coded *tajwīd* [forms of recitation] rules. This plays a portion from the Qur'ān, and then translates it (with various options available for translation); the audio can be followed on the screen. It has a user-friendly interface, which is accessible, with no downloads required. It is also available as an app for iPad, iPhone, and Android (Qur'ān Explorer 2014).

More complex online resources, useful for those with an advanced knowledge of the Qur'ān, are also available. For example, *altafsir.com* is a Qur'ān resource produced by the Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Jordan, which provides a variety of materials associated with commentaries (*tafsīr*) of the Qur'ān. The site is notable for developing with Martin Lings an English translation of the selected verses from the Qur'ān, and "a user-friendly interface for the study and comparison of all the established *qirā'āt* [recitation styles] and *maqāms* ['pitch organization' (Oxford Dictionary of Islam 2013)] of Quran recitation." This could be seen as a resource for in-depth study of specific themes and verses of the Qur'ān (*altafsir.com* 2014). Also available is a website that provides Arabic pronunciation, Roman transliteration, and access to no less than fifty-one English translations of each of the Qur'ān's 6,236 verses (*islamawakened.com/Qur'ān*) (Islamawakened 2012).

The dissemination of the message of the Qur'ān is conducted through a variety of media channels and devices, and may be found on commercial sites. Guided Ways offers a comprehensive range of tools and downloads, much of it free and multi-format. There is also a searchable Qur'ān and Hadith database. One of the products featured is the iQuran, available on multiple platforms (Guided Ways 2012). Elsewhere, the Qur'ān is available for download as an e-book, for example for use on Amazon's Kindle, in a variety of editions and translations, part of a broad selection of Islamic sources available as digital downloads (Amazon 2012). Examples of calligraphy from historical Qur'āns have also been placed online, as part of museum and archive initiatives (British Library 2014; Fihrist 2014; Harvard University Islamic Heritage Project 2014).

Through these and a multiplicity of other devices and channels, the Qur'ān—the core element of Islamic spirituality—has been made more widely available, certainly to those within societies where digital access and literacy have been engendered.

Accessing the Qur'ān and other resources online has also been endorsed and supported by traditional Muslim authorities. In 2012, authorities in Abu Dhabi issued a *fatwa* (juridical opinion) permitting access to the Qur'ān on smartphones and other interfaces, drawing on the concept of Revelation within the Qur'ān: “There isn't just one specified way of reading the Quran,” said the fatwa, released by the Ifta Centre of the Abu Dhabi Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (*Awqāf*). “Reciting a verse from the Al Muzammil chapter in the Quran, the fatwa says: ‘Read you, therefore, of the Quran as much as may be easy for you’ (20: 73)” (Ghazal 2012a, 2012b).

Islamic Knowledge and Spirituality Online

Prophetic Traditions can similarly be accessed through online resources and databases. This is particularly relevant, given the inherent complexity of diverse collections and versions of Sunna and Hadith materials—notably their lines of authority and issues of authenticity. A database is not going to solve this issue, but it does provide a method of accessing and comparing a range of traditions. Some prior knowledge of the types of material available in textual form may be required. There may be issues (as with any text reproduced in a digital format) of accuracy of transcription and variance of translation. Specific meanings may be implied or inputted into traditional sources. Prophetic traditions are also utilized as part of the range of *tafsīr* commentaries. Here we can see the benefits of hyperlinked commentaries, which enable a reader to access a range of materials that may otherwise require specialist library access.

What used to be the preserve of traditional scholars versed in normative texts and traditions has opened up to a more general readership. Discussions of traditions online by lay people frequently draw on the range of commentaries and interpretations of traditions presented online. This has proved a contentious area for scholars, who feel threatened by such developments, given that their opinions in local contexts may be ignored by a generation used to acquiring knowledge online. Other scholars, however, have embraced the challenge and raised their own status (as well as the popularity of their interpretative opinions) through utilization of the Internet. This phenomenon, while no means universal, has become a critical element in understanding the significance of the Internet to Islamic spirituality. It has been particularly important in western Muslim “minority” contexts, where individuals dissatisfied with the range of understandings and interpretations available from traditionally oriented clerics have gone online to seek contemporary dynamic and more relevant opinions from web-literate scholars and their organizations.

This remains a significant issue as one enters into the diverse frameworks of interpretation and understanding represented across the Islamic spectrum, especially with regard to the spirituality of litanies, invocations, and devotional texts. Within this palette of spiritual shades, the language, prayers, and texts evoked digitally reflect their

original sources and at times their transcendent qualities. Such experiences may lack the multisensory impact of being in a place of religious spiritual practice—such as a mosque, *tekke* or Sufi shrine—but can still represent qualities associated with the divine.

Listening to a prayer or a Qur’ān recitation online using headphones can be an evocative experience, taking the listener outside everyday mundane activities. The portability and availability of digital materials enhances opportunities for connectivity with religious expression in a multiplicity of forms. The Internet offers a greater range of spiritual experiences, which can be integrated with more traditional approaches to sources and materials. Individuals have opportunities to access a much wider range of litanies, invocations, and devotional texts from their desktop and through mobile devices. In addition, they can potentially do this discretely, in order to explore world-views that are far away from their cultural and traditional perspective.

Whether this is a positive or negative development is clearly in the eye of the beholder. The scholarly monopoly of Islamic spirituality has been broken in some contexts, and perhaps the sense of *taqiyya*—the concealment of religious preferences or secret practices of religious devotions—can be introduced into some of these cyber experiences. The anonymity presented by the Internet allows a taste of religious experience and practice from outside traditional frameworks. This taste may subsequently be dismissed or ridiculed by observers, but equally may provide a greater sense of understanding of how the variety of Islamic spiritual practices manifest themselves in diverse contexts. It can also demonstrate what is shared between and within the different shades of Muslim opinion; for example, points of commonality discovered online may engender better intra-Muslim relations.

Those seeking to pray via the Internet may also encounter other religions. A search by the writer of YouTube for “Islamic prayer” brought up Christian-sponsored video advertisements. A search will also bring attention to a range of sites and apps facilitating prayer, such as prayer times, forms of recitation, and performance. Some of these may provide introductory instruction, through video and animation. How to Pray in Islam is a YouTube video tutorial, breaking down the elements of the *Ṣalāt* prayer (see Chapter 14: The Spirituality of Prayer in Islam by Hugh T. Halman) by using a video clip and recitation (Muslim Prayer Mat 2012). An animated 3-D tutorial aimed at children was produced by IslamicStudio, which includes narration by a child (with a northern English accent, incorporating colloquialisms) and recitation from the Qur’ān. The suppliant is represented by a green featureless face, praying on a carpet. The site features an Arabic text with English translation of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* (the opening chapter of the Qur’ān), and then shows screenshots from an online translation for the second portion of recitation to be performed as part of the prayer (Learn Quran with Tajweed 2014). More conventional instruction is provided by Cartoons4MuslimKids, which uses recitation in conjunction with animation (Cartoons4MuslimKids 2011).

One cannot stereotype the potential audience for materials relating to Islamic spirituality, which crosses age, language, culture, and gender divides. For example, one low-tech clip of instruction for Muslim women is narrated by a man, and shows a woman praying in her living room with her toddler child prominent in the foreground (Arman 2010). The controversy in some quarters over women and men praying

together is also represented online, with scholarly dialogue and documentary evidence (Voice of America 2012; Quick 2007).

The Internet will also demonstrate the evocation of prayer through music, which can be abhorrent to “orthodox” Muslims. For example, the Egyptian singer Amr Diab’s “*Ya Baqī*” (“Oh, Eternal [God]”) was presented in a YouTube clip illustrated with film of the Ka’ba. Calligraphy of the Beautiful Names of God is also included in the clip, interposed with pictures of natural phenomena that illustrate the magnitude of Creation (Amr Diab 2012). When viewed on YouTube, such output may be juxtaposed with commercials, which may distract from any spiritual experience evoked through the one-minute clip.

Several apps provide a phone app representation of Islamic prayer beads (*misbaha* or *tasbeḥ*) that are used in prayer to recall the 99 Names of Allah (*Asmā’ Allāh al-Ḥusnā*). Some also have a tutorial for Arabic pronunciation, which helps the supplicant know how many evocations of the divine names have been given (for example, Dhikr and Dua 2021; Qibla Finder 2012). Coincidentally, there is a vibrant market for these beads in their analogue form online. This is part of the market for online products that can also facilitate the pursuit of Islamic spirituality.

The Spirituality of Islamic Places Online

Online expression can also extend itself to concepts surrounding the spirituality of places and spaces. Within Islam, the central physical location for religious expression and obligation would be the Ka’ba in Mecca for its role as an orienting focus of prayer, the spiritual center of the obligatory Ḥajj and optional ‘*Umra* pilgrimages, and the city’s historical role in the formative period of the emergence of Islam. (See Chapter 6: The Spiritual Meaning of Mecca, the Ka’ba, and the Ḥajj by Gordon Newby.) For certain religious perspectives, other places may also play a role as centers of spiritual activity. These might include sites associated with the Prophet Muḥammad, including Medina and Jerusalem. (See Chapter 7: The Spiritual Meaning of Medina by Daoud Casewit and Chapter 8: Jerusalem in Islamic Spirituality by Brannon Wheeler.) Within Shī’ism, significant locations associated with the Imamate and other key religious figures have acquired specific status for religious activity and pilgrimage. In particular, the tombs of Sufi saints have also acquired a special role for their followers. (See Chapter 9: The Spirituality of the Sufi Shrine by Carl Ernst.) Add to these locations the importance of regional and culturally focused religious buildings and institutions, from city mosques to village shrines, and one finds a wealth of places and spaces associated with Islamic expression (Salamstock 2012).

Many of these places have a representation online—whether it is in the form of simple texts and photos, or multimedia. Some of this information is designed to aid visitors and local members in attending the location; for example, there are some very practical websites that provide a “one-stop shop” for potential Ḥajj pilgrims. These sites may also have a commercial element, relating to sales of tickets, accommodations, and official *muṭawwif* guide services for Ḥajj and ‘*Umra* visits. Another dimension is provided

by sites that seek to create an immersive spiritual experience; however, whether this can be described as equivalent to the experience of attending a pilgrimage in person is open to question. There are many factors that might prevent an individual going on Ḥajj, such as the teaching that one should only go if it is personally and financially possible. Ḥajj online resources also have a role in teaching a person how to perform the pilgrimage, through step-by-step instruction. Apps incorporate location tracking and how-to advice for each stage of the pilgrimage (see for example, IT department of Dawateislami, 2012).

There have been several attempts to provide a “three dimensional” immersive Ḥajj experience online. 3-D Kabah is one of the most longstanding of these, being a “fly-through” experience of the Ka’ba. This site is available through several channels, including YouTube (3-D Kabah 2012). A Turkish site in 3-D also provides renditions of twelve mosques, including the al-Azhar and Ibn Ṭulūn mosques in Cairo, and several mosques in Turkey (3dmekanlar.com 2012). The virtual reality team of the King Fahd Glorious Quran Printing Complex also presents panoramas of Medina in 3-D, available for download (King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur’ān, 2021). 3-D renditions also include depictions of historical mosques, such as the Great Mosque of Córdoba, imagined as it was prior to being converted into a cathedral (ARS Productions 2012). The mosque of al-Aqṣā’ in Jerusalem (*al-Quds*) can also be found in 3-D online, including one that integrates 3-D images of al-Aqṣā’ Mosque with an animation of events associated with the Palestinian Intifada, giving a specifically political resonance to religious imagery (Intifada Al Aqsa 2008). A range of 3-D renditions of other mosques can also be located online, some accompanied with recitation or music.

Shī’a shrines are also available as 3-D representations, as reflections of specific Shī’a worldviews and interests; for example, Karbala, the site of the Prophet Muḥammad’s grandson Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī’s martyrdom in 680 CE and one of the most important religious sites for Shī’a Muslims, has been rendered in 3-D. Religious figures interacting with sacred spaces have also been depicted in 3-D animation; a representation of Imam Ḥusayn is shown in Mecca, as part of an animation of his journey to Karbala (hasanabbas.com 2012).

Individual clips filmed by pilgrims can be found alongside more professionally produced movies, as part of propagation efforts relating to the visitation of shrines. These in themselves can be informative and illustrate others undertaking religious experiences. An example of this can be found in film of the Shrine of Sayyida Fāṭima Ma’šūma, the sister of Imam ‘Alī al-Riḍā the eighth Shī’ī Imam (d. 818 CE), and the daughter of Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓim the seventh Imam (d. 799 CE), in Qum, as a site for *ziyārat* (shrine or tomb visitation) in Iran. Clips show pilgrims in prayer, films of the shrine and its associated mosque, accompanied by an audio recording of the lament that is recited at the tomb (*muṣībat*) (Kalimpur 2012).

The city of Mashhad is an important shrine center in Iran, being the home of the shrine of Imam Reza (‘Alī al-Riḍā), and has been presented as a 3-D game (Mashhad Imam Reza Mosque 3D Game 2011). The shrine complex of Mashhad is well represented online, through video tours, such as the one uploaded by the Islamic Republic’s international channel PressTV (PressTV 2020). There are numerous clips showing the

ritual practices connected with the *ziyārat*, notably the celebration of Muḥarram in Mashhad, and the recitation of *noha* poetry and prose praising the Imams and their families (3D Noha 2008). The practices of *Ashūra* (the tenth day of Muḥarram), including self-flagellation by male pilgrims, can also be located online. Many videos showing the *Ta'ziyya* passion plays—ritualistic performances depicting the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn—can be viewed as well (Kolbitsch 2016).

A more unusual clip is the uploaded video, “A Visit at The Shrine of Imam Reza by an Animal.” This shows a dog in the shrine, being treated as an honored visitor and accompanied by a recording glorifying Imam Reza. This video is meant to indicate the miraculous nature of the shrine; however, it is potentially controversial and open to misinterpretation, given that dogs are typically seen as “unclean” in Islam (theza21 2007). Many of these clips of shrine visitation do not come with commentary, making it problematic for outside observers to fully ascertain the context of their contents.

Many Sufi shrines are also represented online, with dedicated websites and resources. (See Chapter 9: The Spirituality of the Sufi Shrine by Carl Ernst.) In India, for example, the Shrine of Hazrat Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā’ (d. 1325 CE) has a web resource giving historical background, practical visitor information, and biographical data about this particular saint (Shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia). Religious meetings and rituals are recorded and posted online from many shrines. Activities at the Data Ganj Bakhsh shrine (‘Alī al-Hujwīrī, d. 1077 CE) in Lahore, Pakistan, have been recorded and posted on YouTube by the Faizaneraza Network, which has a multimedia website, online TV channel, and presence on Facebook and other social media. Bombers have in the past targeted this shrine, and after a 2010 terrorist attack, clips of the attack were also featured online (Faizaneraza Network 2012). Another prominent Sufi site is the mausoleum of Mevlana Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273 CE) in Konya, Turkey, which has been turned into a museum. The virtual tours available online often reflect the touristic potential of the space, including ritual performances by the Whirling Dervishes as part of a sound and light show (Safa 2007).

Generic resources such as Google Earth have been utilized to access religious spaces and places. Pilgrimages and religious events are widely documented online. Mosques can be viewed and “visited” through Google Maps. The sense in which these sites provide evocative religious experiences is debatable, but they may facilitate and inform future visits. Instagram has been used to record pilgrim activities in various locations, including the ubiquitous “selfie” (Instagram 2019). Users upload photos of their activities in the holy precincts and in the wider city. There may be religious implications here, as the use of mobile devices such as phones is technically prohibited in the precincts of Mecca; however, this has apparently not dissuaded pilgrims from recording their experiences. Material on pilgrimage sites also include generic documentary materials that are featured online, including copies of television broadcasts and films. In relation to Mecca, an HD trailer for a feature film on the journey of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1369 CE) presented evocative and highly cinematic impressions of the Ḥajj journey (Journey to Mecca 2012).

Through these and many other online materials presented in diverse formats, one can get a feeling of Islamic spirituality in relation to religious spaces and places. The

potential for representing such experiences online is being realized, and they are “upgraded” whenever there are technological improvements to Internet media forums. Islamic spirituality is represented online by diverse networks and nodes, drawing on diffuse understandings of interpretation and cultural-religious knowledge. The technologies applied may be generic, but their application has a sacred dimension, and they are as “cutting-edge” as other utilizations of the Internet in more profane zones of the Internet. While it is possible for the reader to recognize this to varying degrees in the material above, it may become more challenging in the next section under discussion, that of “jihad.”

Islamic Spirituality and Jihad Online

The purpose of the present section of this chapter is to illustrate examples of an eclectic range of online content associated with electronic jihad. The extent to which this fits with the theme of Islamic spirituality is open to question; participants and supporters of this form of “jihad” may be able to locate a spiritual element in their activities but this is by no means the consensus of every Muslim. The notion of jihad in classical Islamic contexts is much broader than the violent associations it has acquired recently, especially since the first Palestinian Intifada in 1987 and the World Trade Center/Pentagon attacks of 11 September 2001, followed by several other jihadist attacks (Bali 12 October 2002, Madrid 11 March 2004, and London 7 July 2005). The term *jihād* in Arabic covers peaceful spiritual “striving” in the name of Islam (which many Muslims call the “Greater Jihad”), as well as the more well-known militaristic activities (called the “Lesser Jihad”). Just as it can be said that not all battles are conducted by military campaigning, so the “battles” of the individual Muslim (such as those against the pressures and temptations of the mundane world) can also be described as a form of jihad.

In some ways, the field of jihad studies suffers from information overload, with new examples of alleged “jihad” emerging on a daily basis. Jihadi platforms such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Shabaab fully integrate the use of social media into their activities, providing followers with regular updates of campaigns and semi-official statements. For the purposes of this section, some of the significant milestones in this form of online discourse have been chosen, while recognizing that each example could be further unpacked and analyzed. A substantial amount of this material is hidden from general viewing. Thus, the primary focus in this section is on the online phenomena associated with jihadi networks, the ways in which jihadists represent themselves and Islam through the Internet, and the ways in which jihadi networks interact with a variety of members and users.

The term “e-jihad” has been applied to suggest a variety of forms of electronic jihad, with a focus on the militaristic connotations of the concept. This is often stereotyped as an al-Qaeda phenomenon, but it is important to recognize that the concept of jihad long predates al-Qaeda—it goes back to the time of the Prophet Muḥammad—and is manifested in diverse geographical, cultural, and religious contexts. However, the focus in the present section is on al-Qaeda, given its long-standing online articulation of jihad.

Varied jihadi applications of the Internet that are utilized in the name of Islam may combine social media, websites, multimedia, chat rooms, e-mail listings, and various other types of interactivity. It is relevant to mark the ways in which the content of this media has evolved and demonstrate the dynamic ways in which this sector of Islamic expression represents itself in cyberspace.

Religious language and spirituality may be invoked within these jihadi cyber networks, in a variety of rhetorical and written styles. As with other sectors of Islamic cyberspace, a spectrum of qualities and concepts associated with God and spirituality can also be found within these networks, and statements expressing compassion and mercy are prevalent. However, there are also examples in which reference to religious concepts is tokenistic, or is used as an implicit undercurrent to other activities. As part of everyday language, Islamic terminology and phrases are invoked within statements and discussions online, as a precursor to jihadi conversations. Banners and logos reflect this throughout jihadi networks. Those unwilling or unable to study a jihadi tract may be drawn into dynamic interactive multimedia presentations, which can facilitate an emotive response among some readers. A single tweet can lead to pages of rhetoric associated with jihad and its religious justification.

Jihadi site developers consistently draw on the latest software applications, for audiences of “digital natives” with inherent expectations of content accessibility and format. Enhanced web literacy and accessibility, cheaper and more powerful hardware, and faster and less expensive bandwidth have facilitated the development of online jihadi networks, although it cannot be assumed that they all intersect. Networks may pass each other by, for reasons of language, culture, politics, location, or the nuanced nature of content. This can be related to specific technological factors as well. Locations with limited bandwidth access are unlikely to benefit from video streaming or files requiring substantial download time.

Distinct dangers of information overload emerge when exploring forms of content associated with the al-Qaeda entity online. Within a couple of hours of surfing, it is possible to acquire a snapshot of net activity, with material being released and rapidly circulated via social media, blogs, chatrooms, and email lists. The notion of online jihad has had support from prominent jihadi ideologues, including Osama bin Laden (d. 2011) and Ayman al-Zawahiri (d. 2022), in its application as a propaganda and strategic tool (Bunt 2009).

Advocates of jihadi “spirituality” were quick to adopt Web 2.0 + media, such as Twitter and Facebook, in support of their cause. For example, the Taliban in Afghanistan was represented by @alemarahweb and a Facebook page, which described itself as being linked to the “official website of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” (@alemarahweb 2012). While obviously there are issues as to the veracity of ownership on a site such as this (with numerous spoof “Taliban” Twitter feeds available), documentation provided in the form of photos, statements, and videos would seem to endorse its authenticity. The majority of tweets were related to operational updates, rather than matters specific to spiritual concerns.

One key area of jihadi online output—which combined both spiritual and strategic matters—were the many online magazines published by al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

These were published online, in a multitude of formats, and became increasingly nuanced and professional in their presentation. The magazines were usually announced on online forums, and in places on file sharing sites for distribution. However, there may only be a finite window for downloading magazines, as file sharing sites now attempt to close down “inappropriate” jihadi content. These magazines have enjoyed considerable publicity by being picked up and discussed in mainstream media channels. Their development saw editions focused on particular demographics; al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s *Inspire* magazine developed by the Saudi-American propagandist Samir Khan and the Yemeni-American imam Anwar al-Awlaki was significant for its use of colloquial English language content in a “user-friendly” format (Bunt 2014: 191–196). The magazine was seen as influential on several jihadi campaigns, and continued its influence despite the killing of al-Awlaki and Khan in 2011 by a US drone attack. Working under the banner of al-Malahem Media, other publications in 2012 included a slideshow called “Hallmarks of al-Qaeda.”

In all the issues of *Inspire*, interspersed with operational guidance were Qur’ānic quotations, commentaries from “religious scholars,” and images which sought to highlight the religious nature of al-Qaeda’s jihad. These articles endeavored to place jihadi activity in a religious context, as well as in political, campaigning, and military frameworks. These documents, drawing on colloquial language, were seen by analysts to have a major impact on recruiting jihadis from urban western environments. Internationally, *Inspire* and similar online publications were deemed influential by prosecutors in numerous court cases relating to jihadi activities, and possession of the digital documents was seen in some contexts as sufficient justification for imprisonment.

Substantial development time and resources went into al-Qaeda’s media activities as a significant element of online jihad, and these activities continued to achieve prominence even when key figures were removed from the production equation. Propagation materials have a substantial online “shelf-life,” especially videos of sermons and operational activities, and are also copied and shared offline. The production values of these videos have improved in line with technological advances, and they integrated spiritual values and justifications for operational and political contents.

Some representative examples of other jihad-oriented content include: multimedia content of recordings and transcriptions presented by the Jihad Media Battalion of a speech by Osama bin Laden; Global Islamic Media Front statements quoting from the Qur’ān in Arabic, with English and German translations juxtaposed with an AK-47; a multimedia eulogy from al-Ansar Media Battalion representing the life of the “shaikh and mujahid” of al-Qaeda in Iraq Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (d. 2006), entitled “Follow the Caravan,” which emphasises the religious nature of his activities; a multimedia jihadi rap video entitled “Dirty Kuffar,” that brings together clips and narratives in a rap music format; a video from the Islamic Army in Iraq presenting “The Best of the Juba (Baghdadi Sniper),” citing from the Qur’ān in the process (*Sūrat al-Tawba*, Q 9: 39).

The technical quality of diverse jihadi statements and videos, which as well as being posted on the web have often been forwarded to international broadcast networks, have become a subject of analysis in its own right (Reuters/Free Republic 2006). The impact of this has been significant, especially the use of video for actuality and operational

reports. There are also examples of unusual approaches to presenting the al-Qaeda message (and concepts of spirituality), perhaps as a way to target certain audience strands and as a “light-touch” entry point to other materials. Throughout al-Qaeda’s online statements, religious language and a type of spirituality is evoked, albeit couched in the rhetoric of jihad (Lawrence 2005; Lia 2007; Peters 2005; and for further analysis, Devji 2005, 2008).

The engagement between jihad and Islamic spirituality is tentative. While the military or lesser jihad may be a minority position in Islamic discourse online, it is significant to consider these materials as part of the spectrum of online Islamic spirituality, especially as (erroneously, perhaps) online jihad has become synonymous in the journalistic imagination with Islam and the Internet.

Islamic Spirituality and Music Online

An antidote to exposure to jihadi materials online may be found in those areas of the Internet focusing on spirituality in music, song, and poetry. This can range from *Qawwali* (see Chapter 24: The Spirituality of *Qawwali* by Scott Kugle) to hip-hop—of which both genres offer spiritual elements of understanding. While there may be opposition to music from some perspectives in Islamic contexts, many Muslim cultures embrace music in a multiplicity of forms, of which religious content is one dimension. Music can be presented commercially, for example through sites offering music to purchase via download; it can also be offered simply for the spiritual benefit it might offer the listener. Islamic music may be found on streaming services such as Spotify, or through radio stations with an interest in “world music”—where it may be juxtaposed alongside music of other genres and backgrounds. Clearly, Islamically associated music is a very broad category, which covers a variety of genres and contexts (Levine 2011; MePop 2014).

The levels to which spirituality can be measured in musical offerings may often be open to question. There is clarity with certain performers, such as the *Qawwali* master Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (d. 1997), who is well-represented online through video clips, fan sites, and music downloads. His repertoire shows a range of styles, ranging from traditional devotional music to pop-oriented recordings made with Peter Gabriel (Khan et al. 2007). The same may be said of the Senegalese musician Youssou Ndour (b. 1959), whose pop output (also including input from Peter Gabriel) can be found online alongside Sufi devotional tracks from his album “Allah” (Ndour 2009; Ndour and Gabriel 2007). The output of Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens) has embraced both folk-rock and devotional tracks; this is highlighted on websites utilizing both names, which have promoted his albums and a stage musical (Yusuf Islam 2014). Spirituality may also be associated with purely instrumental music, as with artists such as Mali’s Ali Farka Touré (d. 2006), whose influential “African blues” style was influenced by syncretic beliefs in Islam and the spirit world of the *jinn* (Mali Music 2011).

Music is also a means through which protest against specific interpretations and understandings of Islam, and their applications in society, can emerge. There are many

examples of this from diverse religious-cultural frameworks. In May 2012, the Iranian rap artist Shahin Najafi was accused of blasphemy by a grand ayatollah, and had to go under police protection in Germany after posting a video of his song “Ay Naghi” online (Najafi 2012). According to a report by Deutsche Welle, “The song itself, set to an insistent beatbox rhythm, picks up the failings of the Islamic Republic: corruption, prostitution, religious hypocrisy, discrimination against homosexuals” (Deutsche Welle 2012). The use of rap music as a form of protest and mobilization in Muslim contexts has numerous precedents. During the Arab Spring, “Rais Lebled” (“President of the Country”) by the Tunisian rap artist El Général (Hamada Ben-Amor) achieved an anthemic status with its critical views of the Tunisian government, resulting in Ben-Amor being jailed (Tfi9ou 2011).

The rap genre has a long-standing relationship with Muslim communities in North America, dating from the Last Poets group emerging from the black civil rights movement of the 1960s, through to Public Enemy and the contemporary Muslim hip-hop communities. (See Chapter 27: The Islamic Spirituality of Hip-Hop by Michael Muhammad Knight.) This incorporates such diverse artists as Native Deen, from Washington DC, whose rap style features non-percussive instrumentation. Their 2012 online video “Our Earth” integrated an ecological theme with their religious message, as the performers rapped in a “weightless” environment over the Earth (Native Deen 2012). Other performers reflect other styles associated with hip-hop music, and can be found streamed on muslimhiphop.com, an online community that sells MP3s, updates on performer news, and offers content with “100% Halal Lyrics” (Muslim Hip-Hop 2012). Performers use generic music sharing sites as well as muslimhiphop.com to promote their music, selling MP3s and advertising performances (Aidi 2012).

Religion and spirituality are not necessarily primary themes for musicians who just happen to be Muslim. For example, the Massachusetts punk band The Kominas felt that the “Muslim” label detracted from the quality of their music. Nonetheless, The Kominas’ online release included music that related to Muslim political and social issues, such as “Tahrir Square Dance” and “No one Gonna Honor Kill My Baby” (The Kominas 2014). The Kominas originally emerged as part of a movement derived from Michael Muhammad Knight’s novel *Taqwacore*, and were featured in a documentary and a feature film about the movement, which arose in part from this novel. The bass player of the band suggested that the label “Muslim punk” was inappropriate, and was one he wished to disown (Taqwacore 2009; Usmani 2009). The extent to which spirituality is a central theme of this band’s music may be open to question, but religious identity can be perceived as one of several labels associated with these performers.

The Internet is a channel through which traditional devotional and other forms of Islamic spiritual music can be found, alongside expressions of religious identity and reflections about the place of religion in society that reflect forms of popular culture. The Internet can open up a range of musical perspectives from diverse Muslim cultures and contexts, offering new audiences for contemporary and traditional music forms performed by Muslims, some of which contain a spiritual message.

Conclusion

The Internet acts as a constantly evolving multimedia depository of knowledge about Islamic spirituality. It is a library in which the shelves are constantly changing, and some sections may disappear from view altogether. Internet content can be transitory, and is not always archived, so important images and data about spirituality may be lost from view. Despite this, there are infinite ways in which Islamic spirituality can be explored online. However, approaching this material can be daunting. As with other areas of spirituality, a *murshid* or guide may help one through the different stations of knowledge; especially because the map keeps changing frequently. Through immersion in the Internet, a sense of Islamic spirituality may emerge; depending on the tastes of the individual, this might or might not be undertaken in conjunction with traditional, “real world” approaches to Islamic knowledge. What can be said with some assurance is that on- and offline mediation of digital understandings of Islamic spirituality are not necessarily separate endeavors. As with other sectors of life, the digital and the organic worlds often merge into a single, holistic approach to information about Islamic spirituality, including its precepts and practices, its benefits and limits.

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