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3 Muslim encounters with new media

Towards an inter-civilizational discourse on globality?

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This chapter discusses uses of the internet and the world wide web by Muslims, in the contexts of tradition, modernity, and globality. Electronic networks have become symbols of a technological civilization that has extended itself around the planet. The traditional world views of Muslims have often been identified in dominant Western discourses as being against modernity and its expressions of globality. However, the social-intellectual aspects of the 'Islamic piety model', which is quite distinct from the anti-modernist manifestations of militant Islamism, offers an alternative approach to modernity. Its emphasis on a transcendent view of knowledge, a frontierless fellowship, a humanism founded on religious faith, and an economic framework that gives priority to social justice and social ethics, (Pasha and Samatar 1997), offers a particular way of conceptualizing human progress.

The non-materialist ethos of the Islamic piety model, which represents the world view of 20 per cent of the world's population, serves as a foil for the economically and technologically deterministic models of progress that have tended to create vast disparities between the haves and the have-nots at national and global levels. The dominant discourses on modernity and globality are mainly anchored in Western history, and have been largely shaped according to the priorities of market-centred neo-liberalism. In many parts of the world (including the industrialized West), the centrifugal tendencies of globalization appear to be inspiring a centripetal resurgence of national and communal identities (Karim 1997: 77-9). An inter-civilizational discourse on these issues would allow for alternative constructions of human progress, which could enable an authentic globalization that is inspired by the experience and ideas of all humanity, as well as responding to its diverse needs and values.¹ Such a discourse may be increasingly possible as people of various backgrounds engage in hori-

zontal, inter-continental communication with each other via online networks which are relatively less hierarchical and centrally organized than the mass media (Karim *et al.* 1998). This form of communication, while limited to those who have access to online services, also has advantages over the mainly one-to-one telecommunications services such as the telephone or the fax. In addition, whereas inter-civilizational discourse is already carried out among societal elites such as diplomats, academics, journalists, artists and others whose professional or financial status permits such interactions, online networks enable more continual contact for a broader cross-section of society.

The current socio-political turmoil experienced by several Muslim societies is partly a reaction to forms of Westernization that may be considered inimical to indigenous values. Some of the expressions of such turmoil, including religious dogmatism, philosophical conservatism, and the repression of minorities, would seem to go against the grain of the traditional Islamic piety model. The focus on the restrictive and punitive aspects of Muslim law, as opposed to its overall purpose of providing a societal context for spiritual and material growth, appears to manifest the use of religion for personal and group politics. Conversely, the elites in some Muslim-majority states have aligned themselves with dominant models of modernization and globalization, adopting a neo-liberal view of progress and aspiring to become members of the transnational elite. Therefore, while proposing that the Islamic piety model could form part of an inter-civilizational discourse on globalization, I remain aware of the internal tendencies in Muslim societies that serve as barriers to its promotion.

Given the increasingly significant place of diasporas in the context of globalization (Appadurai 1996), this discussion will consider the role of diasporic Muslims in inter-civilizational discourse. While the place of indigenous Muslim minorities living in various countries and that of minorities in states with Muslim majorities is also important, the focus of the present study are migrant Muslim diasporas. The latter appear to have significant access to online technologies, and are using them to communicate within Muslim communities and with others.

Tradition and modernity

Tradition has often been viewed as being the polar opposite of modernity. According to Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1958), an influential work of its time, adherence to tradition was an obstacle in attaining modernity.

Modernization, as used here, is synonymous with Westernization. Lerner insisted that in the Middle East, tradition, in the form of Muslim cultures and religion, had to be surpassed as modernization involved 'the infusion of "a rationalist and positivist spirit" against which, scholars seem agreed, "Islam is absolutely defenceless"' (Lerner 1958: 45).² Lerner's book not only influenced subsequent work on development communication, for instance Wilbur Schramm's *Mass Media and National Development* (1964), but it also served as a pillar for thinking about development in general through the 1960s and the early 1970s. Smith (1970: 14) speculated that secularism in its 'humanistic-pragmatic' form would sweep through Muslim-majority countries. Lerner's views were also embraced by certain Arab social scientists such as Hisham Sharabi, who wrote that 'in the contemporary Arab world Islam has simply been bypassed' (Sharabi 1966: 26).

This kind of thinking has had to be reassessed in the light of the *ulama*-led Iranian revolution in 1979, and the rise of militancy among Islamist groups in various other countries. Use of 'small media', such as audio cassettes and traditional communications networks, enabled the efficient dissemination of messages to large numbers of people, who had lost faith in the state-controlled mass media (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994; Mowlana 1979). Such innovative uses of communications systems appears to be a clear example of the spirit of experimentation characteristic of Lerner's modernized individual; but here she/he was linking traditional communications networks with contemporary technology to attain her/his aims. The methodology of Lerner's study of the mass media in Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iran appears to have been tainted by an ideological framework shaped by the Cold War and by cultural imperialism.³ These biases rendered the proponents of his approach blind to the continuing significance of indigenous cultures, even as Muslims and other peoples in developing countries gradually adopted the accoutrements of a technological society.

The social theorist John B. Thompson (1995) has revisited Lerner's work in his discussion of the relationship between media and modernity. While Thompson does not subscribe to the view of a linear progression from tradition to modernity, he finds value in Lerner's notion of 'the mobile personality' of the modernized individual who, in contrast to the traditional person, is 'distinguished by a high capacity for identification with new aspects of his environment' (Lerner 1958: 49). This was due to their faculty of empathy with the larger society, which was the result of going beyond the face-to-face world of daily interaction to the larger world presented by the mass

media. Lerner suggested that this capacity made the modern person an active participant in society (as a cash customer, radio listener, voter) and the mass media, described as 'the mobility multiplier', facilitated such participation (Lerner 1958: 52). Experience and knowledge that previously could be gained mainly through travel were seen as expanded by mediated perception. Lerner implied that the media transmit messages in value-free and benign manners around the globe, resulting in the formation of a unitary and progressive 'world public opinion' (Lerner 1958: 54). This made the traditional person, whom the author constructed as shunning rationality and innovation, more open to experimentation as they entered modernity. Such changes in attitude would lead to the breakdown of locally based, traditional structures of power and authority, since the new points of reference were not local, face-to-face ones but national and global. However, Thompson (1995) suggests that tradition does not disappear in the process of modernization, but that it is 're-moored' in new contexts.

Human beings have an innate need to make sense of the world around them and of their place in it. This is done by giving value and meaning to objects and relationships. Thompson asserts that the discourses of technological society merely provide their own sets of meanings that exist alongside the long-standing cultural and religious value systems (Thompson 1995: 192). In the West, and many of its former colonies, contemporary legal and constitutional systems are partially based on ideas derived from the Bible. The Christian calendar and festivals guide the rhythms of what are otherwise secular societies. The media, which Lerner said would unravel tradition, have actually been significant participants in the weaving of threads of Western religious traditions into the fabric of contemporary life. Not only are Christian ceremonies, festivities, dramaturgy, music and discourse a substantial part of media content, but basic 'Judaean-Christian' notions of right and wrong, good and evil, and self and other are echoed in entertainment as well as in news production (Silk 1995).

Thompson holds that, just as the media are infused with elements from tradition, tradition is also changed by the media. He suggests that society has become deritualized, depersonalized and delocalized, primarily through a decreasing dependence on face-to-face communication (Thompson 1995: 195-7). As the cultivation of traditional values and beliefs becomes increasingly reliant on the symbolic cultural and religious content borne by media products (books, films, etc.), the need for the enactment of ritual in congregational, face-to-face settings diminishes. Also, because the transmission of tradition becomes dependent on mediated forms of communication, it becomes

detached from the people with whom one interacts on a day-to-day basis. Despite the broadcasting of religious content, mediated froms of communication can, at best, only provide for a 'non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance' (Thompson 1995: 197). The rootedness of traditions in particular spatial locales also weakens as the mass media obviate the need to maintain bonds through face-to-face interactions. Thompson does indicate, however, that these processes are not uniform and unambiguous, and that there are varying degrees of the deritualization, depersonalization, and delocalization of tradition that result from mass media use. He also maintains that the de-localization of traditions allows them to be re-moored in other contexts and re-embedded in social life in new ways, which 'does not necessarily render them inauthentic, nor does it necessarily spell their demise' (Thompson 1995: 202). These ideas are evaluated below in the context of Muslim uses of online media, together with a consideration of the re-mooring, not only of tradition, but also of modernity, and, by extension, of globality.

Re-mooring modernity

In *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Benjamin Barber refers to an 'exceptionalist thesis' which marks out Islam and its followers as standing outside (and even against⁴) global trends of social, political and technological modernization:

Islam creates an exceptional set of circumstances that disqualify Islamic countries from becoming democratic and fates them to an eternal struggle against the Enlightenment and its liberal and democratic children.

(Barber 1995: 208–9)

Similarly, Naipaul (1991) identifies Muslim societies as unfit for what he calls the 'universal civilization', and Huntington (1996) pits them against the West in his prognosticated 'clash of civilizations'. The vital contributions of Muslim scholars to the growth of knowledge in the medieval era, and the attempts by a series of modernizers since the nineteenth century to engage Western philosophy from Quranic perspectives (Fakhry 1983), generally go unacknowledged by Western commentators.

Theorists who share the views of Barber, Naipaul and Huntington seem to remain unaware of the contemporary discussions among Muslims on Islam, modernity and postmodernity. Azmeh (1993) states

that the revivalist Islamist movement manifests a break with crucial aspects of the Muslim tradition, and should be seen as a characteristically modernist phenomenon that draws on themes commonly encountered in the discourse of romantic populism and subaltern nationalism. However, Ahmed (1992) says that if modernism meant the pursuit of Western education, technology and industrialization immediately following de-colonization, then the current return to traditional Muslim values and a rejection of modernism by some Muslims is a feature of postmodernity. Rather than being limited to the varying contingencies of modernity and postmodernity in their material contexts, Azim Nanji has sought to move the debate to what is termed 'intellectual modernity':

Intellectual modernity...ought not to be seen as a totalizing discourse, but as a perspective, as a set of tools of comprehension which unlock creativity and release the potential for a constructive dialogue with the community in its contemporary environment.

(Nanji 1991: 222)

Such an approach would not be dependent on others' conceptions of modernity, but would help determine paths of development appropriate to the needs and values of Muslims themselves.

The Muslim concept of *ummah*, the worldwide Muslim community, is providing a basis for contemporary Muslim discussion on globality. Mowlana (1996) contrasts an 'Islamic community paradigm' with the 'information society paradigm' proposed by Western governments in order to promise a Utopian future that would be brought about by the use of new technologies. As opposed to the instrumental rationality and market-based logic of the latter, the 'Islamic community paradigm' would be guided by principles of social justice and of an ethical system informed by Islam. Mohammadi (1998) suggests the formulation of an 'Islamic cultural strategy' to protect Muslim identities from the homogenizing effects of globalization. This would be achieved through a redefinition of knowledge according to Islamic epistemology, which, in contrast to Western intellectual traditions, draws on revelation as well as on the tangible universe.

Pasha and Samatar (1997) approach Islam's relationship with modernity and globality by proposing a two-pronged framework which echoes the thinking of a number of other Muslim scholars:

First, we situate 'globality', as a feature of modernity, in a more interactive framework – as the product of a long historical

exchange between different cultures, including elements that draw their inspiration from the Islamic civilization. Second, we treat Islamic piety as an integral part of an alternative vision of modernity.

(Pasha and Samatar 1997: 187–8)

Globalization has been described as 'the *intensification* of world-wide social relations which link distant localities' (Giddens 1990: 64, emphasis added). Thompson (1995: 150) traces the origins of globalization to the expansion of trade in the late (European) Middle Ages, although the intercontinental land and sea networks established by Muslims to link themselves with their neighbours in Asia, Africa and Europe had even earlier origins. Pasha and Samatar (1997: 192) draw attention to the long-standing inter-civilizational dialogue between Christendom and Muslims by challenging what the historian Marshall Hodgson has criticized as the 'presentist' readings of modernity. Their approach attempts to surpass the global/local dualism through an understanding of civilizational relations in a more horizontal framework that avoids the reinforcement of the North/South hierarchies. Rather than being relegated to the margins of the world, as a local, anti-modernist particularism which will be swept away by the 'universal civilization', Islam emerges in this perspective as a challenge to the Western elites' political and corporate hegemony. It becomes a participant, representing one fifth of humanity, in an inter-civilizational discourse on globalization.

Pasha and Samatar see Islamic piety as an alternative construction of modernity that is cognizant of non-materialist dimensions of progress and their place in an ethical social formation. They criticize the reactive tendencies among some Muslims for being fixated on opposition to modernity and for disregarding the traditional roles of Islamic piety in renewal and affirmation, as well as in conducting inter-civilizational dialogue (Pasha and Samatar 1997: 195). These authors view the social expression of Islamic piety to be in the form of a covenant that guides ethical conduct in the social, economic, and political aspects of life. Therefore, 'citizenship' for the members of the *ummah* is founded, not on juridical or contractual bases, but on a 'more durable and sacrosanct sources' (1997: 196). Islamic piety 'registers a mobilizing tendency to move large populations to seek a better world, to put materialism in its proper place, and/or to negotiate a new relationship with modernity' (197). In this way, tradition interacts with modernity in a dialectical fashion rather than being its irreconcilable nemesis.

Pasha and Samatar suggest that Islamic piety offers a way to deal with the aspects of modernity and globality that lead to hedonism, narcissism and consumerism.

The role of Islamic piety in providing an alternative vision of the future cannot be dismissed on the mere basis that its use in fundamentalist discourse resurrects anti-modernist sentiments. In stressing the pitfalls of materialism, piety compels a language of propriety and pushes towards a humanization of the world. It qualifies the arrogance of reason with a gentle reminder that ultimately the content of any civilization rests on its capacity to organize social life on the foundations of justice and equality – above all, on humility. Islam does not propose an anti-rationalism, but emphasizes tempering rationalism to serve human need and dignity (Pasha and Samatar 1997: 200).

Islamic piety offers, therefore, a social-intellectual way of dealing with the effects of globalization that create blocs of haves and have-nots and privilege only Western, secular perspectives of rationalism. The challenge for Muslims, according to Pasha and Samatar, is to avoid slipping into the monastic or the zealous interpretations of their religion as they engage with globality. And the reciprocal task for the West 'is to recover memory and history, acknowledge the diversity of the Islamic *ummah*, and strive toward a solidarity based on mutual recognition and respect' (Pasha and Samatar 1997: 200).

Islamic piety becomes a practical mode for 'globalization-from-below' to deal with 'globalization-from-above', which Richard Falk identifies as reflecting 'the collaboration between leading states and the main agents of capital formation (quoted in Pasha and Samatar 1997: 190). The latter type of globalization is characterized by a relentless push for accumulation driven by a consumerist ethos, whose protagonists are transnational capital and political elites, together striving for the functional integration of national structures and cultural tastes into a mode of planetary uniformity. Conversely, globalization-from-below highlights the dysfunctional and degenerative consequences of globalization-from-above, 'by pointing to a corrosion of autonomy, individual and group efficacy, a weakening of the local bases of material sustenance, and the diminution of ecological values and the breakdown of cultural foundations' (quoted in Pasha and Samatar 1997: 190). In this view, transnational networks of non-state actors work to highlight the threats to the environment, to democratic freedoms, and to human rights.

A key aspect of globalization-from-below is constituted in the activities of diasporic groups. Diasporic connections are becoming increasingly significant in the light of what is viewed as the diminishing importance of national borders and the growing global links between non-state actors. Whereas Appadurai (1996: 18) is somewhat premature in declaring the imminent 'end of the era of the nation-state', what he calls the 'transnations' of diasporic communities do appear to be significant aspects of globalization processes. In some ways, the notion of *ummah* located around the planet but united in certain basic beliefs, prefigures the globalized nature of diasporas. Muslim diasporic transnations (linked by sect, ethnicity, national origin, and/or political alliances) straddle several continents, maintaining contact with each other through various media including mail, telephone, fax, and digital broadcasting satellites (Mohammadi 1998), and the internet. Muslim diasporic transnations use these technologies, which are part of the top-down globalization's infrastructure, to develop alternative communication flows running along networks that support a globalization-from-below. In some cases, such networks counter the restrictions placed by governments in countries with Muslim majorities, for example the Kurdish MED-TV and the Muslim television company Ahmadiyya International (Karim 1998).

According to postcolonial theorists Homi Bhabha and Abdul JanMohammed, the immigrant diasporic community in the West becomes the site of the cultural border between the country of origin and the country of residence. Bhabha (1994) writes about the integral place of newcomers ('postcolonials') in the Western state, the hybridity of cultures engendered by migration, and the 'third space' that opens up beyond the binary oppositions of national and ethnic identities. The discourses of minorities challenge majoritarian claims of cultural dominance, the notions of a homogeneous people in a nation-state, and the supremacy of any one group's history over another. Bhabha links the Western state with the immigrant through the shared past of colonialism. He suggests that '[t]he Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative *internal to its national identity*' (Bhabha 1994: 6). In an era of intensified globalization, the Western state is faced not only with the consequences of history, but also with the contemporary value that the transnational nature of its diasporic minorities has to offer (Bhabha 1994: 213). The evolving national identity of the individual Western state in the globalized environment becomes vitally linked, therefore, with that of its newest citizens, whom it is forced to deal with by virtue of their very presence in its midst:

colonial and postcolonial texts do not merely tell the modern history of 'unequal development' or evoke memories of underdevelopment. I have tried to suggest that they provide modernity with a modular moment of *enunciation*: the locus and locution of cultures caught in the transitional and disjunctive temporalities of modernity.

(Bhabha 1994:251)

We see here a re-mooring of modernity to a wharf on which is found not only the past and current contingencies of the West but also those of other peoples, upon whose histories, social structures, economic development, and modernities the West has impinged. Such a perspective enables us to view the use of communications technologies by Muslims as expressions of modernity which are not necessarily inconsistent with their tradition. These expressions may even, in some cases, be at the cutting edge of global culture.

The internet in countries with Muslim majorities

Even in a country like Canada, which has the cheapest monthly internet subscription rates in the world (Karim *et al.* 1998: 12), a large part of the population is without ready access to the internet. Canadian statistics show that the probability of a person's online access decreases if they live in a household with a low income, are over fifty-five years old, do not have a post-secondary education, are not familiar with English, live outside a major urban centre, are not enrolled in an educational institution, or are not employed (Karim *et al.* 1998: 14–17). The measurement of internet access is still in its early stages, and widely differing figures are sometimes provided by various sources, even in countries with fairly sophisticated means of statistical surveying. Assessments about data are made more complicated by the endemic hype-driven reporting about the worldwide growth of information and communications technologies (ICT), which often leads to the inflation of figures. Internet access in countries with Muslim majorities appears to be growing at varying rates. Some governments have substantial restrictions against the use of ICT, and accurate information for most states is difficult to obtain due to the fast-changing access to online services. The available data (see Table 3.1 below) only list *access*⁵ to the internet through subscriptions with internet service providers (ISPs). Actual numbers of users may be four times higher than the subscription figures indicate (DITnet: www.ditnet.co.ae).

Table 3.1 Internet subscriptions in Muslim-majority countries*

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Date</i>
Afghanistan	N/K		
Albania	N/K		
Algeria	500	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Azerbaijan	N/K		
Bahrain & Saudi Arabia	46,538	DIT Group	Jan. 1998
Bangladesh	7,000	Nando Techserver	Sept. 1997
Bosnia-Herzegovina	N/K		
Brunei	N/K		
Djibouti	400	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Egypt	61,021	DIT Group	Jan. 1998
Egypt	20,000	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Eritrea	300	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Gambia	150	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Guinea	300	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Indonesia	80,000	Indonesia IT	May 1998
Iran	N/K		
Iraq	N/K		
Jordan	20,213	DIT Group	Jan. 1998
Kazakhstan	N/K		
Kyrgyzstan	N/K		
Kuwait	42,350	DIT Group	Jan. 1998
Lebanon	43,828	DIT Group	Jan. 1998
Libya	N/K		
Malaysia	600,000	Jaring Network	Jan. 1998
Mali	400	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Mauritania	100	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Morocco	6,000	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Niger	200	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Nigeria	1,000	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Oman	20,888	DIT Group	Jan. 1998
Pakistan	N/K		
Palestine	N/K		
Qatar	17,295	DIT Group	Jan. 1998
Senegal	2,500	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Somalia	N/K		
Sudan	300	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Syria	N/K		
Tajikistan	N/K		
Tunisia	3,500	SANGONeT	Jan. 1998
Turkmenistan	N/K		
Turkey	600,000	NUA Est	May 1997
United Arab Emirates	88,552	DIT Group	Jan. 1998
Uzbekistan	N/K		
Yemen	2,426	DIT Group	Dec. 1997

Source: Compiled from data listed by Nua Internet Surveys (www.nua.ie)

Note: *A Muslim-majority country is defined here as one with a Muslim population of 50 per cent or more.

■ The Malaysian government's aggressive policy to develop ICT appears to have resulted in high rates of internet access.⁶ The Jaring Network's January 1998 study yielded the rounded-out figure of 600,000, which constituted around 3 per cent of the Malaysia's population. This seemed to show unusually steep growth rates when compared to an October 1998 survey by International Data Corporation, which had cited 137,436, i.e. 0.7 per cent of the population (Nua Internet Surveys: www.nua.ie).⁷ Indonesia, which has a much larger population, was estimated to have 80,000 connections in May 1998. The economic downturn in South-East Asia has led to a drastic decrease in national information technology budgets, and forecasts for growth in ownership of personal computers have been reduced (Bickers 1998).

■ Some Arab countries are experiencing a boom in growth rates for internet subscriptions. The rate of 17,295 for Qatar, shows that access was available to 3.1 per cent of Qataris in January 1998, up from 1.51 per cent in July 1997. A similar rise was noted in the United Arab Emirates, up to 2.99 per cent from 1.47 per cent. Kuwait also saw a growth from 1.51 per cent to 2.15 per cent. The figures for Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, which are lumped together by the DIT Group, were less spectacular (0.19 per cent to 0.23 per cent).

■ Saudi Arabians have access to the world wide web primarily through university email accounts and through ARAMCO. The government has already given its go-ahead for the introduction of the internet in the kingdom. At the moment (November 1998), only intense negotiations among Saudi Arabian IT and telecommunications companies are holding up its availability. All analysts expect the number to hit the roof when Saudi Arabia finally comes online (DITnet: www.ditnet.co.ae).

■ There are wide variations in the data for Egypt. Whereas SANGONeT reported only 20,000 in January 1998, DIT Group found 61,021 connections (up from 35,520 in its July 1997 survey), which, in this the largest Arab country, accounts for only 0.09 per cent of the population. However, some of the technical aspects for growth potential appear to be present. Egypt has a relatively high number of ISPs (26) compared to other Arab countries, and according to the Intel Corporation, it 'has the second "fastest growing" market for personal computers in the world' (ArabiaTech 1998a).

■ Although 'after Israel, Iran was the second country in the Middle East to link up to the internet in 1992' (Arabshahi 1996), the conditions for domestic use were still undergoing a major government review in mid-1998 (ArabiaTech 1998b). Information about the

number of subscribers is hard to come by; one 1996 estimate indicated that 'at least 60,000 people have in one way or another used internet services' (Arabshahi 1996). Nevertheless, 'access is limited to government organisations and those with special permission, such as journalists from the state-run media' (ArabiaTech 1998b). Universities also have connections. For those who have access, use is slowed down by the low-capacity telephone lines on which the networks run. Officials conduct random checks 'to ensure users do not use bad language or transmit unfavourable political messages' and a government review on the internet was also studying ways of 'preventing its possible detrimental effects' (ArabiaTech 1998b). Although the review was to include an examination of the usefulness of the internet to Iran, recent history has shown that the conservative members of the Iranian leadership have not been receptive to new technologies that enable cross-border communications.⁸

In absolute numbers, Turkey seems to have the same number of internet subscribers (600,000) as Malaysia, but this makes up only 1 per cent of its population. While there is significant activity in Turkish online chat groups, possibilities for discussion of public affairs are limited. In June 1998, a Turkish teenager was given a ten-month suspended jail sentence for posting comments which were deemed anti-police on a daily chat forum hosted by Turknet, a local ISP (Reuters 1998). Three Malaysian netters fared worse in August 1998 when they were arrested and jailed indefinitely, under the Internal Security Act, for spreading false information about race riots in Kuala Lumpur (Hiebert 1998). Since the Malaysian government is seeking massive foreign investment in its Multimedia Supercorridor project it has, on the one hand, promised a 'hands-off' approach to electronic content with the exceptions of illegal or offensive materials while, on the other hand, it has restricted the direct reception of satellite broadcasts (Smeltzer 1997: 44–6). Before the Saudi Arabian government granted its first ISP licenses, it attempted to ensure that 'sufficient measures have been taken to prevent the transmittal of pornographic or politically sensitive material over the Net' (Nua Internet Surveys: www.nua.ie). World wide web services in Arab countries appear to be heavily business-oriented, with strong encouragement from the transnational information technology industry to move towards electronic commerce. Web sites seem to predominate in the areas of computing and electronics, banking, consulting and tourism. A growing number of online versions of newspapers are also available.

As a group, countries in sub-Saharan Africa have the least access to the internet. They are handicapped by major infrastructural problems

such as poorly developed telephone systems and the lack of computing hardware (Thapisa 1996: 76). With the exception of Senegal and Nigeria, Muslim-majority countries in this region do not have more than 400 internet subscribers each, according to current data. Given that Nigeria's population in 1991 was 88.5 million, the 1,000 internet access points are far from sufficient for the country's needs. Senegal, with a much smaller population (8 million in 1991), has been making efforts to enhance its computer-based technologies. In 1988 it became the first African country to have access to CD-ROM equipment (Richer 1996: 296), and had 2,500 internet subscribers in January 1998. Senegal appears to have played a role in the development of the information technology policies of the Francophonie, the international organization of Francophone countries (Richer 1996: 296), and also at the inter-African level of technological development. The 'Dakar Declaration on the Internet and the African Media', signed by media organizations, non-governmental organizations and educational institutions from west, central and southern Africa, as well as from Europe and the US, stresses the fostering of information pluralism, human rights, civil society and international cooperation (Dakar Declaration 1997).

It appears ironic that those in Muslim society with the fewest means for electronic communication seem to be the most concerned about the democratic uses of the internet. Governments around the world have attempted to bring a measure of regulation and control over online technologies. Whereas the concerns about content in developed states have been mainly about pornography and incitements to hatred, the focus in several developing countries has also included discussions that challenge the national *status quo*. The primary use of the internet in most Muslim-majority countries appears to be by government organizations and by business. Although there is some use by research and academic institutions, open debate on political issues is generally discouraged. There is not sufficient access to the internet in countries with Muslim majorities to suggest that its use has supplanted face-to-face interaction. Therefore, it seems too early to test Thompson's (1995) contention that the use of media technologies in these contexts is aiding deritualization, depersonalization and delocalization.

In Malaysia, the Muslim-majority country with the greatest per capita access to the internet, information policy theorist Tengku Mohammed Azzman Shariffadeen has suggested that this is a technology that 'has come closest to the human mind and the human spirit' (Shariffadeen 1992: 1). Shariffadeen has attempted to discuss Malaysia's ICT policies within an Islamic framework:

development in the Islamic sense, even in the context of science and technology, refers to the attainment of spiritual progress and perfection, of which the natural world is the environment provided for man to prove himself. Ultimately, scientific enquiry, the application of technology and man's attempt to improve himself in development, are acts of worship in understanding his mission towards his Creator and the...[manner] in which it should be fulfilled. Knowledge is the key element in development, but this knowledge must be transcendent linking human understanding to its Ultimate Source and thus attain the power to guide man to correct understanding and subsequently, legitimate action.

(Shariffadeen 1992:9)

Such an approach to the use of the new communications technologies could provide for an integrative practice of national development that would 're-moor modernity' to other than merely material concerns. However, those Malaysians who support this perspective appear to have a difficult challenge within a global policy and corporate environment, one which does not seem to appreciate the non-material aspects of technological endeavour. This task is especially arduous given that the Malaysian government and businesses are eager to attract investors and high-technology firms from the West. The latter's primary interests appear to be the exploitation of the potential of Malaysia's proximity to enormous Asian markets for their products rather than the application of metaphysical concepts related to knowledge and development to their work. Nevertheless, Shariffadeen's words provide a rare rationalization of ICT policy from an Islamic piety perspective, contributing to the articulation of a counter-discourse to globalization-from-above.

Diasporic Muslim networks on the internet

The most innovative and far-reaching uses of the internet among Muslims appear to be carried out by diasporic communities, which have mostly resulted from inter-continental migrations over several generations. Several of these global communities⁹ are communicating with each other using online services such as e-mail, Usenet, Listserv, and the world wide web. These technologies are especially appropriate for the far-flung 'transnations', since they are cheaper to operate compared to the mass media, and they generally operate in horizontal networks rather than in a linear, hierarchical way. Due to the greater access to internet resources in the West than in developing countries,

those members of diasporas who are resident in North America, Europe and Australia have more opportunities to utilize this global medium for their purposes.¹⁰ While the mere use of contemporary technology is not an indication of modernity, the varied applications of electronic networks by Muslim diasporas provide examples that contradict Lerner's (1958) model which presented tradition and modernity as being polarized. Thompson's (1995) notion of the re-mooring of tradition with the use of contemporary media may offer a revision of Lerner's views, but Thompson provides a limited range of empirical evidence to support his ideas. Examples from diasporic Muslim uses of new communications technologies present an opportunity to test Thompson's hypothesis about the deritualization, depersonalization and delocalization of traditional structures effected by media use.

One of the key problems with Thompson's construction of deritualization (1995: 195–6) is that it appears to reduce the role of ritual in physical gatherings to merely maintaining traditional practices. This disregards the ontologically based meanings of the religious ceremonies for those who perform them. In fact, the primary aspect of rites for believers is their spiritual efficacy. Thompson's functionalist view of ritual proposes that its regular repetition in face-to-face settings 'is the only way of securing temporal continuity' (1995: 195) and that, with the fixation of symbolic content of ritual in media materials, the maintenance of tradition over time can be separated from the continual re-enactment of rites. Thompson attributes the decline of church attendance to the availability of religious materials in books and films.

Scans of websites containing Muslim religious materials indicate a growing corpus of information relating to scripture, ritual, doctrine, theology, history, literature and current events. These are in textual, graphic, pictorial, audio, and video formats. Among the sites from which audio recitations of the Quran, the Islamic holy book, can be accessed include: 'Radio Al-Islam' (islam.org/radio) based in California; 'The Quran' (www.the-quran.com) operated from Vancouver; and a British-based site (www.unn.ac.uk). The ability to *hear* the text of the primary Islamic scripture is of special significance to Muslims, since in Islamic belief it was initially recited by the Prophet Muhammad as he received it through divine revelation. Events in the Muslim calendar are tracked in various sites, providing timely information to the faithful on congregational gatherings and ritual practices (e.g. times for prayer and fasting). In addition to information about the holy month of Ramadan, offered in several web documents, certain sites also have materials on practices of specific groups like Sufi orders,

Ismailis, Ithna Aasharis and Ahmadis. The 'Naqshbandi Sufi Way' (www.naqshbandi.org) site, based in California, carries a video file of a 'live Naqshbandi dhikr' (*dhikr* is a form of Islamic worship). The 'Moharram' site (www.vcan.com/moharram), operated from Mumbai, India, offers audio versions of the congregational *Majlis* held during the Muslim month of Muharram, by Shia Ithna Aashari adherents in Mumbai's Moughal Masjid. Beliefs and rituals are also discussed in electronic discussion groups, participation in some of which is open only to members of particular Muslim groups through designated passwords.¹¹

Whereas broadcasts of Quranic recitations and other Islamic rituals have been carried out for decades on radio and television, the world wide web allows the playing of recordings at the convenience of the user, who could be anywhere in the world where she/he has access to the web. Therefore, this technology, which has become an icon of global modernity, is being used by Muslims (among followers of various faiths) to practice their religious traditions. While Thompson (1995) suggests that the fixation of symbolic content of ritual in material media content can diminish the need to maintain tradition, it is difficult to establish if this is the case in Muslim contexts. On the contrary, the availability of web-based religious resources seems to offer the diasporic faithful, especially those who may be isolated from their communities and live in places where the mass media do not provide information on their ritual practices, the means to remain in touch with their religious traditions. The religious calendars and listings of upcoming events on websites and their mention in electronic discussion groups, may also provide the information as well as the incentive to participate physically in congregational gatherings. However, substantial field studies and surveys would have to be conducted before one could establish whether or not deritualization is occurring among diasporic Muslim groups due to their accessing of religious materials through computer-based technologies.

Thompson also maintains that 'to the extent that the transmission of tradition becomes dependent on mediated forms of communication, it also becomes detached from the individuals with whom one interacts in day-to-day life – that is, it becomes *depersonalized*' (Thompson 1995: 196). He suggests that for media-dependent adherents, the tradition itself gains a certain autonomy from those individuals who may be actually responsible for transmitting it from one generation to another. In this way, even Christian 'televangelists', such as Billy Graham, while succeeding in 'repersonalizing' tradition, have not enabled personalized interactions with the individual believer.

Websites run by Muslim diasporic groups often carry information about the past and current activities of their respective religious leaders in text, audio, pictorial and video formats. Among other items, the 'What's New' file of the 'Naqshbandi Sufi Way' site tracks the activities of the group's shaykhs reciting Quranic verses, leading religious ceremonies, providing explanations on doctrinal issues, making polemical statements to counter criticism of the order, visiting various countries, and meeting leaders of other religions (www.naqshbandi.org/whatnew.htm). 'F.I.E.L.D' (globale.net), an unauthorized Ismaili site operated from Canada, contains files on the activities, speeches and interviews of the Ismaili *imam*, the Aga Khan. Thompson's notion of depersonalization through the media would seem to apply here if one were to disregard particular Muslim beliefs about the profound spiritual relationship between the disciple (*murid*) and the guide (*murshid*), which is viewed as transcending barriers of distance (Schimmel 1975: 206). The history of sections of Muslim groups who, in various periods, have been separated from their religious leaderships (*shaykhs*, *pirs*, *imams*) by physical or political borders for centuries has demonstrated their ability to rejoin the respective community once the obstacles have been overcome (Daftary 1998). The latter is especially true in the present time of easier travel and the lifting of border restrictions after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In many cases, the isolated sections of respective Muslim communities only had dated printed materials as guides to their religious traditions. The reintegration of these communities appears to belie Thompson's notion about the long-term effects of media depersonalization on adherents of a particular tradition.

Thompson also says that the rootedness of traditions in particular spatial locales weakens as the mass media remove the need to maintain bonds through face-to-face interactions (1995: 197). In this context he offers the example of migrant populations whose traditions in new lands are sustained through media content. Online networks are offering unparalleled opportunities for diasporas to reconstitute the community to a limited extent in cyberspace. There is a growing body of literature on 'virtual communities' or 'cybercommunities' comprising those individuals who interact regularly via online technologies (see Jones 1997). Apart from communicating via e-mail, chat groups and Usenet with members of the inter-continental *ummah*, Muslim diasporic netters are also locating long-lost friends and relatives through inquiries via these services.

The notion of community among Muslims, whether at the level of the *ummah*, which constitutes all adherents of Islam, or at the

sub-levels, such as *madhhab*, *firqa*, *tariqa*, *jamat* or *ikhwan*, has long included a non-localized horizontal relationship. (Ibn Khaldun, the Muslim proto-sociologist, theorized about group solidarity of various kinds as early as the fourteenth century.) The idea of a global community is therefore not novel to those individuals who are attempting to use online networks to actualize an Islamic ideal of frontierless groupings of Muslims extending around the world. In addition to providing a broad range of files on information related to the Sufi order led by Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, the Naqshbandi Sufi Way site's hypertext links also connect to Naqshbandi sites in Europe, and to other sites on Sufism and on Islam in general (www.naqshbandi.org). Similarly, members of the Khoja Ithna Aashari community (with origins in India) have websites inter-linking their diaspora in Tanzania and the United Kingdom as well as carrying 'News from the Shia World' (www.world-federation.org).

The wide range of newsgroups and chat groups also allows Muslims to actualize communal links electronically. However, experience has shown that an electronic discussion group only seems to be able to support coherent and relevant discourse on an ongoing basis for a limited number of participants. My own tracking of the newsgroup 'Ilm Net', which is administered from Winnipeg, Canada, indicated that most of the active members tend to be from North America. Dissatisfied with the Canada and US-centred nature of discussions, UK participants expressed a desire to form their own network. Thus the spatial locale in which netters are situated seems to matter even though they 'meet' in cyberspace. The Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has attempted to mobilize American Muslims primarily in the United States through its Listserv mailings and its website (www.cair.com). Its primary area of activity is to report discrimination against Muslims and conduct a media watch function, following up any perceived injustice by communicating its concerns to those deemed responsible (media, government officials, politicians) and encouraging the individuals on its mailing list to do the same. Such activities in cyberspace (in addition to those carried out by various US Muslim organizations in 'real life') appear to create solidarity among American Muslims¹² in the US national context, reinforcing the notion of a distinct community within the larger *ummah*. Thus, while diasporic Muslims may lose strong attachments to their previous locales, the community is reconstituted in another territorial locus.

It may appear from this that these migrant communities are re-mooring their traditions in alternative, electronic 'spaces' through

processes of de- and re-localization, as Thompson (1995) suggests. However, even though the conditions of group communication dynamics using online networks allow interaction mainly at local levels, the ultimate reference point for religious community among Muslims generally remains the global *ummah*. The intercontinental linkages of the Naqshbandi and Ithna Ashari serve as examples of the continuing desire to sustain and perhaps even strengthen global connections using new communications technologies. By bringing this historically valorized notion of worldwide fellowship to the process of globalization, through electronic communication, modernity and globalization are re-moored. The ideas of spiritual solidarity attached to the planetary sisterhood/brotherhood of the *ummah* challenges from below the dominant materialistic model of globalization in which transnational linkages emphasize relations based on exchange value.

Conclusion

Pasha and Samatar (1997) suggest that the Islamic piety model could have a central place in an inter-civilizational dialogue on globality between Muslims and the West. But such a *dialogue* merely between two civilizations would be uncharacteristic of the history of Muslims, which is a record of interaction with a variety of peoples. Apart from the European, African, Indian and Chinese civilizations and non-Muslim minorities with whom Muslims have been engaged in the past, there are also opportunities to participate in a more multilateral discourse that is inclusive of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Australasia and Oceania. Contemporary conditions enable the bringing forth of insights into modernity from all the cultures and intellectual traditions of the world. A horizontal inter-civilizational discourse, without engaging in cultural relativism, could de-link modernity from Eurocentric and elitist biases (Amin 1989), and re-moor it to sets of diverse world views through lateral, global interaction. The Islamic piety model, representing the ethos of a billion people, can potentially provide a stream of ideas and practice for the betterment of humankind.

As an alternative construction of modernity, it offers a framework which values ethical, non-materialist aspects of progress. Its long-standing concept of global community, *ummah*, presents contemporary thinking with an example of worldwide solidarity based on ties other than those of exchange value. With the failure of Marxism's notion of proletariat-based opposition to capitalism, such solidarity can offer an alternative for countering the socially

destructive facets of corporate globalization such as rampant consumerism. The Islamic piety model's particular view of knowledge, which underlines its transcendent value, also has the potential to make important contributions to current thought about 'information society' that tends to reduce knowledge to commodity.

However, the dominant discourses of globalization-from-above are currently pushing aside the Islamic piety model, even in Muslim-majority countries. The evidence to date shows that the policies of many of these states are being aligned with the agenda of powerful Western governments and transnational corporate interests. Additionally, democratic discourse via new communications technologies is often disallowed by the governments in Muslim-majority states, as in many other developing countries. While there is occasional voicing of the Islamic piety model in the context of national and community development, it is muffled, on the one side, by the chorus of those supporting dominant discourses on globalization, and on the other by that of the anti-modernist Islamists.

Nevertheless, there does remain hope that diasporic Muslim groups working in alliance with their co-religionists in Muslim societies, as well as with people of other backgrounds, can engage in inter-civilizational discourse on globalization. Their present use of online networks provides opportunities for the development of such a discourse, since they are generally able to overcome the barriers faced by the hierarchical and centrally controlled communication channels of the mass media. Whereas the closed discussion networks allow for intra-community communication, the discussions on public networks like Usenet (e.g. *alt.religion.islam*) seem to show the growth of inter-cultural and inter-religious discourse. Although these discussions sometimes disintegrate into name-calling, they are also providing occasions for mutual understanding.

The nature of the web theoretically allows for open access to the contents of various sites for all users, with opportunities in many sites for feedback via e-mail. However, it appears that the communicative potential of such technologies has not been fully exploited. An example of an innovative use of the web-based technology in order to develop an interactive, global discourse is the Napf project. Described as an 'intercultural multimedia project' (www.hof3.ch) and based in Napf, Switzerland, it enables artists in various locations around the world to contribute video narratives coordinated according to common themes, camera placements and time period. It is designed to produce an ongoing electronic interaction based on personal expressions of life observed by participating artists (including those of

diasporic backgrounds) who are located in Switzerland, Egypt, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, the United States of America, Brazil, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Ukraine. This showcasing of local environments by individuals in a transnationally coordinated mode makes for a unique experiment in how this medium can be used to enhance inter-civilizational and inter-cultural discourses:

We are creating a panorama at the end of the century and are trying to correct the image of how this world is mediated by television-news. During this one year we are not observing the global centers, or its events and noises but instead twelve places on this world where everyday life happens.

(www.hof3.ch)

Such preliminary efforts may be far from developing a fully fledged bottom-up challenge to transnational elites, but they do seem to indicate the potential for re-mooring modernity and globality.

Notes

- 1 This notion of inter-civilizational discourse is drawn from Jürgen Habermas' conception of 'communicative action' that challenges and rivals the state and the economy in the coordination of life (Habermas 1987).
- 2 These views appear to echo the proposition of Enlightenment philosophers who posited rationalism as a necessary characteristic of modernity.
- 3 Rohan Samarajiva has shown that Lerner's work was part of broader research secretly funded by the Office of International Broadcasting of the US State Department, and was carried out for the Voice of America – a key player in the Cold War (Halloran 1997: 33). Lerner's ethnocentric attitude towards Muslims can also be traced to certain academic traditions of orientalism (Said 1978).
- 4 For a discussion of how Barber essentializes a perceived opposition of Islam to modernity through his use of the term *jihad*, see Karim (1996).
- 5 For a discussion on the difference between access to and use of online services see Karim *et al.* (1998).
- 6 Central to Malaysia's ICT policy is the development of the 'Multimedia Supercorridor'.
- 7 These figures are far below those for Canada, the United States and some Nordic countries, which had the highest percentages of national populations with internet access at between 25 and 30 per cent in the same time period (Nua Internet Surveys: www.nua.ie).
- 8 In 1994, the Islamic Council Assembly banned the import, manufacture and use of satellite dishes (Mohammadi 1997: 88). Nevertheless, diasporic Iranians have made a broad variety of materials available on the web, including the writings of controversial Iranian writers such as Abdol Karim Soroush (www.seraj.org).

- 9 Apart from Muslims resident in Muslim-majority and Western countries, there are substantial minority Muslim populations in non-Western countries; for example, India has around 100 million Muslims – more than in most Muslim-majority states.
- 10 Since ICT access data is not collected by religion, it is virtually impossible to ascertain how many diasporic Muslims use online services.
- 11 Heated debates on various points of belief occur in some of these electronic discussion groups (Cohen 1997). There are also ongoing discussions on Islam by Muslims with non-Muslims on public Usenet newsgroups. Additionally, Muslims interact in a variety of areas via online services with other members of their respective ethnic and cultural groups who may belong to other religions.
- 12 American Muslims, as with Muslims in many other Western countries, also include those who are not from immigrant backgrounds.

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