

8 Sunni Religious Authority on the Internet

I: Muslim Majority Contexts

The Internet brings *ijtihād*-related issues into sharp focus, when any individuals can proclaim themselves as ‘authorities’ on Islam qualified to make pronouncements, exercise *ijtihād*, provide ‘Islamic advice’ and/or issue *fatwas*. Their ‘qualifications’ for this activity may not be scholarly. They could ignore the traditional Islamic models endorsed by al-Azhar and other institutions. Some critics do not necessarily perceive such academic study as appropriate or relevant within Islamic decision-making, preferring to present alternative models, which they still describe as *ijtihād*. Status markers such as family connections, political authority, religiosity and/or levels of education can also potentially contribute to the power of an individual to exercise *ijtihād*. The debate on Islamic decision-making issues has now transcended traditional contexts, to emerge within cyberspace, acquiring a global dimension in the process.

On the Internet, there is a new audience for alternative Islamic opinion and interpretation, as well as the traditional articulation of religious values and understandings. Electronic *ijtihād*, or e-*ijtihād*, and/or electronic *fatwas* not only reproduce conventional processes of interpretation and reasoning to reach decisions or opinions; they are also created especially for the medium. There can be a blurring between the two digital and ‘conventional’ sources. There is evidence of a transition from the newspaper archives of *fatwas* that have been placed online (and columns written by ‘scholars’), to the introduction of especially created online *fatwa* resources (some may run in parallel with newspaper columns). Advice on a key issue might be solicited on different websites: this may be through searching database archives of *fatwas*, edicts, opinions, questions and answers – or by e-mailing a site with a question. One advantage for petitioners (and the curious) is that use of the Internet can be anonymous. Whilst this factor has perhaps been overemphasised in cyber-studies in general, in relation to Cyber Islamic Environments some specific and unique themes are raised. These include issues linked to whether

an online opinion is binding or not, and the moral implications on the person making the petition or asking the question. Should an opinion solicited by e-mail be followed? Are the moral and ethical dimensions the same as receiving an opinion from a scholar in non-electronic contexts? There is evidence that 'authorities' are approaching some of these issues. In the related area of the authority of SMS text messages on mobile phones, a 'Dubai court validated the divorce of a husband who sent his wife her marching orders by text message on his mobile phone'.¹

There may be benefits to be gained from the study of online decision-making resources, which can act as indicators to contemporary needs of (sectors of) Muslim communities, providing personal insights into the concerns of individuals, as well as being one symbolic focus of Muslim authority in cyberspace. They also provide insight into the processes of decision-making applied by diverse authorities, indicating the language, sources and methodological approaches of *fatwa*-issuing bodies. One proviso may be that a website can look 'official', 'Islamic' and contain substantial content, whilst not being 'representative' of majority opinion. This proclaimed authority has its critics, but in terms of academic analysis does provide insight into contemporary Islamic diversity and a representation of opinion that may be difficult to locate within other source materials. Important new issues, with no immediate basis in traditional sources, can be discussed. Opinions can be disseminated rapidly, but are not necessarily observed or followed by readers, who may visit another site to solicit an opinion more in line with their personal requirements. This reflects a pattern observed by the writer in 'real-world' fieldwork exploring decision-making concerns and notions of religious authority, where in some cases several scholars noted that petitioners would shop around for an opinion that matched their expectations.²

Islamic websites often present *fatwas* in searchable databases, such as Fatwa-Online, Ask-Imam and Islam Q&A.³ Opinions can also be integrated into 'sermon' content, a prevalent content theme in Sunni cyberspace. Some feature versions of newspaper columns, for example, Islamicity's Ask the Imam reproduces material from Jeddah's Arab News.⁴ Those living in environments hostile to their religious worldview may find comfort, advice and inspiration through the content of web pages, whilst others might appreciate the perspectives of other dimensions of interpretation and understanding. The

influence of scholars and others giving advice based on Islamic principles can extend from their own (micro-) communities to be placed before a global audience. The observation and recording of developments such as the online *fatwa* in Cyber Islamic Environments represent a significant research area in themselves.

The substantial growth in the number of Muslim religious 'authorities' making the Internet a primary channel for the pronouncement of their edicts and opinions is a significant contemporary phenomenon, requiring detailed observation, analysis and recording. 'Questions' submitted to online authorities might be 'genuine' and represent 'real' readers, but conceivably could be hypothetical questions providing authorities with an opportunity to present a religious edict to address a specific concern. When viewing such sites, it is pertinent to consider that some authorities increasingly respond to various forms of 'crises' and situations – be they moral, cultural, legalistic, spiritual and/or political in nature – primarily through the Internet. As with other areas of the medium, determining the impact of these materials on Muslim readers and popular opinion is open to question. Some sites focus on specific communities and audiences, whilst others appear intended for 'general Muslim consumption' (dependent on access).

The extent to which a Muslim surfer will apply the knowledge acquired in cyberspace regarding Islam, and be influenced by pronouncements, is difficult to quantify. Issues which could be considered dangerous or embarrassing to raise within a domestic framework can be presented to an 'authority', locally or globally, or indeed from a different cultural-religious outlook. However, local knowledge is also significant when decision-making processes are considered. The Internet can be accessed by only a small (but increasing) proportion of the world's Muslim population. The sites discussed in this book may represent one foundation for religious authority, when access levels to the medium increase. They have been chosen because they represent different online models of authority, can be innovative in nature and often appear to be relatively popular within their own theological, legalistic, cultural and/or political frameworks. Given the appropriate resources, it would be possible to analyse hundreds of such sites and make scientific consideration of the geographical locations of petitioners (questioners), the typologies of questions and the influences on responses. Many of the following sites would be worthy of detailed analysis of this nature, but for the purposes of this section it is

intended to provide introductory sketches of key sites and their content. Significant issues to consider are the sites' 'Islamic' identities and perspectives, and the emphases on particular issues and interpretative considerations.

For ease of reading, the key sites have been divided between those operating in Muslim majority (in the next section) and Muslim minority (Chapter 9) contexts; in effect, this division can represent a grey area, as sites may have contributors from both contexts, or authored in one and hosted by an ISP in another. All sites are in the English language, although some operate Arabic and other channels; the extent to which this influences content is a subject for further investigation.

ANALYSIS OF SUNNI WEBSITES – MAJORITY CONTEXTS

Islam Q&A

Islam Q&A represents one model of online fatwa provision, centred on a single Sunni scholar in a 'majority' context, who seems to provide the majority of the site's outputs. The content suggests awareness of the medium, built up from several years' experience of providing decisions and opinions online, and diversification into materials in languages other than English and Arabic.

Islam Q&A site was founded by Shaykh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid from Saudi Arabia in 1997, which in Internet terms makes it one of the long-standing *fatwa*/question sites in a web format.⁵ In August 2002, it was registered to al-Munajjid, at an address in al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia, and hosted by a company in Florida. The site has sections in Arabic, English, French, Indonesian and Japanese. The latter is particularly unusual in the context of online Islamic *fatwa* formulation (the Japanese section requires navigation via an English interface, before a selection of Japanese titles can be accessed). Elsewhere, there are lectures, sermons, a mailing list and Holy Quran Radio. There is an external link to the Chechen qoqaz.net (see Chapter 6).

The Q&A section of the site consists of a regularly updated database of subject areas, which is also fully searchable by date, question number or topic. E-mail questions can be posted to the site. Pages contain printable versions, and they can be e-mailed within the site to other e-mail addresses. In August 2002, the English-language

section of the site contained approximately 3,975 answers (an increase from 2,700 in March 2001), clearly categorised under broad headings.⁶ The largest area was Jurisprudence and Islamic Rulings (2,434), in which Acts of Worship (1,201) and Transactions (841) dominated:

All questions and answers on this site have been prepared, approved, revised, edited, amended or annotated by Shaykh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid, the supervisor of this site.⁷

The site has the following agenda:

- 'to teach and familiarize Muslims with various aspects of their religion';
- 'to be a source for guiding people to Islam';
- 'to respond to users questions and inquiries to the best of our resources and capabilities';
- 'to assist in solving the social and personal problems of the Muslims in an Islamic context'.⁸

Al-Munajjid was trained by Shaykh 'Abd al-'Azeez ibn 'Abd-Allaah ibn Baaz, the influential Saudi Arabian theologian and scholar (discussed below), to whom al-Munajjid attributes his knowledge of *fatwas*. As with many 'traditional' scholars, al-Munajjid presents full details of his education, including his teachers. He also provides information on the places where he has subsequently taught and details of the courses. This offers a detailed picture of the types of influences that inform Islam Q&A.

The site offers personal replies, as well as replies posted onto the server. At the time of writing, the Submit Questions facility was open only once a week (for 24 hours) due to high demand. There are broad ranges of issues covered within the decisions, including questions associated with the Internet. Twenty-three entries were located when the term 'Internet' was entered. Al-Munajjid even recommends the net as a source of knowledge about Islam when other materials are unavailable.⁹ Amongst other questions deemed significant regarding the Internet are:

- ruling on condemning people on the Internet;¹⁰
- benefits of the Internet in spreading knowledge;¹¹

- men and women talking to one another on the Internet within the limits of good manners;¹²
- picture of Internet fiancée;¹³
- contact with a fiancée via the Internet;¹⁴
- ruling on transactions made via modern means of communication;¹⁵
- warning about Internet sites that distort the Qur'an;¹⁶
- investing in Internet services;¹⁷
- if the owner of an Islamic website takes payment for advertisements, will that detract from his reward?¹⁸
- advice to those who visit chat rooms.¹⁹

One question tackles the theme of pornography on the Internet:

Some of my friends have introduced the Internet into their homes, where their children and wives have access to it in this permissive land in which we have the misfortune of living, and they do not have any control over their children's computers. I need some statistics and numbers that I can use to convince these brothers who perhaps cannot be convinced except through numbers. I hope that you can help me in this matter. May Allaah reward you with good.

Answer:

Praise be to Allaah.

It was narrated from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) that among the Signs of the Hour is that *zina* (unlawful sexual relationships) will become widespread. (Narrated by al-Bukhaari, 1/178). According to a report narrated by al-Haakim, 'immorality will become widespread'. During the Internet age in which we are living, this hadeeth has become true, and we see the reality of the events foretold by the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him). No one can deny this except one who is arrogant. The kaafirs recognized the seriousness of the matter before the Muslims did. Now on the Internet there are half a million pornographic sites displaying immorality, and another 100 new sites are added every day, spreading nakedness and immorality in the world.²⁰

The discussion digresses into an analysis of Internet impressions (or hits) on prominent pornographic sites. It is interesting to note that the discussion incorporates hadith source material, and an

indication that the pornography sector of the net is a 'Sign' of immorality foretold by Muhammad. It also features the complex issue of Internet access and how usage can be monitored (if that is desired). Al-Munajjid is critical that *kafirs* (a derogatory term for people who are not Muslims) recognised the 'problem's' depth before Muslims. Al-Munajjid is criticised by other Muslim websites, including those who define themselves as 'pure Salafi'. Labels associated with Islam, including 'Salafi' and 'Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l Jam'aa', encompass a broad range of definitions, agendas and perspectives. They may all assert, in the words of the Qur'an, that Muslims should 'hold fast, all of you, and do not fall apart'. There are a number of broad and different definitions associated with the term 'Salafi' (*Salafiya*), including association with reform-centred movements, and also 'fundamentalism'; the Islamic practices of the 'pious ancestors' (*al-salaf as-salih*), the generation after Muhammad, are also described as Salafi. 'Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l Jam'aa' can refer to 'the People of Custom and Community', a traditional name for people adhering to the practices of the Prophet Muhammad. Groups using these terms are not necessarily affiliated or associated within an organisational hierarchy. Surfing the Internet can highlight that dialogues about the status and classification of different Islamic groups (or 'sects') is an ongoing and frequently heated subject of discussion in Muslim contexts.

This discussion is reflected in relation to al-Munajjid; in a publication by the Salafi Society of North America, there is an allusion to him being a 'Qutubi', that is one whose perspective is presented as a follower of 'Ahl-i-Sunnah', whereas his thought is negatively deemed to be associated with the Egyptian 'reformer' and Muslim Brotherhood ideologue, Sayyid Qutb

So I do not know from this man (Saalih al-Munajjid) that he is a Salafee. Rather, his implications and indications show us that he is not Salafee. In fact, there are implications that indicate that he is a Qutubi Suroori. Either he is just like that or in the least of conditions he inclines towards them and agrees with them in their methodology, even if he isn't affiliated with them in a party. And Allaah is most High and knows best.

... So some people have good thoughts about Saalih Al-Munajjid because they think that he is one of the scholars of Saudi Arabia and that he is on the way of the Salafee scholars of Saudi. However, this man is not from Saudi Arabia, rather he is Syrian. Many people

that listen to his tapes think that he is Saudi, so therefore they have good thoughts about him. But the man is a Syrian living in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for a while now. So it is thought that he is Saudi, but that is not so, for he is Syrian. And the reality is that Syrians are overwhelmed by the *Ikhwanis* [Muslim Brotherhood] and overcome with influence from the *Hizbee* [factional] methodologies and by the way of the Qutubis and the Surooris [followers of Muhammad Suroor], except for those whom Allaah has mercy on – and how few they are. So this is a fact and a clarification of the reality – that his homeland is not originally Saudi Arabia, and we ask help from Allaah.²¹

Muhammad Suroor is accused in a related publication of being a disciple of Qutubism, and an advocate of the ‘qutubi strategem [which] ... calls to civil strife and unrest, unnecessary commotion, calls for open rejection ...’²² This quotation appears on the Allaahuakbar.net site, which emphasises the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his ‘reformation’, but is strongly critical of pseudo-‘Wahhabis’ or those who ‘make the false claim to be Ahl us Sunnah wal Jam’aah’. Such criticisms go both ways on the Internet: for example, *some* of the ‘True Scholars’ endorsed in Allaahuakbar.net (such as al-Albani and al-Shawkani) have been heavily criticised elsewhere on the Internet (and in Islamic literature) for having poor reputations as Islamic scholars, and for their ‘neo-Salafi’, ‘divisive’ outlook.

The argument in relation to Salafi identity is a pervasive one in Sunni cyberspace, and is returned to later in this chapter, in particular in relation to Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Some varied perspectives on Salafi Islam are also presented. It is interesting to note this divergence within ‘orthodox’ Islam is not always observed by commentators, whilst drawing attention to it can lead to accusations that academics are presenting ‘Islam’ as divisive.

Fatwa-Online

Fatwa-Online represents a model of a well-developed Sunni-oriented Internet platform, based around the output of a number of contemporary and historical scholars on a broad range of issues. At present, the focus is on the English speaking ‘market’ or audience.

Several Islamic websites present a searchable listing of *fatwas*, and a key word search should bring the surfer to the subject of interest

within the site. The influence of Saudi Arabian scholars (or scholars located in Saudi Arabia) is evident on Fatwa-Online. If success can be measured in the growth of content, then Fatwa-Online has proved to be popular, with new content being added to the site on a regular basis. The domain is registered to an address in Medina. Its pages incorporate content obtained from at least 18 scholarly sources (from Ibn Taymiyyah through to the *fatwas* of Shaykh Ibn Baz and his former students) well connected to the Saudi Arabian Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatawa (Ibn Baz is eulogised in a specific section of the site, with anecdotes about his life).²³

The Fatwa-Online site is searchable, with an interface containing ample user assistance, whose navigation has been improved through a drop-down menu. Features that had been added during 2002 included an Arabic Language Syllabus (as studied at the Islamic University of Medina), 'Learning to Read Arabic for Beginners' and a *Hajj* Guide.²⁴ All the materials are in English, and there are no 'Islamic' images or graphic image files (GIFs) on the site – conforming to some Muslim perspectives on 'images', as well as accelerating its download time (a very important factor for surfers with slow Internet connections). Readers can be updated of new topics on the Fatwa-Online site via an e-mailing list. Fatwa-Online's emphasis is on translating scholarly opinion from Arabic resources. Despite a request that no *fatwa*-seeking questions be sent to them, the site's authors (some of whom are based in Medina) were inundated with questions that require translation and placing with Shaykhs for a response.²⁵

During the 'second intifada' in 2002, there was a great deal of advice on Palestine-related issues, including a *fatwa* on boycotting American products, software for connections to the PalTalk webcast system, and a speech against Israel.

The Shaykh explained that: 'the enemies of Islaam offer a false culture and civilisation which (negatively) differentiates between mankind, and nullifies (all) agreements, offering all types of weaponry to destroy mankind.'

... The Shaykh expressed 'that which has befallen the *Ummah* today is as a result of sins and weakness of *eemaan* (faith) in addition to the presence of partisanship (*tahazzub*) and (much) differing in the religion; and the last of the *Ummah* will never be corrected except by that which corrected the first of the *Ummah*.'²⁶

This indicates an enthusiastic audience for online *fatwas*, and that significant questions are not answered satisfactorily off-line. The *fatwa* archive is divided into nine primary categories: Buying and Selling, Creed, Innovations, Marriage, Women's Issues, Worship, Miscellaneous, Muslim minorities and New Muslims. These are further divided into subsections. For example, Women's Issues includes sections on Beautification, Clothing, Breastfeeding, *Hijaab*, *Mahram*, Menstruation, (Idda) and Worship; Marriage features sections on Sexual Relations, Divorce and Annulment, Interview and Proposal, *Mahar*, *Mahram*, Marital Relations, Polygamy and Wedding; Worship is one of the most substantial on the entire Fatwa-Online site, with ten subsections on the 'primary duties' in Islam, and at least 45 sub-subsections.

The breadth of topics included on the site is indicated in the New Muslims section.²⁷ The range of questions features answers drawn from a variety of sources, including scholarly texts and classical sources, and indicates the concerns of the site's readers. A selection includes:

- 'Circumcision is obligatory so long as it does not create an aversion to Islaam.'
- 'Changing one's name after embracing Islaam.'
- 'When a disbeliever accepts Islaam during the daytime in Ramadhaan.'
- 'The ruling concerning the *salaah* of one whose clothes are polluted by pork, lard, etc.'
- 'Does a new Muslim have to separate from his wife?'
- 'A non-Muslim touching a translation of the Qur'aan.'
- 'The uncleanness of a disbeliever is of an abstract nature.'
- 'A Christian woman married to a Muslim dies while pregnant; should she be buried with the Muslims?'
- 'Is it permissible for a non-Muslim to enter a masjid if there is hope that he might become Muslim.'²⁸

The pages have strong views on a number of subjects, including relations with non-Muslims, which are condemned in the response to the question: 'I am living in Jordan in a place where most of the residents are Christian brothers. We eat and drink together. Is my *salaah* [prayer] invalid? Is my living among them impermissible?'

The response condemns the notion of 'Christian brothers':

There can be no brotherhood between a believer and a disbeliever, ever, rather it is mandatory for a believer not to take a disbeliever as a *walee* [friend].

The response, from Ibn Uthaymeen cites further from the Qur'an, before concluding:

It befits you to avoid constant mixing with non-Muslims, because constant mixing with them will obliterate the attitude of vigil and care for the religion from your heart, and may possibly lead you to love them.²⁹

Ibn Uthaymeen's opinions on other subjects are also reproduced on Fatwa-Online, via his published works, including the subject of jihad. The site's subsection on jihad (incorporated into the Worship section) incorporates four *fatwas* on suicide bombings, 'Concerning suicide bombings', 'Attacking the enemy by blowing oneself up', 'Attacking the enemy by blowing oneself up in a car' and 'Committing suicide'. 'Concerning suicide bombings' reproduces an opinion from a translated published work on the subject, which is negative, and determines that suicide represents 'faulty' *ijtihad* (albeit with an 'appropriate' motive):

so when one of the Palestinian blows himself up and kills six or seven people, then in retaliation they take sixty or more. So this does not produce any benefit for the Muslims, and does not benefit those amongst whose ranks explosives are detonated.

So what we hold is that those people who perform these suicide (bombings) have wrongfully committed suicide, and that this necessitates entry into Hell-Fire, and Allaah's refuge is sought and that this person is not a martyr (*shaheed*).

However if a person has done this based upon misinterpretation, thinking that it is permissible, then we hope that he will be saved from sin, but as for martyrdom being written for him, then no, since he has not taken the path of martyrdom.

But whoever performs *ijtihaad* and errs will receive a single reward (if he is a person qualified to make *ijtihaad*).³⁰

This *fatwa*, from the prominent twentieth-century religious authority Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Saalih Ibn 'Uthaymeen (1926–2001), introduces questions associated with the nature of decision-making

and qualifications for making *ijtihad*, together with critical questions associated with notions of martyrdom in relation to Palestine.³¹

During 2002, the site expanded its section of Bibliographies of prominent scholars. Contemporary scholars dominate: 19 are listed from the fifteenth century in the Islamic calendar, six from the fourteenth century, and one – ibn Taymiyyah – from the seventh–eighth Islamic century. Other centuries were blank at the time of writing.

The site also incorporates a section on five ‘deviant’ groups, which are seen as going outside Fatwa-Online’s Sunni Ahl-i-Sunna wa’l Jamaat perspective:

In this category, we shall endeavour to list short ‘biographies’ of deviant groups and individuals of past and present who have stained the name of Islaam, preferring to adhere to their own cocktail of whims and desires, far from the Qur.aan and the authentic Sunnah as understood by the best of generations, namely the Sahaabah, the Taabi’oon and the Atbaa’ at-Taabi’een, in short, the pious predecessors, inshaa.-Allaah.³²

This category includes 15 *fatwas*, on subjects such as the Ahmadiyya, Braylwiyya (Barelwi), Jama’at at-Tabligh and Khawaarij Muslims. One example illustrates the tone of the site. The Barelwi, a Sufi-oriented group originating in the nineteenth century, are condemned in an online *fatwa* produced by the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwa:³³

Whoever has these characteristics and attributes, then it is not permissible to offer your *salaah* [prayer] behind them (their imaam), and whoever knows of their condition, then their *salaah* is not correct. This is because most of their characteristics and attributes are of *kufr* [non-belief] and *bid’ah* [innovation] which negate the *tawheed* (oneness) with which Allaah had sent His messenger and revealed in His Book, and that which conflicts with the Qur.aan, such as His (Subhaanahu wa Ta’aala) saying:

‘Verily, you [Muhammad] will die and verily, they [too] will die’ [Soorah az-Zumar, Aayah 30].

And His saying:

‘And the mosques are for Allaah [alone], so invoke not anyone along with Allaah’ [Soorah al-Jinn, Aayah 18].

And their *bid'ah* which they practice should be detested with good manners, and if they accept (and leave these practices) then all praise is for Allaah (alone).

The 'soorah' (surah) quotations are from translations of the meaning of the Qur'an by Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan.³⁴ Elsewhere in the statement, in an extensive list of 'faults', the Barelwis are condemned for their 'innovative' practices, the form of their veneration of Muhammad, worship of 'saints' and their ritual practices. Themes contained within this online denunciation reflect elements of the thought of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92) and his 'school', the influence of which having spread far beyond its Arabian origins in the two centuries after his death, and perhaps now accelerating from contemporary religious organisations in Saudi Arabia and their global subsidiaries via the Internet. The content of Fatwa-Online would not be well received in all Sunni circles, as there are parallels with the underlying ideology of Islam Q&A (above). This is a theme returned to in other sectors of cyberspace explored in this chapter.

Islam-Online

Islam-Online is an example of a substantial fatwa resource, operating in a Muslim majority context, but reflecting the expertise from authorities and counsellors from a broad range of minority and majority contexts. The key scholar is the Qatar-based Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who also has an 'official' Arabic language website.³⁵ There can be a contextual blurring, so the location of an Internet server or madrassah becomes insignificant, such as the case of Islam-Online, registered in Doha, Qatar, and staffed by 100 people based in Cairo – including students and graduates from Al Azhar University.³⁶

Islam-Online's material is available in Arabic and English, although not all aspects of the site's content are paralleled in both languages. (The following discussion primarily reflects the English-language content of the site.) Islam-Online invested heavily in the notion of the online *fatwa* as part of its site content, and claimed to receive a million hits a day in 2000.³⁷ There are major sections for Cyber Counselling, submission of questions via Ask the Scholar, and real-time Live *Fatwa* dialogues between scholars and site visitors, in which questions can be submitted to an 'expert' and a response immediately posted back. These Live *Fatwa* are advertised on the main page of

the site, with dates and times, and often provide an interesting commentary on popular opinion in relation to contemporary events.

'Scholars' utilise their knowledge on a broad range of questions which have been sent in by surfers. Scholars appear to have a wide range of backgrounds from within a set of parameters sympathetic to Qaradawi's worldview (Ebrahim Desai of Ask-Imam, discussed above, is one of the scholars listed in the database). 'Qualified practitioners' provide the counselling. Cyber counselling incorporates conventional counselling models, which might not be deemed conventionally 'Islamic' in other contexts, together with other forms of 'professional help' integrated with an Islamic ethos. There is cross-referencing between the counselling and *fatwa* zones of the Islam-Online site. Both represent indicators of contemporary issues, from petitioners across the world. Some breakdown of petitioners' gender and location may be required in further research.

It is difficult to determine the origins of petitioners, given that conditions of anonymity apply, and it is feasible that a petitioner can state that she or he comes from any country in the *fatwa* application form. In rare cases, full names have been given, but this is highly unusual, especially given the nature of the questions' content. Perusal of *fatwa* and cyber counselling areas indicate that there is a clear demand for information on Islamic issues. This may indicate a shortfall of available information, or a desire for supplementary information; the extreme nature of some of the questions would suggest that these are some issues that individuals do not wish to discuss or cannot discuss with family or local religious authorities.

Questions can be very detailed in nature, despite anonymity, and it may be possible for individuals to divulge information that could allude to their location or personal circumstances, enabling them to be 'recognised' by other visitors to the site. This is a very public domain, unlike traditional ('Islamic' and other) counselling. Given the nature of some of the questions, issues emerge as to whether some topics should be made such a public process (archives being accessible and searchable on the site), or whether greater editorial input (for example, in the editing of questions) is required.

There are parallels with newspaper question-and-answer facilities on Islamic issues, although these resources may be more conscious and experienced in ensuring total anonymity for a petitioner. Unless a petitioner uses anonymous e-mail, there is always a danger that such personal information could fall into the wrong hands. It is feasible that, if other family members have access to the petitioner's

computer and e-mail account, this information could be acquired through this channel. In the case of Islam-Online, they do not divulge e-mail contact details, and many petitioners are represented by a first name and location. They do not provide any advice on anonymous e-mail or computer security. In the *fatwa* form, it is compulsory to place e-mail details; other categories, such as name, age, marital status, education, and country of origin are optional.

There are important questions to be addressed relating to the application of the 'language' of Islam within a counselling context. Professional advice is often linked to information provided by imams and 'authorities' elsewhere on the Islam-Online site. This may be a new articulation of a traditional message about Islam, but it is difficult to determine the impact, in terms of whether it is transforming approaches on personal and community levels towards 'appropriate' Islamic interpretation of issues. The 'Islamic' component of this counselling may incorporate phrases such as 'Allah knows best', religious terminology and links to specific interpretations of the Qur'an, hadith and sunna. Assumptions are made regarding the validity of *fatwas*, and the role and status of Islamic jurisprudence. References are made to forms of off-line help available, for example within mosques and local counselling organisations (Muslim and other).

The Islam-Online Cyber Counsellor section covers a broad range of issues, some of which would not be out of place in the 'problem pages' of a magazine or the content of a television exposé programme. One would not wish to over-sensationalise this listing, because clearly it involved real-life issues, which are filtered through a specific Islamic counselling matrix. The following select list is indicative of the range of topics (approaching 1,000 in August 2002) that the counsellors have had to deal with:

- 'In love with a Muslim man, who is unhappily married to a non-Muslim woman with two children.'
- 'Sexually abused when I was young, and am suffering from a lack of self-esteem and self-worth.'
- 'Good brain, a healthy athletic body, over 40 and looking to get married.'
- 'Want to marry a Muslim brother but his family won't let me as I am a white revert.'
- 'Hindu boy I met on the net is just perfect.'

- 'Slept with a woman for the first time, and now I am so sad and depressed.'
- 'Homosexual tendencies are hurting me and my marriage, are there Muslim counsellors?'
- 'Abused by the husband of my maternal aunt, and now I am unsure about marriage.'
- 'Gave up my Internet boyfriend, now he has found someone else, and I feel so hurt.'
- 'Told my husband about my past near-*zina* [adultery] experience and now he verbally and physically abuses me.'
- 'Divorced Catholic woman about to marry a Moroccan Muslim man, what should I expect?'
- 'Virtual friend turned out to be a non-Muslim man.'
- 'Spanish Catholic man interested in becoming Muslim; is it possible to be Muslim in secret.'
- 'Muslim boyfriend is pressuring me to have sex; I am non-religious and he says sex before marriage is OK in Islam these days.'
- 'Is there any help for Muslims with HIV?'
- 'Porn-addicted husband and his generally far from Islam family are making me quite depressed.'
- 'Met a man online from another country, we had sex, and now I want to marry him.'
- 'Pornography addiction is causing me to be depressed.'
- 'Feelings of guilt are killing me because I had an abortion when I was sixteen.'
- 'My online friend wants to keep me company on 'eid day and I don't want to come between him and his family.'
- 'Met a man on online matrimonial service, now he says he won't marry me.'
- 'What about using the Internet to get married?'
- 'Dad was into drugs and I never knew him, but his death has left me in pain.'
- 'I am a German, married to a Somali, and serving time in Peru – please help.'
- 'Pregnant and stressed out over husband visiting pornographic sites on the Internet.'
- 'Feeling regretful for lying to parents about an Internet friend.'
- 'Falling in love on the Internet and inter-racial/cultural marriages.'³⁸

Examples of the type of advice and questions that appear on the site (drawn from the Counselling section of Islam-Online) are discussed below, in order to approach the counselling methodology and type of language applied by petitioner and counsellor.

In the first case, a 'new Muslim' woman in an American city was concerned about having been approached by an Iraqi Muslim man in a grocery store, and being asked to meet him unsupervised in a restaurant, with him claiming that this was permissible under Islam:

Q Melanie United States: A man from Iraq, age 34 approached me at a Halal grocery store. I told him that I was a new Muslim and he wanted to exchange email addresses. After chatting online, he wanted me to call him, so I did. He tells me that he is looking for a wife and wants me to meet him at a restaurant. He also wants to see my apartment. I told him that is forbidden in Islam. He said that nowhere in the Quran does it state supervision is required for a meeting between a man and a woman. He said that it is only a social rule that is different for each country. Help me because he is pushy and I do not want to meet him alone ³⁹

The answer from Islam-Online urged the woman not to contact the man, especially as he was (in their eyes) misinterpreting the Qur'an on this issue. Their response included an appropriate saying from Muhammad and advice to the woman on learning more about Islam (which included contacting the local imam):

A: May Allah (swt) protect you and strengthen your *Iman* [religious faith].

A: 'Under no circumstances should you allow him to enter your apartment or know where you live. Please do not meet him at any restaurant either. We urge you not to continue this relationship with this man. If he is this forward and outgoing with you, why should you trust that he has not also asked other sisters for their emails, or their telephone numbers, or to see their apartments? You need not feel obligated to respond to his emails or his phone calls ...

In addition, he is misinterpreting both the Quran and the hadith regarding proper interaction between unmarried males and females. This is not about culture, it is about a direct saying of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that *shaytan* [Satan] is always the third person when a man and woman are alone.

If there is a chance that you like him, then we strongly suggest that you get the local Imam involved. Tell your Iraqi friend to contact the Imam if he wants to see you or speak to you about marriage. You cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of sisters before you who were new and vulnerable and were taken advantage of. We do not know this specific person and cannot judge him, but we are advising you to proceed with caution ...

Make *du'a* [prayer] to Allah (swt) to guide you, to protect you and to strengthen your Iman.

Keep in touch. And Allah (swt) knows best.⁴⁰

This particular extract raises a number of contemporary issues associated with converts to Islam, knowledge of religious duties and Internet chatting. The formula in the answer is one based on pragmatism, warning of the 'mistakes' of others in relationships, and advising contact with a local Imam (not just his cyber-equivalent), together with making prayer (*du'a*) to God.

The harsh realities of family relationships and the issue of child abuse/sexual assault are brought into another stark question on the Islam-Online site: a young woman had been 'abused' by her uncle, having been made uncomfortable by his behaviour in the past, and had e-mailed the site for advice. The young woman was concerned about the implications of having to maintain dialogue with this errant family member (which she was reluctant to do), and about the psychological impact on her in terms of future relationships with men:

3. *Muslima* My problem is my uncle! I did not grow up with him and I did not know much about him. The first time I saw him was when I was a young girl and all I remember is that I did not feel comfortable around him. I did not know why. When I grew up I met him again and I told my mum that I did not like him. She felt sad about that and told me that I should try to get to know him because after all he is my uncle and he loves me and I should love him back ...

One day, he did something to me and I was so shocked. I did not know what to do. I felt very dirty and sad. I got depressed and could not talk to anyone at first, but after a while I told my mom. She confronted him with it and he denied it. My mom did not believe him and told him to stay away from me and he did.

My problem is that he is married and has children. I hear that as a Muslim I should not cut off relations with my family. He is

family and his children too. What should I do? Do I have to keep in contact with them? And if yes, what can I do about my feelings towards him?

A: It is not clear from your message, but we are assuming that you are referring to being sexually abused by your uncle only because you have referred to feeling uncomfortable by the way he 'touched' you. You also felt 'shocked' and 'dirty' after he did something to you.⁴¹

Islam-Online invokes Allah's protection on the young woman and her mother (who had offered some constructive help), whilst stating that the uncle required 'professional help'. The site suggested that the young woman obtains professional counselling:

May Allah (swt) protect you and guide you. You have handled the situation extremely well by reporting the abuse to your mother. May Allah (swt) bless your mother for believing you and for taking some action. Your uncle needs professional help so that he does not repeat such behavior ...

We are very concerned that you have not really processed your feelings since the occurrence of the abuse. If you have not yet done so, please seek professional help so that you can come to terms with what has happened. Your uncle is entirely at fault and you are not to blame yourself for his behavior. In addition, you are not 'dirty' for what your uncle did to you. You are the victim of abuse and you need to seek help from a counselor so that you can begin the process of healing ...

Seek the help of Allah (swt) so that *insha'allah* [God willing] with His protection and guidance, you will be comfortable in being with and trusting your future husband.

Make *du'a* to Allah (swt) to protect you and also seek forgiveness for your uncle.

Should you feel you would like to address this issue further, you may write directly to our counselors at cybercounselor@islam-online.net.

We look forward to hearing from you. And Allah (swt) knows best.⁴²

In some settings the reporting of such an assault would demand the intervention of the police, and it is perhaps surprising that this

suggestion is not incorporated into Islam-Online's professional advice. The notion that the uncle might remain tolerated and 'undiscovered' within the family sphere might be abhorrent to many readers (from whatever cultural, ethical or religious background). The online Islamic counselling model may incorporate anonymity and confidentiality, but it also raises some important ethical issues, which also have importance in other contexts.

Not having access to the petitioners, it is difficult for this writer to gauge the impact of the advice provided by Islam-Online. It is a comprehensive and regularly augmented resource, covering a broad range of questions. Consideration might have to be given to the legal implications of such advice being placed online, and the ways in which the information is accessed and processed by the respondent. This would require the establishment of monitored reader groups and is a subject that could be the focus of future research.

One hundred and thirty-four new answers to questions (not necessarily deemed '*fatwas*') appeared in the Ask the Scholar section during July 2002 on contemporary and 'traditional' themes. Each issue is a substantive one in its own right, as indicated by this random selection of titles:

- Has the Bible been tampered with?
- A husband refusing intimacy with his wife.
- Immunisation: does it contravene belief in the *ghayb* [unseen]?
- Islamic workable measures to overcome AIDS.
- Is body piercing permissible in Islam?
- Is liposuction permissible in Islam?
- Islamic remedy for procrastination and laziness.
- How Islam views cremation.
- Hymen repair surgery.
- Placing American flags on Islamic centres in the States.
- Arab-centric religion makes me upset, I want to stop feeling like a fraud.⁴³

Questions transcend the 'Islamic issues' that one might find in contemporary collections of *fatwas* elsewhere, including child abuse, physical violence, fraud, subterfuge, drug and alcohol abuse, and criminal acts. Issues of sexuality and relationships appear to dominate the listings. The impact of personal information being circulated has serious implications, given that the forms of judgement and opinion often found in conventional Muslim frameworks of petition are

suspended. This can be very much a raw, real-world experience, rather than the ideals of Muslim societies expressed in other contexts (on- and off-line).

Islam-Online also contains several *fatwas* associated with Internet behaviour. Internet 'chatting', especially between the sexes, raises cultural and religious concerns associated with 'appropriate' behaviour. There is evidence of online 'relationships' being conducted and subsequent meetings taking place, together with offers of marriage. Some of these are inter-continental, electronic 'dangerous liaisons'. Such activities and issues are not exclusive to the Muslim sphere, although there are particular religious and cultural concerns which may be specific to diverse Muslim interests, in particular how such behaviour might contradict forms of religiously sanctioned relationships and appropriate Islamic conduct. These issues are also not necessarily exclusive to the Internet, as they reflect concerns that are being faced by individuals, families and communities throughout the 'Muslim world', and indeed they can reflect historical precedence. The electronic dimension is added to traditional and cultural questions of interpretation and behaviour, whilst the formal parameters of control have, in some cases, been transcended.

Two examples of *fatwas*, representing the online formulation of petition and response, are provided below. The first, a good example of a contemporary issue relating to the Internet, and seeking a solution via an electronic *fatwa*, comes from a Jordanian reader on the subject of marriage through the Internet:

I want to know your opinion about the following issue of mine. My story began when I knew a man through Internet chatting. He is a good Muslim and I think he is the right and suitable man for me. He is living in USA. Is this wrong? Be assured that my intention is good and this is the same for that man. He said he would not leave me and he would try to come to Jordan to get engaged to me. He tried before that but he couldn't. So he sent some friends from Syria to meet my father, but my father refused, and said what I am doing is wrong and not right. I really want your advice. I think the Internet is a new way for communication; so if you think that I am not doing anything wrong, please advise me on what can I do and how can I convince my father ...

A: 'In principle, conversation between males and females is lawful, so long as both of them observe the Islamic rules and manners of

talking to members of the opposite sex. If the conversation is decent and abides by the rules of Islam, then it is permissible; however, if it is indecent and is only sought to exchange love and emotions, it is absolutely Haraam and rejected by Islam.

Internet chatting is very similar to writing letters or talking to someone on the phone. Actually it is a combination of both. Muslims have to observe the same rules as they observe in writing letters or making telephone calls. Islam forbids love letters or intimate conversations between males and females who are not married to each other. In all our correspondence and conversations we must be decent and observe a high sense of bashfulness. It is unacceptable for a non-mahram Muslim male and female to indulge in long conversations with each other unless it is necessary for purpose of education, business, *Daw'ah* etc. All conversation must be decent.

As for chatting which does not have any goal or purpose and just sought for the purpose of socialisation and passing time, it is blameworthy and should be avoided ...

Therefore, Internet chat is *Halaal* so long as the words used are decent and customarily accepted, but it may become Haraam if it contains something which contradicts the rules of Islam or is customarily held as indecent.

Your father should talk to the man, ask about him, and if he finds out that he is a good Muslim and of high morals, he should accept him as your lifetime partner. It does not matter if this man has come through the Internet or anywhere else.⁴⁴

This response is particularly interesting, as it provides some parameters for Internet activities, including the appropriate application of chat technology and its use to acquire marriage partners. The response integrates quotations from the Qur'an (the title of individual surahs being placed in brackets after a quote). Such activities are not unique to Muslim Internet sites, and it would perhaps be naïve to consider that they should be 'banned' from use, or even if a ban could possibly be effective. The following response is one of several pertaining to the 'appropriate' application of the Internet on Islam-Online (other responses have condemned the use of chat room technology altogether):

Q: Is Internet chat allowed in Islam or not? Because when you chat on net you don't know whether the person you are talking [to is a] him/her or what is his actual age ...

A: Salaamu Alaikum Sister. We must always be very cautious about making something haram that has not been made explicitly unlawful by Allah. Chat rooms, chat forums and emails are all tools for communication. Communication itself is not wrong or haram, even between men and women. However, what is being communicated and under which circumstances information is being communicated, are factors that could determine the lawfulness or the unlawfulness of chat forums and chat rooms. I am not a scholar and will not make any rulings ...

Allah knows best, but I would say the answer to your question is 'no'. Public forums (like this one) can be a wonderful place to discuss topics of concern or relay helpful knowledge to others ... If modesty and a business-like/professional tone are adopted to email structure between genders, there may be no harm in using the Internet to pass on valuable information. However, individuals should always be careful that their interaction with strangers, via the world wide web, does not go beyond the bounds set by Allah and His Messenger (peace be upon him) who is reported to have said: 'When a man and a woman (who are not bound by the prescribed degrees of family or by marriage) are alone together, Shaitain (evil) makes the third.' Allah says in His glorious Recitation: 'The ear and the eye and the heart shall be called to account' (17:36) and 'He (Allah) knows the traitor of the eyes, and that which the bosoms hide.' (40:19).

... Allah is the best one to take as our 'secret' friend ...

... our connections to our Creator is direct – no passwords, no firewalls – faster than high speed and cable and all the other methods one usually uses to 'log on' ...⁴⁵

Yusuf Qaradawi has contributed a number of *fatwas* to Islam-Online. These can be quite detailed in nature, with extensive references to the Qur'an, hadith, Islamic scholarship and the Bible.⁴⁶ Islam-Online represents a significant channel for this specific perspective on Sunni Islam, one that is not always received with acclaim by other Muslim organisations and individuals (as discussed below). It does represent part of a strategy in which Qaradawi identified the Internet as a significant channel for disseminating a

specific worldview.⁴⁷ Islam-Online certainly indicates, at the time of writing, that as Internet access increases, if it maintains the daily additions to its Fatwa Bank, Counselling Services and related pages, it will continue to enhance its share of the *fatwa* 'market' (and attendant influence and authority).

Qaradawi has been the subject of criticism from a number of Sunni sources, similar in nature to the criticism of al-Munajjid (Islam Q&A) above. 'Qaradawism' is one derisory term that has been used, the suggestion being that any -ism has negative, 'un-Islamic' connotations. Again, this reflects the Salafi argument (above):

Yusuf Al-Qaradaawee, since we came to know of him and heard about him, was a partisan [*hizbee*] and an innovator. As for saying that he is an enemy of the Sunnah, then we cannot say that he is an enemy of the Sunnah. Nor can we say that he is from the children of the Jews. We must be fair, as Allaah says:

'And do not let your hatred of a people cause you to be unjust. Rather, be just, that is closer to Taqwaa' [Surah Al-Maa'idah: 8]. And He says: 'And when you say something, be just' [Surah Al-An'aam: 152]. And He says: 'O you who believe, stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allaah even though it be against your own selves, or your parents or your kin, be he rich or poor.

Allaah is a better Protector to both (than you). So follow not the lusts (of your hearts) lest you avoid justice. And if you distort your testimony or refuse to give it, then verily Allaah is All-Aware of what you do' [Surah An-Nisaa: 135].

... Therefore, I do not advise that his tapes be listened to nor that his lectures be attended nor that his books be read because he is foolish. He has a book in which he makes it permissible to have numerous groups (*jamaa'aat*), even though the Prophet (*sallAllaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) said: 'The Hand of Allaah is with the *Jama'aah* [Group]' and he did not say 'with the *Jamaa'aat* [Groups]! ...

... Therefore the Muslims are one Group, so it is not permissible for Al-Qaradaawee to strive to split the ranks of the Muslims and to divide them. And he only weakens them by splitting them up ...

... And what is more despicable than this is what has been reported on him in a newspaper that he said: 'We do not fight the Jews because of Islaam, but rather we fight them because they have occupied our lands.'

I say: How terrible is this rotten *fatwa*!

... So the Religion takes precedence over the land and country, but however it is the *hizbiyyah* (partisanship) that causes one to become deaf and blind. Furthermore, we have written a treatise refuting him which is titled: 'Silencing the Howling Dog Yusuf bin 'Abdillaah Al-Qaradaawee.'⁴⁸

This criticism of Qaradawi accuses him of factionalism, poor *fatwas* in relation to Palestine and for innovation in the name of religion. It appears on the al-Manhaj site, discussed above in relation to al-Munajjid, and is reflected extensively elsewhere on the site in other extracts from Salafi publications. For example, a translation of a book by Ahmad bin Yahyaa al-Najmee accuses Qaradawi of allowing division in Islam; claiming democracy is the equivalent to the Islamic concept of '*shura*' consultation; that jihad should only be defensive; that Sufism and Salafi beliefs should be mixed.

In a note introducing al-Najmee's book, Muqbil bin Haadee al-Waadi'ee also discusses Qaradawi:

And from among the callers to misguidance in our time is this Yoosuf bin 'Abdillaah Al-Qaradaawee, the Muftee of Qatar, for he has become the spokesman for the enemies of Islaam. So he has given his tongue and pen into the services of waging war against the Religion of Islaam.⁴⁹

Allaahuakbar.net's section on Yusuf al-Qaradawi describes him as 'the Muftee who allows the common-folk to persist upon their ignorance, time-wasting and indulgence in vanities and novelties, which are but instruments of the Accursed One, and which but cause them to forget the remembrance of Allaah.'⁵⁰

It is not the purpose of this chapter to analyse these accusations, simply to highlight the existence of this conflict and especially its representation online. It brings into question the ways in which online *fatwa* sites might represent themselves as 'definitive' perspectives on Islam. This could be further highlighted, given that neither of these disputing 'Salafi' perspectives is necessarily going to be endorsed by other Muslim viewpoints from within so-called orthodoxy, as well as from diffuse 'Sufi', 'Shi'a' and other understandings of Islam (these umbrella terms cover a broad range of beliefs, not necessarily always complementary).

The production of *fatwas* is not the preserve of Salafi scholars (however the term is defined). Examples emerge from diverse global contexts relating to forms of decision-making. These are not necessarily defined as '*fatwas*', given that the term is not always considered appropriate or relevant. Religious 'authority' may be interpreted as being beyond human intervention, advice may be provided through other, less 'legalistic' channels, or there may be different emphases on Islamic sources. It is intended to explore some of those perspectives below.

OTHER INFLUENCES IN SUNNI MAJORITY CYBERSPACE

South East Asia

South East Asia was one area in which online *fatwas* appeared at an early stage, for example through the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) in Singapore and various Malaysian governmental and political-religious sites.⁵¹ The Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) site offered 93 *fatwas* in August 2002, in a searchable format, on aspects of ritual, *zakat*, social relations, medical issues and 'contemporary issues' such as approaches to post-mortems. However, many of these 'e-*fatwas*', in fact, dated back to the 1980s.⁵² The main 'e-*fatwa*' page links to some of the sites discussed elsewhere in this chapter, such as Fatwa-Online, Islam Q&A, and Ask-Imam, providing a useful perspective on 'officially sanctioned' Islamic perspectives in Malaysia, given that the first three of these sites are non-governmental ('officially'), Sunni and Wahhabi in orientation. The inclusion of Ask-Imam, the South African site, is perhaps less predictable. The JAKIM page also links to regional 'approved' authorities in the Malaysian Federation: these include *fatwas* produced by the Muftis in Kedah, which are primarily associated with ritualistic practices.⁵³ There are also links to a basic page produced in Pinang, and link pages to other regional authorities (although these lacked extensive *fatwa* resources).

Two Malaysian Federation states that were missing from this listing were Kelantan and Terengganu, both under the regional governmental control of the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) Islamic political party at the time of writing. This is reflected in the PAS website, a long-standing resource and a hub for national and regional activities. This makes use of multi-media applications to present its messages, links to local and international media, and also to other sympathetic

parties (including those associated with Anwar Ibrahim, the imprisoned former deputy prime minister). The local Kelantan site features links to jihadi organisations in Chechnya, Palestine and Afghanistan. Notions of religious authority permeate the pages of the sites, in both textual and multi-media forms, and the site is worthy of detailed evaluation as a religious-political hub utilising the Internet to develop and propagate its values, and network its members. Substantial investment has gone into the site(s), which are updated on a daily basis.

Discussion on Malaysia should also incorporate reference to Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), the 'Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia', which played a pivotal role in Malaysian politics in the 1960s and 1970s, and had close ties with Anwar Ibrahim. The ABIM site incorporates extensive commentaries on the Qur'an (*tafsir*) by the president of the organisation, Siddiq Fadhil, together with articles on aspects of Islam and approaches to interpretation.⁵⁴ The site is a hub, linking to other ABIM sites.

MUIS, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, was discussed in *Virtually Islamic* as being a substantial governmental online resource for Muslims operating in a minority context.⁵⁵ The *fatwa* search engine database has expanded, to include 179 *fatwas* in August 2002, including questions on ritual issues, medical ethics and economics. These responses are in Malay, although the MUIS offers a brochure entitled 'What You Need to Know about Fatwa' in English. This explores the definitions of *fatwas*, the processes for their issue, their intellectual and knowledge basis, and ways of contacting the MUIS Fatwa Committee (including online).⁵⁶ The *fatwa* section is linked to an Islamic knowledgebase (requiring registration) and sermons (in English and Malay).

There is considerable work to be undertaken on the online *fatwas* emerging from South East Asia, particularly Indonesia, which has the highest Muslim population in the world, and also a relatively high level of Internet connectivity. The Majelis Ulama Indonesia website contains a listing of 50 *fatwas* in Bahasa Indonesia, but this was not functioning at the time of writing.⁵⁷ The Muhammadiyah Network, focused in Indonesia but with branches elsewhere in South East Asia, has developed a website linking communities together and providing ideological and informative content online.⁵⁸ They represent a particularly interesting group for future observation, given that they have a focus on the application of science and technology being integrated with their *da'wa* mission work.⁵⁹ Their Singaporean

branch highlights the work of their Information Technology Unit, offering training in systems and software at Madrasah Al Arabiah. A full study of Indonesian Islamic cyberspace would require another volume, given the profound complexities and diversity in the region in relation to religious and cultural perspectives.⁶⁰ Locating religious authority requires consideration of the belief spectrum ranging from Liberal Islam through to al-Madina (an 'Ahl-us-Sunnah' site) through to Laskar Jihad.⁶¹ The former site features an article on Yusuf Qaradawi's work and *fatwas*.⁶² Other areas of cyberspace encourage dialogue and discussion on issues of interpretation and understanding, notably MyQuran.com, which has discussion areas on various aspects of Sufism, together with (monitored) discussions on the Qur'an and hadith.⁶³

BOSNIA

Bosnia is an area requiring detailed, specialist work on the issue of online authority, especially given that external 'authorities' have influenced more traditional understandings of Islam. There are a number of professionally designed sites on issues associated with Islam and Bosnia, many of which naturally reflect on the crimes of genocide inflicted on the region. A good example of this can be found at IslamBosna.com, based in Sarajevo; at the time of writing, this site was dominated by an image of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideologue Sayyid Qutb, hyperlinked to an article and analysis. The same site hosts the IslamBosna Fatwa Council, which can be e-mailed via the site; the *fatwa* archive contained material (accessed from the index page) incorporating advice and links to external (non-religious) sites.⁶⁴

The Rijaset site also offers advice and interpretative information from religious authorities.⁶⁵ What is interesting about this site is that it also focuses on the diaspora Bosnian Muslim community, with a special section hyperlinked to various European cities with Bosnian communities, with photos of religious activities.⁶⁶ Other sites, such as Islamski Internet Portal, provide hubs for resources including Qur'an interpretations and translations, commentaries and other forms of religious knowledge. Some of this is about basic ritual practice, for example the appropriate ablutions prior to prayer, which is illustrated in photographs.⁶⁷ The opening surah of the Qur'an is transliterated for Bosnian readers.⁶⁸ The extent to which this resource

is utilised is open to question, as the number of impressions for this section was less than 200 for most categories at the time of writing.

Islamski Informativni Portal, amidst materials on the Qur'an, hadith and political Islam, contained a link to an article by the erstwhile Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke (describing himself as National President, European-American Unity and Rights Organization (EURO)), linking the events of 11 September 2001 with Zionists (the article further links to Duke's website, and articles on 'Jewish Supremacism').⁶⁹ Other materials on the same page linked to works by (or about) the academic and writer Noam Chomsky, al-Ghazali, Sayyid Qutb and journalist Robert Fisk. The fusion of materials on such Islamic sites is an area worthy of further consideration and study.

NOTES

1. 'Man Divorces Wife by Phone Message', *Reuters*, 29 June 2001. Muslim religious leaders quickly endorsed this opinion in Singapore and Malaysia. 'Text Message Divorces Approved for Muslims', *Ananova*, 10 July 2001. There is potential, by analogy, for divorce by e-mail.
2. Gary R. Bunt, 'Decision-Making and Idjtihad in Islamic Environments: A Comparative Study of Pakistan, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United Kingdom' (PhD dissertation, Lampeter: University of Wales, 1996).
3. An earlier version of the discussion on Fatwa-Online and As-Sunna Foundation can be found in Gary Bunt, 'Interface Dialogues: Cyber Islamic Environments and the On-line Fatwa', *ISIM Newsletter* 6, November 2000, <http://isim.leidenuniv.nl/newsletter/6/media/1.html>.
4. Discussed in Gary R. Bunt, *Virtually Islamic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 115–16. This is a significant resource, but represents a transformation from newspaper to Internet – rather than an Internet-specific and e-mail-centred 'authority'.
5. Islam Q&A, www.islam-qa.com. Click on 'English'; then navigate using the subject tree or the search engine in the top right hand corner of the page.
6. These statistics were derived from the site on 1 August 2002.
7. Islam Q&A, Introduction. There is some inconsistency with the transliteration of al-Munajjid's name in the site.
8. Islam Q&A, Introduction.
9. Islam Q&A, question 861: Wants to embrace Islam but there are no Muslims Town.
10. Islam Q&A, Question Reference #: 8504, Posted on 25 July 2000.
11. Islam Q&A, Question Reference #: 820, Posted on 19 January 1998.
12. Islam Q&A, Question Reference #: 6453, Posted on 12 November 1999.
13. Islam Q&A, Question Reference #: 4027, Posted on 7 November 2000.
14. Islam Q&A, Question Reference #: 2105, Posted on 19 May 1998.
15. Islam Q&A, Question Reference #: 1848, Posted on 7 February 1999.

16. Islam Q&A, Question Reference #: 2428, Posted on 26 June 1998.
17. Islam Q&A, Question Reference #: 2467, Posted on 29 December 1999.
18. Islam Q&A, Question Reference #: 12087, Posted on October 2000.
19. Islam Q&A, Question Reference #: 8185, Posted on 9 November 2000.
20. Islam Q&A, 'He wants some statistics on Internet filth in order to convince some of his friends', Question Reference #: 21505, Posted on 18 July 2002.
21. Al-Manhaj (Salafi Society of North America), Shaikh Usaamah Al-Qoosee, Concerning Sayyid Qutb, Saalih Al-Munajjid and Al-Maghraawee, 'Questions that were asked to him by SSNA from his visit to the USA on 4/16/01', (16 April 2001) www.al-manhaj.com/Page1.cfm?ArticleID=66.
22. Allaahuakbar.net, Readings in Elementary Qutubism, 11, www.allaahuakbar.net/downloads/qutubism.zip Also see Readings in Intermediate Qutubism, 16 and passim, www.allaahuakbar.net/downloads/qutubism1.zip.
23. See Scholarly Jewels, Ibn Baz section, 'Where is Shaykh 'Abdul-'Azeez ibn Baaz, and When Will He Arrive?', 'One of the pious people had a dream about Shaykh Ibn Baaz shortly before his death', and 'And from the accuracy of the Shaykh's memorisation.' www.fatwa-online.com/scholarlyjewels/ibnbaaz/index.htm.
24. Fatwa-Online, Downloads, www.fatwa-online.com/downloads/index.htm. This page was down in August 2002, as demand for content had exceeded the 20 gigabytes bandwidth quota.
25. Fatwa-Online, www.fatwa-online.com. Mirror site: www.e-fatwa.com.
26. Shaykh 'Abdul-'Azeez Aal ash-Shaykh: 'Indeed waging war against the weak Muslims in Palestine is (Israeli) terrorism and oppression', 21 February 2002, www.fatwa-online.com/news/0020221.htm.
27. Fatwa-Online, New Muslims, www.fatwa-online.com/newmuslims/index.htm.
28. Edited selection of titles drawn from Fatwa-Online, New Muslims, www.fatwa-online.com/newmuslims/index.htm.
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Gary R. Bunt

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