The Digital Turn in the Humanities:

Islam in Cyberspace and Im/possibilities of Re/Shaping Religious Authority

Dr. Mimoune Daoudi

Associate Professor of English and Cultural Studies
Department of English - Discourse, Society, and
Creativity Research Laboratory
Faculty of Humanities - University of Sidi Mohamed
Ben Abdellah, Fes, Morocco

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Abstract

The significant digital shift throughout the human sciences has increased academia's deep interest in the humanities in general and digital humanities in particular. In fact, Digital humanities incorporate key insights from Religion, literature, history, media and communications, computer sciences and information studies and combine these different disciplines into new frameworks.The speedy rise of digital technologies has significantly altered the way religious knowledge is communicated and consumed. Therefore, the advent of these new technologies has triggered new challenges and paradigms to religious authority in the Muslim world. It has also introduced a new paradigm to the practice of religious instructions in a way that led to the delocalisation and deconstruction of Islamic authority. This paper explores the extent to which cyberspace has shaped Islamic discourse through the analysis of newly-born preachers in the new media platforms. It adopts a qualitative method to analyse some case studies from Moroccan digital platforms. The informal language and style, and the extensive use of modern media tools have become a new paradigm where these voices can contest the established, and book-oriented Muslim religious authority represented by the *Ulama*[1]. The paper seeks to examine not only the style of these preachers, but also their goals, their audience, the topics they address, and their influences.

Key Words: Digitization; Islam; New Media Preachers; Morocco; Religious Authority

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[1] Ulama is an arabic word for institutionalised people of religious knowledge in the Muslim world.

Introduction

The growing presence of religion and spirituality in the cyberspace has grown exponentially. Muslims' religious life has been deeply affected by new technologies and the rapid rise of computer and smart phones mediated communications. New media platforms have redefined the ways Muslim communities exist in the world, communicate with their members, and propagate their views and religious opinions.

Cyberspace and cyber-activism now start shaping peoples' religious identities because fluid and transitional identities come to appear as a result of the networked activities that Muslims are now part of. Cyberspace is thus an identity workshop wherein alternative identity formations online emerge. Similarly, new media now instigate opportunities for debates and share traditional forms of authority which is historically based on hierarchy.

Studying religion online is interesting since it provides a microcosm for understanding trends within religious practices and meaning-making in society. Many opinions that have trouble being heard are now being aired freely. Alternative media channels like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube provide a virtual platform for the public sphere as they are well suited for self-expression. Muslims from all over the world have found in these channels opportunities to share views and opinions on different issues relevant to their religion including *fatwas* and basic guidance constituting what is known as the virtual *Ummah* or the online public sphere which seems to be very much divided into public sphericules due to their different tendencies.[2]

Digitisation has increasingly decentralised social relationships and has made them fluid, and religions and religious practices are no exception. With the globalised network, our traditional relationships and patterns of beliefs are becoming much more individualised and less tied to institutional constraints and boundaries, we get a version of religion that is more dynamic individual/ personalised.[3]

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[2] Ahmed Al-Rawi, « Facebook as a virtual mosque: the online protest against Innocence of Muslims », *Culture and Religion*, 17:1, pp. 19-34, (2016) .

[3] Heidi campbell, «Who's Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet,» *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication,* 12, pp. 1043–1062, (2007).

New media have shaped Islamic discourse. Within this newly born digital public sphere, Islam is now articulated on a plethora of online platforms: scanned copies of sacred texts, Fatwa websites, live forums, online blogs, personal websites, youTubes…etc. Gary Bunt refers to the umbrella term: "Cyber Islamic Environment" as a term describing the multiplicity of Muslim worldviews and identities that are present on the Internet. Digitally literate Muslims have access to live sermons and videos, which challenge, Bunt goes, the authenticity and credibility of religious authorities offline. It may also alter religious expectations of the community[4].

Islam's heavy presence on the internet triggers debate with regard to whether digital space fosters religion or on the other hand leads to the fragmentation and delocalisation of religious authority.

I.   Religious Authority in Islam

There is a diversity of religious actors in Islam. There are institutions and scholars who lay claims to religious authority and who are able to interpret and transmit Islamic knowledge. However, the Ulama institution is the most dominant religious entity in the formative and classical periods of Islam; the authority of Ulama was a scholarly civic project. It relied on charismatic and pietistic characteristics to guide Muslims of Islamic doctrine and practice. They interpret sacred texts: the Quran and the Hadith (the prophet's sayings). In the case of Morocco, the Ulama are institutionally organised as follows: the Supreme Scientific Council based in Rabat and headed by the Secretary General. Its members are appointed by the king who is himself the Amir Almouminin (Commander of the Faithfuls), and he is the one the council turns when encountering a controversial issue. The Ulama have the privilege to issue Fatwas. They received classical and traditional schooling which included: the Quran and its previous interpretations, the Hadith, classical Arabic grammar and rhetoric, the Fiqh (Jurisprudence) and the Sira: the prophet's detailed life.

Yet, the Ulama institution starts diminishing in front of the increasing literacy rates and technological advances. In this regard, a new wave of lay interpreters, new preachers, cyber imams, online bloggers, and televangelists vy to speak for Islam. Consequently, within this

[4] O'Leary, S.D. (1996) Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks. Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 64, 781-808.
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diverse and pluralistic context, the question of who speaks for Islam is no longer attributed to the Ulama, but an issue shared by all Muslims who have access to mass media and information technology. (Eickelmann, and Piscatori, 1996, p. 131). Traditional forms of hierarchical power operated through chains of command between people, network society, on the other hand, operates through data rather than people. Chains of authorisation in Islamic tradition are different in which the *Hadiths* for instance are regarded as legitimate where they have a continuous chain of known persons to verify their legitimacy. With data operation power becomes no longer embodied but a switchpoint in the information flow. In brief, religious knowledge is institutionalised in Islam.

The internet turns into a public space that allows a new class of interpreters to reframe Islamic authority and expression in their own terms. Anderson asserts: "in this move, relatively greater anonymity conveys an aura of more social- or at least more common- authority than that of face-to-face transmission between master and pupil." (Jon Anderson, 2003, p. 48.)

Max Weber divides religious authority into three categories: 1. Rational or Legal. 2. Traditional. 3. Charisamtic. Legal authorities are part of a legally established hierarchy and hold an official position. Traditional authority places power in the person rather than the institution, and hence obedience is based on personal loyalty and not on a system of legal rules. Third, charismatic authority which is a characteristic that refers to a person endowed with supernatural and superhuman powers or qualities. (Max Weber, 1994.)

The new preachers this study investigates do not fit in any of the above categories. They do not hold official positions, thus they are not legal authorities; they are not recognised as members of the Ulama, so they do not belong to traditional authority. Also, they are not charismatic because they use their status as ordinary Muslims.

Digital media offer the possibility to subvert traditional authority structures. Pauline Hope Cheong (2013) suggests two perspectives with regard to changes that digital religion provokes in authority structures. The first perspective is about the debate on the ability of new media to disrupt traditional authority allowing alteration models of leadership. The second perspective revolves around the urgency of learning digital media mechanisms by religious leaders. In this respect, Heidi Campbell (2016) based on the work of Jon Anderson (1999) discusses three categories of emerging religious authorities: 1. Digital professionals: those who employ their technological skills to create resources for religious communities. 2. Digital spokespersons:

those who develop the online presence of religious institutions. 3. Digital strategists: those who seek to serve their religious communities through online production.

These preachers were two-fold. First, they sought to rejuvenate interest in religion and thus targeted Muslim youth, a group who was disenchanted with the stricter, more rigid methods of traditional Ulama. Second, they called for faith-based development, both on an individual basis and at the community level, a nahḍa (Renaissance) that would restore the Muslim world to its former glory.

In truth, all three preachers offer an array of religious examples to encourage their audience to take action and relinquish the idea of passive viewership. In each case, they note that Muslim youth are central to developing the region. Perhaps they see young people as the easiest implementers for such change, due to their numbers or their youthful energy, or the fact that they are less indoctrinated in the current system than their older counterparts. Whatever the case may be, the preachers offer numerous examples to motivate youth and change public opinion about the younger generation, showing them that young people can be successful leaders.

First, the preachers stress that society needs to better educate young people, both in and out of the classroom. Following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, they say that Muslims have a responsibility to educate and guide the younger generations.

The preachers' ability to reach this group allows them to target two issues: the need for social and community development, and what they see as one of the main flaws of modern society, a lack of religiosity. The preachers motivate youth to take action and thereby change society, stressing that young people can be leaders, as long as they are armed with more education and renewed ties to religion. Muslim youth thus become both the preachers' tool for change as well as the target audience for their religious messages.

Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyse the digital content of Moroccan new media preachers. The case study method is useful to explore different facets of a contemporary phenomenon in real life context. (Baxer and Jack, 2008). Stake (1995) makes a difference between three types of case study research: 1. Intrinsic, 2. Instrumental, 3. Collective. An intrinsic case study is typically used to investigate a unique phenomenon, and the researcher has to provide arguments about the uniqueness of the case. The instrumental

case study selects a particular case to provide a general appreciation of a phenomenon. The collective case study includes the simultaneous examination of multiple cases in an attempt to reach a broad and more in-depth understanding of a particular issue.

The paper adopts a collective multiple case study research method to deepen the investigation of a complex social and religious phenomenon. This multiple case study method offers an analytical frame to study and critique the cultural, social, and religious contexts within which these new media preachers act.

The case studies focus on two Moroccan religious preachers who gained popularity in the Moroccan blogsphere/cyberspace. I must admit that these case studies are not representative of digital Islam in Morocco and the newly born digital content. However, I consider these cases important and mesmerising in that they provide insights to the dismantling of religious authority in the Muslim context and Moroccan religious tradition in particular. There are many other social media preachers in Morocco worthy of deep study and investigation, but I believe that the scope of this paper would not allow for including other new media preachers as Yassin Omari, Mohamed Hilali, and others. The ones I focus on in this study gained momentum with regard to the sub issue I am tackling in this paper which is religious authority deconstruction. Analysis will target Instagram and YouTube posts and focus will be placed on themes the preachers address in their social media communication. Redwan Ben Abdelssalam: Instagram: 1873 posts, 1,600,000 followers, facebook:2,000,000 followers, Tik Tok: 1373 followers, (his videos reach 1080, 11,5k,6013, and 3316 views),youtube he has two accounts, the major one is: Ben Abdelssalam Youtube channel: he is active since 13 december 2017, 73000 followers, and the views reach 2496743 views. His second account is: Redouanzarghil: active since 9 October 2020, with 430 followers and 5072 views. His videos in youtube reach: 171077, 4102, 38222, 186313 views as examples)

Results

Redouan Ben Abdelssalam from Tetouan city, Northern Morocco, represents a modern moderate Moroccan Islamist. His folloers prefer calling him Cheikh Redouan. He opts for a funny enjoyable speeches on his youtube videos. Hence, one can talk about infotainment. He relates everyday stories that take place in social life in Morocco. He posts videos taken from marriage parties giving his sermons to audience at dinner tables. He mostly refers to Islamic teachings and ethics in his storytelling.

He also addresses social ills such as excessive use of technological devices. He focuses on civic conduct and proper behaviour that all Muslims should uphold. This 'light' or 'soft' Islam appeals to youngsters who tend to reject traditional institutions and specifically organised institutionalised religion.

Discussion

Islam in Morocco as well as in other parts of the Muslim world witnesses a transition and dynamism manifested in its capability to adjust to changing times and new parameters introduced by the advent of new technologies. Additionally, Islam has a creative potential in sustaining itself within contemporary society.

New media preachers exploit the affordances of digital technologies to engage the audience to experience religion within cyberspace. Entertaining storytelling is the new marketing strategy to preach and not the traditional lectures and sermons based on dogmatic texts and given in religious institutions as the mosques.

Focus is placed on human relationships, civil life, and what it means to be a modern Muslim (the beach as an example). Empowered by the social media platforms, they contribute to the shifting configuration of Islamic discourse. They challenge the established institutional religious authority. While traditional religious scholars (the Ulama) received traditional education based on the Quran, the Hadith, and classical Arabic, and got religious degrees, these new preachers rely on their superficial knowledge and resort to dialect to convey their messages. They are dynamic online and not adequately and deeply trained in Islamic knowledge. They are not recognised as legitimate scholars whom the audience can rely on in issuing Fatwas.

Furthermore, new preachers, unlike traditional ones who are more interested in matters of worship (Ibadat) such as praying, fasting, and pilgrimage, are more focused on matters of social life: how to get dressed properly in modern society, how to behave courteously, matters of social etiquette, eating habits …etc.

(Gauthier, 2012, p.107) refers to the "move from a regime of orthodoxy towards a regime of orthopraxy." Islamic content competes with other media and entertainment activities, and products. In the context of the ever-increasing pull of promotional culture on all aspects of cultural life, social media influencers are obliged to become more customer-oriented and more entertaining to appeal to the need and wants of Muslims. The new regime of orthopraxy aims

to sacralize the individual and to celebrate the self and the authenticity of personal expression rather than to sacralize a religious tradition or institution.

One of the critiques directed to these new media preachers is hat they give a simplified version of Islam. Eickelman calls it "Air-conditioedn or light Islam"/ Others call it "Daawa Diet". They are unschooled in the basics of religion and they are thus not reliable preachers to speak for Islam. They do not possess the credentials. They transmit simplistic or even incorrect interpretations of Islam and have a say in debatable issues. They issue Fatwas or religious opinions regardless of the scholarly methods or visiting the vast body or religious discourse compiled over centuries of Islamic presence by highly qualified scholars with a super-literacy of an interpretive ability.

The second critique directed to these preachers is that they are interested only in making money and fame. For example, in his book about al-du3at al-judud in Egypt, Egyptian journalist Waiil Luṭfi presents a two-faced portrayal of the du3at and their goals. He argues that these men "want to preach about religion without losing what they really relish: fame, wealth, influence, and commercial projects." This accusation is important because it establishes a claim that the new preachers are not working for the people and are solely interested in their own fame and profit. In other words, this puts their religious credibility into question, creating a division between these popular preachers and the Ulama, who see themselves both as spokespersons for the people, representing the interest of the community, and also as "heirs of the Prophets," responsible for the preservation and transmission of religious knowledge.

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