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Comment on Possamai, Turner, Roose, Dagistanli and Voyce/1

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by Catherine Blaya

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1. Introduction

Digital communities have developed very early on the Internet. Their aims although diverse, have in common the will to share and to exchange and thus to offer discursive spaces for interaction. As a consequence, the Internet has become a new place for social bonding, ideologies spreading and symbolical construction [Proulx 2006] including the development of digital religion. The article by Possamai and his colleagues [2016] proceeds to investigate on how e-Islam communities manage online *fatwas* and contribute to the de-territorialisation of the practice of Islam from traditional system of values and practices to the production of new forms of religious practices and culture. This research focuses on online *fatwa* sites and roots from the work of Marcotte [2010].

The study that is introduced as a case study, analysed the interactions on Internet sites and highlights that there is an online regulation process of personal and daily life issues and some other types of communication that take the form of a *Shari'a* court among the Muslim community in Australia. This qualitative research work is based on the analysis of a total of three online Australian forums where *fatwas* may be obtained (*Darul Ifta*, *Darul Fatwa Australia* and *Sydney Muslim Youth Forum*). Possamai and his colleagues draw on the concept of de-territorialisation of Deleuze and Guattari [1972] to investigate how e-Islam enables to achieve some distance from the traditional religious authorities. Method is based on the Cowan's [2011]

framework of “Questions to ask in Internet research” and the Internet comparative case study approach.

2. Offline Community and Online Communities

The authors use in a similar way the term of community to refer to the off-line Muslim community and what they call the on-line community. This could deserve some in-depth discussion. Shall we expect and take for granted that on-line communities act and interact in the same way as off-line ones? As stressed by Proulx and Latzko-Toth [2000], we shall not consider *a priori* that a group of Internet users will necessarily behave as a community when online. What are the specific conditions that lead individuals to develop a feeling of belonging so strong that the website or social network becomes a symbolical place of identification for the members of this specific group? The works of Papadakis [2003] or Hine [2005] seem particularly relevant, here. As seen by these researchers, online group communication presents characteristics similar to off-line. Online groups are social and symbolical environments that generate a feeling of belonging and collective identity to the people who share it. Software developers and media companies have well understood the interest they have in developing technology to help individuals to grow attachment to online groups.

As showed by the authors, social groups online can be very structured and organized with rules and codes of conduct proper to the group as in face-to-face environments. The main bonding factor in online communities as for off-line communities is the sharing of similar interests, preoccupations or ideologies [Casilli 2010]. Some groups are shut to outsiders, reinforcing the feeling of belonging to a special group and community versus outsiders who do not seem to be allowed to belong as for the *Sydney Muslim Youth “Ask the Sheikh”* in Possamai *et al*'s article. It is interesting to see how the power structure that exists in off-line communities is duplicated within online groups. The *Darul Ifta Australia* but also the *Darul Fatwa* organisations are very hierarchical and based on the authority of the ones who know and have access to the information (those who can read the *Qur'an* for instance or those who are religious authorities and whose name is used to settle the argument). As the authors stress, the answers publish some verses from the Quran in Arabic to give some greater authority to the message excluding those who cannot read Arabic. This is interpreted as an attempt to give and preserve legitimacy to the Sheikhs leading the sites.

The “*Ask the Sheikh*” forum plays on the sharing of experiences and personal opinions, which contributes to empower individuals and give them a voice that they

might not have in the off-line world. As a consequence, one has the opportunity and satisfaction to share ideas and ideology among a group of supposedly like-minded people, to whom they can identify. This no doubt provides a feeling of empowerment and of belonging to the group as showed by Timmerman, Leman, Roos and Segaeert [2009] who highlight that the Internet acts as a factor of empowerment for Europe's migrant Muslim communities, especially for the young people. For the Australian context, Aly's research [2007] demonstrated that the Australian Muslim Community perceives alienation strongly and that the counter-terrorism actions implemented in the country lead to a greater Muslim disengagement from mainstream society. Better contextualisation could further inform the underlying reasons for the Australian Muslim community to resort to online Muslim groups for advice seeking on the *Shari'a*.

3. De-territorialisation or Re-territorialisation?

Although the authors start their paper declaring that "New forms of communication and greater accessibility of Islamic texts on-line allow Muslims to shape their own religiosity, to become less dependent on established sources of authority, and thereby to become more aware of their own cultural diversity as a community [Possamai *et al* 2016, 1]", the findings do not meet that assumption as firmly as it could have been expected to start with.

As it is pointed out, the global growing of digital practices and communication among individuals opens up tensions between the so-called traditional world and the digital one. Through the concept of de-territorialisation, the construction of a digital Islamic culture that could possibly contribute to the adaptation of the culture and values of Islam to the dominant cultural context of the country where individuals live is questioned. This leads also to question the traditional process of domination and leadership in the digital era and the paper website moderators play in shaping adapted religious practices.

The authors highlight somewhat the need for *bricolage* [Levi-Strauss 1962] of Muslim identity and way of life in a dominantly non-Islamic country, due to the difficulty for some Muslim people to comply with both the *Shari'a* and the legal rules of the country they live in. Their assumption is that the Internet becomes a space where adaptation to modernity and the actual conditions of life permits some kind of distance from the traditional Muslim religious practices, contributing to the *bricolage* in the anthropological meaning of Levi-Strauss of new forms of religious identity. However findings do not convince that the assumed process of de-territorialisation is completed. This article suggests that the process is not as obvious and that if geogra-

phical and digital de-territorialisations are effective, the research does not enable to conclude to a mental or spiritual de-territorialisation [Poché 2014]. It mainly shows how the studied organizations that exist offline have migrated into the online world and make the most of it to perpetuate tradition. As stressed by the authors, the role of moderators is based on control for two of the studied sites and seems to preserve the Islamic traditions and normativity of the off-line religious practices as already showed by Marcotte [2009; 2010]. Only the *Darul Fatwa Australia* shows some signs of seeking adaptation to the Australian context. Some analysis of the profile of the forums users would have been interesting. As seen by Ramji [2013] the young people's goal is to practice what they think is the "real" Islam at the same time as they seek an individualisation of their relation to religion. The way the forums are organized might reflect not only the wish to preserve tradition but also the need to stick to the spiritual needs of the youngest Muslim generations. This highlights the interest in further investigating the issue since the authors could have completed their analyses of de-territorialisation trying to identify what Deleuze and Guattari [1972] name as absolute de-territorialisation and relative de-territorialisation. Although the Internet is often considered as the way to liberation and changes, this research among others tends to nuance this perception and stresses that religious leaders seek to strengthen their leadership and re-territorialise religion through the Internet.

4. Conclusions

As presented in this paper, although the cyberspace potentially opens up new perspectives of adaptation of religion practices to the modern context, some resistance is underway and can counteract the possibility for change using the very same canal of communication. The authors show clearly the use of the Internet for religious purposes is a significant element in Australian Muslims' daily lives and is a source of guidance. These conclusions meet the ones of Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis [2009], who showed that the debates on Muslim sites can be dogmatic and assertive, and restrict the emergence of new practices.

The data presentation is rather descriptive and the last question of Cowan's set of questions [2011] that is "how does online content and participation affect religious belief and activity offline?" is not answered. The way the digital religious space affects the offline one or the possible disconnection between the two spaces deserve some extra investigation. Further steps are needed towards a deeper knowledge and understanding on the way the Internet affects religions, and potentially gives rise to a multi-cultural and post-modern Islam in "real" life.

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Abstract: The Internet has opened up new communication perspectives and the possibility of the creation of online communities, among which Muslim communities offering advice to individuals seeking information and *Shari'a* in a non-Muslim country, as highlighted by Possamai and his colleagues. The issue is to understand if these online groups work as communities and if they do contribute to a de-territorialisation process from traditional religious practices or if on the contrary they are part of an attempt of re-territorialisation of the Muslims who potentially could achieve some gap with a conservative view of Islam. The challenge is to better understand the impact of online Muslim groups on daily life and the potential *bricolages* to adapt religion to context.

Keywords: Muslim; Online Communities; De-territorialisation; Re-territorialisation; Shari'a.

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