Essays

A Response to Comments.

by Adam Possamai, Bryan S. Turner, Joshua M. Roose, Selda Dagistanli *and* Malcolm Voyce

Belonging and community is a common thread running through all of these commentaries. Another common theme is the question of religious authority, hierarchy and power in cyber practices of religion. In a sense, these broad thematic points are linked; one cannot be considered without the other. Hierarchical power structures and authority dictate the dominant religious interpretations to the exclusion of minority and marginal religious interpretations. In the examples provided in our paper [Possamai *et al* 2016], pronouncements from facilitators of *fatwa* sites, those claiming an authoritative voice as regards everyday *Shariʿa* practices, reveal clear boundaries of inclusion/exclusion that define notions of community and belonging. In this sense, cyber religious practices do not differ much from offline congregations. This point of similarity between the online and offline adherents informs, in turn, the idea of re-territorialisation. That the cultural and geo-political/territorial situatedness of religious communities shapes the practice and interpretation of religion should come as no surprise even though there is an ever-present sense of belonging to a wider collective, a global *ummah*. In other words, practicing Islam in a shared secular cultural context, breeds a particular interpretation and everyday practice of the faith while a sense of belonging to and identifying with other Muslims across the globe also acknowledges how faith is always already globalised, transcending national boundaries. New technologies facilitate this process of globalisation further but, as some of these academic commentaries show, religion has elided and transcended geographical borders long before the internet.

In this vein, Anna Neumaier's commentary specifically addresses the nuances of de/re-territorialisation and authority/hierarchy in online religious practices. She proposes that we distinguish, and rightly, between "collectives, communities or other social arrangements" [2016] that are realised by the practice and dissemination of *Shari'a* in cyber-space, and spatial entities of local and national territory in which these social communities reside. This partly informs her point that religion elides borders in its influence and that social communities who constitute a community of adherents to a particular religion carry more significance for the development of religious practices. This diminishing of the importance of spatial territory and the greater relevance of social communities or other collectives in the practice of religion could, according to Neumaier, perhaps inform the concept of de-territorialisation.

Furthermore, the challenges of religion to notions of territorial boundaries is extended by the Internet. But this does not mean that this kind of de-territorialisation is synonymous with a "de-hierarchisation" of religion – hierarchies and authority are not dismantled by an apparent de-territorialisation represented by online religious engagement. Religion already elides territorial boundaries while the hierarchies remain firmly in place. We consider this in our suggestions that de-territorialisation does not signal a demise of authority and that power relations that exist in face to face practices are simply reproduced in this new media sphere. We argue that sites that are operated from Australia exhibit certain cultural characteristics that bear relevance to Australian Muslims, suggesting a process of re-territorialisation. While it might be true that the forces of religion and the Internet combine to elide and transcend territorial boundaries, *Shari'a* practicing Muslim communities are also situated in a specific geo-political, social and cultural context which inevitably impacts on the ways in which the religion develops and is practiced in a particular territorial space. This is true of any religion. Overall, Neumaier calls for substantial empirical research to develop the connection between concepts of authority and de/re-territorialisation in the practices and transformations in contemporary Islam.

Armando Salvatore argues that cyber-Islam feeds into a global *umma* (which is balanced with a sense of belonging to a local community and nation) while new resources are mobilised by older forms of authority. He argues that the spread of Islam as a set of normative ideals cannot be framed as just a response to contemporary developments, such as new media and communication technologies. It is historically grounded in Islamic civilizational visions that were cosmopolitan in their presuppositions and continue to be so through polygossic contemporary re-framings of belonging in a translocal *Umma*: "reframing, rather than re-enacting, more traditional conceptions of the *umma* and patterns of authority therein. It is likely that such activities retrieve historical experiences of common belonging, while transforming

them sensibly" [2016]. Ultimately, Salvatore suggests that a productive line of enquiry would exist in a more comprehensive, larger historico-sociological contextualisation of contemporary socio-cultural changes brought about by cyber-*Shari'a*. Future endeavours taking this approach would engender "fruitful comparative scenarios" in questions around the innovative or conservative character of *Shari'a* in cyberspace.

Catherine Blaya [2016] raises the important and interesting question of how an offline community can be distinguished and differentiated in its behaviours from an online community. This is a significant point and one that warrants more attention. In particular, Blaya focuses on the recurring theme of belonging and collective identity in an online community and, once again, the structures of authority that inhere in such an environment to delineate the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion. Blaya locates the online community of *Shari'a* adherents within a broader national context of Muslim exclusion, disenfranchisement and disengagement from mainstream society whereby a sense of belonging through common beliefs and practices is sought in a cybersphere.

While this sort of contextualisation was not the focus of our article, we believe that such insights could have been included to enrich the analysis. Contextualisations including both the specific (in contemporary Australia – per Blaya), and broader views (in the nexus of the *Umma* and the history of the Islamic cosmopolitan vision – per Salvatore), should be incorporated into future research and analyses of *Shari'a* practice.

The two remaining discussants depart somewhat, from the theme of community and belonging in their appraisal of our paper on *Shari'a* in cyberspace. The first, Abdulhadi Khalaf's contribution [2016], raises some very interesting points about how such fringe and counter public spheres, including those that are generated through new media and technological innovation, can come under threat from authoritarian State rule. The possibility of "*fatwa* shopping" and a potential "multiplication of competing authorities" that is presented by *Shari'a* in cyberspace is one that may be extinguished by State political intervention in Muslim countries that see such innovations as "*fatwa* chaos." The concept of "*fatwa* chaos" is certainly interesting and one that warrants further investigation in future research. The possibility of State intervention into the seemingly de-territorialised sphere of the internet (and indeed, religion), once again highlights the re-territorialisation of religious practices – locating them within a specific geo-political space.

Finally, Ermete Mariani [2016] makes a valid point that was echoed to some extent in the other responses: that the websites considered needed to be situated in a wider social context. Mariani extends this however and concludes that the empirical context overall was too narrow to reach any meaningful conclusions and that the

content analysed is out of date. While we appreciate that this is a reasonable criticism, the paper does not claim to be a comprehensive empirical interrogation of *Shari'a* practices online, but only a small snapshot taking into consideration only a few case studies. In this sense it is only a micro-analysis that sits within our much wider research project conducted in Australia (Sydney) and the United States (New York) into the everyday practices of *Shari'a* among Muslim diaspora in those contexts. Perhaps we should have made this clearer from the outset to illustrate the place of this specific analysis within the wider scope of our larger project.

References

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A Response to Comments.

Abstract: The authors reply to the comments by Catherine Blaya, Abdulhadi Khalaf, Ermete Mariani, Anna Neumaier, and Armando Salvatore, explicating some arguments of the original article.

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