ers. In many eparchies, special departments that create content have existed for many years. Today in the period of coronavirus-related isolation, the Orthodox Church confronts new challenges and shapes its online image in new ways. Discussions about the "disinfection of shrines" as well as the necessity of special liturgies and prayers against coronavirus all take place exclusively online. There is a sense that the Church today exists no less in the virtual world than it does in the real one; like the social sciences, the Church is searching for new ways to adapt to the breakneck pace of change and the rapid shifts between online and offline status.

S. Belorussova

References

Campbell, Heidi A. 2010. *When Religion Meets New Media*. New York: Routledge.

Campbell, Heidi A., ed. 2013. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. New York: Routledge.

Lundby, Knut. 2012. "Dreams of Church in Cyberspace." In *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures*, edited by Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, and Charles Ess, 25–42. New York: Peter Lang.

Spadaro, Antonio. 2014. *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet*. Translated by Maria Way. New York: Fordham University Press.

Stout, Daniel A. 2012. *Media and Religion: Foundations of an Emerging Field*. New York: Routledge.

Persistent Orientalism: How Does the West View Islam on the Internet?

Review of: Gary R. Bunt. 2018 *Hashtag Islam. How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. — 234 pp.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22394/2311-3448-2020-7-2-103-111

Professor Gary Bunt was one of the first to draw attention to the phenomenon of cyber-Islam. As they would say in social media sites, he examined this topic "before it became mainstream." By mainstream, I am referring to the influx of works that rec-

This article was prepared to fulfil the state research assignment of RANEPA.

ognize the effective use of media by the "Islamic state" and the special role social networks played in the Arab Spring (including its association with Islamic discourse). In reality, the phenomenon of electronic Islam dates back not to the 2010s, but to the 1990s, when Bunt became a pioneer of this topic. In an article published in 1999, he examined sites in detail to analyze the identity of British Muslims (Bunt 1999). He was the first to draw attention to the technology's performative role in the lives of Muslims, a conclusion he based on his fieldwork in Malaysia and Pakistan in the mid-90s. In his analysis of religious authority and decision-making, he noted that emails and communication on sites began to have a real impact on events in the real world (6). After the publication of his first monograph in 2000, Bunt immediately became one of the most cited authors on the subject (Bunt 2000). The aim of the work was to assess the implications of how Islamic sites functioned and to examine not only how they represented Islam and Muslims, but also to ascertain how Muslims and non-Muslims might perceive Islam and Islamic issues (Bunt 2000, 9). Building on this work, his 2003 monograph focused on "digital jihad" and "online *fatwas*" (Bunt 2003). And in 2009 yet another work dedicated to "digital Islam" quickly attracted the attention of many scholars (Bunt 2009). Bunt's next monograph, the subject of this review, builds upon his many years of research, and thus gives the scholar the opportunity to critically assess the work's analytical language and its methodological approach and to determine the place of this work in the broader context of Bunt's research.

Bunt's work focuses on the *cyber-Islamic environment*, (CIE).

> The Cyber Islamic Environment [is] an umbrella term which can refer to a variety of contexts, perspectives and applications of the media by those who define themselves as Muslims. These may contain elements of specific Muslim worldviews and notions of exclusivity, combined with regional and cultural understandings of the media and its validity (Bunt 2003, 5).

This term covers a wide range of "online activities," from a Muslim scholar's claim on a site to a blogger's tweet. "The term *Islamic* (ital. in original) is used to refer to any view that describes itself as belonging to Islam, even if that view is not universally shared by all Muslims" (7). This concept is rather broad, but according

to the author, it is the most effective approach to this subject. Thus, almost any reference to Islam on the Internet — whether a *fatwa* site or a single post on a social network — is within the sphere of Bunt's research. The question is whether this is justified or productive.

The primary advantage of such a broad interpretation of the cyber-Islamic Environment is the ability to demonstrate the diversity in the articulation of Islam on the Internet. The work *Hashtag Islam* is a kind of guide to countless Islamic online discourses. The empirical (not methodological) part begins in the second chapter, where Bunt analyzes social networks as "a significant game changer in relation to articulation of religious values and concepts" (20). Here, he speaks less about content and more about the structural aspects, for example, the growing popularity of social networks (which, for some reason, is only considered for countries in the Middle East and North Africa) and the expansion of Internet access, both of which have transformed the transmission of religious knowledge. Recently, the issue of Internet control or censorship is beginning to resemble a symbolic struggle for "correct" articulations of Islam. In relation to this, "Islamic alternatives" to Facebook and Twitter are also briefly discussed.

In the third chapter, he addresses selected elements of digital Islamic discourse. For example, considerable attention is paid to the digitization of the Qur'an. He analyzes new immersive forms of the representation of the Qur'an — new approaches to its visualization, recitations through mobile apps, convenient online platforms for discussion, and ergonomic interfaces that simultaneously display several translations of the Qur'an. Such a focus leads to another of the key questions: how does this relate to tradition and "traditional ways of obtaining knowledge?" For Bunt, the answer is quite simple and is formulated in the logic of Talal Asad's "discursive tradition":

> New forms of knowledge can be acquired outside of traditional cultural and religious contexts. What "traditional" precisely means is open to scrutiny: intergenerational differences exist between ideas on religion and its place in society, along with distinctions between and within communities at all levels (36).

In the same chapter he also addresses other segments of Islamic online discourse, namely pilgrimage, fasting during the

holy month of Ramadan, Islamic converts, the problems of gender, sexuality, and familial relations, as well as representations of Sufis, Shiites, and "alternative forms of Islam." This chapter is filled with case studies from all corners of the Muslim world, from Morocco to Indonesia. However, it is not completely clear to what extent the aforementioned segments characterize the cyber-Islamic environment, or if they simply attracted the bulk of Bunt's attention. At the end of the chapter, he notes the emergence of a new phenomenon — "Islam 3.0." In "Islam 3.0" Muslims are no longer simply using the Internet (Islam 2.0), rather the online space, itself, has a significant transformative impact on Muslim practices and on non-Muslim's perception of Islam. For example, the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoon scandal would not have been possible without lightning-fast distribution via the Internet.

In the fourth chapter, Bunt addresses, what is in his view, the primary aspect of the study of the cyber-Islamic environment — the problem of religious authority. He proceeds from the assumption that the online environment is the most important factor in the transformation of the essence of authority in Islamic tradition today. Primarily, this is because the Internet is closing the gap between the average Muslim, seeking answers to religious questions, and the scholar, who is qualified to make judgments based on sacred texts. This gives rise to several contradictions at once. On the one hand, it becomes possible to "localize" Islamic knowledge up to its individual personalization. If earlier the interaction of an individual *ulama* with an *ummah* was limited to a *fatwa* directed toward all Sunnis, now the specific identity of its target has become the key to the success of a YouTube channel of one *ulama*, which takes into account not only the identification with a particular branch of Islam, but also the individual's political views, age group, region, and so on. On the other hand, such a massive "opening of the gates of ijtihad" raises the question of religious authority. The anonymity and accessibility of the Internet makes it possible for everyone to act as a religious authority and base that authority on their own convictions rather than on years of theological training. This ultimately leads to the vulgarization of Islamic knowledge, and the emergence of a new generation of Google sheiks and Wikipedia muftis, turning the Internet into a boxing ring, where their main weapon is cyber-tajwid or, more simply, trolling (83).

Finally, the fifth and sixth chapters discuss cyber-jihad. The fifth chapter analyzes this phenomenon and illustrates it with abundant examples (e.g. the Taliban, Al-Shabab, Al-Qaeda, as well as cyber-jihad's role in the Palestine-Israel conflict, in Pakistan and Mali, and among Muslim minority communities in Western societies). The sixth chapter is devoted specifically to the Islamic State. So, how has the Internet influenced the actions and strategies of the movements in question? The fundamental difference between "Al-Qaeda" and the "Islamic State," from this view, lies in the fact that the former adapted and gradually included in its strategy the use of the Internet to recruit members, whereas the latter from its very inception pursued an active media strategy that included vigorous promotion on social networks, the development of original content, often in the forms of online magazines and films about "peaceful life" in the State, and an emphasis on the aestheticization of violence. It is worth noting that from the very beginning Bunt stipulates that jihad is a very minor element in Islamic cyberspace, yet it dominates contemporary Western agendas regarding Islam.

Bunt brilliantly identified the general tendencies that characterize contemporary Islamic cyberspace. However, at this point, the sociological study of Islam can solve more "problematic" issues, rather than simply and almost in a positivist way applying separate changes in the structure of cyberspace. In this regard, several questions arise about the methodology of this study.

Firstly, in his effort to give a general depiction of Islamic cyberspace, this concept becomes rather fragmented. Examples from different geographic and political contexts unduly and excessively homogenize the Muslim world. It seems as though the Indonesian cyber-Islamic environment is no different from it in the Moroccan or European context. Yet, for example, a survey of the representation of gender in the online sphere is critical in all these different regions.

Secondly, Bunt proceeds from a thesis, which apparently needs no more argumentation, that assumes the "overreaching transformational effect" (8) of the Internet on Islamic practices. This assumption is based on Marshall McLuhan's concept of the "global village" and Jurgen Habermas' public sphere, both of which Bunt refers to in the text. Although he occasionally makes a reservation about the importance of taking into account other social, political, and economic factors, the general message

remains the same: it is indisputable that meanings are more-fully articulated in hyperreality than in the real world. This raises several questions. Should online and analog Islam be separated? How does the Internet actualize the implicit and explicit meanings of symbols in a religious context? And finally, how is the structure of knowledge of Islam shaped in the online environment? While captivated by the poststructuralism of Jean Baudrillard, Michael Foucault, and Roland Barthes, Bunt nevertheless seems to be implementing David Easton's "systems theory" approach, but instead of a political system, there is the cyber-Islamic environment. In such a theory, the system is like a black box that receives inputs and modifies questions based on proposed solutions. For example, in this approach a Qur'an reading application, originally designed to satisfy the demand for easier access to religious knowledge, changes the "traditional" system of knowledge transfer, but this raises the question of whether tradition should be interpreted as such. The main problem of Easton's "systems theory" approach is that it does not allow one to examine the black box itself. The issue here is to determine the transformational impact on the substantive rather than the structural level. The work itself seeks to formulate the impact of the online environment on Islamic identity, however, Bunt's descriptions focus too much on Islam and too little on Muslims. One should ask: How Muslims assess the importance of particular segments of the cyber-Islamic environment? How do the sociopolitical and economic contexts of individual regions, countries, or communities impact the patterns of participation in "online activities"? That Bunt bypasses these questions makes his work seem schematic. For example, in the second chapter, which discusses the issue of controlling social networks, he turns to Iran and Saudi Arabia. Here, he seems to confirm existing stereotypes about these authoritarian regimes, while turning a blind eye to censorship in other "less-obvious" cases.

This is not to say that the study is purely descriptive and that the research question is overlooked. Bunt repeatedly declares that his primary interest is to learn how the multifarious online projects transform Islamic authority. This is not a new inquiry in the sociology of Islam. There is even a certain tendency to pose such a question: European researchers, for example, tend to emphasize positive aspects, depicting the democratization of access to Islam-

ic knowledge as a consequence of the polyarchy of authority on the Internet. For example, B. S. Turner focuses on the "democratic discourse" that various religions enter into in cyberspace. "The Internet also has a democratizing effect in the sense that it levels out power differences between social groups; for example, the Ismailis can appear to be as mainstream as other movements in Shi'ism" (Turner 2007, 127). The emergence of "new intellectuals" leads to the systematization of Islamic thought, an increased level of literacy, and greater competition among "new intellectuals," seeking to expand their influence in the religious environment. Bunt is also inclined to such positive assessments. No stranger to left-liberal discourse, he draws attention to the fact that the voices of Muslim minorities are being recognized thanks to the Internet. The erosion of the "traditional" monopoly of authority on Islamic knowledge on the Internet creates new opportunities for articulating (and thus legitimizing) a multitude of local identities.

The emphasis on the competitiveness of Islamic discourse reflects the insistence that sociological and anthropological inquires in Islam examine the diversity of Muslim communities. Against the backdrop of a flurry of publications after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which linked Islam and terrorism and assessed the problems of "radical Islam," the study of Muslim individual experience and "lived Islam" is designed to overcome stereotypes about the centrality of radicalism and violence in Islam by showing the "normality" of regular Muslims. It would seem that Bunt's work should solve this problem, but it in fact does the opposite.

In an effort to cover absolutely all Muslim contexts and regions, Bunt mentions only the most prominent cases that are more understandable to a western reader. Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando very succinctly described this trend: "the reincorporation of Muslims into the realm of the ordinary hinges on showing how Muslims — or at least 'everyday Muslims' — cultivate and celebrate values that are deeply familiar to secular sensibilities." (Fadil and Fernando 2015, 75) As an example they cite numerous studies devoted to the problem of the hijab as "an idiosyncrasy that needs to be explained" (2015, 65 f. 13) As a result, only those practices that do not correspond to the "secular lifestyle" become the object of research (2015, 65, f. 13). If Fadil and Fernando draw attention to the framework of secularity, which confines the study of

Muslim experience, then Bunt's research inevitably turns out to be mediated by Orientalist discourse. The diversity of the cyber-Islamic environment boils down to a set of segments that fit into generalized Western ideas about the Muslim world and Islam, i.e. the problem of Islamic attitudes toward women, radical Islam, etc. . . When it comes to Iran or Saudi Arabia, the pluralistic cyber-Islamic environment is opposed to a homogenous and centralizing state system, almost in the vein of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations." The cyber-Islamic environment becomes a space for free discussion of reforms in opposition to a rigid "traditional" system.

Pioneering research approaches in the field of digital Islam from the early 2000s, now seem to require an update. A simple description and fixation on the change in the institution of authority brought about due to the transformation of the ways of transmitting Islamic knowledge is no longer sufficient. Given the complexity of the social context of Muslim experience, it seems more productive to examine not general global tendencies, but rather to explore individual local practices, paying special attention to their contexts, their intertextuality, and their interrelationships. Underestimation of such context in this case oversimplified the subjects of Bunt's research. Finally, although the study strives to analyze the impact of the online environment on Muslim identity, Muslims are absent from the study. Ultimately, it turns out to be a re-articulation of Orientalism. In analyzing the "objective" trends and main segments of the cyber-Islamic environment, Bunt, in fact, describes how the West views Islam in the online environment. Furthermore, a fundamentally important question remains unanswered: how do Muslims, themselves, assess the importance of certain segments of the cyber-Islamic environment? It seems that a change in analytical optics, which would consider the agency of the Muslims themselves, will bring a new dimension to the study of the cyber-Islamic environment.

S. Ragozina

References

Bunt, G. 1999. "Islam@Britain.net: 'British Muslim' identities in cyberspace." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10 (3): 353–362.

Bunt, G. 2000. *Virtually Islamic Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Bunt, G. 2003. *Islam in the Digital Age: E-jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments*. London: Pluto Press.

Bunt, G. 2009. *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*. The University of North Carolina Press.

Fadil, N., and M. Fernando. 2015. "Rediscovering the "everyday" Muslim. Notes on an anthropological divide." *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5 (2): 59-88.

Turner, B. S. 2007. "Religious authority and New Media." *Theory, Culture and Society* 24 (2): 117–134.