

Islamic Algorithms: Online Influence in the Muslim Metaverse By Gary R. Bunt. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024. 326 pp., ISBN: 1350418269, ISBN13: 978-1350418264

The topic of Digital/Virtual Islam receives a lot of attention from the scholars of Contemporary Islam and Digital Religion. Gary Bunt is well-known for his previously published books on these topics (*Virtually Islamic: Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000); *Islam in the Digital Age: E-jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto Press, 2003); *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber Islamic Environments are Transforming Religious Authority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018). In his new book, he examines the influences of Islamic historical and contemporary settings, and how they resonate digitally on the Internet. He also explores ‘different forms of contemporary influence and influencers, across social media and digital platforms, in ways which relate directly to impacting individuals and societies regarding their practice and understanding of Islam’ (p. 8).

The book consists of an Introduction and 11 chapters, each of which can be read separately and out of sequence (p. 7). The Introduction and Chapter 1 outline the theoretical approaches and methodology. Bunt often refers to his previous books and connects ‘Islamic algorithms’ to the general term ‘Cyber-Islamic Environment’, which reflects the multifaceted and diverse Muslim worldviews, the diversity between and within different zones in different iterations of cyberspace over time (p. 2). The term ‘algorithm’ in this book applied as a metaphor for influences/ influencers that impact Islamic understandings (p. 9). So Islamic algorithms are seen here as a metaphor for subsets of influences and allow, through the influence of their interpretations and discussions in various digital contexts and search hierarchies, to understand how digital content is embedded in contemporary understandings of Islam (p. 3). Using online observation and archiving/capturing of Cyber-Islamic Environments in a variety of formats, Bunt studies how the interpretations of Islam are presented online and how the dynamics of digital discourse have begun to influence the interpretation of Islam itself (p. 3). Further he defines conceptual apparatus by explaining the terms ‘Metaverse’ (p. 5), connections between Artificial Intelligence and Cyber-Islamic Environments (p. 11), notions of influence and influencers, etc. Then he provides an overview of significant works on the study of the internet in general, religion and the internet, and Islam and the internet, referring to M. McLuhan, J. Baudrillard, M. Foucault, R. Barthes, B. Lawrence, and others. In the end of ch. 1, Bunt explains the reasons for the chosen ‘influences’. It was the key figures that have made an impact in Muslim histories, cultures, societies and religious developments (p. 26).

Chapters 2 and 3 outline the significant Islamic influences that arose before and during the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, respectively. Bunt analyses ethereal entities (jinn, shayṭān, angels) and the personalities of prophets and other important Islamic figures (ʿĀdam and Eve/Hawwāʾ, Nūḥ/Noah, Ibrāhīm/Abraham, Mūsā/Moses, Al-Khiḍr, ʿĪsā/Jesus). These

major figures are integral to the perception of Islam (also as part of interreligious dialogue) and show how different interpretations and disagreements between Sunni and Shīʿī sources intensify in cyberspace (p. 42). In characterizing historical figures (here and in subsequent chapters), he begins with a brief overview of personality and then moves on to a person's 'digital impact'. Since depictions of Muḥammad and other figures are discouraged in many Islamic traditions, their representation usually relies on textual and other sources (p. 47). Therefore in ch. 3, Bunt analyses various digitisations of ḥādīth sources and Muḥammad's biographical sīra. Text sources might be simply reproduced as e-books and documents; or be presented through multimedia interfaces (p. 49).

Chapter 4 presents the roles of those who succeeded Muḥammad as caliphs and different members of Muḥammad's family, and how they are influential within Cyber-Islamic Environments. Understanding the impossibility of studying all main historical figures within this book, Bunt concentrates on most prominent among them by their 'online presence'. Therefore, he studies Khadīja, 'Ā'ishah, the Prophet's other wives, Bilāl, 'Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthmān. Bunt usually considers the differences between and within Shīʿī and Sunni Islam and refers to it when studying these and other personalities. At the same time, in my opinion, the chapter would enrich from discussing the personality of Bilāl from Shīʿī perspective, both offline and online, given Shīʿī claims about Bilāl's loyalty to Prophet's family (his refusal to give an oath to Abū Bakr, his refusal to give 'adhān after Prophet's death because his voice reminded Fāṭimah of her father, etc.). Also, when talking about Bilāl, Bunt analyses the animated film 'Bilal: A New Breed of Hero' which in the chapter is mistakenly called 'Mu'āwiya: A New Breed of Hero' (p. 68).

The following chapters focus on contested digital interpretations of prominent figures of Sunni, Shīʿa and Sufi Islam. In analysing them, Bunt first provides a brief introduction to the individual and then proceeds to explore contemporary digital 'influence'. He places a great emphasis on shrines since they act 'as focal points for physical pilgrimage and wider online networks' (p. 153). Chapter 5 starts with the prominent figures of four Sunni primary schools of Islamic law/madhāhib (Ḥanafī p.78, Mālikī p. 80, Al-Shāfi'ī, and Ḥanbalī p. 81), and how their influences resonate online. Further he moves to the Islamic influences in cyberspace and existing alternative interpretations from Middle East (such as Al-Ghazālī, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb), Indian subcontinent (Shāh Walīullāh Dehlawī, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Abul A'lā al-Mawdūdī) and modern 'renewers' and 'reformers' (Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad 'Abduh, Rashīd Riḍā, Ḥassan al-Bannā', Sayyid Quṭb, al-Albānī). This chronological approach chosen by the author allows the reader to see 'a shift from the traditional and textual forms of influence and authority to a myriad of digital approaches' (p. 103). Also interesting was the parallel drawn between the fatwā section of the Al-Manār journal and contemporary online fatwā outlets and producers, which based on classical models of interpretation, but address contemporary topical issues (p. 97). On p. 83 it is written that 'in 1258, five years before Ibn Taymiyyah was born, the Mughals had occupied Baghdad', but the author confuses 'Mughals' with 'Mongols'. In 1258, Baghdad was taken by the army of the Mongol Khan Hulegu/Hulagu, while the Mughals were a Muslim

dynasty of Turko-Mongol origin that ruled much of northern India from the early 16th to mid-18th centuries.

Chapter 6 shows how diverse Shī'a concepts and beliefs are intertwined in various cyber-media, linking disparate nodes of religious and cultural understanding, supporting digitally connected Shī'a Muslims (p. 105). Bunt studies digital representation of Fāṭimah al-Zahrā' and 12 Ja'fari/Twelve Imams from Alī bin Abī Ṭālib till al-Mahdī. Recognizing the diversity within Shī'ism there are also sections on Zaydis and Ismā'īlīs, mainly the Dawoodi Bohras, Nizāri Ismā'īlīs, and Alavi Bohras. In the context of Shī'ism, pilgrimage is not solely associated with Mecca and has many other forms which are actively explored online (p. 118). Sites associated with 'Alī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn became significant pilgrimage focal points not only on reality but also online (p. 111). Chapter 7 explores more contemporary figures and Shī'a religious authority in digital space. Bunt divides them by the impact of these Ayatollahs within and outside of the immediate context of Iran. The first group included Ruhollah Khomeini, 'Alī Khamenei, Wahid Khorasani, Muhammad Taqī al-Modarresi, Lutfullah Saafi Golpaygani, Makarem Shirazi, Mohammad-Taqi Bahjat Foumani, and the second one - Isa Ahmed Qassim in Bahrain, Muḥammad Husayn Fadlallah in Lebanon, and Iraqi marāji' 'Alī Sistāni, Abu al-Qāsim al-Khoei, Basheer Hussain Najafi. In these chapters a minor point of criticism relates to the writing of the names of some prominent figures. On p. 120 instead of 'Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Jawād' is written 'Muḥammad ibn Abī al-Jawād'. As for the name of Khomeini author used the 'Khomeini' transliteration meanwhile most of sources usually use 'Khomeini' or 'Khumayni', and p. 130 may appear confusing for non-academic reader where author use both 'Khomeini' and 'Khomeini' within the same paragraph.

Chapter 8 starts with problems of labelling the term 'Sufism', which refers to many diverse understandings and approaches, and, in the book, it is applied to interpretations associated with selected esoteric interpretations of Islam (p. 143). Further Bunt moves to the digital manifestations of main Sufi figures from prominent Sufi orders such as Rābi'a al-Baṣrī, Manṣūr Al-Ḥallāj, Abū Ḥāmida al-Ghazālī, Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, Abu 'l-Najīb and Shihāb al-Dīn 'Umar Suhrawardī, Dātā Ganj Bakhsh, Khwājah Mu'tīn al-Dīn Chishtī, Muḥyī ad-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Muḥammad Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshband Bukhārī, and Sidī Aḥmad al-Tijāniyy. The online content about these figures demonstrates creative and sometimes innovative digital approaches to disseminating information about their lives, beliefs, and practices (p. 146). Chapter 9 examines the ways in which electronic-jihād/e-jihād has impacted online communities, focusing on key influencers and influencers specifically associated with militaristic interpretations of e-jihād (p. 173). After a brief chronological introduction to e-jihād, Bunt moves on to case studies of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, 'Islamic State'/ISIS (and also their activities in Khorasan and Central Africa), Al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Shabāb, and Boko Haram. He chose these organizations because of their developed, sustainable online influence, the integration of digital content into their strategic approaches to networking, information dissemination, logistics and funding, and even when the organizations were suppressed or defeated, their online content continued, and figures like Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki continue to have

an audience with the legacy of digital content, despite the efforts of content platforms and authorities to close them down (p. 191).

In chapter 10, the focus shifts to platforms and people who have gained credibility through their role as ‘influencers’, who deals mainly with online activities and statements, rather than previously discussed ‘influences’ whose interpretations were posted online by other people (p. 193). Bunt starts with an overview of Muslim women, female Qur’ān reciters, gender and influence in Muslim digital frameworks, and how women problems in Afghanistan, Egypt, Turkey led to the development of female-only platforms, where users can feel safer and not be exposed to the social pressures (p. 196). The internet opened opportunities for increased presentation also for LGBTQ+ people, who successfully used social media and other channels for networking purposes, strengthening identities, and developing activist agendas (p. 199). The chapter then moves on to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on structures and religious authority, discussion the digital influences of Muslims in Palestine and Gaza (a case of 2021 conflict that is now increasingly relevant again) and digital religion in Indonesia. Indonesia was chosen here as a case study for its relatively high levels of internet connectivity, and it is a prominent example of how digital Islamic influencers move through different levels of society, from formal top-down influence from religious organizations and authorities to less formal platforms presenting ideas about Islam and their interpretations in the Indonesian context (p. 210). In the end, Bunt discusses how memes, using Muslim and anti-Muslim sentiments, and elements from popular culture, anime, or comics, present complex ideas about religion and society (p. 194). In the last chapter, Bunt summarizes the book’s main findings.

The book studies how digital media have shaped the articulation of diverse religious influences across space and time (p. 223). Its strongest part is the variety of contexts studied, especially in relation to minorities. Bunt refers often to Sufi and especially Shī’a context and discourse, seeking to counter ‘Sunni-dominant’ themes that dominate many conversations about contemporary Islam, and which have relevance to the framing of Islam and Muslims in digital constructs (p. 21). Various little-studied Sufi orders and Shī’i Ismā’īli groups were covered and most of the ‘digitally active’ Muslim groups were highlighted, with the exception of Ahmadiyya. The author often reflects on the future of Digital Islamic studies, predicting that Cyber-Islamic Environments will transform and possibly mutate over the coming decades in unanticipated directions (p. 229), and maintaining that something what is speculative now, ‘a form of religious sci-fi’, may evolve rapidly in future (p. 226). It is difficult to disagree with this, given all the technological changes that are taking place, especially from the point of view of G. Bunt, who has been conducting research in the field of Islam, Muslims and the Internet since 1997.

Overall *‘Islamic Algorithms’* is a great contribution to the topic of Digital Religion. It provides up-to date information on various Cyber-Islamic Environments covering majority of Muslim groups. Notes and references to various interpretations can be used by scholars to explore in more detail various aspects of the Cyber-Islamic Environments, such as the media, the materiality of religion, collective and/or collected memories, etc. It will also be of interest

to the non-academic reader, especially in terms of ‘trending’ topics such as artificial intelligence, metaverse, memes, influencers.

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