

WHEN RITUAL BECOMES VIRTUAL: AN ANALYSIS OF THE RECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS DAILY PRACTICES IN TURKISH ISLAMIC WEBSITES

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Introduction

In the recent years, Internet hosts many virtual Islamic communities in different web sites. Even if the sites were designed as a communication platform for the Muslims that also provide educative information on the Islam religion, it was observed that the content has moved far beyond the proposed function. Aykanat (2006) points out to the wide use of Internet by the Islamic communities in Turkey by referring to a typical day of a young Muslim on the Internet: "I've read the verses and hadiths of Kouran that came to my e-mail box. I felt that it would be a good day. I've ordered a few things from the virtual market for ifthar, because I invited my friends from the yahogroups. Then I opened MSN messenger. I learned that my closest friend's father passed away. I immediately opened the prayer website that I was already subscribed and clicked for forwarding a hatim. I ordered flowers on the internet for my girlfriend Ayfle. I met her by an islamic website and I plan to marry her. I calculated the amount of zekath that I had to pay by the help of internet and I paid it on the net wit my credit card" (Aksiyon, 2003:51). These sites are transformed into virtual spaces where daily practices are shared on religious basis among the users through the Internet technology. In other words, by benefiting from web tools, various religious

experiences are reconstructed and offered on these sites. This paper investigates the reconstruction process of religious daily practices in Turkish Islamic websites by a qualitative analysis focusing on the design and content aspects of the sites involved.

Theoretical Background

As stated by Krueger, "since the early 1990s, religious movements appeared on the Internet and introduced new forms of communication in ritual and dogma" (2004: 183). Mostly based on web sites offering diverse services, www acts as a communication platform for different virtual religious communities. "Their Internet sites present different dogmatic, institutional, and other aspects of their religion; provide interactive communications and religious services; or simply sell religious items" (Krueger, 2004: 183).

Although a great orientation of the religious groups towards the Internet is frequently observed, there is a only a limited number of studies on these so-called virtual communities most of which are theoretical re_ections rather than empirical investigations. Mainly putting forth the argument that the gaining of ritual and dogmatic knowledge is losing its dependence on direct social interaction in a spatial community and increasingly relying on Internet-based discourse in religious newsgroups and other discussion forums, Krueger's empirical study can be considered as one of the first researches investigating the question of religion in the medium of the Internet. In this study, Krueger's theoretical approach and taxonomy of religious websites will be used as a guideline for the qualitative analysis of the Islamic websites involved.

In order to analyze the religious websites, it is necessary to define the main variables or dimension of the religions. "According to Charles Y. Glock, religion can be characterized by _ve essential dimensions: the belief dimension, the practice dimension (ritual and devotion), the experience dimension, the knowledge dimension, and the consequences dimension (Glock, 1962). Thus, at least the dimensions of belief, religious practice and knowledge depend on learning processes within a

social community; these can principally be observed as acts of communication" (Glock, 1962 in Krueger, 2004: 185).

Krueger seems to benefit from these dimensions in forming his taxonomy of religious websites. Defining the three textual dimensions of websites as their syntax, pragmatism and semantics, Krueger proposes four fundamental functions of religious websites on the dimension of pragmatism. "The first function is the presentation of religious institutions, groups, and doctrines (on respective home pages just as on newsletters). The second is interactive communication on religious themes (through chat rooms, guest books, FAQs, discussion forums and discussion lists). The third function is the offering of religious services (free or against payment), such as pastoral care, horoscope predictions, or the ordering of rituals online, while the last is simply commercial: the advertisement and sale of books, music compact discs, ritual items, etc. All these functions may appear on one website, but in most cases, there is one dominating aspect" (Krueger, 2004: 185).

Krueger examines some religious websites to illustrate these pragmatic dimensions. The web sites of the Christian churches take attention with their accent on institutional presentation. "The Vatican homepage resembles in its pragmatism and syntax an ordinary business or public facility homepage that presents the fundamental pillars of its institutional and doctrinal dimension, but without any possibility for its adherents to get in touch with the highest level of the church. In contrast to this, on a lower institutional scale of Christian church homepages, there is normally a total absence of religious doctrine and liturgical information, but a most detailed presentation of the local parish" (Krueger, 2004: 186).

Considering the function of offering religious services on religious sites, the web sites of institutional religions like Christianity, Islam and Judaism can be given as major examples. Christians have had access to the service of online pastoral counseling ever since Protestant and Catholic theologians started their Internet service on 27 September 1995.

Muslims in Germany also have the opportunity to receive advice and to clear their theological doubts by consulting a *hoja* (an Islamic theologian) (Krueger, 2004: 186). However, the Israeli website Virtual Jerusalem of the Jews, differ by the service they propose. This site provides the opportunity to send prayers via e-mail to Jerusalem which are printed and taken to the Wailing Wall in the center of the city, where the message is believed to be read by God. The site presents the possibility of the practice of a major religious routine by e-mail.

Less hierarchical religions tend to stress more on the ritual dimension of their religions. Zarahustran and Hindu religions' websites can be given as relevant examples (Krueger, 2004: 187). The web site of Zarahustra includes a Cyber-Temple link which offers a virtual pilgrimage to three kinds of "open air" holy temples of the Zoroastrians (Table 1). Though offering a virtual experience, users are gently asked to maintain a proper state of mind and body. In the Hindu religion, the fundamental ritual of everyday life and of the great feasts at home or in the temple is the *puja* (a sacrifice of flowers, incense or food to the deities). Saranam.com offers systematically sorted pujas in nearly 200 temples in most Indian states, pujas for popular deities (Table 2).

When we focus on the Islam religion on the Internet through the Islamic websites, we can state that a great orientation towards www was observed following the pressure over the Islamic communities after the September 11th attacks, (Bunt, 2003: 34 in Aykanat, 2006:51). By the year 2002, the number of Islamic websites increased 1000 %. This increase was mostly associated with the possibility of establishing global Islamic networks on the web sites (Noor, 2004: 78 in Aykanat, 2006: 52).

In Turkey, the Internet was evaluated as a space of freedom of expression for the Islamic communities who pointed out that they couldn't find the opportunity to express their social-political discourse and rituals on conventional media. The number of Turkish Islamic websites started to increase after the ultimatum of the Army on the 28th of February. Internet was named as a platform of freedom which



Table 1: Cyber-Temple of Zarahustra

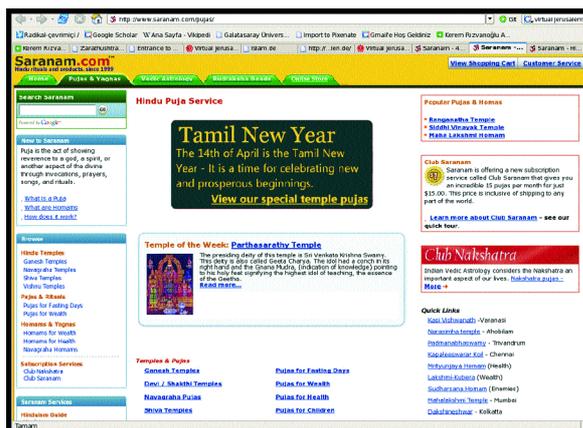


Table 2: www.saranam.com

can be used to provide a new way life: "We can do nothing by imprisoning ourselves in Anatolia. We, as Muslims, should do something in this period in which everything is turning out to be a medium. Will we use the current media and their language? Absolutely not... We are going to transform the current forms of the media through our norms and values. What needs to be done is to transform slowly in the short term and in the long term, we should innovate our own media and develop our own media language. We shouldn't consider Internet just as a platform for struggle against our opponents, we must also consider it as a medium in which we will share our life practices. Internet should become indispensable For the Muslims" (Kaplan, 2005:26 in Aykanat, 2006:53).

Though Internet has become such a popular media for Islamic communities, there is still a limited number of researches on Islamic websites in the literature of

social sciences. Recent researches mostly discuss the use of Internet as the emergence of a public sphere which focuses on the content of discussion forums and chats (Rinnawi, 2002). There are also other studies on the Islamic communities in the Diaspora in the context of multiculturalism (Brouwer, 2004). Considering the Turkish Islamic websites, there is just a recent study of Aykanat (2006) on Turkish Islamic websites which discuss the use and implications of the Internet, including its potential for collective action, social change and democratization.

Methodology

Being the first step of a user-centered larger research on Turkish Islamic communities online, this study is based on the qualitative analysis of the design and content aspects of the Turkish Islamic websites. The pragmatical taxonomy of Krueger was adopted as a guideline for the analysis. Though there were web sites like the site of the Department of the Religious Affairs which emphasized the presentational dimension with an institutional homepage, the "ritual services" and "interactive communication" functions were preferred to be the analysis axis as the study focused mainly on the reconstruction process of religious daily practices in Turkish Islamic websites,

The sample consisted of a total of 50 websites which are the most popular Turkish Islamic websites. Following a search in Google with the keyword of "Islamic websites" among Turkish web sites from Turkey, the top five "top lists" of Turkish Islamic websites in the SERP were accessed. These top lists are as follows:

- www.islamiveb.net,
- www.tehvidweb.com,
- www.islaminsesi.com,
- www.dinisyafalar.com
- www.islamilist.com.

10 top websites from each top list with hits ranging from 500 to 5000 were chosen as the sample of the study, resulting with a total 50 websites. Besides their popularity, the criteria for the preference of these sites were their varying contents which propose different ritual services and interactive communications tools.

Findings and Discussions

Considering the design aspects of the sites analyzed, an effort to stick to the fundamental web design standards and guidelines was observed in the layouts. Most of the layouts benefited from the standard templates and had the main navigation schemes with left-hand menus, a logo in upper left corner and a search box close to the navigation bar.

Deviating from the standard design issues, a significant use of splash screens was observed either in the form of a separate intro page or as a huge banner at the top of the homepage. This approach mostly included the use of the images of Islamic symbols. The designers insisted on combining Islamic art and digital art which resulted in kitsch solutions and a poor aesthetics (Table 3).

Whereas the design aspects of the sites reflected an ordinary and standard approach, a great variation was observed by the specific services at the content level. In order to discuss the issues incrementally, the findings about the content of the sites will be evaluated in three parts. The first part of the religious services served as informative sources on the Islam religion. Benefiting from the multimedia and www technologies, these links included the Kouran in Arabic and Turkish, hadiths, Islamic encyclopedias, e-books, history of Islam and the Prophets, religious songs, poems, religious days, religious stories, pieces and religious multimedia like films, fotos and audio. The second part included the interactive communication dimension as well. Services included standard popular web utilities like discussion forums, chat, guestbook, religious counseling, polls, e-card, e-groupes and even a popular feature from Web 2.0: Islamic Wiki. The content of these services consisted of Islamic issues at both the macro and micro level. The topics varied from global political issues in the Islamic world to the ones like family, marriage and women in Islam. In a way, it can be stated that these services seemed to satisfy the curiosity of the public about Islam. Sak (2003:49) agreed with this statement: "The virtual world has turned out to be digital madrasah (theological school attached to a mosque) where online calls are made and virtual ulama (Muslim theologians and scholars) gives

fetwa (religious opinion)". This analysis overlaps with Krueger's findings about the institutional religions' websites which offer online pastoral counseling service as a standard feature. But on the other hand, the third part of the services proposed by the Turkish Islamic websites moves beyond the expected.

At this point, the "Islamic Marriage" web site in the sample can be evaluated as a relevant case. In Islam, marriage is an important social issue which is defined detailly by religious rules and is established by a religious ceremony. This web site presents the opportunity of online chat between different profiles of Muslims for the goal of finding a match and getting married. These profiles are described as follows: Ladies with Hijab, religious gentlemen, ladies, gentleman, chat friend and other friendships. The mission and the vision of the web site are stated at the homepage by an introductory message on the opportunity of the marriage by chat: "Marriage is one of the most important curves in human life. There are lots of ways to take this path. The traditional methods longing for centuries and on the other hand the methods shaped due to the period which we are living through. In fact, all seems to be the same. All include the search of men and women for happiness. What we are trying to express here is not the superiority of a significant method, but rather that the Internet doesn't appear to be a different one. God shall lead our promising efforts to promising results as soon as possible. Marriage by chat will protect you from 'adultery by eye'. Amen" (<http://www.islamievlilik.com>). Another link includes a "table of comparison" which lists the advantages of Islamic marriage online in comparison with other conventional methods (Table 4). Besides the chat, complementary services for couples like "digital poem production tool", "evaluation of the relation by a survey" and "e-card" are presented in the site. Being a distinctive religious service link in the site and supporting our hypothesis, "chain of prayers" provides a new possibility for the performance of a religious practice (Table 5). By posting a prayer with an expiration date in the forum, this service enables you to share your prayers with the other Muslims. This service overlaps with the similar services found in the other sites like "send a prayer", "prayer groups" and etc. Though, further

research is needed, such a content can be evaluated a change in the social structure of the religion which is normally based on the collective performance of the rituals. Detaching from the original social bonds and orienting towards the virtual space, Internet provides the individual with a private acquisition of religious practice online which subsequently leads to the individual acquisition of the ritual competence. The findings about the Islamic software presented in the websites also support this claim.

Benefiting from the last improvements in the Internet technologies, diverse Islamic software is provided in these web sites. Besides educative software, screensavers and games on Islam, there is also several software -named also as prayware- which is designed to lead the daily practice at the Islamic basis. Some examples are as follows: "Sevap (Good deed)" calculation software, "inheritance" calculation software and even "married woman/widow" software which leads a married woman or a widow to live in harmony with the Islamic way of life.

Conclusion

The findings support the notion that Islamic websites should also be considered as cultural artifacts which provide valuable ethnographic information for the researchers working on cross-cultural issues in the area of human-computer interaction.

Sociological studies concerning "religion" define ritual competence as the result of a learning process within a social community that requires regular participation. This statement overlaps with Habermas's analysis: "The acquisition of ritual competence implies the adoption of a collective system of values and beliefs" (Habermas, 1981: 182-228 in Krueger, 2004:190). However, Krueger states that by bringing a disengagement from the spatial conditions and the original social bonds, Internet provides the individual with a private acquisition of ritual knowledge. Giving examples mainly from the Diaspora religions like Santeria and Wicca, Krueger (2004: 188) associates his statement with Luckmann's concept of "individual/invisible" religions which sustain their existence once by books and nowadays on the web.

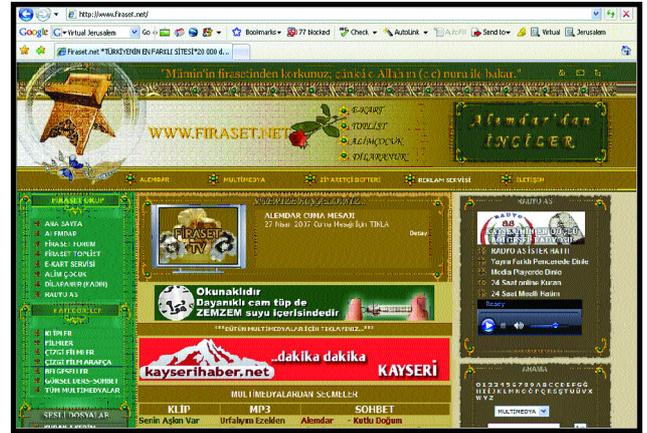


Table 3: www.firaset.net

Mukayese Faktörleri	İnternet Kullanımı	Etnik Uygunluk	İncelme	Diğer Faktörler
Görüşme sıklığı	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Nikâhın dinî gereklilikleri	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Kızlar terzide karar verme kabiliyeti	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Sonuçlanmasın halinde vaka edilebilirliği	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Tarzınan netleşen detaylı konuşmaya istekliliği	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Sabırlı olmaları detaylı konuşmaya istekli olması	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Suçluğünden aldatılması riski	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Çocukları kullanmasın olmasını	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Kültürel, sosyal, fiziksel, manevi tercihleri göre aday seçimi	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Yüksek tempolu süreçler için zaman ayırabilmesi kolaylığı	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Ade ve çevresinde etkileşimdeki kalite ve tutarlılığı	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Table 4: Table of Comparison, www.islamievlilik.com/tablo.html



Table 5: Chain of Prayers, duazinciri.islamievlilik.com

However, the aspects of the sites that are involved in the study carry this proposition a step forward. The findings show that Internet provides the individual with the private acquisition of religious practice online as well. Routine religious practices involving both individualistic and social aspects are reconstructed through religious services and interactive

communication utilities proposed in Turkish Islamic websites. As a conclusion, the so-called virtual communities are not constituted by the collective performance of rituals but rather by the individualistic performances of rituals online. Referring to Luckmann and Krueger, this conclusion may indicate to the question of the emergence of an "individual/invisible" version of Islam; "Islam online", constituted by users with virtual identities which perform most of their religious practices online.

Being the first step of a larger research, the findings of this study on the Turkish Islamic web sites present the presumption of a change in the social structure of the Islam religion which seems to be re-established on the www. Including user-centered empirical studies with the online Turkish Islamic community, new phases of the further research are expected to provide complementary findings for investigating this social phenomenon.

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