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Comment on Possamai, Turner, Roose, Dag-istanli and Voyce/4. About Authority, (De-)territorialisation and Their Intersections

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Comment on Possamai, Turner, Roose, Dagistanli and Voyce/4.

About Authority, (De-)territorialisation and Their Intersections.

by Anna Neumaier

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As media rapidly change our everyday world, our habits and possibilities of acquiring knowledge or discussing convictions, they do the same to religion and belief. In the light of new opportunities of interactive, translocal and at least in part anonymous digital media, it can be assumed that contemporary religiosity as well as religious hierarchies and authorities, practice and dogmas change.

However, the direction of these media-related transformations is everything else than settled. Reasons for this do not only lie in the newness of the object of research as such, but also in its rapid internal changes.¹ Internet platforms and their media characteristics shift constantly, and so do our habits of use as well as the consequences for related offline areas, among them traditional religious institutions or authorities. Within the last years, some studies have diagnosed the demise of traditional religious authorities as they lose control over religious sources and have to face misinformation and de-regulations within modern information technology; others have underlined the emergence of a new diversity of voices in religious discourse which challenges former institutionalized authorities (see e.g. Dawson [2000], Turner [2007], Horsfield [2012]). Other approaches in contrast point to clergy using the Internet in order to disseminate traditional views and re-establish their authority [Cheong

¹ See e.g. Chris Helland's revision of his well-known categorisation of "religion online" and "online religion" which he stated was necessary also due to alterations of the Internet and the adaption of official religious organisations within a few years [Helland 2005].

2014]. Still other studies with a focus on Islam online do not so much argue in favor of the Internet as a *sui generis* medium of questioning religious authority, but point to processes of proliferation already set in motion before the rise of the Internet [Anderson 2005].

“*Shari‘a* in Cyberspace. A Case Study from Australia” [Possamai *et al.* 2016] addresses these questions of religious authority within the Internet with regard to Australian online *fatwa* sites. The focus on the *Shari‘a* is of great value in this regard as especially Islam within the Internet needs some more research (notwithstanding e.g. Bunt’s [2003] and Anderson’s [2005] important work) and may serve as a prime example for current and pressing questions of religious authority in times of digital media. In line with several scholars, the authors point out that the Internet has eroded any scholarly monopoly of *ijtihad* and allows to bring up alternative or deviant religious worldviews and exegesis. Additionally, the authors argue that Muslim worlds may have been “deterritorialised” in the Deleuzian/Guattarian sense, also referring to Olivier Roy, who links “the process of de-territorialisation with that of de-traditionalisation” [Possamai *et al.* 2016, 1-2]. Assuming that the Internet enhances the decrease of borders, the authors intend to “study how authority, and activity, on the internet can impact on the de-territorialisation process of Islam” [*Ibidem*, 2]. In the following, I will add some remarks on this elaboration, mainly addressing the concepts of authority, (de-/re-)territorialisation and, in particular, their intersection. Thereby, I hope to introduce some further perspectives and theoretical foundations for this promising field of research.

Regarding authority, one important point is mentioned by the authors right at the beginning and in line with the multifaceted field of research up to now: claiming the overall demise of authority may be overhasty. While online interactivity facilitates some additional freedom in uttering different opinions, Possamai *et al.* here point to alternative authorities online, specifically moderators who observe and monitor the online debate. This is consistent with other research claiming moderators or webmasters rising as new authorities online [Cheong and Ess 2012],² but brings me to a first and very general remark: research on religion and the Internet, or religion and digital media, is always a part of research on contemporary religion. As mentioned in the beginning, religious structures, practices and the like are in no way independent of recent media development, and, vice versa, what is happening online in terms of religion may be understood as part of a religious field in general. Therefore, I would argue that it is not only possible, but also fruitful to draw on general

² However, others did not find the moderators to be specific religious authorities (see Kołodziejska and Arat [forth.]).

theoretical approaches as concepts with which we research religion within media.³ This applies also to the concept of authority. In this regard, other approaches have discussed a broader field: for instance, Heidi Campbell has outlined and differentiated the concept of religious authorities, pointing to quite diverse forms of religious authority, namely hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text [Campbell 2007; 2010]. Thereby, she refers to traditional religious leaders, but also to established systems like community structures, shared beliefs, as well as texts and other religious sources. While her elaboration surely must be critically discussed with regard to varying empirical manifestations of religious authority and their transformation in digital media, particularly considering different religious traditions, its broader understanding of religious authority might serve as an applicable starting point for also integrating other than only “personal forms” of religious authority. Especially in research that focuses on media which are characterized less by corporal and more by textual or visual exchange, this may expand the awareness to other, maybe more subtle processes of shifting authorities, e.g. the loss of embodied authority while simultaneously texts gain increasing importance. In the case of this study, it could therefore lead to not only focusing on the respective sheiks as authorities of the websites, but putting them into a relation with the referred Qur’an passages, the provided *fatwas* et cetera: How far do those entities reinforce or interfere with each other? Do other users in comment sections or “Ask the member” sections rely on scriptural sources as well? Or do even other authoritarian references appear, e.g. quoted advice from non-religious authorities or everyday experience, be it in contributions from other users or the sheiks themselves? Working with such a concept of religious authority in general – and of course others would be applicable as well, depending on the overall approach – thus allows to take diverse forms of authority into account, thereby approaching a more complete picture of shifts of authorities within the field of religion in the Internet. Additionally, referring to general theories of (religious) authority, and also including those which are not specifically related to media, involves another advantage: we avoid the risk of automatically relating findings to the specific medium alone, but develop also indications which may in reverse be also fruitful to discuss with regard to broader processes within the field of contemporary religion.

However, the commented article does not only focus on religious authority, but primarily asks for the consequences with regard to processes of de-territorialisation of Islam on Australian online *fatwa* sites. As those online *fatwa* sites provide a global connection and thereby globalize Muslim identities, the authors introduce approach-

³ See for an elaboration Neumaier [2015].

es which argue in favour of a reinforcement of the notion of de-territorialisation. At the same time studies hint at processes of re-territorialisation, as those sites are de facto sometimes linked to local religious communities (the authors refer to Sisler [2011]). These two possible developments in the relation of global(izing) media and the importance of local references make the research focus for Possamai *et al.*'s paper. Asking for target and actual user groups of the three investigated websites, the authors identify different approaches to de-territorialisation, as the pages and the given interpretation of the *Shari'a* focus on different levels, either Australian or international. Especially the first distinction is essential and could be emphasized even more, as it makes quite a difference whether the respective *sheikh* understands himself as aiming at either a specific local or national or international context, whether the given *interpretation* refers to local customs or understands the rules of the *Shari'a* as not adaptable, and whether the *users* long for more general or more specific feedback on their requests. Again, also the underlying concept of de- and re-territorialisation is crucial for the adaptability of empirical findings, for questions of territorialisation are an important and promising topic with regard to research on religion and the Internet and can be linked to quite diverse aspects, from the role of spatial qualities in online and offline religious surroundings up to the significance of digital media in processes of migration, connecting religious diasporas or other minorities. In the paper, conceptual questions are of secondary interest, but de-territorialisation is understood as "dislocation between a system of values, beliefs and practices, and the social community that produced it" [Possamai et al. 2016, 1], as the authors derive it from Deleuze and Guattari [1972]. From an external perspective, this does not necessarily seem related to the spatial entities which are debated in the paper with reference to Australia or even Sydney, but rather points to collectives, communities or other social arrangements. Although both may overlap, this does not necessarily have to be the case. Especially with regard to diaspora communities, or in the given case of Muslims in non-Muslim countries, it seems rather fruitful to distinguish between a social community and a local or national territory, as they may differ to a great extent (for instance if Muslim migrants regard family and acquaintances in their country of origin as their primary social community and/or reference in terms of a religious conduct of life). To grasp this, a suitable approach might be Andreas Hepp [2008] conceptualisation of territorialised and de-territorialised communities, the latter actually not having any territorial point of reference anymore.

Besides, a further aspect arises with regard to the territorial references of religion in particular: having postulated global communities, universal dogmas and ulterior truth, religion of all things might be most used to crossing, neglecting or even eliding borders in its sphere of influence. Therefore, one could argue, a de-territori-

alisation in terms of spatiality might be fundamental for religion in terms of territory. If this corresponds also to the notion of the users or hosts of the respective Muslim websites, the concept of spatial territory could lose its significance to a large degree, and the question for social groups of reference would gain importance. Consequently, findings which point to a strengthening of spatial references, as presented in the paper, would be even more remarkable, but would also call for a consideration of exactly this tense constellation.

However, it seems just as conceivable that despite religions having often claimed to be of global reach, their everyday exegesis of sources and application of norms may in fact differ from village to village or religious scholar to scholar. This leads over to my last remark on possible intersections of authority and de-/re-territorialisation. Researchers who work on religion, authority, territory and the Internet have to deal with several unknowns, which results in a quite complex set-up for research. As mentioned, ideally a broad range of forms of religious authorities would as well be taken into account as a detailed understanding of territorialisation. Based on this, a subsequent closer look at the intersections of processes of demise or continuity of traditional authorities and de- or re-territorialisation of religion on the Internet becomes possible. Systematically, different combinations seem possible: if, for instance, Internet users increasingly debate about the righteous lifestyle without relying on local religious authorities, we may diagnose a decline of traditional authorities and a simultaneous de-territorialisation – as long as these users do not instead draw on religious sources like scriptures, which may just signify a shift in the selection of traditional authority (if at all). On the other hand, a stabilisation of traditional authority and re-territorialisation is possible online just as well, as the authors indicate with their case study. But such a perspective on the intersections is not limited to religion within digital media. If the Pope for instance loses his importance for individual believers in favor of local Catholic grassroots organisations, we might diagnose a spatial and maybe social re-territorialisation of Catholicism while at the same time traditional authorities decline. If, in contrast, the Pope increasingly determines and coins global Catholicism down to the smallest details, we might diagnose a de-territorialisation and simultaneous stabilisation of traditional religious authorities. Indeed especially global religious institutions like the Catholic Church show that de-territorialisation does not necessarily have to go along with de-hierarchisation of religion—which is a promising start for research on and in the Internet, a field which challenges notions of territory as much as religion does.

To understand contemporary religion, it is absolutely necessary to include online platforms and infrastructures into research, while trying to keep pace with their latest developments. By connecting studies on authority with those on (de-/re-)ter-

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ritorialisation, the article opens up important question on the transformation of contemporary Islam. More studies in this field, in particular those developing theoretical concepts based on substantial empirical work, would be desirable. In an ideal case, this would not only serve to understanding religion online better, but also contemporary religion in general, and not least improve our conceptual tools for doing so.

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About Authority, (De-)territorialisation and Their Intersections.

Abstract: This essay comments on Possamai *et al.*'s paper on *Shari'a* in Cyberspace [2016], relating their insights to selected theoretical approaches which propose further systematizations of the key concepts, i.e. (religious) authority and (de-)territorialised community. Following from this, it argues for a close connection of case studies on digital religion and authority to broader theories on trends in the field of contemporary religion in order to not only gain further insight into the field of digital Islam but also develop diagnoses which are not limited to religion within digital media. Since digital media is a crucial part of contemporary religion, such a liaison would improve both our understanding of recent transformations in the field of religion in general and our conceptual tools for further research.

Keywords: Religion; Authority; Digital Religion; Islam; Territorialisation.

Anna Neumaier obtained her PhD at the Center for Religious Studies (CERES), University of Bochum, with a study on the motives, modes, and consequences of religious online use. Currently she works as post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Religious Studies, University of Bremen, on a project on religious identity in times of religious pluralisation. Her research interests include contemporary religiosity, digital religion, and qualitative methods.