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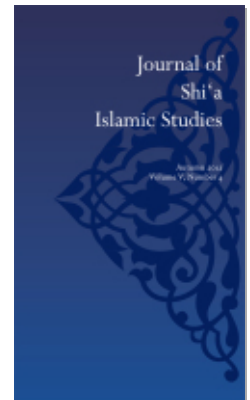
*Muslims and the New Media: Historical and Contemporary
Debates* (review)

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Muslims and the New Media: Historical and Contemporary Debates by Göran Larsson, 2011. Farnham, UK and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, x + 223 pp., £45.00 (hbk). ISBN: 978-1-4094-2750-6.

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Larsson's work on *Muslims and the New Media* is a much welcomed and needed piece of research on religious approaches and perspectives on media usage. As the title indicates, he focuses on Islam and Muslim societies; and he addresses how, through their fatwas, the ulema reflect on and confront innovation in both information and communication technologies. The research – luckily – approaches the concept of 'new media' in a diachronic manner by historically contextualising how various forms of media have entered the Islamic *ummah*; in this way, the author invites us to repeatedly challenge and re-profile the same idea, including the attention that 'new media' has been enjoying following the so-called 2009 Twitter Revolution and the 2011 Arab Spring.

In each chapter, Larsson consistently explores how the ulema have reacted to innovations in media. He discusses the printing press (Chapter 1), photography (Chapter 2), cinema (Chapter 3), the radio and the television (Chapter 4), the telephone (Chapter 5) and, finally, the Internet (Chapter 6). The remaining seventh and last chapter is about media and the Qur'an. Although this latter chapter provides for a clearly arranged space to sum up how the researched media challenged appreciation and understanding of the Holy Book, it nevertheless could have equally been used to introduce his research as a whole: in fact, it would have been possible for the author to use the Qur'an as an entry case study because he centres his study of the relation between media and Muslims on the way the ulema made sense of their theological sources. The introduction succeeds at framing the references, while the conclusion succinctly wraps up the previously debated questions; in the same way, the final chart points out the problems and the possibilities that have been articulated throughout the chapters. Finally, the references and the index are consistently arranged and precise.

Larsson's choice to very carefully define his space of analysis is effective in providing readers with a clearly defined work of research. Chapters 1 to 5 are historically and theologically well set, and his analysis through juxtaposition of the answers of the reformist and traditionalist sides is clear. His chosen historical approach is well-framed and particularly functional in understanding how, regardless of the specificities of time and space, innovation has confronted the establishment. The author defines the terms for a very clearly arranged analysis that represents a valid introduction to media theory for scholars of Islamic studies; in addition, he offers a sound introduction to Islamic issues for researchers in media studies. In his 'Conclusions', Larsson finally suggests that this debate is not uniquely Islamic, as it would be erroneous to 'draw the impression that Muslims are different and that their reactions are distinct from those of other religious groups'; in fact, 'the debates that occur among the *'ulama'* can easily be found among non-Muslim religious leaders too' (199).

The author rightly points out how the same dynamics of progressive and very conscious and negotiated acceptance of information and communication technologies has been a social constant throughout history, and how the same process would be true for any other religious group. It eventually appears that the perceived feeling of being under attack by new forms of information and communication technologies is largely shared amongst religious communities because of the unsettling and challenging dynamics technologies bring into established power structures, and their legal and normative codes of behaviour. This is why I agree with the author in his invitation to develop and refine the study of religion, media and cultures, particularly with reference to how religious communities make sense of new IT tools in their daily lives, and how these new ways of life empower them as well as renovate their understanding of religious texts.

The latter issue appears to be a rather relevant one as in fact 'new' new media – and by that I here refer to online media – actually brings up the same idea of community, an issue that has been already very effectively addressed by Olivier Roy through his idea of the deterritorialisation of Islam.¹ Within such a framework, the extremely fast development of contemporary media as considered in conjunction with the very high rates of pervasiveness within contemporary cultures and social settings makes any study of Internet-based cultures always and unquestionably old. Issues of qualitative analysis (the kind of conclusions and suggestions that is possible to draw from any specific

set of data) could be compared to similar case studies, but I wonder how such a research framework might consistently reflect very debatable segments of audience and their daily lives, an issue that researchers on the anthropology of media have been confronting for some time. It might be suggested that the volatility of any research focusing on the Internet as a social space and a social container is doomed to appear dramatically dated already by the time it gets published: this clearly represents a serious challenge for any sociological or anthropological research. This is the reason why researching the Internet beyond any very narrowly shaped subject might be referred to as the most challenging issue for researchers on media. Possibly, the only way to overcome such limitation might rely on the researcher's usage of new media formats and platforms, or at least on formats and platforms capable of integrating and harmonising offline and online research. The reason behind this requirement should be that of providing easy access to integration and updates of – by the time of their publication – dated data, while offering participants social spaces for integrative views: in other words, by applying the terms of a 2.0 Digital Research, and thus consistently reflecting a new field of research through a new way of researching. Of course, this remains a rather difficult task to pursue within established current research attitudes, but it very well reflects all issues underlined in Larsson's sixth chapter, with particular reference to elements of social recognition, power acceptance and, eventually, the politics of social representation.

The author's main thesis on the neutrality of the medium is particularly relevant in shaping a very well arranged piece of analysis capable of presenting both the possibilities and the problems inherent to the introduction of each new technology. His approach of relying on how the ulema of different schools have come to terms with the 'new' media is properly chosen, and the debate between the traditional and the reformist side is framed clearly both for those who are merely curious about Islamic studies and the shariah expert.

On the whole, the study is very successful in contextualising and situating the terms of Islamic *fiqh* and information/communication technologies, as well as their interactions, thus successfully overcoming the challenges of dealing with a subject spanning two rather different fields of research such as media studies and Islamic studies.

Larsson is very attentive in researching whether media developments introduced social changes, promoted them, or were eventually initiated by them. By referring to the way Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad

‘Abduh and Rashid Rida managed to accept the neutrality of the medium, the author very convincingly explains the terms of the so-called modernist/reformist Islam, which would later be taken on by scholars such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Tariq Ramadan. In the same way, the juxtaposition between the *al-ra’i* and the *al-hadith* perspectives clarifies debates over *niyyah* as a key to deal with the possible harm new technologies could carry.

I particularly enjoyed the quotation at the opening of Chapter 5 because it illustrates how a creative use of the holy revelation allowed the Saudi Arabian king ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa’ud to theologically justify the telephone. The chapter then offers a perfect example of how *qiyas* might be used to support innovation rather than traditional perspectives. Eventually, *qiyas*, *ra’i*, and *niyyah* appear to be the tools which allowed the reformist/modernist side to take advantage of the Internet to perform *da‘wah*. A quotation by Yusuf Islam, or the artist formerly known as Cat Stevens, does not take away from the very well theologically researched and scholarly addressed analysis, but rather offers a final insight on the medium of music.

Notes

¹ See Oliver Roy, *Globalized Islam. The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).