iMuslims: Rewiring the
House of Islam

Gary R. Bunt
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 358 pages.

In his new book *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*, Gary Bunt builds
upon the research represented in his two previous books: *Virtually Islamic*
(Oxford University Press: 2000) and *Islam in the Digital Age* (Pluto Press:
2003). Bunt's latest book, however, provides a more comprehensive, elabo-

rate, and up-to-date analysis of the nature and various approaches of the diverse Muslim voices that are projected online and included in what he described in previous work as a "cyber-Islamic environment."

In this six-chapter book, Bunt succinctly explains the consequences of the interaction between what he characterizes as two of the most powerful and widely dominant forces in the twenty-first century: Islam and the Internet. He argues – and correctly so – that there are many "Net-literate generations" of Muslims who are highly connected to and engaged with the Internet. This engagement takes different forms, such as participating in chat rooms, blogging, receiving religious edicts (fatwas) online, and downloading religious sermons and lectures through various Islamic websites. A Muslim who is involved in some or all of these online activities is, in his words, an *iMuslim*. This term, however, should have been defined in the introduction, especially since it is part of the book's title, instead of in the conclusion.

Bunt's book takes the reader on a gradual, sequential, and smooth ride of the complicated world of online Islam with all of its nuances and intricacies. In chapter 1, he sheds some light on the Internet's transformative impact on Muslims; provides examples of how the Web has changed, or at least affected, their lives, such as making available a platform where they can convene and share their agonies during times of crises; presents Islamic information and knowledge beyond what they receive at their mosques; and exposes them to translations and interpretations of the Qur'an. All of these services are part of what the author refers to as "Web 2.0," a term that reflects the Internet's role in providing "user-generated content, and enhanced and evolved information-retrieval systems" (p. 41).

These services provided by the Internet, however, do not come without some difficulties and challenges. In chapter 2, Bunt discusses one such challenge: Internet access (or lack thereof) by the average Muslim. He refers to the "digital divide" seen in the Muslim world today between the technology haves and have-nots. This chapter includes some significant and telling statistics related to this divide. According to Bunt, no Muslim-majority country seems to be pioneering in Internet access or penetration in today's world. The chapter also includes a very interesting table compiled by Bunt showing the Muslim-majority countries' ranking with regard to the Digital Opportunity Index (DOI) and provides some suggestions on how to reduce the digital divide, such as selling computer hardware and software at cheaper prices and Arabizing the software to make it more user-friendly in Arab countries.

Unlike Bunt's two other books, which noticeably focused on extremist and jihadi or militaristic Islamic sites at the expense of mainstream or moderate sites, this book provides a more balanced perspective by shedding light on both mainstream and jihadi sites. In fact, the whole of chapter 3 deals with how mainstream Islamic sites serve as extensions of "real-world" Islam by providing basic information (e.g., prayer direction and times) or more complex services (e.g., online zakat payments). In this chapter, Bunt poses an interesting and essential question: Can humanity's relationship with God take on a digital interface? He does not try to impose his answer, but leaves it to the reader to decide after discussing the various services available through mainstream Islamic websites.

The chapter also includes examples of particularly prominent Islamic sites, such as IslamiCity.com, Islamonline.net, and Al-Islam.com, along with visuals showing their homepages, which makes the readers live the experience of actually visiting these sites. Despite his lively and well-picked examples, however, Bunt does not offer any in-depth description of one or more of these sites through a scientific content or textual analysis – something that could have provided the reader with a better idea of what these sites have to offer.

One element that was missing in Bunt's two previous books, but is addressed in this one, is the impact of such social-networking sites as MySpace and Facebook on the younger generations of Muslims. To add a lively aspect to his discussion of these sites, the author provided examples of several MySpace pages belonging to young Muslim men and women. One main form of social networking is blogging, which is dwelt upon at length in the fourth chapter. This chapter starts off with a general definition of what blogging is and how it developed, and then moves on to dealing with it in an Islamic context by means of examples of bloggers from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran, Egypt, and other Islamic countries.

Chapters 5 and 6 shed light on the militaristic or jihadi Islamic sites. As the term *jihad* is often simplified by many western media outlets, Bunt uses chapter 5 to explain its Islamic context: the "spiritual striving to attain goals, focused on the paradigm of the Prophet Muhammad, which draws on the divine source of the Qur'an" (p. 183). Terms coined by Bunt, such as *e-jihad*, *multi-media jihad*, and *digital jihad* are discussed at length in the last two chapters, with several examples taken particularly from Iraq and Palestine.

Overall, *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* is an interesting, easy-to-digest book that is a must-read for basic and advanced courses in religious

studies, digital media, and international communication. It can also be a useful guide for those interested in learning more about the fascinating world of online Islam.

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