Bunt, Gary: *iMuslims. Rewiring the House of Islam*. London: Hurst & Co. 2009. ISBN: 978-1-85065-950-1; 358 p.

Rezensiert von: Jens Kutscher, Erlangen Centre for Islam and Law in Europe, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg

As can be seen in many situations below, so-called cyber-Islamic environments (CIEs) shape Islam in the twenty-first century. But which elements of Muslim societies have been altered through online activities? How do iMuslims make use of the CIEs? Who are these iMuslims anyway? It is this set of questions that Gary Bunt attempts to answer in his book *iMuslims* from the perspective of a scholar of Islamic Studies who has done extensive research on Islam, Muslims, and the Internet. Gary Bunt's contribution to the field[1] is beyond doubt seminal. It forms part of the larger spectrum in Islamic Studies that focuses on Islam online.[2]

In order to answer the introductory questions Bunt identifies two main themes. The first is about negotiating identity. The second is about waging jihad. In both areas of concern iMuslims – that is, people who consider themselves as being Muslims using the Internet and related information technology – create and maintain websites to spread their ideas and opinions and any material deemed interesting for proliferation. For instance, MuslimSpace.com operates as an imitation of MySpace.com with a Muslim focus. The renowned preacher Amr Khaled has his own profile on MuslimSpace.com. Similarly, Muxlim.com offers a broad range of Web 2.0 activities including social networking, blogging, audio and video sharing, etc. Like Amazon.com these websites work with links that enable the user to dig ever deeper and search the web content for further ideas: „Muslims who liked this item also liked…" A case in point is also the Islamic video platform NaqaTube.com, which was set up after the publication of *iMuslims*, yet still serves to underline Bunt's argument. The search for identity is one of the central motivations for CIEs. They form part of an Islamic particularism online where the identification of a Muslim with a website may be greater than with his or her local (offline) mosque. Or else, being online on the path of God is a sort of jihad.

However, jihad – or rather e-jihad – can be a much narrower term as used by Bunt. Although he acknowledges the wide meaning of the term, he devotes two chapters to jihad as a militaristic endeavor in the name of Islam. For obvious reasons the evidence of influence of jihadi online content cannot be ascertained. What little is known has aptly been compiled by Bunt. To mention but two examples the author refers to the jihadi ideologist Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (whose influence on surfing terrorists has elsewhere been noted in a German court[3]) and to the significance of the Internet for al-Qaeda activities with their decentralized and anonymous natures. He concludes that „[i]t is necessary to distinguish between the application of the Net as a propagation and recruitment tool and its utilization as a logistical device" (p. 240). In either case, using the Internet is an additional asset to offline jihad.

When discussing blogs Bunt observes that „[j]ust as the 1991 Gulf War coincided with the expansion of the significance of satellite television, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent conflicts coincided with growing global awareness of the potential of blogs" (p. 147). Throughout the discussion he sticks to national boundaries and enumerates blogs from different countries one by one. It might be a bit surprising to contrast this categorization with the general alleged deterritorialization of the Internet. Then again it makes sense because top level domains are frequently associated with country names (for instance, .eg for Egypt or .ir for Iran). Moreover, the blogs chosen for review by Bunt do not always have an Islamic background even though originating

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[1] Gary R. Bunt, Virtually Islamic. Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments, Cardiff 2000; Gary R. Bunt, Islam in the Digital Age. E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments, London 2003, et al.

[2] Cf. e.g. Bettina Gräf / Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen (eds.), The Global Mufti. The Phenomenon of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, London 2008.

[3] Annette Ramelsberger, Der brave Bombenleger. Er wollte die Ungläubigen bestrafen und einen mörderischen Plan umsetzen – im Prozess präsentiert sich der junge Islamist nun schrecklich harmlos, in: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 19.12.2007, p. 3.

from a predominantly Muslim country, which shows once more the diversity, and perhaps contradictions, of the Internet that Bunt had to tackle.

However, there is an overarching theme of identity and religiosity especially for his presentation of Iranian and Egyptian blogs. „This confrontation of media stereotypes via blogs, and the critical reflection of Arab and Muslim identities, distinguishes such blogs from other more mundane and everyday sections of the blogosphere" (p. 161) – or rather „blogospheres" (p. 175). Bunt's approach is a bit incoherent when he generally dismisses a blog count and other figures regarding the Internet as problematic, but states, for example, that there were some 700,000 blogs in Iran in 2006.

One of the most convincing parts of *iMuslims* is the chapter on religious authority. From the outset Bunt distinguishes between religion online and online religion. Their relationship is characterized by a „digitization of many long-standing essential concepts and practices" (p. 77). For instance, the Islamic declaration of belief (shahada) can easily be professed online through a webcam, a microphone, and a video conference with the required number of witnesses. Likewise, the visit of a mosque in the virtual world of Second Life could be regarded as some sort of online religion. By contrast, those services providing the prayer times and the direction of prayer (qibla) at any place on Earth could be considered a reference to religion online. „Clearly there is the potential for it to impact on real-world understandings, one that has increasingly been recognized by Islamic authorities." (p. 114) Consequently, iScholars at al-Azhar and in Qom catch up online.

Altogether, Gary Bunt presents a phenomenology of Islam on the Internet or what he calls the „source code" (p. 77ff.) of Islam. His book is up-to-date and gives due consideration to different kinds of new media technologies and content with a special outlook on integrated media as in the case of Islam-Online. Bunt's survey is rich with anecdotes, examples, and illustrative quotes by iMuslims, all of which displays the great diversity of CIEs. Unfortunately, it appears that this sequence of blips and bits of information is rather descriptive most of the time and lacks a coherent analysis. The lack of a separate bibliography must be noted as well. Navigating the endnotes is somewhat impractical and not very reader-friendly. Still, the book can be recommended for the general public because it explains Islamic terms from the outset without requiring prior knowledge, for security authorities interested in the development and range of e-jihad, and for scholars who need a reliable survey of and information on the broad spectrum of CIEs in the early twenty-first century.

HistLit 2010-4-078 / Jens Kutscher über Bunt, Gary: *iMuslims. Rewiring the House of Islam*. London 2009, in: H-Soz-Kult 01.11.2010.