

# **Alt-Muslim: Digital Islam as a Third Space**

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## **Abstract**

Through a textual analysis of the website Alt-Muslim and semi-structured interviews with the site's founder and editors, this paper explores the ways in which new Muslim subjectivities are envisioned and arguably enabled in what I call the 'third spaces of digital Islam'. Specifically, I ask how the site imagines a new face of public Islam that appropriates slick media and design aesthetics (more visual and non-linear) and communication modes (more interactive) to draw inspiration and nurture a different and presumably authentic religious experience. I also look at how the site produces new religious practices and generates new templates and narratives of social action for its users while policing at the same time the terms and boundaries of what it calls modern Islam.

## **Keywords**

Resistance; Alt-Muslim; Third Spaces; Identity; Digital Islam

Both popular and scholarly debates on Islam have been largely captive of a narrative of security and/or integration of Muslims in Western societies, or the compatibility of their faith with modernity. The actions of Muslims have often been inscribed in a cultural and political discourse that casts them in subordinate terms as traditional, introverted and fatalist. Re-instituting faith in a culture that sees itself mostly at the receiving end of a powerful imported secular culture, no matter how liberating it might be, is unequivocally considered regressive and anti-modern by those who see no emancipation in the dogmas of the religious. But a number of Muslims have turned to modern media technologies like the Internet, not necessarily to re-invent religious tradition and stir up pious passions but to seek original ways to render religious discourse more deliberative and create spaces of meaningful religious experiences beyond scripturalist forms of Islam and bounded religious practices.

Islamic media are a far cry from the staid sheikh delivering his sermon on a state-owned television channel. Men and women host talk shows, reality programs, and music variety shows on television and on YouTube where formerly taboo issues like politics, sexuality, relationships, and women's rights are openly debated. A growing number of tele and web-Islamists effectively weave Qur'anic narratives into elaborate programs of social change and civic engagement. And traditional institutions of religious authority like Al-Azhar University in Egypt and other state-sanctioned constituencies are also adopting aggressive media strategies to counteract what they see as an emerging culture of semantic disarray over what Islam means today. On the Internet, videobloggers and otherwise marginal actors are capitalizing on much cheaper means of media production to join this massive fray of new cultural producers in Islam. Their mediation of Islam

This paper will focus on one influential Muslim Web site and analyze its claim for deepening the spiritual experience of Muslims through public engagement and disciplined consumption. Alt-Muslim.com is described as a space for introspective comments on the Muslim world and a forum for progressive Muslims. With contributing editors and writers from the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK, Alt-Muslim bills itself at the forefront of an emerging independent Muslim media in

the West. Its articles, opinions, media reviews, podcasts and video commentaries seek to project an alternative view of Muslims as intellectuals, politicians, and artists. Specifically, this paper examines the dialogic and deliberative aspects of Alt-Muslim in its attempt to function as an alternative to conventional authority in Islam and in its claim to create a counterculture for Muslims across the world. I argue that the producers of the site have used the digital to create a third space of religious enunciation. Rather than treating digital manifestations of the religious as either inevitably corrosive or merely hyperreal, I argue that digital spaces such as Alt-Muslim are important performative sites of enunciation where formal and unitary structures of religious knowledge and practice can become the object of both revision and transformation. As such, the digital with its own communication logic, stylistic features, and convergent properties can become a significant site of disruption and invention, or at least of imagined possibilities of what values such as community, authenticity, and civility among others could be in a presumably open terrain of non-linear thinking. Conceived this way, visitors to Alt-Muslim are interpellated to adopt both a religious logic in their media consumption and a media logic in their religious imagination. Modern communication technologies become therefore critical tools not only in the transmission of religious teachings and the extension of the religious message across space, but increasingly in the creation of new aesthetic forms which arguably rival existing structures of preaching and other forms of religious mediation.

The kind of thirdness that I seek to foreground in borrowing the concept of third spaces from postcolonial theory is primarily its resistance to the impulse to anchor culture and identity in place and within bounded frames of thinking. Third space arguably unsettles the singularity of dominant power narratives and opens up new avenues of identification and articulation. In the context of digital spaces of religion, I argue that our research efforts should be directed at interpreting these sites as critical attempts to recuperate the particularity of the lived experience of religion or spirituality in late modernity and divest it from a narrow essentialism of belief. Far from being mere technological events, religious third spaces in the digital realm are different not because they are radically new, but because they build from the ambivalent encounter of old and new forms of sociality and negotiate differing poles of cultural identity. As a 'contact zone', to use Mary Louise Pratt's concept (1991), these social spaces are not simply places where marginal subjects toy around with their peripheral individuality, but rather are sites where individuals use the technical capacities of the digital to imagine social and cultural configurations beyond existing binaries of the physical versus the virtual and the real versus the proximal religious experience. The encounter of these binaries in these third spaces does not end in tension only but is often generative of new cultural meanings and social practices.

Through a textual analysis of Alt-Muslim and semi-structured interviews with the site's founder and editors, this paper explores the ways in which new Muslim subjectivities are envisioned and arguably enabled in these third spaces of digital Islam. Specifically, I ask how the site imagines a new face of public Islam that appropriates slick media and design aesthetics (more visual and non-linear) and communication modes (more interactive) to draw inspiration and nurture a different and presumably authentic religious experience. I also look at how the site produces new religious practices and generates new templates and narratives of social action for its users while policing at the same time the terms and boundaries of what it calls modern Islam.

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# **The Ties That Bind and Break: Emotional Fraud and Community Formation in Religious Mom Blogs**

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## **Abstract**

In this presentation I focus on the issue of “emotional fraud” in social media, showing how the discernment of truth from falsity is framed as a social question as well as a religious one in these spaces, and how the question of what is “real” online has become a central problem for online users and communities. Attention to the construction and interpretation of authenticity on the web reveals a complex set of negotiations and practices taking place in social media networks around its adjudication, as users struggle with the conflict between the imagined ideal nature of online communities versus the revelation of deception and manipulation. I rely primarily on the work of Birgit Meyer on “aesthetic formations” to analyze how emotional investment in personal blogs has a binding function in the creation of online communities, and the exposure of fraud leads to unbindings and rebindings in the creation of new communities.

## **Keywords**

emotional fraud; aesthetic formations; mom blogs; authenticity; social media

In this presentation I focus on the issue of “emotional fraud” in social media, showing how the discernment of truth from falsity is framed as a social question as well as a religious one in these spaces, and how the question of what is “real” online has become a central problem for online users and communities. Attention to the construction and interpretation of authenticity on the web reveals a complex set of negotiations and practices taking place in social media networks around its adjudication, as users struggle with the conflict between the imagined ideal nature of online communities versus the revelation of deception and manipulation. I engage the concept of “third spaces” (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012) as an interpretive tool to explore the generativity of these blog spaces, and the work of Birgit Meyer on “aesthetic formations” to analyze how emotional investment in personal religious blogs has a binding function in the creation of online communities, and the exposure of fraud leads to unbindings and rebindings in the creation of new communities.

The blogosphere caters to a culture of consumption hungry for the truth. “American Protestants manifest a persistent inclination to experience media as an untrammelled representation of ‘the truth,’” David Morgan writes, and images “naturalize what believers have wanted to assume about the world and their pressing mission within it.” (Morgan, 2002, p. 37-38). Through design, text, and photographs, personal blogs about mothering promise an unvarnished, entertaining picture of motherhood as it exists in real life, not on TV or in glossy magazines. Pulling back the curtain, inviting readers into one’s living room, the successful mom blogger promises authentic revelation: “See! This is what my floor *really* looks like, unvacuumed and covered with toys and

spilled milk! My kids are wearing the same clothes they wore yesterday and slept in last night, and I haven't had a shower in two days!" Pictures and narratives capture happy family moments and carefully posed and framed memories for the scrapbook, but they can also record epic tantrums and parenting disasters. Because the blogosphere is viewed and advertised as the site of "authentic voices" and "conversations," even authentic revelation on occasion, and indeed, even seems to be a last bastion of authenticity as media users increasingly shift their time from traditional to social media, a blogger's credibility is deeply tied to honest self-disclosure.<sup>1</sup>

Americans on the whole continue to lose confidence in organized religion, as indicated by Gallup polling over the past two decades showing decreasing levels of trust in TV evangelists and organized religion.<sup>2</sup> In such a climate, religious innovators like mom bloggers may come to play an increasingly visible and influential role in the American religious marketplace, striving to present credible portrayals of faith to a suspicious public. Indeed trust and deception are key features of market culture, and as historian Leigh Schmidt reminds us, the evangelical movement in U.S. culture has made religion "entertaining, popular, dramatic, enterprising, and marketable," at the same time that it has also become the object of deep suspicion. (Schmidt, 1999, p. 375). Once made part of the market culture, religion has become subject to the same kinds of suspicions and doubts endemic to a highly competitive and entrepreneurial economy. Similarly, once commodified and branded, authenticity in personal blogs is also rendered suspect.

Two evangelical Christian mom blogs, "The Story of April Rose" ([littleoneapril.blogspot.com](http://littleoneapril.blogspot.com)), and "My Charming Kids" ([mycharmingkids.net](http://mycharmingkids.net)) are my case studies for the analysis of socially mediated fraud and authenticity in digital spaces.<sup>3</sup> These cases address issues of trust and authority in social media and how they are defined, ascribed, and contested, while also pointing to questions of broader significance in the study of religion and media regarding religious authority and community verification. On the one hand, the internet is hailed as a bastion of freedom and transparency, allowing people to be who they really are and form relationships based on shared interests and communicative relationships, rather than on personal appearance. Yet on the other hand, precisely because the internet allows for interpersonal relationships to develop virtually rather than face to face, it also allows for the possibility of mass deception in those relationships: the perils of online dating and Manti Teo's recent fake girlfriend scandal are well-known examples. So it is not surprising that awareness of the constant risk of deception, along with the evolution of socially mediated practices of discernment designed to distinguish truthful representations from fraudulent ones, have emerged as central features of online practice.

The investment of "emotional capital" is part of the everyday fabric of the blogosphere, drawing readers to keep coming back to compelling stories and powerful, evocative writing. However, if

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<sup>1</sup> The largest women's blog network, BlogHer, describes itself as the place to find "the best conversations led by women in social media. A curated selection of authentic voices. **Life well said.**" "About BlogHer," <http://www.blogher.com/about-this-network>, accessed 3 March 2013.

<sup>2</sup> A June 2012 Gallup poll found that 55% of Americans have "some," "very little" or no confidence in organized religion or "the church"; see <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx#2>, accessed 3 March 2013. While in 1980 most Americans had a favorable view of television evangelists, this dramatically changed during the decade as a result of various scandals. A 1987 Gallup poll found 63% of Americans believed TV evangelists were "untrustworthy," and by 1989 this number had increased to 79%, describing them as "dishonest" (70%), "insincere" (67%), "lacking a special relationship with God" (67%), and "uncaring" (62%). George Gallup, *The Gallup Poll 1989* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1990), 204-05.

<sup>3</sup> Two points of clarification are in order here. First, both blogs have since been taken down by their authors or allowed to expire, and can hence only be viewed as cached pages. Second, the term "mom(my) blog" is somewhat controversial. Some bloggers embrace it, others reject it as trivializing. I use the term in a descriptive sense to reflect the distinctive content of the blogs I refer to and because I am not aware of another umbrella term for this particular genre.

this emotional capital is discovered to have been invested in an imaginary source, i.e. when the persons and situations created in the blog are found to be false or misleading, readers of personal blogs feel emotionally manipulated and used, and the question of “emotional fraud” arises. Emotional fraud online seems to be primarily motivated by the emotional payoff of power, authority, popularity, sympathy, and attention rather than financial gain. The creation of fictitious situations is made easier by the existence of online forums and communities specifically designed to offer support to those struggling with particular illnesses or difficult life situations, such as the grave illness or loss of a child. Because these communities operate with a presumption of honesty and authenticity and are designed to offer instant support to members without question, the exposure of frauds creates significant fractures within these communities, yet also allows for the creation of new ones. I highlight some of the effects of that awareness and practice by examining community exchanges and consequences in these cases when readers began to suspect deception on the part of the blog authors. What emerges is a contextualized analysis of emotional investment and emotional fraud in the blogosphere, and the role of trust and deception as key factors in the binding and unbinding of religiously-based social media networks.

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## Creative Rebellion: PostSecret Participation as a Third Space of Digital Religion

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The general connotations that most often accompany the object “postcard” include terms associated with travel and storytelling. This method of communication most often conveys a sense of “I miss you” or “wish you were here” to the recipient, and is often found displayed on refrigerators or kept as a method of memory. Recently, thanks to the creation of *PostSecret*, an art project that solicits, displays, and profits from the submission of anonymous secrets, postcards are now involved in the production of confessional, often subversive discourses. The *PostSecret* project has created a forum for resistive, creative, and anonymous expression that occupies a space between offline/offline and traditional/resistive activity. With messages such as, “My revenge to you is to have a wonderful life,” and “I don’t want to share my workout videos to my friends because I want to have the best body not them,” *PostSecret* has created a “third space” for the creation and circulation of rebellious discourse. In fact, Warren was cited in a *RELEVANT* (2009) article as saying that *PostSecret* offers an opportunity to express “the things we really can’t say in church.”

Before *PostSecret* became a commercial empire, drawing 4.1 millions users to its website each month, it was an art-based community project created by Frank Warren (Yallouz & McGee, 2011). Based on his earlier project, *The Reluctant Oracle*, which centered on the anonymous distribution of Warren’s personal postcard creations, *PostSecret* became a *public* project that invited individuals to anonymously submit postcards with a personal secret. In 2004, Warren began handing out postcards in Washington, DC with specific instructions that included an emphasis on revealing anything, staying anonymous, being brief, being legible, and being creative: “let this postcard be your canvas” (postsecret.com). After successfully receiving submissions, Warren created the *PostSecret* blog and continues to update it every Sunday. In addition to the anonymous submissions—200-300 arrive in Warren’s mailbox daily—and the blog, the empire of *PostSecret* includes five books published by William Morrow publishers (a division of Harper Collins), a lecture tour—*PostSecret Live!*—hosted by Frank Warren himself, an international art exhibit, community-focused picnics and events, and an online discussion board, *PostSecret Chat*, that offers a non-hierarchical online space for discursive production. Recently, *PostSecret* has entered the social networking arena, including a Facebook page with 1.2 million “likes” (as of 11 March 2013) and a Twitter account with 518,369 followers (as of 11 March 2013). In 2001, an app was launched but was shut down in January 2012 due to issues related to an overwhelming amount of “gore” and “pornography” posted daily, according to *The Washington Times* (Phillips, 2012). According to the *Times* article, moderators could not keep up with the postings, which were based on instant imagery captured by phone cameras rather than postcard drawings and photography. In the end, Warren, his family, and the moderators received threats, and the app was voluntarily shut down.

Although there are various themes that motivate the postcard submissions of *PostSecret* (i.e., eating disorders, suicide, family, marriage), this paper focuses on those with a religious dimension, and argues that *PostSecret* offers a unique space for religious expression due to the aesthetics of its website, the affordances of its online discussion boards, and its cultivation and curation of religious secrets. This paper can be described as a case study in orientation and adopts the framework of cultural studies in its focused investigation of mediated, lived practices in contemporary culture. In the context of religion, it would be limiting to analyze *PostSecret* as just

another digital interface that threatens traditional order. Although this reaction has surfaced, it fails to capture the unique way in which *PostSecret* has emerged as a fluid space that facilitates the production of religious discourse in a postmodern digital era. As opposed to the traditional top-down model of religious knowledge production, *PostSecret* invites anyone and everyone to submit their thoughts and then shares these secrets through a capitalist process. But beyond the profit-generating books and the lecture tours, the organization of the offline picnics and gatherings, the video montages created for YouTube, and the *PostSecret Chat* (discussion boards) uniquely allow for a community-focused, non-hierarchical exchange of information and opinions. These online and offline exchanges do not dismiss traditional religious discourse, nor are they free from the logics of capitalism, but they do work as an alternative method of religious practice for individuals that both support and question religious authority.

While *PostSecret* includes a strong offline dimension, this paper draws on critical textual analyses of its online components—the Sunday Secrets, *PostSecret Chat*—in order to situate the affordances of digital media in their facilitation of the “rebellious” discourses within the *PostSecret* project. The Sunday Secrets are the 20-30 postcards that Warren curates from his weekly submissions and posts to the website. Each Sunday, these postcards appear against a black, advertisement-free backdrop, and are available for “sharing” on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Pinterest, and Reddit. The opportunity to discuss the Sunday Secrets postcards is also available on the *PostSecret Chat* page. Here, users are able to recycle the religious meanings found on these postcards and add personal meanings in the form of introductions to the postcard, such as Facebook posts or Tweets to accompany the image. After an exploration of *PostSecret Chat*, specifically, the Secrets of Spirituality “topic,” it was discovered that users were utilizing this space as a forum for democratized discussion and discourse. In other words, users were capitalizing on the affordance of digital media’s allowance of multiple voices and viewpoints, which can be conceptualized as the democratization of religious discourses. Rather than reproduce and promote religious dogma—or the work of power regimes—users on *PostSecret Chat* are using this space to question and challenge discourse and concepts. This proliferation and production of reverse discourses allows individuals to enter a space for the open expression of ideas about religion outside of her/his immediate material community. It is critical to keep in mind that the *PostSecret* project is not religious; rather, religious themes and discourses have emerged from online affordances and offline organization. As a result of *PostSecret*’s invitation to self-reflexivity, catharsis, and community, individuals are able to communicate their religious beliefs and practices in a postmodern arena.

Finally, this paper concludes by drawing on the work of Edward Soja (2008), Kim Knott (2006), and Michel Foucault (1990) to connect the online logics of *PostSecret* to the larger claim that this project is an example of a third space of digital religion.

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