Rebranding Religion on YouTube: Salafism and 'Third Spaces'

Abstract

This paper presents an analytical challenge to the study of Salafism after the 2011 Arab Spring. With the help of mass media, self-identified Salafists in the United Kingdom construct an increasingly politicized form of Salafism that diverts from historical Salafi movements in being global, multicultural, and applying the language of postmodernity. Using evidence from the YouTube channel Salafimedia, I challenge the categorization of Salafism as an anti-modern Islamic revivalist group. I demonstrate that Salafimedia's construction of Islam uses "in-between-ness" of Islamic revivalism and Islamic reformation, or a third space, creating a new type of Salafism. In this third space, the dialectical relationship between the message of Salafism and the channel's platform allows for the creation of an Islam that is both modern and a return to the origins of Islam.

Salafimedia and the Rebranding of Islam

Islamic reformation and Islamic revivalism (see Smart & Denny, 2013) have been two hot-button topics in Western media, especially after the emergence of new forms of Salafism after the 2011 Arab Spring. While Islamic reformation is often treated as favorable due to its adaptation to Western norms, the Islamic revival of Salafism is feared to bring back an ancient and anti-modern form of Islam that could threaten Western society.

However, in face of Salafists' increasing usage of mass media, how do we analyze a form of Salafism created *through* the media? A prime example is the YouTube channel Salafimedia, which was created in 2009 with the aim to promote monotheism (*tawheed*) and strict adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah upon the understanding of the righteous predecessors (*salaf al-salih*) or the first generations of Muslims after the Prophet Muhammad (see also Meijer, 2009). According to the website, Salafimedia's main concern is outreach (*dawah*) and the target audience is male Muslims in the UK and internationally, who are addressed as brothers. As of February 28th, 2013, there are 908 subscribers and 60,661 views of the channel's shows, interviews, news, lectures, and other "top quality programming," which are designed produce the best insight to Islam.

Salfimedia identifies as the most authentic and most modern Muslim community (*ummah*), as demonstrated in their most recent video posting, entitled *The New Salafimedia Rebrand Video 2013: 4th Year Relaunch*. Describing their new identity as rebranded and Salafism as a brand indexes marketing or business strategies – a new brand usually sells a new outlook. Furthermore, employing the metaphors of "rewriting the script" and "going back to the drawing board" further communicates the members' desires to reorganize and change their story, more so since they increasingly have to respond to accusations of radicalization by the UK government. Salfimedia becomes a platform for social action and their beliefs become politicized.

The rebranding video has two parts: the first part presents action sequences and special effects that

accompany important messages. For instance, the video begins with the image of a lion, later explained by "May Allah make us have the roar of a lion, with the heart of a lion." Text runs through the screen, urging the audience to "believe in it, live by it, be ready to die for it," where *it* refers to the promise of Allah, the call, or the revelation. In the transition to the second part, a wild black horse gallops over a dark, war-torn, post-apocalyptic world accompanied by lightening flashes, symbolizing both the destruction of a corrupt world and the renewal and power through Salafi Islam.

In the second part, four lecturers scold an imaginary Muslim audience about having forgotten the core message of the Prophet Muhammad from 1400 years ago. For special effects, superimposed animations of gunshots are fired through the screen and followed by explosions. The men project Salafism as "the truth and nothing but the truth" and they tell their followers that they are the best *ummah*. Especially prominent are the speakers' repeated calls to "enjoin the good and forbid the evil," highlighting the binary oppositions between the Salafis (the good) and the Western unbelievers or *kufar* (the evil). Only through a radical reorientation to the way of the *salaf* can the global *ummah* regain agency, strength, power, and victory. The video is an urgent wake-up call for misguided Muslims.

My analysis shows that Salafimedia is neither an Islamic revivalist nor a reformist movement. On one hand, it is revivalist because it clings to the way of the *salaf*, despite accusations of being anti-modern and oppressive. On the other hand, it differs greatly from Salafist norms before the 2011 Arab Spring that are very much anchored in territory, ethnicity, nation, kinship, or tribe. All four men insist that they are "not a group," nor do they support any UK based Islamic group or organization. Instead, they call on the *ummah* to "leave off all groups, deviant sects, and parties." The audience is encouraged to solely identify with the *salaf* and to background other possible identity categories, such as ethnicity, nationality, or denomination. This allows new Salafis to circumvent mosques or Islamic centers that might not accept them so readily. The modern educated Islamic activist defies the traditional Muslim legal scholars (*ulama*).

Olivier Roy, a scholar on Islamic practice, links this type of deterritorialization of Islam to the growing number of Muslims living in Western non-Muslim countries, which spreads specific forms of religiosity, including neo-fundamentalism, a renewal of spirituality, and an insistence on Islam as a system of values and ethics. Assuming that this is the case and that "religiosity" is more important than "religion," we can see commonalities between the creed of Salafimedia and contemporary reformed religions, such as Christianity. It is not surprising that the basic ways to get to the Truth in Salafism are embedded in postmodern religiosity that foregrounds an inward-looking and personal relationship with God (see also Stadlbauer, 2013). Feelings of being in touch with God are more important than closed scriptural interpretations that developed over centuries. This privatization of faith has been seen in numerous evangelical and charismatic movements. Roy claims that "Islam cannot escape the New Age of religions or choose the form of its own modernity" (p. 6).

In sum, the productive and creative modes of religious meaning-making through an Internet platform complicate the analysis of contemporary Salafist movements. What is clear is that Salafimedia is not a digital extension of a "real" Salafi community. Instead, the YouTube platform creates *third spaces* (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2012) in which individualized "true" Islam can thrive outside the confines of corruptible human interpretations by the *ulama*. It creates a decentralized, egalitarian, and multicultural community, aligning with precepts of postmodernity. In this space, both the ultra-orthodox Salafist doctrine and the YouTube channel platform are in a dialogical relationship and promise easy, direct, and unmediated access. The former grants direct access to the Qur'an, Sunnah, and hence to God as the highest authority. Similarly, the YouTube platform grants free and quick access to animated messages. The controversial rhetoric of Salafimedia fits well with this platform that is known for presenting revolutionary, innovative, and authentic ideas. The YouTube channel creates new possibilities for the actualization of belief that not only defy opposing "real" and "unreal" communities, but also should make

us wary of classifying new Salafi movements as anti-modern or not, revivalist or not, or reformist or not. Instead, rebranding might be a better analytic concept.

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Neo-Pagans online: an example of Third Space

Abstract

The relationship between religion and media opens today a wide range of possibilities of expression and new ways of living one's spirituality. I analyze some Neo-Pagan and Wiccan presences (like the website www.wicca.com, The Celtic Connection) on the web to show how new spiritualties based on ancient rituals and beliefs can use Internet to enhance connections and to create new spaces of action. I utilize the concept of Third Space in relation to digital cultures and their capacity to create new environments; working with this framework, I analyze online aesthetics, authority, in-between-ness as well as construction of virtual selves and communities.

Keywords

Neo-Pagans online

In my analysis of Neo-Pagan websites I take into consideration two main features. The first one is the capacity to transpose online an offline world, that is, create virtual communities that mirror groups of physical persons in different geographical places; this help them practice and gain knowledge of a new religion that is often stigmatized in the offline world. The second one is the creation of a new set of practices and actions entirely online. Examples of this are virtual communities that practice rituals online through chat-rooms, blogs or Second Life and engage in relationships that are only on the web. In this case they also create a new concept of body and nature, different from the offline Neo-Paganism.

In particular, some interesting features are present in the website I analyze, The Celtic Connection (www.wicca.com). The website does not refer to a particular Wicca Church, but apparently he was creating by a group of people whose desire was to have an online place to exchange and provide information about faith and beliefs. The Celtic Connection includes various webpages based on different traditions, like Celtic, Native American, Shamanism, as well as information about meditation, animal guides, crystals. It is also linked to a "magical shop" where people can buy on-line goods and books, and which is structured in an amazon-like fashion. In the blog and on the facebook page many people interact with each other to describe their spirituality and gaining more information, since in many case they seem not to have an offline community to refer to. This is a case of how they use the web to enhance their faith and also as a Third Space of exchange and creation of meaning.

Resistance in on-line Neopaganism

Neo-paganism is not an institutionalized movement and, even if there are some recognized churches and books, it does not have clear structures of authority or a corpus of sacred texts. The manifestations of online Neo Paganism I analyze imply resistance in the sense that they are not part of any mainstream religion and they are often stigmatized in the offline world. There is no dichotomy between mainstream Neo-Paganism versus marginalized one; rather, the dualism is between the structure of established traditional religions, like Christianity, and a more personal and non-codified spirituality that characterizes Neo-Paganism. In this perspective, internet gives the possibility to create new meanings and new spaces where spirituality can be experienced in a way that is outside the mainstream view of religious rituals and practices of the society. The resistance can also be found, from another perspective, in various websites against Neo-Paganism, for example Christian blogs that alert parents against the potential danger of having a Neo-Pagan child. In the online world, Neo-Pagans operate a process of appropriation of spaces and meanings that are not possible in the same way in the offline communities. They create an aesthetic of imagined distant places where they can live their spirituality and they sometimes perceive that their

identity can be fully disclosed only on the internet, where they do not encounter opposition and resistance of mainstream religions.

Methodology and theoretical framework

For the methodology, the work is primary based on a content analysis of internet websites and forums, especially The Celtic Connection. I also take into account other manifestations of Neo-paganism online, like for example Second Life communities and videos that show rituals on Youtube. Also, my analysis includes a reception study with interviews of Neo-Pagans that practice their spirituality both in the online and offline world. The findings are that the Neo-Pagan scenario is heterogeneous in its relationship with the internet. Some groups refuse to practice their rituals and spiritual encounters online, because they want to be constantly in contact with the 'real world' and with nature, a fundamental feature of this religion. On the other hand, some Neo-Pagans consider the internet and the web as a different plan of reality and consequently a tool to enhance their spirituality, a magic space where they can create new ways of connecting with their religiosity. This is also linked to the idea of "technopagans", people that create and perform their religiosity online. Even if the aim of my study is to engage primary with people that live their faith both online and offline, I also take into account these forms of spirituality as an example of marginal Third Space.

As for theoretical frameworks, I engage with the definition of Third Space to explain how Neo-Paganism creates an internet hybrid space in-between real and imagined places. I employ Birgit Meyer's concept of 'aesthetic formations' to explain the process of community formation in relation to internet and religion. Within this framework I explore how Neo-Pagans live the web as something with not only an abstract component, but they take into account also the material dimension of the computer and the technological tools that they use to connect with other believers. In this way it is possible to account for the transposition of the relationship with body and nature, central to Neo-Paganism, in an online world. I also use Lev Manovich's concept of synthetic reality to explain neo-pagan spirituality on the web. According to my findings, Neo-Pagans do consider their activity on the internet as real, even if it is in a different context than the physical world. Reality is not split between the categories of online and offline, but creates a fluid process where believers' identities and spiritualties can evolve and create new features and spaces.

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Abstract

In analysis of the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young Iranian protester killed on amateur video in 2009 protests of the contested Iranian presidential election, this case study seeks to understand how she has become an iconic figure. Her death, the nature of it and the response to it, have caused devotion to her, not unlike Marian devotions in both Christianity and Islam. Through an examination of visuality and death, visual piety and gendered representations of female martyrs and religious figures, this case study examines how the third spaces, facilitated by the internet and mobile technologies, allow for the formation of new religious manifestations.

Introduction
In 2009 Iran went through a tumultuous summer. Following the contested results of the presidential election between Mir Houssein Mousavi and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, thousands of people, young and old, men and women poured into the street; their silence ringing out as a protest against the abuses of the Islamic republic. This was the Green Movement. In the face of a largely peaceful protest, that made careful use of Islam in order to give the government little reason to condemn the movement either rhetorically or legally, the Iranian state responded with unexpected force and violence making the images of this violence a call to action for change (Varzi, 2011). It was during these peaceful protests that the Basij military took to the streets, killing the "beauty" of the Green Movement that evolved in the days following the election (For Neda, 2011). Through these protests and the use of new media the world became captivated by an image of a woman dying on June 20, 2009. Neda Agha Soltan was a young woman participating in the protests that day. She walked down the street with her music teacher, her head scarf wrapped around her pony tail, a visor blocking the sun from her eyes. She was shot in the heart and a mobile phone camera captured the graphic way she died in a 47 second video that was subsequently posted to YouTube and aired by news stations all around the world (Hejazi, 2011).

Neda: Why she captivated the digital world
A Google search of the name "Neda" will link you to graphic images of a young woman bleeding to death on the street, her gaze locking with the camera lens, as though to invoke our attention and our emotion. Each of the videos of her death has over one million page views (Wounded girl dies in front of camera, 2009). The response to this powerful imagery was immediate. In the days following her death Neda was called or referenced by the media as everything from "Martyr," and "Angel of Freedom," to "Pillar of the movement," "symbol of struggle," "symbol of goodness," "The YouTube Martyr," "We are Neda," and "Our Angel" (Neda, 2009; Burns &Eltham, 2009). Through analysis of eight YouTube videos that were created in response to the original video of the murder, we can see that Neda went from being a "referential image to an iconic image symbolizing a greater cause and struggle" (Stage, 2011). Of the YouTube videos analyzed, several themes appear. One is the language that appears in each of these tributes to evoke a certain degree of emotion. Many of the videos refer to Neda as an angel and martyr. She is an icon commemorated in poem, image and song. The songs and poems call out to Neda as a symbol of peace and a prayer for the dissidents, as well as using her image to represent an ancient Persian ideal of secularism or an Islam "which your poets dreamed" about ("Neda", 2010; A Poem for Neda Agha-Soltan, 2009).
Zelizer (2010) uses Neda's image to elaborate on how powerful images implicate the viewer in what they see. By giving the viewer a sense of being a bystander in a murder, the video of Neda elicits an emotional and visceral response that has thus given her an eternal life on the Web. The digital realm gives Roland Barthes concept of third meaning, in which viewers understand not just literal and informational meanings but also symbolic ones, a new place to thrive (Zelizer, 2010). In the case of Neda, the digital response is indicative of a place in which bystanders = witnesses to her death can express the symbolic significance that transcends the pure informational qualities of the video. As one blogger stated, access to Neda's death gave American's access to their own humanity (Zelizer, 2010). The video of Neda as she is about to die makes sense because it pushes the subjunctive nature of the visual; the visual "situates action within the hypothetical" thus adding uncertainty to the images and making them so they can reappear and resurface in different contexts (Zelizer, 2010). Neda's video and image has done just that. In addition to the YouTube tributes to her, there have been masks and posters made that carry slogans such as "We are all Neda" and "We are all one Neda, We are all one calling" (wearealloneneda.wordpress.com, 2010). These physical

manifestations of Neda allow protesters and supporters around the world to embody their protest against the Iranian regime and injustice against humanity (Stage, 2010).

Third Spaces and Neda
It is important to add to this discussion the way the creation of a "third space," through the internet and mobile technologies, contributed to the creation of a martyr and angel and gave a platform for many mourners around the world to express new forms of religious devotions. In today's society sacred spaces exist beyond the brick and mortar confines of churches, mosques and synagogues. The dimensions of space are no longer confined to the body, space "is also a mental or conceptual dimension, one which may float free of any physical mooring, but which uses the notion of space metaphorically and may provide a means of imagining and giving expression to human possibility, cultural difference, the imagination itself, as well as social relations" (Knott, 2005). Religion as expressed through digital technology allows for a space in which power relations are able to shift and change. As Fisher (2010) highlights, Twitter, Protest Networks and other aspects of what he calls the "infosphere" allowed for open communication that picked up where news fell off during the Iranian elections. "Protestors in 2009 have been much more successful in engaging with an infosphere, metaphorically floating above the streets. Twitter provided a relatively easy yet powerful means of passing information while maintaining degrees of anonymity. The ability to combine credibility and anonymity was important as this struggle played out over months rather than three days" (Kamalipour, 2010). This engagement creates a third space in which protestors can openly express their thoughts, passions and hopes without the confines of an oppressive regime. This does not mean that the online environment is the third space; rather, the online environment facilitates the creation of a third space which can develop social capital through its transnational ability to bridge communication across cultures and imaginations. Not only is this third space a place for recognition of and devotion to the sacred, they also contribute to the sacrilization of images, things and beliefs that may not have otherwise been so.

Conclusions and Points for Discussion
This paper skims the surface of the importance of Neda, her death and the resulting imagery and devotion to her iconic status. It does however provide a starting point for analysis of how third spaces use the internet to enable the creation of new religious figures that while being emergent are based on historical religious ideals that are ingrained in digital users. While the Iranian government seeks to argue to this day that Neda was either killed by protestors or by the Western powers that be, the truth of her murder as well as justice for it was determined via a collective memory of a transnational community online.

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Digital Media and the Protestant Establishment

: Reflection on the Theological Approach to Digital Space of

the New Media Project

Seung Soo Kim

The history of Protestantism is deeply interwoven with the history of media and media technology. The broad circulation and appropriation of Luther's writings, for instance, has been enabled by the invention and dissemination of movable-type printing. In addition, Evangelical Protestants in the United States have actively employed mass media, such as radio, film, and television in order to expand influence on American mass culture and public sphere (Hendershot, 2004; Hoover, 2011; Moore, 1995; Rosenthal, 2008). Noting such intertwined history of Protestantism and media technology, this paper explores the question of how the use of digital media is conceptualized, imagined, and repurposed in the Mainline Protestant discourse and whether it fails in understanding any aspects of digital space, by looking into the New Media Project based at Union Theological Seminary in New York, a longtime influential center of Protestant Theological Education.

The project aspires to help Mainline and liberal churches rethink their relationship to digital media by looking at a variety of cases. The researcher analyzed ninety-one post blogs and six case study reports produced by the

project's researchers from May 2011 to January 2012, uploaded on its website[1].

In order to analyze the Protestant thoughts on digital media and their relation to

religion, the paper embraced a new way of thinking digital space. According to

Hoover and Echchaibi (2012), digital space generates "in-between-ness (p. 9),"

something beyond the conceptual and the physical, the private and the public,

institutions and individual, commodities and authenticity, embodiment and

virtuality, and authority and autonomy. Second, digital space has its own

aesthetic, genre, and structuring capacities through new media technologies and

their enabling practices (p. 18). Lastly, people imagine new modes of religious

identity, practice, and community and as if their imagination is completely

accomplished and working the way it should in the space. The hybridic and ludic

possibilities of the aesthetic of the digital space are deeply rooted in this "as-if-

ness (pp. 22-24)."

In the analysis, four centered-themes were found: First, there were

overflowing worries about the decline of spiritual discipline such as mindfulness,

genuine salvational experience, and commitment. For instance, distraction was

regarded as the key problem aroused by Christians' heavy use of new digital

social media. Second, despite its concerns about distraction, the New Media

Project celebrated the universality of digital space in that God's transcendence

and immanence could be found in these characteristics of digital space. Third, the

celebration of universality of digital space led to the expectation of new kinds of

communal relationship and communities where anybody could participate

irrespective of geographical location and time. Digital space and new social

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[1] http://blog.newmediaprojectatunion.org

media networks were regarded as a sort of hyperlinked connection with others and God, where the ideal of Christian community was partially fulfilled. Fourth, the crisis of authority received a great attention in the project. Surprisingly, however, the project interpreted the crisis of sole and powerful charismatic leaderships as the potential chance to realize the ideal of priesthood of all believers.

What are the explicit and implicit assumptions about the nature of digital media and their relation to religion? And what do these assumptions imply?

First, the project's researchers in general tend toward the alleged instrumental approach to digital media that has dominated so much of public and lay discourses about them. In this view, digital media is not a destination, but the way to get to a destination. This is a very pragmatic view; one that scholars of digital media would suggest ignores more profound implications of these developments. Instrumentalism is also evidenced in the Project's focus on the contribution of digital media to offline community. When the Project's researchers argue that new media should be used in order to build community, they mean offline community. They assure their real, physical, and offline community cannot be (or should not be) replaced with online community. A possible "as-if-ness" is spurned where the community members may act "as if" it were real and physical in digital space shaped by new media.

Second, this instrumental (not dialectical) approach to digital media is derived from their presupposition about the rigid separation between online and offline, technology and human. The researchers presuppose that technology itself is neutral, and that its good or bad usage depends on people who use it. Again,

technology is only an instrument for human and it is not recognized that media technology and people might interact with each other; for example that people develop technology for specific purposes. In their understanding of digital media and its relation to social relations, there is no "in-between-ness" which digital media may generate between online and offline, technology and human.

Third, therefore, technology and online space are considered to be merely created and used by bad or good people in most of these case studies. In this sense, digital space tends not to be considered to have its own autonomous logic and force to shape lived experience, practice, and culture on its own. The good or bad usage of new media technology and digital space is thought to be determined only by the performance of embodied offline people or communities who use them. Digital space is treated as more-or-less neutral, while its own logics and aesthetics which can shape lived experience, practice, and culture, are overlooked.

Brief suggestions for the New Media Project's theorization of digital media would be apposite in conclusion. First, the research objects for examining the Protestants' digital media use need to be beyond the institutionalized and denominational ones. The relative stability and solidity of the organized churches they examine can limit the chance for the project to find its own logic and aesthetic, "as-if-ness", and "in-between-ness" that digital space may generate. However, there is a large, fluid, and evolving digital space where a wide range of old traditions, new traditions, non-traditions, hybridic traditions, and aggressively "anti" traditions, are finding a place (Hoover and Echchaibi, p. 3). New Media project will need to broaden their research objects up to non-organized, non-denominational, and hybridic individuals and communities who use new media.

Second, the New Media Project needs to transform its understanding of media which has been confined to the legacy media model focusing on media effects and their instrumental use. New media technology, to some extent, generates new and hybrid rituals, communities, and ultimately social relations (Hoover, 2006; Meyer, 2009). Without fundamental scholarly interest in social theories, including media, identity, and culture theories, the project would keep having a difficulty in understanding what really happens in digital space and in adequately dealing with digital space. The project researchers may only say what aspects of new media the Christian individual should accept or refrain from. Their analysis, in this regard, remains only *instructional*. Their analyses of and strategies to deal with digital media are *not practical* even though their interests in new media and digital space are clearly practical. For this purpose, the New Media Project will need to undertake more rigorous scholarly investigations into digital space and new media itself.

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