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Anonymity and Digital Islamic Authority

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Abstract: Much of the literature on digital religious authority has focused on spiritual "influencers" and the challenges they pose to traditional religious hierarchies and structures of authority. Less attention has been dedicated to religious websites, social media pages, and digital feeds whose popularity and influence do not hinge on the personalistic qualities of their creators. There is a wide assortment of generic religious reference sites that, although developed and managed by largely anonymous webmasters and administrators, command significant audiences and exert substantial influence on religious interpretations and practices. We argue that anonymity affords certain advantages for bolstering visibility and influence that have hitherto received insufficient attention in the literature on religion, authority, and cyberspace. In contrast to spiritual influencers, who draw attention to their personal biographies, credentials, appearances, and connections to enhance their legitimacy and authority, individuals or groups who administer religious reference sites commonly employ alternative strategies that involve concealing personal identities, experiences, and affiliations. Their aim is to come off as neutral, impartial, and free of ideological baggage that might bias their interpretations. This facilitates their efforts to frame the content they share as a form of universal religious truth that transcends ideological and sectarian differences. Our analysis centers on websites and social media pages that provide guidance to Spanish speakers on Islamic theology, jurisprudence, and piety.

Keywords: digital religion; authority; anonymity; internet; social media; Islam

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1. Introduction

The internet is now inundated with digital content on Islam and other religious traditions. A diverse array of "religious digital creatives" (RDCs) publish digital content and vie with one another for visibility and influence (Campbell 2020). Scholars have taken a growing interest in how RDCs unsettle or consolidate traditional structures of religious authority (Cheong et al. 2011; Golan and Martini 2020; Hoover 2016). Much of the literature on this topic has focused on religious "influencers" and their growing prominence in the religious field (Berger et al. 2023; Beta 2024; Campbell 2020; Jetter 2024; Peterson 2020, 2022; Zaid et al. 2022). Their vibrant personalities and creative use of audiovisual resources, as well as the challenges some pose to traditional structures of authority, make them extremely enticing subjects for scholars interested in shifting dynamics of religious power and influence (Bunt 2009, 2022).

Less attention has been dedicated to religious websites, social media pages, and digital feeds whose popularity does not hinge on the personalistic qualities of their creators. Although developed and published by largely anonymous webmasters and webpage administrators, several of these sites command significant audiences and exert substantial influence on religious interpretations and practices. This anonymity is particularly notable in the case of generic religious reference sites that provide guidance on religious theology, jurisprudence, and piety. Like religious influencers, those administering these sites aim

to build a "brand" that enhances recognition and trust (Sorgenfrei 2021; Zaid et al. 2022). However, while religious influencers draw attention to aspects of their personal identities and biographies (e.g., religious training or physical markers of piety) that enhance their credibility, those administering generic religious reference sites often hide their personal identities, experiences, and affiliations. In this article, we explore anonymity as a strategy employed by RDCs seeking visibility and influence among Muslims or potential converts to Islam who use the internet to learn about Islamic doctrine and ritual. Our analysis elucidates the typical features of anonymous reference sites, as well as the Islamic perspectives most reflected in their content. We argue that anonymity affords certain advantages, such as coming off as neutral and non-sectarian, that have hitherto received insufficient attention in the literature on religion, authority, and cyberspace.

2. Anonymity and Digital Religious Authority

Following DeGloma (2023), we conceptualize anonymity as a performance "in which actors obscure personal identities as they make meaning for various audiences." At its core, anonymity is a type of "non-identifiability" involving the "non-coordinatability of traits in a given respect" or the "dissociation of a person from her properties," generally though not exclusively through concealment of personal information (Ponesse 2013, p. 331; Wallace 1999, p. 23). Anonymity is distinct from social "unknown-ness" in that it "presupposes social relations" (Wallace 1999, p. 24). People are only anonymous vis-à-vis others with whom they bear some form of relationship or share a social environment. For instance, the anonymity of an author presupposes the existence of a readership familiar with the author's work. What makes the author anonymous is the concealment of personal information that would enable her readership to connect her writings with her real name and biography.

Anonymity, as Wallace (1999, p. 25) points out, "is never perfectly complete", insofar as anonymous persons generally reveal some aspects of their personal identities despite hiding others. For example, the website and social media administrators whom we discuss in this article do not conceal the fact that they are Muslim. Many, however, share little more about their identities, thereby precluding viewers from connecting the perspectives propagated on their sites with their personal background and education, their geographic residence, the branch of Islam with which they identify, their alignment with specific schools of Islamic jurisprudence, and so on.

Scholars have begun to explore how digital anonymity opens new possibilities for religious engagement. Some have pointed to how Muslims take advantage of the anonymity afforded by the internet to ask deeply personal questions they might otherwise feel uncomfortable discussing in person with local spiritual leaders (Mishra and Semaan 2010). Others have shown how Muslims feel freer to "surf" the internet, speak openly, question the views of established authorities, and advance alternative viewpoints under the cover of anonymity, as it offers protection against potential stigma, backlash, or persecution. Anonymity also provides a means of avoiding censorship and may facilitate engaging in illegal or otherwise nefarious activity (Bunt 2009; Larsson 2016; Schlicht 2013). At the same time, Muslims are more exposed to Islamophobic insults, and online forums may become conflictive and uncivil if participants are confident their personal identities cannot be detected (Greifenhagen 2013).

Despite the growing attention dedicated to anonymity and religious or anti-religious activity, little has been written on how anonymity enables those who produce religious content for large audiences to claim legitimacy and authority when propagating their religious understandings to digital audiences. In certain contexts or situations, it is precisely the absence of personal identity markers that imbues actors with power and the ability to influence others. Standpoint theorists have written at length on how presenting knowledge as emanating from an "Archimedean point"—as a "view from nowhere"—gives the impression of universality, objectivity, and in consequence, authority (Bordo 2013, p. 137; Haraway 1988; Lemert 1992, p. 68). By the same token, exposing diverse forms of knowledge as partisan, sectarian, or otherwise partial in a manner that was not initially evident

may have a relativizing effect that diminishes their perceived credibility, legitimacy, and authoritativeness.

In the analysis that follows, we analyze anonymous or partially anonymous websites and social media pages that provide general information and guidance about Islam. In contrast to Islamic influencers, who draw attention to their personal biographies, credentials, and connections to enhance their legitimacy and authority, the RDC's that administer these sites employ alternative strategies that involve concealing personal identities, experiences, and affiliations. Their aim is to come off as neutral, impartial, and free of ideological baggage that might bias their interpretations. This facilitates their efforts to frame the content they share as a form of universal religious truth that transcends ideological and sectarian differences.

3. Methodology

The research for this article was conducted between February 2023 and May 2024. In identifying sites to include in our analysis, we imagined that we were ordinary Spanish-speaking Muslims, potential converts to Islam, or individuals otherwise interested in general aspects of the religion. We conducted a broad search via Google, the most popular search engine worldwide at the time of our research, using the keywords: "*islam*", "*español*", and "*página web*" (website). These are three broad search terms that individuals seeking basic information about Islam would plausibly use. Of the top 20 sites yielded by this search in April 2024, 10 were anonymous or partially anonymous Islamic reference sites. By "Islamic reference sites", we mean sites that provide general guidance on different aspects of Islam for practitioners of the religion rather than for academics or others interested in historical or sociological aspects of the religion. Hence, encyclopedic sites like the Wikipedia entry on Islam were excluded from our analysis. We also excluded popular reference sites like "Islam Question & Answer", which states explicitly that it is supervised by a specific Sheikh and thus does not fulfill the criterion of anonymity.

Several of the most frequented Islamic reference sites, as indicated by their high ranking in Google searches, provide options for content in multiple languages. This has made them accessible to a wide variety of audiences around the globe. As a test, we conducted a search using the same keywords in English, and several of the same sites, such as "IslamiCity", "islamweb.net", and "The Religion of Islam", were among the top results in both English and Spanish. These sites tended to be administered by webmasters located in the Middle East or the US. There were, however, sites administered by individuals or teams located in Spain or Latin America that were more targeted toward Spanish-speaking audiences.

We are cognizant that the World Wide Web is highly dynamic. The results we attained in April 2024 are merely a snapshot that has changed since and will continue to change in the future. Moreover, since Google search results vary by location, the results of our search were likely tailored to inhabitants of Spain.[1] Our aim was thus not to identify all relevant Islamic reference sites accessible to people around the world, but rather to elucidate the general features of the kinds of generic and anonymous or partially anonymous sites that broad searchers for Islamic content online tend to yield by analyzing several prominent and prototypical examples.

After identifying relevant reference sites, we used textual analysis to illuminate their overall presentation, structure, and content. This involved identifying the narratives site administrators used to describe themselves and their objectives, the headings and subheadings used to organize the sites, and the actual information posted under these headings and subheadings. Where possible, we mined the sites for information, both textual and aesthetic, that enabled us to deduce the specific branches of Islam whose perspectives administrators (implicitly) espoused. This enabled us to identify patterns regarding which perspectives tend to be overrepresented or underrepresented on these sites, as well as the branches and sub-branches of Islam with which they are aligned. It also alerted us to gaps between how the administrators perform their identities and present

their theological visions (e.g., as universal and non-sectarian), on the one hand, and the identities and theological visions actually reflected in the content of the sites, on the other. We contacted the administrators of these sites to arrange interviews via chat tools or contact forms but did not receive any responses to our requests.

In addition to analyzing formal Islamic reference sites that appear in general Google searches, we investigated generic and anonymous Islamic reference pages on Facebook. We identified these pages via searches using the phrases: "*islam en español*" (Islam in Spanish), "*religión islámica*" (Islamic religion), and "*musulmanes en españa*" (Muslims in Spain). We limited our analysis to the top 20 results, selecting only those with over ten thousand followers. We selected five Facebook groups and one Facebook page that met these criteria. Our aim was not to identify all the anonymous and generic pages with Islamic content on Facebook, but rather to identify some of the most prominent pages and to ascertain their main characteristics. As with the websites discussed above, we conducted textual analysis to ascertain the overall presentation, structure, and content of these pages. To learn more about the perspectives, experiences, and motivations of those administrating them, we conducted semi-structured interviews with three Facebook page administrators. We reached out to several others but did not receive a response. All interviews were conducted in Spanish or Catalan. When referencing Facebook pages in the present article, we do not cite their titles to protect the confidentiality of their administrators.

4. Anonymity and Universality

Islamic reference sites generally disseminate a basic understanding of Islam and the practical requirements for living as a pious Muslim. Those that are anonymous aim to give the impression they are "letting Islam speak for itself" via a form of "aperspectival objectivity" that does not reflect personal or sectarian biases (cf. Gal and Woolard 2014, p. 34). Concealing the identities, affiliations, and ideological projects reflected in the religious content published on the sites facilitates this endeavor.

Some sites, such as "Islamic Bulletin" or "Islam Port", provide no information at all about the individuals or groups who administer them, though Islam Port mentions that its "aim is to offer a simple authentic well organized data which we think is suitable for people who are seriously looking for Islam and its values".[2] Other sites include generic descriptions of the administrators, typically (though not always) in a section entitled "About Us". These descriptions reinforce the notion that site administrators are non-sectarian, unbiased, and therefore trustworthy. The following are some prototypical examples:

> "ReligionDelIslam is a team of ordinary people with an immense love for the pure and true Islam and the message that it brings—peace, surrender, submission to Almighty God—Allah" (Religión del islam).[3]

> "IslamiCity was launched in February 1995. We provide a non-sectarian, comprehensive and holistic view of Islam and Muslims. We cultivate peace, inspire action, explore positive solutions and encourage purposeful living through the universal teachings of Islam. We are active in the promotion of universal values, cooperation and dialogue among civilizations. We attract millions of visitors each year from over 225 countries and territories. . . We are on a mission to empower, nurture, protect and promote values that affirm human dignity, human rights and the integrity of creation while making the world healthier, peaceful, and more beautiful" (IslamiCity).[4]

> "We are Muslims from various national backgrounds, education and skills, united by our monotheist belief, by conviction in the Noble Qur'an being the last revelation from Almighty Allah to mankind revealed to his last Prophet Muhammad may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him (PBUH), and by the Sunnah (commands, laws and practical examples of the Qur'an in action) of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and the rightly guided predecessors (the family and the companions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and successive generations). We

> claim no affiliation with, and do not support, any sect or political ideology which deviates from the above principles in belief or practice" (Islamic Invitation).[5]

Hence, in addition to citing the virtue of spreading the message of Islam and the Qur'an, these descriptions reference how the sites promote universal values such as social justice, human rights, beneficence, and peaceful coexistence. This reinforces the notion that the core motivations for developing the sites are not linked to personal or collective interests (cf. Reyes 2011). Several emphasize how the messages transmitted on the sites, as well as the audiences and, in some instances, the team of administrators, transcend national and geographic boundaries. This, in turn, contributes to the idea of universality the sites purport to embody.

Anonymity, as discussed above, is never complete. Different Islamic reference sites display diverse degrees of anonymity. Some include subtle references to the identities of the individuals or organizations supporting the content posted. For instance, "Islamweb.net"—one of the most frequented Islamic references sites—includes the logo of Qatar's Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs in the footer of the site.[6] The logo is scarcely legible and tucked away at the lower right corner of the page, which suggests the administrators do not wish to foreground the site's connection to the Qatari state. The overall organization of the site largely mirrors that of other more strictly anonymous Islamic reference sites. Information about the Qur'an and diverse fatwas is presented as if it were the unadulterated truth, independent of any ideological filter, and references to specific Islamic authorities are generally scarce.

A comparable site is "The Religion of Islam", also one of the top Islamic reference sites to appear in searches using generic keywords. The site features references in the footer to the "Dawah Association in Rawdah", a communications and IT agency called "Tamayyuz al-Muhtawa", and two "strategic partners" called "Namaá Wa Ataá Awqaf" (Growth and Giving Endowment) and "Awqaf Al-Rajihi" (Al-Rajihi Endowment), whose logos are exclusively in Arabic.[7] With a little digging, it is possible to determine that these are all Saudi entities. Awqaf Al-Rajihi is associated with Sheikh Abd Al-Aziz Al-Rajihi and collaborates with Saudi Arabia's General Authority for Awqaf. While the site administrators are anonymous, there is a clear connection to the Saudi state, and the content offered reflects a traditionalist approach to Islam. For the average viewer outside the Arab world, however, the Arabic names of the organizations mentioned in the footer do not necessarily hold meaning, and the site offers no explanation regarding the background, training, or credentials of those who administer it. Hence, although "The Religion of Islam" is less anonymous than the sites that do not include any information regarding political or organizational ties, the overall format and dearth of information regarding those who administer it are comparable. The likely explanation is that foregrounding the site's connection to the Saudi state might deter some potential viewers.

The fact that Islamic reference sites supported by Qatar and Saudi Arabia are two of the more prominent sites featured in basic searches for websites covering Islam suggests the importance of financial and technical resources in the competition for audiences. These sites are relatively easy to navigate, include a significant volume of material, and are available in multiple languages, which contributes to their global accessibility and "algorithmic authority" (Campbell 2020; Lustig and Nardi 2015).[8] Whether most viewers are aware of their ties to Gulf states is an open question.

The anonymity of certain sites has changed over time. For example, "IslamOnline" is a site that was initially launched in 1997 under the helm of the late Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi. However, contention between Qaradawi and the site's more conservative Qatari board of directors regarding the way controversial social issues were being addressed led to his ousting in 2010 (Gräf 2018). The management team for the site has subsequently undergone major changes, as has the content posted. The site is now less connected to the vision of a single scholar or group of scholars. It currently presents its mission as being "worthy of your trust", which is achieved through the involvement of "experts from all over the world and from all religions, ethnicities, and cultures specializing in economics,

the media, sociology, technology, the arts, and other fields. . .”[9] While the site no longer enjoys the legitimacy that comes from its close connection to the charismatic and influential Qaradawi, its new, more anonymous self-presentation arguably provides an alternative source of legitimacy and authority linked to the general expertise of its contributors. The lack of information regarding the theological orientation of these “experts” produces a “view from nowhere” that contributes to the impression of university and objectivity.

5. Generic Islam and Majoritarian Muslim Positionality

The Islamic reference sites identified during the course of our research appear oriented toward ordinary Muslims seeking information about different aspects of Islam, as well as converts or potential converts to Islam. The main topics addressed include Islamic theology, Qur’an recitations, rituals such as prayer and fasting, sharia (Islamic law) and fatwas (legal rulings), and guidance on personal moral and ethical conduct. Some sites include a section dealing with Islamic perspectives on contemporary issues, such as family life, gender, social justice, and interfaith dialogue. There are also sites that provide resources for learning Arabic, studying the Qur’an, or understanding Islamic history. Some sites are tailored toward Muslim converts or potential converts insofar as they foreground information on conversion and Islamic interpretations of key Christian doctrines, ideas, and figures like the bible, Jesus, the Trinity, and the Virgin Mary. Examples include “Islam Port”, “The Religion of Islam”, and “Islamic Invitation”.

As part of their performance of anonymity and effort to present published content as universal, the sites we selected for analysis provide little information about their theological alignments or affiliations within Islam in their “About Us” sections. Nevertheless, it is possible to locate these affiliations and alignments based on the content they publish. In some instances, theological positionality is quite simple to decipher. For example, the Saudi-sponsored site, “The Religion of Islam”, includes a series of articles on “Sects Attributed to Islam” that portray Shiism, Sufism, Ahmadiyyah, and Qur’anism, among other movements, as deviant, misguided sects whose teachings contradict foundational Islamic beliefs and principles.[10] One of the articles states that Sunnis, by contrast, “are not a splinter group, but merely name themselves as such to differentiate themselves from the Shiites and other deviant sects”. The Sunni identification of those administering the site is thus presented as non-sectarian and universal.

In contrast to “The Religion of Islam”, the religious alignments and affiliations of other sites we analyzed in our study are less blatant. They are, however, generally detectable in a variety of ways. Several sites post links to other, less anonymous “recommended” or “friendly” sites that are more explicitly connected to specific Islamic branches. Some sites post videos or articles that showcase the views of Islamic authorities associated with particular theological approaches or currents within Islam. For example, “Islamic Bulletin” publishes links to a collection of radio channel recordings of reformist scholars, including Omar Abd al-Kafi, Mohammad Metwalli al-Sha’rawi, and Mohammed Rateb al-Nabulsi.[11]

The way sites narrate key historical events like Ashura provides additional information regarding their theological alignments and affiliations.[12] The fatwas different sites publish also facilitate clues regarding the Islamic branches, schools of thought, and currents (e.g., traditionalist or reformist) with which they are aligned. This, however, is not always the case. Some sites use the term, “*jumhur al-ulama*”, which refers to the majority scholarly opinion across the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence. This allows for avoiding clear alignment with any single school. For sites like “Islamweb.net”, which place importance on presenting themselves as universal and non-sectarian, this theological maneuver provides a useful rationale for doing so.

It is noteworthy that all the generic and anonymous or semi-anonymous Islamic reference sites we identified align with a Sunni perspective. Since Sunnis are a majority globally and in most diasporic contexts, Sunni RDCs who administer generic reference sites may simply feel it unnecessary to specify the Islamic branch with which they are affiliated since it is assumed. The predominance of Sunni reference sites may also reflect a

sense of privilege or exclusivity regarding the right to speak about Islam in a generic sense without specifying the specific branch or approach represented. By the same token, Shi'i, Ahmadiyaa, and other minorities may be reticent to publish generic Islamic reference sites in languages of the diaspora, such as Spanish or English. Given the global predominance of Sunnism, these minorities may prioritize creating awareness of their respective existence and perspectives as alternatives to mainstream Sunnism. Publishing sites about Islam in a generic sense would do little to accomplish this goal, even if it might enhance the sites' ability to reach a wider audience. Minorities within Islam might also fear backlash from Sunnis angered by the dissemination of information and traditions perceived as sectarian or heretical without explicit signaling of the specific branches represented. Or they may simply feel that the content of their sites so obviously connects them to a particular branch that it would be pointless not to be forthright with their affiliations. Finally, structural aspects of certain Islamic branches may be antithetical to genericism or anonymity. The importance of allegiances to specific religious clerics (*marja'iyya*) within Shi'i Islam, for example, may complicate the construction of websites that do not specify their theological orientation.

To be sure, not all generic and anonymous reference sites are easily pinpointed as aligned with Sunnism. The Spanish language site, "Mundo Islam", is an example of a site that, though generally Sunni in orientation, is more difficult to locate along theological or sectarian lines. It includes information on a mix of current events, Islamic culture, and religious topics. News items are published about Muslims from diverse branches and territories around the world without clear normative judgments that would indicate an obvious sectarian affiliation. Perhaps the site's alignments are more difficult to identify precisely because of its hybrid character, insofar as it does not focus exclusively on theological topics and frames its content through a cultural, rather than strictly religious, lens.

6. Social Media and Informal Islamic Reference Sites

The performance of anonymity by Muslim RDCs is likewise present on social media. Although social media pages are typically highly personalized, this is not always the case. Basic searches using the phrases "*islam en español*", "*religión islámica*", and "*musulmanes en españa*" yielded several Facebook groups and pages with content about Islam but without information about their respective administrators. Some reference their administrators using pseudonyms that are difficult if not impossible to trace to real identities. To be sure, much of the content on these pages takes the form of links to videos or writings with identifiable authors. However, the general appeal of the pages themselves is not necessarily linked to the background or credentials of any single author or influencer. The generic and anonymous presentation of these pages still serves as a hook for audiences interested in general aspects of Islamic thought and practice.

Islamic reference pages on Facebook differ from the websites analyzed above in various ways. Given the basic parameters of the platform, they are more unstructured insofar as they are not organized neatly into different categories. The pages' objectives or missions are rarely explained. They consist mainly of posts that vary widely in form and content: reflections on different aspects of Islam, news items of significance to Muslims, suggestive photographs or videos with religious or political content, verses from the Qur'an with Spanish translation, poetry, or links to related websites. Some groups permit followers to post on the "Wall". Others limit permissions for "Wall" postings to administrators. These pages do not typically offer information on fatwas, original elaborated content, or in-depth religious commentary.

Administrators of Facebook groups and pages proved more accessible for interviews than administrators of the generic and anonymous websites described above. Those whom we interviewed saw themselves as intermediaries rather than religious experts. They do not create original religious content, but rather synthesize diverse sources accessible in Spanish that they deem valid. One of the administrators we interviewed explained that while he does not consider himself an expert, he knows what sites are trustworthy and how to distinguish credible from non-credible information regarding Islam. The

content he posts comprises information from diverse webpages with Islamic religious texts translated into Spanish. He sees the combination of his fluency in Spanish and general understanding of Islam as enabling him to occupy an important niche in the "marketplace" for religious knowledge.[13]

As with generic websites, most of the content posted on these Facebook pages reflects a Sunni vision. Some pages are more obviously identifiable as Sunni than others. For example, one Facebook group that came up in our search explicitly identified as Sunni–Salafi and included a condition that "posts from deviant sects (Shi'i, Sufi, Ahmadiyah, Khawarij, Jahmiyyah, Murji'ah, Qadariyyah, etc.) are not accepted". Such blatant statements about "deviant sects", however, are rather exceptional in the sites we identified. Most general reference pages that came up in our searches do not mention the branch of Islam with which they are aligned. Nevertheless, it is possible to deduce their affiliations from the content included in posts and from the websites they reference or tag.

Facebook groups and pages catering to Shi'i and Ahmadiyya generally foreground their religious affiliations in a more explicit manner. While conducting our research, we came across a page that initially had a title that referred broadly to Muslim women's activism. However, upon returning to the page several months later, we noticed that the name had been changed to include specific reference to Shi'i women. When we asked the administrator about this change in an interview, she explained that the original name was highly general and failed to create awareness of Shi'ism as a distinct school of thought:

> "It was like really general. There are many women that are part of the Islamic resistance. However, there was no emphasis on the [Shi'i] current of thought. And that's why we gave it a more specific name."[14]

As a Shi'i woman, the administrator felt it was important to create a Facebook page that highlighted not only the activism of Muslim women in general, but of Shi'i women in particular.

The administrators of Facebook pages we interviewed were conscientious about competing with other Facebook pages for viewership. They emphasized the importance of having a highly generic page name for maximizing viewership. For this reason, there are several pages that have the same name (e.g., "*islam en español*"), albeit with different letter casing. During our interviews, some of the administrators expressed frustration with "copycat" pages that used similar names and formats, and emphasized how their pages were more original and authentic.

While the administrators we interviewed certainly saw themselves in competition with other page administrators, the rationales they articulated for remaining anonymous did not relate exclusively to strategies for augmenting viewership. Some cited religious motivations linked to the value Islam places on humility when explaining their preference for remaining anonymous. Several told us that gaining notoriety as individuals might lead to arrogance or egotism. For example, the administrator of a generic Islamic reference page on Facebook spoke of the importance of not feeling superior to his viewers as a motivation for concealing his identity:

> "So that I won't be proud, you know? I might feel like I'm superior to others. Of course, that's what I don't want [. . .] That is, in the religion, according to Islam, I should [. . .] never think that I am better than the other."[15]

"Fatima", the administrator of another "Islam in Spanish" Facebook page, likewise spoke of religious motivations linked to humility when explaining why being anonymous was "spiritually better":

> "I don't use my name for the simple reason that our religion says that. . . you shouldn't do things so that people will say, 'Wow, so-and-so explains things so well.' 'Wow, so-and-so does things so well.' This is not for us. We don't want flattery from people. We want God to see us this way, not the people. We do things anonymously to show our faith. [. . .] We want to strengthen our faith so that it will grow, no? Because if people start flattering you, what's going to

> happen? You're going to stop doing it for a sacred motive. If you start doing it to show off how well you explain things [. . .] that's where you lose yourself. Better anonymous."[16]

"Yasmin", who administers a Facebook page providing guidance for Muslim women, stated that she refrained from using her name so that the focus would be on Muslims as a collective, rather than on her as an individual. She argued that by using a generic account, she could focus on religious content without having to provide details about her personal life or experiences.[17]

The fact that anonymous webmasters and social media administrators do not share their personal profiles publicly does not necessarily mean they conceal their identities from those who express interest in getting to know them personally. Some of our interviewees said that when people contacted them via private messages, as we did when requesting an interview, they were happy to reveal their personal identities. Thus, for at least some administrators of Facebook groups or pages that publish content on Islam, anonymity is not something they necessarily seek to maintain when corresponding personally and individually with their viewership.

7. Conclusions

In this article, we have drawn attention to the features of anonymous and generic Islamic reference websites that make them appealing to wide audiences, as indicated by their high ranking in basic Google searches regarding Islam. The performance of anonymity, we have argued, contributes to the impression that the content posted on such sites is universal and non-sectarian. For individuals who are wary of sectarianism and bias in theological interpretations, site descriptions that emphasize the diversity and neutrality of webpage administrators can help to build trust by mitigating such concerns. This function of anonymity in the sphere of "digital religion" is distinct from the functions hitherto emphasized in the literature, such as those of providing protection against stigma or cover for extremist or otherwise nefarious activity (Bunt 2009; Larsson 2016).

Scholars of social performativity have highlighted how performances are not always successful or "felicitous" (cf. Butler 2013). A performance is successful when it comes off as "natural, not contrived, not a performance but an effortless expression, true to life" (Alexander 2011, p. 4). As a strategy for building trust and appealing to a wide audience, anonymity in the context of "cyber-Islamic environments" (Bunt 2018) would presumably be most felicitous when the web content posted comes off as authentic, as if the website or social media page were letting Islamic speak for itself without interpretational bias. If critical users see a contradiction between a site's purported universality and non-sectarianism, on the one hand, and the presence of clear theological, ideological, or political alignments, on the other, they will likely question the site's credibility. However, being able to identify theological alignments and sectarian affiliations often requires prior knowledge of divisions within Islam and the theological or ideological features of different branches, sub-branches, or fringe groups. For audiences that lack this knowledge and are therefore unable to make these determinations, the sites might indeed appear neutral and non-sectarian. Future research might delve more deeply into how different audiences consume and interpret diverse websites and social media pages that include Islamic content, as well as how their interpretations influence their perceptions of the sites' legitimacy.

The performative aim of "letting Islam speak for itself" is, of course, not limited to anonymous sites. Traditional authorities, influencers, and others employing legitimating strategies that emphasize personal religious training, knowledge, and experience likewise aim to convince audiences that they are merely vessels for the transmission of Islam's true teachings. Anonymity should therefore be conceptualized as one among several performative strategies for coming off as authentic and gaining appeal in an Islamic religious field that has become more heterogeneous and crowded since the advent of the internet. Since different "digital Islamic creatives" cater to distinct audiences, they tailor their respective performative strategies to disparate segments of the population, both Muslim and

non-Muslim. As we have noted above, these strategies do not necessarily reflect calculated efforts to maximize religious influence and power alone. Anonymity as a performative strategy, for instance, may reflect ethical considerations that place value on the principle of humility, whether for religious or non-religious purposes. The motivations underpinning different performative strategies should not necessarily be understood as singular or exclusive, as multiple motivations may be operative simultaneously and at different levels of consciousness.

While religious reference sites like those described in this article continue to be a popular resource for individuals looking to learn about Islamic theology, jurisprudence, and piety, advances in artificial intelligence models and chatbots like ChatGPT or Gemini have facilitated new means for learning about Islam digitally and for generating online religious content. Whereas the authoritative power of anonymous sites emanates, in part, from their capacity to come off as transmitting a "view from nowhere", the authoritative power of AI systems stems from their pretense of transmitting a "view from everywhere". Future research might employ both quantitative and qualitative methods to better comprehend the micro-mechanics of trust within the digital Islamic religious field, as well as other digital religious fields, in a world where religious knowledge and authority are increasingly accessed and mediated by digital technology and platforms.

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Notes

1 We assured that we were not logged in to any personal Google accounts when conducting our searches since Google also tailors results to particular user preferences and patterns.

2 http://islam-port.com/who-are-we/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

3 https://www.religiondelislam.com/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

4 https://www.islamicity.org/about-islamicity (accessed on 31 July 2024).

5 https://www.islamic-invitation.com/about (accessed on 15 April 2024).

6 https://www.islamweb.net/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

7 https://www.islamreligion.com/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

[8] While some Islamic references sites include direct translations from one language to the others, most vary depending on the language selected. Future studies might take a more in-depth look at how content is adapted in accordance with language and anticipated audience.

[9] https://islamonline.net/en/about-us/ (accessed on 31 July 2024).

[10] https://www.islamreligion.com/category/86/sects-attributed-to-islam (accessed 31 July 2024).

[11] https://islamicbulletin.org/?page_id=12001 (accessed 31 July 2024).

[12] Ashura (the 10th day of Muharram) is narrated and commemorated differently by Sunnis and Shi'i. Shi'i mourn the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, who was killed in the Battle of Karbala. Sunnis, by contrast, generally place greater significance on commemorating the liberation of Prophet Moses and the Israelites from Pharaoh's tyranny.

[13] Interview conducted on 29 August 2023.

[14] Interview conducted on 5 October 2023.

[15] See above note 13.

[16] Interview conducted on 8 September 2023.

[17] See above note 14.

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