The Fatwā in the Digital Age

What Are Muslim Millennials Looking For?

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FOREWORD

The rise of an important Muslim population in Europe, with no historical tradition of being a minority, led to a recurrent debate about the integration of European Muslims and the compatibility of Islam with the so-called European values. Experts on Islam used to interrogate the Islamic religious corpus (what does the Qur'ān and the tradition say about socializing in a non-Muslim environment?), while social scientists preferred to study the concrete social and religious practices of the European Muslims. Wael Farouq introduced in his book a new approach: how young European Muslims themselves do address the issue of the adequation between their individual practices and the theological corpus? In order to achieve this goal, they adopt a traditional practice in Islam: asking a learned theologian about the religious liceity of a practice, custom, or attitude, and looking for some advice on how they should behave in a given circumstance. The answer to such a question is called a *fatwā*. People who ask for a *fatwā* are called *mustaftī*s and the learned one who answers is called a *muftī*.

Given this new public demand, many websites are in competition to provide *fatwā*s. Some of them, like the European Council for Fatwā and Research (ECFR), connected with the Muslim Brothers, endeavored to set up a jurisprudence dealing with the specificities of being a minority in a Western environment. This attracted a lot of attention in the public sphere, re-enforced by the notoriety of the chair of the council, Šayḫ al-Qaraḍāwī. The Council presented itself as the best representative institution searching for a compromise between adherence to the basic tenets of Islam and integration in the European society and culture.

Nevertheless, Farouq shows that the most consulted sites are not those, like the ECFR, that explicitly claim to set up a 'minority *fiqh*'—a jurisprudence specially constructed to address a new situation (Muslims living as a minority). Young European Muslims prefer to consult more traditional sites, for instance of the Salafi school of thought that does not recognize the specificity of the migrant's situation and offers a traditional normative approach based on 'do/don't.'

At first glance it seems that, among the Muslim youth, this search for normative *fatwā* signals a conservative and traditionalist approach, highlighting the depth of the gap that separates many young Muslims from their Western environment. But Wael Farouq, instead of looking at the explicit content of the questions, shows how the way it is formulated and brought to the *muftī* indicates on the contrary a profound acclimation to Western culture and values from both the one who asks and the one who answers. Firstly, the formulation of the questions shows that the young petitioners consider their rooting in Europe as a fact. They are concerned more by the normativity of daily life in a non-Muslim environment than by the liceity of living in a non-Muslim environment. Secondly, they express themselves as individuals, not as members of a different community. They don't address the general principles and issues—what Farouq calls 'stereotypes' (is Islam compatible with the European way of life?)—that obsess the Western media: they stick to concrete individual questions and answers. How to live my life, to be in peace with myself and my faith? Despite the apparent traditionalist approach (asking for guidance from a learned man), they in fact invent a new form of direct relationship with a distant and often abstract mentor that is not to be found in traditional Muslim societies. The *muftī* is online, detached from any concrete social bind with the *mustaftī*, who appears as being outside any specific social context. Paradoxically, although the two people are not in direct contact, their relation is more individualized because it is not embedded in a social fabric.

In a traditional Muslim society, a young person would not go to the *muftī*'s house or office because it would not be appropriate to bypass his or her father or the local *imām*. One should wait to achieve a certain social status or level of education to address a question to a famous *muftī* and one has anyway to pass through his office assistants. By contrast the young *mustaftī* living in the West has a 'deculturated' and 'dissocialized' relation to the *muftī*. There is nothing traditional in that relation, whatever the apparent quest for conformity. Instead of asking for the norm before

doing something, the *mustaftī* looks more for a retroactive, even if reluctant, legitimation of his or her real life in the West. They ask the *muftī* the same way than other people write to Amy of the *Chicago Tribune* (*Ask Amy*) or *The Ethicist* of the *NYT Magazine*. There are few abstract theoretical questions, but a reference to a concrete personal situation, very often concerning something they already did.

Farouq practices a subtle and original discourse analysis applied to the questions: he studies pronouns and grammar not just keywords. The dominant pronoun is 'I,' the dominant expression is "what to do?" The request never starts with a hypothetical question (What if?) but with the description of a concrete personal case. Hence the way to speak says more on the 'Westernization' of the *mustaftī* than the words he explicitly uses. Maybe we can say that the more he or she 'islamises' the discourse by using Arabic terms, the more it shows that they need these exotic terms to hide what is an in-depth Westernization of the way to live as an individual in a different world.

In a word, Wael Farouq dissipates the old debate that is agitating Western public opinion: tradition versus modernity, McDonald versus *jihād*, etc. He shows that 'Westernization' might take a traditional garb (asking for a *fatwā*) and be expressed in a traditional terminology, but it uses a Westernized 'grammar,' that says more about integration than the explicit reference to orthodoxy. The *fatwā* online system is neither a return to tradition nor just a technical adaptation to modernity; it is a way to live modernity, a way to be modern, or more exactly to adopt a modern form to be conservative. To be modern and/or to be Western is not necessarily to be liberal. That is something that Catholics and Jews are supposed to have accepted long time ago. It is now the turn of young Muslims to show how they cast their faith into a modern grammar.

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Transliteration System

ا	ā	ض	ḍ
ب	b	ط	ṭ
ت	t	ظ	ẓ
ث	t̲	ع	ʿ
ج	j	غ	ġ
ح	ḥ	ف	f
خ	ḫ	ق	q
د	d	ك	k
ذ	d̲	ل	l
ر	r	م	m
ز	z	ن	n
س	s	ه	h
ش	š	و	w/ū
ص	ṣ	ي	y/ī

ء – ʾ transliterated only in the middle and at the end of a word

ة – generally not transliterated; in the case of *iḍāfa* it is transliterated with -t

ى – transliterated as ā

Short vowels:

ﹷ -a

ﹻ -i

ﹹ -u

Diphtongs:

ﹷوْ -aw

ﹷيْ -ay

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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About the Author

Wael Farouq has worked in several international universities such as The American University in Cairo, Egypt; the University of Macerata, Italy; and the Faculty of Law at New York University, USA. He is Professor of Arabic Language and Culture at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy; a member of the scientific and steering committee of the Center for Arabic Language Research (CARA); and a member of the steering committee of the Observatory of Terminologies and Language Policies (OTPL). He is a member of the scientific committee of the *European Journal of Language Policy* and of the scientific magazine *Cahiers de Lexicologie*. He is the editor of the international intercultural journal *Jusur* in English. He is the author of several scholarly articles, essays, and monographs in Italian, Arabic, and English, including *Conflicting Arab Identities: Language, Tradition and Modernity* (Muta, 2023) and *Discourse Analysis in the Epistles of the Brothers of Purity* (Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2018).

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Introduction

In the mid-1930s of the past century, one member of the Egyptian National Assembly (the Parliament) opened his speech with one of the most diffuse religious formulas in the Arab-Islamic world *bi-sm^i-llāh^i al-raḥmān^i al-raḥīm* (in the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful). At that point, Muṣṭafā Pasha al-Naḥḥās, leader of the national liberal majority party al-Wafd, interrupted him by saying, "We are here to speak in the name of the nation, not in the name of God."[1] Approximately a hundred years later, on February 7, 2012, in the same hall, a Salafist Deputy interrupted the Parliament's deliberations by performing the *āḏān*, the call to prayer, and this after the majority of deputies had already declared their first loyalty to religion by adding to the Parliamentary oath—a solemn commitment to respect the Constitution and the law— "As long as God's Law is not violated."[2]

The relationship between Islam and modernity is often seen as a dichotomy and is the subject of a long-standing debate among scholars. In this dichotomous view, Islam is regarded as a reactionary and traditionalist force opposed to progress and modern life. Religion/tradition (Islam)

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[1] See ʿAlāʾ al-Ḥadīdī, *Muṣṭafā al-Naḥḥās: dirāsa fī al-zaʿāma al-siyāsiyya al-miṣriyya* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Hilāl li-l-Ṭibāʿa, 1993).

[2] David D. Kirkpatrick, "Chaotic Start to Egypt's First Democratically Elected Parliament," *New York Times*, January 23, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/24

and (Western) modernity would be a pair of antagonistic and irreconcilable elements. This view may be considered as "a sort of Neo-Orientalism," which is

> characterized by a rationalized language covering a normative and value-laden approach in which the Muslim world is opposed to the Western one in terms of political moderation, democracy and human rights. Neo-Orientalism refers to a substantialist approach to religion and a linear vision of history in which the politics of the Islamic world cannot be anything other than theocracy and a return to past.[3]

Often associated with this dichotomous view is another belief, namely, that Muslims cannot integrate into modern Western societies and, indeed, may pose a danger, both on a physical and on an identity level—a preconception that is often amplified by mass media discourse, contributing to increased fears and social conflicts.

> In the media Islam and Muslims are always represented in connection with conflicts. The implicit explanation is that Islam is the cause and the prevailing assumption is that Islam is a conservative, reactionary cultural form. In this line of reasoning, once present in the West as an immigrant, Muslims have a problem: they cannot be true Muslim believers in a modern, democratic welfare state. If they want to be modern, they must betray their Muslim identity, with the consequent loss of culture. If they want to be a Muslim they cannot enjoy the fruits of modernity.[4]

This view has led, since the late 1980s, both in academic circles and in society, to a "security perspective, which narrowly focuses on the threat posed by global Islamic extremism and the risk of Muslims being radicalised into performing terrorist actions in Europe"[5] and the West in general. Des Delaney further states:

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[3] Jocelyne Cesari, "Islam in France: Social Challenge or Challenge of Secularism?" in *Muslim European Youth: Reproducing Ethnicity, Religion, Culture*, eds. Steven Vertovec and Alister Rogers, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 25.

[4] Lars Pedersen, "Islam and Socialization among Turkish Minorities in Denmark: Between Culturalism and Cultural Complexity," in *Muslim European Youth: Reproducing Ethnicity, Religion, Culture*, eds. Steven Vertovec and Alister Rogers, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 77.

[5] Des Delaney, *The Lived Experiences of Muslims in Europe: Recognition, Power and Intersubjective Dilemmas* (London/New York: Routledge, 2020), 14.

It can be argued that the majority of academic accounts have to a large extent been too narrowly concerned with viewing Muslims in Europe through the lens of political extremism. As a consequence, the everyday is an aspect of Muslim life in Europe commonly lost from sight when the security lens is active.[6]

This dichotomous view, however, can be thoroughly challenged because it assumes that there is an abstract and homogeneous Islam as opposed to an equally abstract and homogeneous modernity. Sociologists have long proposed a better, more reality-oriented approach, the so-called participatory and advocacy paradigm,[7] which deals with Muslims' everyday experiences in specific cultural contexts, either in Western or Muslim societies, rather than with the doctrinal and legal corpus of Islam. This sociological approach, however, has so far produced only qualitative research involving small samples and yielded results characterized by low statistical significance.[8] As will be amply illustrated, the research presented in this volume, which is developed within this approach, is an attempt to overcome this limitation through an accurate thematic and discourse analysis of a wide collection of online *fatwā* questions using the quantitative methods of corpus linguistic analysis.

Why should online *fatwā*s provide useful insight into the long-debated dilemma of Muslims and modernity? *Fatwā*s, in contemporary times, are a complex phenomenon. This complexity arises from the historical evolution of the *fatwā* itself, which ended in centuries of stagnation and uncritical repetition, and from the historical challenge that modernity, in the last two centuries, has presented to Islamic jurisprudential reason, which is

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[6] Delaney, *The Lived Experiences of Muslims in Europe*, 17.

[7] Muhammad Anwar, *The Myth of Return: Pakistanis in Britain* (London: Pearson Education, 1979); Muhammad Anwar, *Pakistanis in Britain: A Sociological Study* (London: New Century Publishers, 1985); Muhammad Anwar, *Race and Elections: The Participation of Ethnic Minorities in Politics*, Monograph in Ethnic Relations, ed. Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, vol. 9 (Coventry: University of Warwick, 1994); Muhammad Anwar, *Between Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1998); Muhammad Anwar, "Muslims in Western States: The British experience and the way forward," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 28, no. 1 (2008): 125–137; Muhammad Anwar, *Ethnic Minorities and Politics: The British Electoral System* (Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009).

[8] As admitted, for example, by Delaney himself, a strong advocate of the 'participatory and advocacy paradigm,' who says, "[…] in terms of empirical expansion, the qualitative findings from this study can and should be accompanied and corroborated by quantitative methods of analysis" (Delaney, *The Lived Experiences of Muslims in Europe*, 193).

faced with the need to harmonize with both the present and its tendency to retreat into the past.[9] This complexity has further developed in the context of Islamic societies, reshaped by modernization processes that have reduced modernity to mere structures, formulas, and mechanisms emptied of the meaning and cultural values on which modernity was founded in the West.

That said, secular Muslims are the primary 'space' where attempts are made to harmonize the Islamic tradition—in the form it assumes today in the context of modern Islamic societies—with the values of the (Western or Islamic) socio-cultural context in which they reside. In the past, these Muslims were difficult to reach and identify, a fact that probably contributed to their marginalization in scientific research. Today, however, they fall well within the scope of scientific research thanks to modern communication technologies, which make it possible to easily answer the questions they ask themselves and their religious authorities on the relationship between their faith and the culture of the society they live in. These questions, along with their answers, make up what is technically called a *fatwā*. These *fatwā*s are now publicly available on many websites that have replaced, in many cases, the traditional Islamic religious authorities and the *muftī*s, who are entitled to issue *fatwā*s. Such websites are the closest and easiest way for secular Muslims to contact religious experts. So, while online *fatwā*s can 'trace' how authoritative religious discourse and jurisprudential reason are affected by modernity, the questions that prompt them can 'trace' how ordinary Muslims deal with modernity in their daily lives.

The growing Islamic presence in the digital world has been carefully mapped in recent decades, for example, by Gary R. Bunt's comprehensive work, which has highlighted "the emergence of digitally literate religious scholars."[10] He and other academics have discussed how cyber-Islamic environments are reshaping traditional Islamic discourse and authority,

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[9] This issue has been extensively analyzed in Wael Farouq, *Conflicting Arab Identities. Language, Tradition and Modernity* (Milan: Muta, 2023).

[10] Gary R. Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 15. See also: Gary R. Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000); Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto Press, 2003); Gary R. Bunt, *Cyber Muslims: Mapping Islamic Digital Media in the Internet Age* (London/New York/Oxford/New Delhi/Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).