

Gary R. Bunt, University of Wales, Trinity Saint David

The Net Imam Effect: #Islam and Religious Authority in Cyberspace

This presentation explores the contestation on issues of representation and religious authority in cyber Islamic environments. In an era where authority networks transcend geographical boundaries, and when digital proficiency can be more important than religious status, there has been an evolution of notions of authority and leadership. Digital technology is shaping how Muslims across vast territories relate to religious authorities in fulfilling spiritual, mystical and legalistic agendas. Millennials and digital natives may respond more to aspects of online authority than 'analogue' equivalents, impacting on everyday concepts of religious knowledge and identity, and also raising concerns regarding radicalisation. Online environments often challenge traditional models of authority. One result is the result of digitally literate religious scholars and authorities whose influence and impact go beyond traditional boundaries of imams, mullahs, and shaikhs. This presentation explores how diverse religious perspectives contest for audiences, reflecting on multimedia approaches from a variety of players. It questions the impact of social media pronouncements, and explores how organisations and platforms might respond to contemporary concerns in the light of continually shifting religious and media contexts.