

Learning to Be Authentic

Religious practices of German and Dutch Muslims
following the Salafiyya in forums and chat rooms

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Note on transcription, translation and quotations from primary material

I have used a simplified version of the transliteration system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) in order to facilitate the reading of the text. For this sake, I have dispensed with all diacritical marks in the transcription. The transcription in the text does not differentiate between long and short vowels with the exception of the glossary where long vowels are marked with a flat bar above them (for instance “ā” for a long a) in order to indicate proper pronunciation for interested readers. The alphabetic order of the glossary does not take account of the article “al” at the beginning of a word or phrase.

Anglicized forms of Arabic words are used whenever possible as with fatwa or sheikh. Arabic and other non-English words are put in italics with the exception of the often used and largely familiar words like Salafiyya, Qur’an, Sunna, hadith, jihad, shari’a and derivatives thereof and those names that are in general known to a broader public like al-Qa’ida.

Translations from Arabic to English are mine unless otherwise indicated. I have used the translation of Arthur John Arberry¹ for Qur’anic verses which I have modified in some cases for the sake of readability. The references I provide for the hadith I cite in the text relate to the digitalised hadith collections and their specific numbering as they are available on the Arabic website of al-Eman (<http://www.al-Eman.com>). The translation of the primary sources, mostly Dutch and German, are mine. Arabic words found in German and Dutch primary sources in both Arabic script and transcribed will be rendered in the translation according to the aforementioned rules without italicization. A translation is either directly inserted into the quotation in square brackets or, in the case of longer phrases, in footnotes on their first appearance.

Quotations from forums and chat rooms have been rendered more readable in the translation by inserting punctuation marks, correcting mistakes in language and syntax where necessary.

¹ The Arberry translation I have used is the 1955 edition re-published in 1964 by Oxford University Press and accessible at http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/Public/book_tki.html.

Introduction: The Salafiyya and digital technologies

Our models of communication, consequently, create what we disingenuously pretend they merely describe (Carey 2009, 25).

Fundamentalists, in short, do not simply exist “out there” but are also produced by modern discursive practices (Harding 1991, 374).

Two social, cultural and technological processes which started out independently have become interwoven in the last decades in Europe: the rise of the Salafiyya² among Muslim populations in Europe and the integration of digital communication technologies into practices of everyday life, including religious practices. European countries with Muslim communities belong to those places where both processes have developed a dynamic that has transformed the ways many Muslims engage with their beliefs and with co-religionists, the way religion is embedded in their lives and the way in which interpretive traditions of Islam are transmitted and adapted to new environments.

Instances of the increasing presence and importance of digital technologies for Muslim life in Europe abound: study groups in chat rooms, blogs translating Arabic religious sources into one of the local vernacular languages, conversions to Islam on mobile phones or in chat rooms, seeking advice and help in religious matters on discussion forums, uploading Islamic videos to YouTube channels, discussing world events from an Islamic perspective in discussion forums, forming Islamic groups on Facebook, or simply meeting online in order to chat with brothers and sisters *fi din* (in religion). Bunt (2009, 1) puts all these phenomena under the umbrella term “cyber-Islamic environment” which consists of “different zones in cyberspace that represent varied Muslim world-views within the House of Islam, all of which present a reference point of identity with a conceptualization of Islam”.

Within Muslim intellectual circles, the power of digital technologies, especially with reference to religious authority within Islam, has been and still is discussed. Yahya Birt, a British writer and researcher, characterizes—tellingly in a blog post—two models of using digital technologies within Islam that mainly inform the inner-Islamic discussion: “Sheikh Google” and “Wiki Islam”. Sheikh Google figuratively stands for

² I prefer to use the term Salafiyya instead of the more common English equivalent Salafism since the Salafiyya has a long and diverse tradition within Islamic thinking which is not reflected in the current usage of the word Salafism especially in media and policy circles. In the following, I use the term Salafiyya for both the different traditions of thought that fall under this label and for the people subscribing to one of these traditions.

the unified madhhab [C.B.: school of law] of the virtual umma [C.B.: the community of Muslims] in which a billion-plus, atomized Muslims project their subjective musings, screaming inanities into the ether in a dialogue of the deaf.

In contrast, Wiki-Islam harbours the promise of

[c]reative collaboration between scholars, experts, intellectuals and Muslim publics [which] would allow for the social and intellectual process of ijma [C.B.: consensus] and ijihad [C.B.: use of individual reasoning with reference to the religious sources] to become dynamic, relevant and infinitely refinable. (Birt 2008)

The “Sheikh Google”-model expresses the fear that digital media like the Internet will be nothing more than a shouting place where random opinions with and without roots in Islam float freely and unaccounted for. “Wiki-Islam” on the other hand expresses the hope that digital technologies enable meaningful collaboration, open up participatory channels for those who have been excluded before and insert a new dynamic into religious deliberation.

The Salafiyya has been able to establish its presence in this “digital House of Islam” through the activism of its followers, preachers and some religious scholars who carry their specific interest in religion and engagement with their faith into computer-mediated environments (CMEs)³. In European debates (and also elsewhere), the Salafiyya is usually associated with fundamentalism, radicalism and Jihadism due to the self-claimed association of many Jihadi fighters and writers with the Salafiyya. However, apart from a Jihadi wing, the Salafiyya as a current contains numerous different factions which are at times deeply divided and fiercely opposed to each other over questions regarding the use of violence, living under non-Islamic governments, engagement in social and political institutions, the stance one should take vis-à-vis unbelievers or apostates and so on. Parts of these divisions are rooted in theological-doctrinal questions while others are generated by the diverse life worlds and contexts in which Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya live.

In the eyes of many observers and experts, the entanglement of the Salafiyya and the new

³ Computer-mediated environments (CMEs) are “distributed computer network[s] used to access and provide hypermedia content (i.e., multimedia content connected across the network with hypertext links)” (Hoffman and Novak 1996, 50). Contemporary popular examples of CMEs are facebook groups, YouTube channels, blogs, discussion forums, chat rooms, Twitter accounts or virtual worlds like Second Life. CMEs are predicated upon interaction between participants using digital communication technologies and sharing content with the help of hypertext links. The term was originally most widely used in marketing and consumer studies, where it was and still is employed as an alternative to terms such as world wide web, Internet, cyber space, virtual worlds (see Hoffman and Novak 1996), as well as in the field of online learning and teaching. In the latter and in other fields in which the term was adopted, computer-mediated environments designate single online spaces in which participants interact and gather around a specific concern, interests or issue, i.e., learning, discussing political affairs or, as in the case of this study, living their religion. I give preference to the term computer-mediated environments because it confers the sense of a space created by the interaction between participants and because it includes a reference to the “non-virtual” aspects of these environments such as computers and other hardware, wiring, keyboards or other artefacts.

information technologies—usually summarised under the label “the Internet”—has ushered a new era of “cyber jihad” or online radicalisation (i.e., Awan 2007; Bunt 2003; Ganor, von Knopp, and Duarte 2007; Paz 2009; Rogan 2007; Sageman 2008; Thomas 2008). Accordingly, most research projects approach the Salafiyya and its use of media technologies from the vantage point of the radicalisation paradigm. This approach, however, is problematic since it can obfuscate other important social, cultural and political processes taking place in digital environments where the Salafiyya is active. Furthermore, the term “radical” is not as scientifically neutral as some researchers construct it to be. Due to a public debate in Europe and elsewhere in which radicalisation is usually constructed as an identity-transforming process attributed to “the Muslim other” and in which the designation “radical” has become a way of denouncing specific expressions of Muslim faith in contrast to a “moderate Islam”, it is difficult to uphold a meaningful scientific notion of the radical. A further issue with research on radicalisation is the variety of definitions in use. In the past, researchers emphasized the use of violence in order to reach political goals in their definitions. Radicalisation in this view is part of political violence. In recent years, the scope covered by the notion of radicalisation has been widened to the acceptance or toleration of violence as well as extremist world views, intolerance and undemocratic behaviour or beliefs (see Kundnani 2012). The problem of such definitions is that they refer to concepts such as democracy, extremism or terrorism which are themselves in need of clarification (Kühle and Lindekilde 2010, 22–27).

On an epistemological level, researchers in this area tend to base their understanding of media implicitly on a scientific paradigm and a communication model which are both contested within media and communication studies, namely on media effects theories and a sender-receiver communication model.⁴ Media effects studies concentrate on finding “a convincing causal chain from the circulation of a media text, or a pattern of media consumption, to changes in the behaviour of audiences” (Couldry 2010, 37). Upon first sight it may sound plausible that playing violent games elicits aggressive behaviour, watching hardcore pornographic material gives rise to sexual abuse and consuming radical thought online leads to radicalisation. The leading communication model within media effects studies is that the sender—that is, those who produce media content—send messages that are deciphered by the receiver—those who consume media content—and that media content influences subsequent behaviour of media consumers.

The relation between media consumption and behaviour is, however, heavily contested

⁴ For a good overview over the different models and approaches used within media studies, especially with reference to the study of religion and media see Hoover’s book *Religion in the Media Age* (2006, 7–44).

and difficult to corroborate scientifically. Research on the effects of media within media and communication studies has not been able to establish a unequivocal causal link between specific patterns of media consumption and human behaviour. This has inspired Berelson (1948, 172) to summarise the results of media effects studies in 1948 in the following way: “Some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effect.” Furthermore, media effect studies suffer from a series methodological and theoretical flaws. For instance, Gauntlett (2005) criticizes the urge to tackle social problems like violence and radicalisation backwards in that they put the media right from the beginning on the research agenda assuming that a certain pattern of media consumption results in violent behaviour instead of empirically catching the practices and factors that might be linked to a certain form of behaviour in the first place. Most research data within media effect studies can at the most establish correlations as for instance “most high school shooters have played violent games prior to their crime” which is not sufficient to establish a causal relationship. Intervening variables such as education, social networks, family situation and social developments are difficult to control in such a research which means that it can never be ruled out that they do not play a role. The two main variables, media consumption and behaviour are in addition difficult to measure. Research that aims to establish a direct causal relation between the consumption of radical Islamic thought online and radicalisation suffers from these methodological and theoretical pitfalls. This does not automatically mean that Internet does not possibly play a decisive role in the process of radicalisation. However, it raises the question as to how the media effects hypothesis in the case of Muslim radicalisation can, if at all, be tested.

Unfortunately, research about the Internet and the Salafiyya tend to proceed from the assumption of online radicalisation and understand the Internet as an information provider and as an interactive system of communication between different individuals, networks or groups (e.g., Sageman 2008, 113–116). The main task of the Internet in this understanding is similar to the one of older media: transmitting content whether as factual information or world-views. Such a conceptualisation of computer-mediated environments restricts online practices to storage, retrieval and spread of information with no further social implications. However, people interact, socialise and, to put it rather simply, “are” or “exist” in computer-mediated environments.

In contrast to these approaches to the Salafiyya and digital media technologies this work is grounded in what is broadly called practice theory since I am rather interested in the social and cultural implications that the merger of the Salafiyya and digital technologies harbours for

religious practices in different contexts. This is not to deny that radicalisation processes do actually play a role when dealing with the Salafiyya and digital technologies or that research on radicalisation and digital technologies cannot be fruitful. However, in the context of my research interest a focus on radicalisation as outlined above would run the risk of capturing only half of the story of the Salafiyya and the new media and of establishing causal links between a media consumption and a specific pattern of (radical) behaviour where there is actually only enough evidence to identify co-relations.

I will use the remainder of this introduction to introduce the group of Muslims that has been at the centre of my research before I outline in Chapter 1 the theoretical and methodological approach employed in this study. The following section discusses the term Salafiyya and the different lines of thought within this religious current until the present. In the light of contemporary events and controversial debates in European societies in which the Salafiyya (and Islam) plays a role, it is necessary to clarify what the Salafiyya actually is as a current within Islamic thinking with a long tradition and as a general term covering a broad range of contemporary religious movements and networks of activists in the Muslim world including immigrant and minority communities in European countries.

The Salafiyya: Doctrines, activism and media

The Salafiyya is on the one hand a current of thought with a specific understanding of theology and jurisprudence different from other currents within Islam. On the other hand, it at times solidifies into socio-religious movements in which activists aim to effect personal, social or political change which they see as an integral part of Islam. Additionally, like other secular and religious world views, Islam and the Salafiyya have been influenced by different media. In order to present its different manifestations and the role of the media, this sub-chapter will discuss the Salafiyya from five different angles: (1) As a current of thought the Salafiyya encompasses specific theological and hermeneutic approaches which distinguish it from other currents of thought within Islam. Simultaneously, some theological issues are contested within the Salafiyya and play a significant role in its fragmentation and internal debates. (2) Furthermore, the Salafiyya has inspired numerous social and political Muslim activists and intellectuals during the last two centuries who have left their mark on modern Muslim activism and thinking. (3) Different uses of media from the early manuscript culture to the printing industry have left their imprint on Islam, Muslim practices and discourses and thereby also on the Salafiyya. (4) Two migratory movements which are central to this study have taken place in recent decades: the migration of Muslims to European countries since the 1960s and the migration of Islam into computer-mediated environments initiated by the digitisation of Islamic religious sources. (5) In the last two decades, Muslims in the Netherlands and in Germany have increasingly been inspired by the Salafiyya and related it to their own specific life worlds.

The Salafiyya as a current of thought within Islam

The use of the term “Salafiyya” or “Salafism” and their respective derivatives is at times confusing because in the course of the history of this concept or label both have come to denote different things within Islamic thought and activism. I will begin this section by outlining how the term Salafiyya has been employed in this research before discussing the term in relation to doctrinal questions in more detail. Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya in contemporary Europe try to emulate the lives of the Prophet Muhammad and of the *salaf al-salih* (the pious forefathers, hence the term Salafiyya) in every aspect of life as strictly as possible. The term “*al-salaf al-salih*” usually comprises the companions of the prophet (*sahaba*) who were part of the first Muslim community around the prophet in Medina and the two generations following them (*al-tabi'un* and *atba' al-tabi'in*). The Prophet is considered to be the uncontested role model of a pious Muslim life as envisioned by God. His companions shared his life world and are believed to have had

unmediated access to the revelation since they could witness it from him first hand. They, according to the belief of Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya, passed on their knowledge and pure practice of Islam to the following generations. The belief in the superior and exemplary position of the first three generations of the Muslim community is grounded in several hadiths—reports of what the Prophet supposedly has done, said or remained silent about (sg. hadith)—in which the Prophet describes them as “the best of my community” (*khayr ummati*).⁵

However, the further away in time and place from the ideal Muslim community the more corrupted Islamic knowledge and practice became. Proponents of the Salafiyya believe that after the third generation, who were partly still able to witness the lives of and to learn from the *sahaba*, corruption slowly crept into Islam. They therefore attempt to purify religious practices from corruption (*fasad*) and heretical innovations (*bida'*, sg. *bid'a*) by referring back to the revelation, the Qur'an and the Sunna, which are both understood to be essentially pure and to carry information about the perfect model for a Muslim life (Meijer 2009a; Rougier 2008). The Sunna is contained in the hadiths.⁶ Those hadiths or reports which are available to us today have been transmitted orally and slightly later also in writing. In contrast to the Qur'an which is believed to be God's true word revealed to the Prophet over a period of 22 years, the hadiths are taken to be authored by human beings as witness reports that have been passed on from generation to generation.⁷ The Sunna, as my interlocutors repeatedly stress, exemplifies what the Qur'an prescribes (e.g., the prayer rituals) and provides guidelines for everyday life. Furthermore, the Sunna is understood as a lens through which the Qur'an should be read and properly understood. Since the Salafiyya believes that the Sunna reflects the life worlds of the prophet, his companions and the following two generations, one can stipulate in extension that Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya try to understand and live the model set out in the Qur'an through the life worlds of those pious ancestors. The practices of the pious forefathers and of the Prophet are

⁵ See for instance in the collection of one of the most eminent hadith scholars Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (d. 870): *Sahih al-Bukhari, kitab 62 (kitab fada'il ashab al-nabi), bab 1 (fada'il ashab al-nabi salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam etc.)*, hadith 3693 and 3694.

⁶ Supporters of the Salafiyya usually employ the term Sunna as a synonym for the corpus of authenticated hadiths. However, the exact definition of the Sunna, which in general means habit or usual practice, remains contested among the different strands of Islamic thinking and also within Islamic studies. For a more detailed account see Krawietz (2002, 115–181) and Duderija (2007, 316–322).

⁷ After the death of the last witnesses of the life of the prophet a still on-going discussion about the authenticity of the individual reports and the status of the Sunna in general emerged. The Salafiyya places an emphasis on examining the authenticity of reports with a series of methods established in the hadith science within Islam. For an excellent overview of the different methods of hadith criticism see Jonathan A.C. Brown (2009, 67–122). While the Salafiyya usually equates the Sunna with the corpus of authenticated hadiths other Islamic currents and traditions use the term in a more flexible way, for instance relating the Sunna to the accepted practice of the Muslim community (D. W. Brown 1996, 6–20).

therefore authoritative and need to be followed strictly in every sphere of life.

This description is largely based on the self-understanding of contemporary Muslims who consider themselves to be followers of the Salafiyya. Lauzière describes the Salafi approach as “a comprehensive orientation that embraces the entire gamut of religious beliefs and practices” which should be followed by all Muslims. Lauzière, however, rightfully cautions that this contemporary understanding of the term does not necessarily correspond to the ways it has been employed in pre-modern times. He argues that the label “Salafiyya” has only in modern times received its comprehensive meaning including a specific position taken in debates in both Islamic theology and in jurisprudence (*fiqh*). He points out that many religious scholars in medieval times like Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) were proponents of the *madhhab al-salaf* (school of the forefathers) in theological doctrine but considered themselves followers of another school in jurisprudence. He concludes that well into the 20th century the term *madhhab al-salaf* and its epithet “Salafi” referred to positions taken only in theology and not in jurisprudence (Lauzière 2010, 372).

While Salafi scholars, activists and believers diverge on some doctrinal issues considerably, as I will explicate later in this section, they nevertheless agree on crucial theological tenets which sets them apart from other Muslim groups and currents of thought. Some might interject that doctrines are fine for religious scholars but do not say a lot about the life worlds and the religious practices of believers. However, it is helpful to understand Salafi positions also in terms of doctrines since those are not merely dead letters but “an activity, a process of the transmission of the collective wisdom of a community, rather than a passive set of deliverances” (McGrath 1997, 11). This process of transmission of doctrinal positions is still a key issue among Muslims following the Salafiyya today. It is, for instance, a common practice to interpret current conflict constellations in terms of the theological, and by extension often political, debates that took place between different Muslim factions following the Prophet’s death and to view the current (Muslim) world through a doctrinal lens. This can go as far as the polemical use of group names from this formative period of Islam for Muslim groups nowadays, for instance *al-rafida* (the defectors) for the Shi’a. Doctrinal discussions are therefore closely linked to the identity of the Salafi community nowadays.

The theological stance that is championed by the Salafiyya has been labelled in different ways throughout Islamic history. Apart from Salafi or Salafiyya we find in the past as well as today among others the terms *athari*⁸, *ahl al-hadith* (people of the hadith) and *ahl al-sunna* (people of the Sunna) and derivatives as well as compounds thereof. Since theology seems to be the main

⁸ From the word *athar* (report) which is in religious literature often used interchangeably with hadith.

point of convergence in the discussions about what the Salafiyya actually is, it is worth looking at its main theological doctrines in comparison to opposing views. The overarching notion to which Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya ascribe is a very strict and absolute version of *tawhid* (monotheism). The Salafiyya identifies in general three categories of *tawhid* which are supplementary to each other: (1) *Tawhid al-rububiyya* (the unity of Lordship) states that God alone has absolute power over heaven and earth and over life and death. (2) *Tawhid al-uluhiyya* (unity of divinity) or *tawhid al-‘ibada* (unity of worship) means that a believer must entirely submit to God alone and that all worship must be directed directly and exclusively towards God without any intermediaries. (3) *Tawhid al-asma’ wa-l-sifat* (unity of names and attributes) implies that the descriptions of God in the Qur’an and the Sunna must be believed literally without neither interpreting them metaphorically nor attributing human characteristics to God since God is unique in nature and incomparable. In order to guard their strict and, in their eyes, pure understanding of *tawhid*, Salafi Muslims focus on fighting even the slightest hint of *shirk* (polytheism) and *bid’a* (religious innovation) which are seen as gateways for pollution and corruption.

It is the third version of *tawhid*, *tawhid al-asma’ wa-l-sifat*, which most clearly differentiates the Salafiyya from other currents of thought within Islam. The debate on the names and attributes of God was fiercely led during the formative first centuries after the death of the Prophet when the main theological currents within Sunni Islam emerged. The debate was, and still is, highly charged because the issue of *tawhid al-asma’ wa-l-sifat* is very closely related to the way a Muslim should understand and interpret the religious sources and how knowledge should be deduced from them. The debate was hence fuelled by different hermeneutic approaches to Qur’an and Sunna. Additionally, the scholarly debate about the attributes and names of God is linked since the early times to the different scholarly views about the status of the hadiths, the reports about the lives of the Prophet and his community. As mentioned before, these hadiths are considered to be formulated and transmitted by human beings and are therefore prone to error, be they wilful forgery or errors which creep in in the process of transmission from one person to another. After the death of the last generation of the *salaf al-salih*⁹ hadith studies (*‘ulum al-hadith*) crystallized as an important pillar of Islamic religious science and produced over the centuries different methods for the verification of the authenticity of hadiths (for an overview over the different approaches see J. A. C. Brown 2009, 67–122; Motzki 2005).

⁹ Most members of the third generation had died by 810, around 180 years after the death of the prophet (Meijer 2009a, 3n11).

Two irreconcilable assumptions grounded in the Qur'an and the hadiths stand at the core of the debate on *tawhid al-asma' wa-l-sifat*. On the one hand, the Qur'an underscores God's transcendence and incomparability: He is beyond the human sensory realm (see Q 42:11 and Q 112:4)¹⁰. On the other hand, though, the Qur'an and the hadiths contain descriptions of God and his actions that are usually ascribed to humans. The Qur'an mentions, for instance, that He has a hand (Q 48:10) or that He sits on a throne (Q 20:5). Secondly, Muslims refer to the 99 beautiful names of God (*asma' Allah al-husna*) said to be derived from the Qur'an like the All-Seeing (*al-basir*), the All-Hearing (*al-sami'*) and the All-Knowing (*al-'alim*). The doctrine of *tawhid* does not only mean that there is but one God but that God is eternal and not dividable into different parts and, therefore, cannot possess properties which exist apart from Him and might have existed before Him. For early Muslim scholars this posed a problem: *Tawhid* implies that God cannot share attributes with human beings like seeing, knowing and hearing because this would mean that these properties existed apart and outside of him. Furthermore, some of the 99 names seem to contradict claims about God in the Qur'an. For example, one of the 99 names is *al-wasi'* (the Omnipresent, the All-Embracing). But how, one could ask, can God be omnipresent and at the same time literally sit on a throne?

Muslim scholars found different answers to these puzzles. The Mu'tazila, one of the theological currents within Islam, developed the following argumentation: First of all, they dismissed hadiths with concrete anthropomorphic descriptions of God as forged. The rationalist Mu'tazila practised content criticism in order to evaluate the validity of a hadith. The reputation of the transmitters or the number of lines of transmissions of the same report and their reach back to the *sahaba* or to the Prophet himself was in their eyes not crucial. Rather, "reason [was] the ultimate arbiter for judging the veracity of a report" (J. A. C. Brown 2009, 104). Therefore, if a report contradicted the Qur'an in content, it was in general rejected as a forgery. Furthermore, they understood the anthropomorphic descriptions of Allah in the Qur'an figuratively: God's hand (Q 48:10) turns thus into a metaphor for his generosity and that God sits on a throne means that He rules over the world. As to the problem of the properties of God (the 99 names), the Mu'tazila saw them as inseparable from his being. Knowledge, for example, does not exist apart from God and is indivisible from his nature. Knowledge has not existed before Him nor is it created by Him (see Martin and Woodward 1997).

The early strictly literalist Sunni theological belief championed by the *ahl al-hadith* in the

¹⁰ Citations from the Qur'an are indicated by Q followed by the number of the chapter before and the number of the verse after the colon.

8th and 9th century, whom Brown calls “original Sunnis” (J. A. C. Brown 2009, 174), rejected in opposition to the Mu‘tazila reason as a criterion for interpreting the religious sources. By the same token, they thought that reason was not a tool to gain knowledge about the divine. After the death of the Prophet, so the assumption, God only speaks through the Qur’an and the hadiths to his creation and He is only knowable through the scriptures. The hadiths were in their view a legitimate source for theological doctrines and in many cases even the primary source in cases where the doctrines derived from the hadiths could not be verified by the Qur’an. Among those tenets of faith solely based on hadiths we find the punishment of the grave (*‘adhab al-qabr*), the return of Jesus with another Messianic figure who together will overcome the Antichrist, a strict notion of pre-ordination and the belief that on the Day of Judgement believers will be rewarded by literally seeing God. Those articles of faith were rejected by the Mu‘tazila because they either seemed to contradict the Qur’an or reason.

With reference to the discussion about the names and attributes of God, the *ahl al-hadith* theologians and their successors argued that what is written in the Qur’an and in the hadiths should be understood literally. Therefore, God indeed has a hand. Concomitantly, God cannot be grasped by human senses (see for instance Q 6:103 stating that “vision cannot grasp Him”) and does not possess human characteristics. Avoiding the accusation of anthropomorphism, the scholars of the *ahl al-hadith* required from believers to believe what is written in the Qur’an and the hadiths without asking how they should understand it. This approach to the problem of anthropomorphism and figurative interpretation of the texts became known as *bi-la kayfa* (without asking how) and is attributed by some to Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), one of the scholars of the past very much revered by the Salafiyya (Abrahamov 1995).¹¹ The notion of *bi-la kayfa* stipulates that there are doctrines which on the surface seem ambiguous or even contradictory to human understanding since their inner (true) meaning is not accessible to human reasoning. Human beings have no other choice than to believe the literal text, to reject anthropomorphism and to accept that they cannot grasp it with reason. While the Mu‘tazila rejected anthropomorphism (*tashbih*) by employing figurative interpretation (*ta’wil* or *majaz*) the early *ahl al-hadith* and its successors rejected both and dismissed *tashbih* and *ta’wil* as heretical innovations.

Among the successors of the early *ahl al-hadith* are the Ash‘ariyya¹² and, what some call,

¹¹ Haykel (2009, 38n12) describes the same approach to theological problems by which the Salafiyya neither denies the literal meaning of the texts nor accepts anthropomorphism with the Arabic term *tamrir* or *imrar* (literally: passing by, moving on). I have not come across this term in writings or interviews during my research.

¹² The term Ash‘ariyya is derived from Abu l-Hasan al-Ash‘ari (d. 935) who used to be a follower of the Mu‘tazila but broke with their strict rejection of the doctrines of the early *ahl al-hadith*. He aimed to compromise between the literal meaning of the Qur’an and the Sunna and the methods of rational reasoning of the Mu‘tazila.

the Salafi school of theology. The Ash'ariyya did not reject content criticism as promoted by the Mu'tazila. However, neither did they reject those tenets of faith of the early *ahl al-hadith* that were based on hadiths only (e.g., the punishments of the grave, the return of Jesus) because their view on the authenticity of those reports was more nuanced. The Mu'tazila (and others) categorised the reports into two groups: (1) those transmitted massively by numerous chains of transmissions¹³ independent from each other (*mutawatir*) and (2) those transmitted by only a few chains or even only one chain of transmission (*ahad*). Only those that were massively transmitted, i.e., *mutawatir*, yielded enough certainty to be used as a basis for doctrines. However, none of the tenets of faith held by the early *ahl al-hadith* actually fulfilled the requirements of a *mutawatir* hadith. In order to be able to hold on to these tenets of faith without blindly believing in the authenticity of the hadiths, scholars of the Ash'ariyya conceptualised a middle category of hadiths that started out with a few chains of transmissions in the first generations but became massively transmitted shortly thereafter. They termed this category *mashhur* (well-known) or *mustafid* (widespread). The growth of transmission chains in the course of the transmission process was interpreted as a sign that the Muslim community had agreed on their authenticity (J. A. C. Brown 2007, 183–194). In addition, they established the category of *mutawatir bi-l-ma'na* (massively transmitted in their meaning). This category comprised reports whose actual texts were not identical or similar but referred to a common element, for example mentioning the coming of the Messiah.¹⁴

With the help of these hadith categories the Ash'ariyya kept the tenets of faith as set out by the literalist *ahl al-hadith* while at the same time accepting some rationalist reasoning as practised by the Mu'tazila in the case of the question of the names and attributes of God. The Ash'ariyya evolved to become the mainstream of Sunni orthodox theology and laid claim on the term *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama'a* (people of the Sunna and the early community). The Salafiyya on their part claims to be the true successor to the early literalist *ahl al-hadith* since they continued to adhere to a strict *bi-la kayfa* stance in the debates about the attributes and names of God and contests the Ash'arite claim to the label *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama'a* due to rationalist leanings of the Ash'ariyya.¹⁵

As we could see from the previous paragraphs, the question of hermeneutics with

¹³ The concrete requirements for a *mutawatir* hadith vary among hadith scholars from 5 transmission chains to 40 in every generation (J. A. C. Brown 2009, 179).

¹⁴ See Krawietz (2002, 134–151) for a detailed account of *mutawatir*, *ahad* and *mashhur* hadiths.

¹⁵ For the sake of brevity and clarity of argument I have described only three theological currents within Sunni Islam: the *ahl-al-hadith* or Salafi school of theology, the Mu'tazila and the Ash'ariyya. A more detailed analysis would have to contain other currents like the Maturidiyya, the Kharijiyya or the Murji'a.

reference to the scriptures and the different understandings of the authenticity of hadiths yielded major theological differences which shaped the debate and different interpretations of *tawhid al-asma' wa-l-sifat*. The Salafiyya refers in their position to the early *ahl al-hadith* and has inherited their notion of a literalist reading of the revelatory texts, the concept of *bi-la kayfa*, and their acceptance of hadiths as long as they possess a sound chain of transmission without gaps and unreliable transmitters. While their shared understanding of *tawhid al-asma' wa-l-sifat* produces doctrinal coherence which contributes to inter-group solidarity, it is a fourth, more recently established category of *tawhid*, *tawhid al-hakimiyya* (the sovereignty of God), that continues to sow discord and has been a main cause for the fragmentation of the Salafiyya into different groups.

Tawhid al-hakimiyya evinces that God's law as embodied in the shari'a¹⁶ should be the only source of legislation and jurisprudence in the political field. This modern addition goes back to the medieval Hanbali scholar Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) who witnessed the Mongol invasion in the Middle East. Although he did not use this category of *tawhid* himself, he laid the argumentative foundation for later generations to do so. He issued a ruling in which he declared the new Mongol rulers unbelievers (*kuffar*) (see Aigle 2007). His line of argument was that though the Mongol rulers had indeed converted to Islam they actually continued to use their own system of law to rule the newly conquered areas. Ibn Taymiyya considered ruling on the basis of divine law as explicated in the shari'a a fundamental attribute of being a Muslim. Since the Mongol rulers refused to establish their rule on the basis of the shari'a, the Mongol rulers had to be considered unbelievers and jihad had to be declared against them. To prove that the Mongol rulers were unbelievers, that is to do *takfir* (excommunication, declaring somebody an unbeliever) on them, was essential in his argumentation, because in classic Islamic law ordinary Muslims are not allowed to wage jihad against their Muslim rulers. He therefore had to prove that they in fact were not Muslims.

Several modern Salafi scholars, ideologues and intellectuals adapted Ibn Taymiyya's notion of *takfir* on Muslim rulers and extended his argumentation. Among them was Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), an Egyptian intellectual and leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood, who interpreted the concept of God's unity (*tawhid*) in an encompassing way. According to him all human conduct and activities without exception must be understood as acts of worship because

¹⁶ The term shari'a is often translated as Islamic law. This translation, though not wrong, can be misleading since the shari'a is not a fixed set of rules and regulations in terms of an unchangeable and eternal code of law. Rather, it designates all the rules and regulations that govern Muslim lives and are derived from the Qur'an and the Sunna with the help of hermeneutic rules in the discipline of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). The exact content of the shari'a can therefore vary from place to place and time to time.

the entire universe issued from the will of God and is governed by His law. To rule and to abide by His law are therefore acts of worship that are only due to God (Khatab 2002, 151–152). He based his argumentation mainly on two Qur’anic verses:

Q 5:44: [. . .]Whoso judges not according to what God has sent down - they are the unbelievers

Q 5:31: They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God, and the Messiah, Mary's son – and they were commanded to serve but One God; there is no god but He; glory be to Him, above that they associate.

Qutb (n.d., 79) concluded from this that following other leaders (lords) and abiding by their laws is tantamount to taking them as Gods and worshipping them. And worshipping other Gods amounts to shirk which nullifies a Muslim’s belief in *tawhid*. Hence, those rulers who do not rule by what God has revealed are infidels and jihad against them is justified (for more details on Qutb’s concept of *hakimiyya* see Khatab 2002). The Salafi ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (b. 1959) continued to walk the path of Ibn Taymiyya and Sayyid Qutb by re-invigorating this notion and linking it, among others, to the concept of *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* (loyalty and disavowal) which I will treat in more detail in Chapter 2 (see Wagemakers 2009). In a nutshell, *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* is the obligation to show loyalty to God, Islam and Muslims and to dissociate from unbelievers. Those modern Salafi scholars felt, and still feel, the need to emphasise this part of *tawhid* as an own category in order to raise attention to the various forms of unbelief committed by Muslim rulers on a daily basis when employing man-made legislation and to frame them as infidels against which jihad must be waged.

As already mentioned, *tawhid al-hakimiyya* is one of the main points of doctrinal contention within the Salafiyya. In particular scholars and lay believers who tend towards a more quietist Salafi orientation do not follow the argumentative line outlined above in its entirety. They refuse to support *takfir* on Muslim rulers who systematically apply man-made law instead of the shari’a. They argue that Muslim rulers who apply man-made law commit *kufr* or unbelief but not necessarily apostasy. They base their argumentation on four hadiths accredited to ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Abbas (d. 687), a companion and paternal cousin of the Prophet, and to his students Tawus ibn Kaysan (d. 723) and ‘Ata’ ibn Abi Rabah (d. 733) in which they comment on the above cited verse Q 5:44 (“[. . .] Whoso judges not according to what God has sent down - they are the unbelievers”) that this should be interpreted as *kufr duna kufr*, that is, as *kufr* less than *kufr* or unbelief that does not nullify one’s belief in God (*iman*).¹⁷ The Salafi opponents of this interpretation, however, reject these hadiths as weak.

¹⁷ These hadiths are found in Ibn Kathir’s comment on Q 5:44 in his classical commentary of the Qur’an *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-‘Azim*.

Furthermore, as long as the act of unbelief or sin is not grounded in the conviction (*i'tiqad*) to do right although one knows that Islam forbids it, in knowingly turning a forbidden act or belief into a permissible act or belief (*istihlal*) or in the negation of the all-encompassing truth of Islam (*jahd*) the ruler remains a Muslim and *takfir* is not permissible.¹⁸ One cannot in general presume that all Muslim leaders implementing man-made law fall within these three categories. In contrast, proponents of *tawhid al-hakimiyya* and *takfir* on Muslim rulers argue that systematically applying man-made law can only be done with conviction, by knowingly making it *halal* and continuously negating the truth. What makes matters worse for their opponents is that doing *takfir* on Muslim rulers only generates internal strife and chaos (*fitna*) in times of external threat to the detriment of Islam and the Muslim community. Finally, they see the addition of *tawhid al-hakimiyya* as a religious innovation and unnecessary since the *tawhid al-rububiyya* and *tawhid al-uluhiyya* imply that solely God has legislative power. In their eyes, the adherents of *tawhid al-hakimiyya* play a political game against Muslim rulers and try to employ Islam for their own ends. Unsurprisingly, Salafi scholars who are closely associated with the Saudi regime and cooperate with it most fiercely reject *tawhid al-hakimiyya* as an independent category and related notions of *takfir*.

Having briefly outlined some major doctrinal differences within the Salafiyya, let me return to their shared hermeneutic approach to the religious sources, that is, their rejection of *taqlid* (imitation). Within Sunni orthodoxy, *taqlid* implies that a believer follows the decision of one of the four established schools of jurisprudence (*madhhab*, pl. *madhahib*) within Sunni Islam¹⁹ without questioning it or scrutinising the argumentation by which the authority in question has arrived at the decision. *Taqlid* stands in contrast to *ijtihad* (literally: exerting oneself) which comprises different methods of independent reasoning in order to arrive at an answer in a juridical matter. The practice of *taqlid* became standard in the Middle Ages not only for believers but also for most jurists while *ijtihad* was the distinguishing feature of a thriving Muslim jurisprudence until the fourth century after the death of the Prophet. The reasons for the

¹⁸ For a summary of quietist arguments see the document “An Explanation of the Deception of the Qutubiyah. The Creed of Imaam Al-Albaanee on Takfir and Apostacy” (Salafipublications 2000) published on SalafiPublications.com, one of the most popular quietist websites in English.

¹⁹ The four schools of jurisprudence crystallized in the formative period of Islamic jurisprudence in the first four centuries after the death of the Prophet. Many medieval Muslim scholars equate the end of the formative period with the fall of Baghdad under the invasion of the Mongols in 1258 and the fragmentation of the Abbasid Caliphate (Krawietz 2002, 70–72). The schools are named after their founders although they themselves neither used these terms nor considered themselves founders of a distinct school of law: the Hanafi *madhhab* after Abu Hanifa (d. 765), the Maliki *madhhab* after Malik ibn Anas (d. 795), the Shafi'i *madhhab* after Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (d. 820) and the Hanbali *madhhab* after Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855). The different schools developed their own methods and traditions with the help of which they derive solutions from the religious sources for questions of law.

stagnation of *ijtihad* and the hegemony of *taqlid* in the following centuries were manifold. Krawietz (2002, 74–77) asserts that due to the continuing fragmentation of the Muslim empire, rulers focused more on political infighting and loyalty and less on the qualifications of a jurist legible for appointment. Under these conditions of political fragmentation, the favourable climate for independent research in the field of jurisprudence vanished bit by bit. Furthermore, the existence of elaborate writings and detailed case studies led jurists to abstain from absolute *ijtihad* and to, instead, reproduce in their decision already existing jurisprudence as unified in the four jurisprudential schools. Zaman (2009, 208) states in a more positive light that *taqlid* served as “a defence against capricious interpretations [...], including, perhaps, those attempted on the bidding of the governing elite”. The Salafiyya considers the practice of *taqlid*, which they often derogatively translate as “blind imitation”, a gateway for corruption and heretical innovation since jurists—whether great or not, whether of the past or of the present—are as humans prone to human error. If the Qur’an and the Sunna do not provide a clear ruling, a Muslim is according to the Salafiyya required to examine decisions and rulings of the religious scholars to the best of her or his knowledge in order to decide which one to follow.

Despite the rejection of *taqlid*, Salafi scholars are often cautious about the use of *ijtihad* which in their eyes can cause ambiguity and confusion. *Ijtihad* in the sense of unlimited free reasoning, according to commonly heard critique, leads to discretion and becomes a carrier of human desires and inclinations (*ahwa’*, sg. *hawa*). In general, they reject the practice of *ijtihad* in the field of *kalam* (theology) as speculative and dangerous since this facilitates heretical innovations to the dogmata of Islam. These innovations are considered most dangerous since they can corrupt the creed (*‘aqida*) and expels a person from Islam. As we could see in the debates on the names and attributes of God, religious scholars following the Salafiyya tend to remain aloof from theological debates and employ the concept of “accepting without asking how” (*bi-la kayf*).

However, within jurisprudence (*fiqh*) which is not concerned with the tenets of faith itself like the existence of a God and His nature but with rules, regulations and legal norms to be applied to a case and which prescribe, advise or sanction a specific act or behaviour, *ijtihad* can become legitimate if neither the Qur’an and the Sunna as primary sources of law in their literal understanding nor the consensus (*ijma’*) of the *salaf al-salih* or the acknowledged grand religious scholars²⁰ yield a legal norm to be followed. The practice of *ijma’* is legitimised with a hadith in

²⁰ While most participants and informants in this research accept *ijma’* as a jurisprudential source they disagree about who actually should be part of a valid consensus. Due to their distinguished position, informants and participants gave priority to the consensus of the pious ancestors. Furthermore, they often referred to the

which the Prophet is supposed have confirmed that God will never have his community agree upon error.²¹ The use of *ijtihad* after all other sources have failed is usually quite narrowly circumscribed to *qiyas* (reasoning by analogy based on Qur'an and Sunna)²² and there is disagreement in theory and in practice as to how far *ijtihad* can go and as to who is entitled to practice *ijtihad*. A minority among Muslims following the Salafiyya tends towards the Zahiriyya, a theological and juridical school which rejects *qiyas* and constraints *ijma'* to the consensus of the *sahaba* and the Prophet. Their aim is to eliminate any trace of subjectivity from jurisprudence and to stay true to the apparent (*zahir*) meaning of Qur'an and Sunna. They do practice *ijtihad*; however, *ijtihad* in their understanding is confined to the search for an appropriate proof-text and not to be compared to the understanding of *ijtihad* in the other schools of law.

Instead of *ijtihad* and *taqlid* most scholars and believers of the Salafiyya practice and propagate *ittiba'* (following). This entails that the believer scrutinises the evidence from the primary sources provided in an opinion by a scholar (*al-'amal bi-l-dalil*, working with evidence) before accepting or rejecting it. By this, the believer is "freed from the yoke of *taqlid*" (Haykel 2009, 44) and not in danger of falling into errancy due to the uncontrolled employment of *ijtihad*. The basis of this practice which, as will be shown later, is quite similar to the practice of proof-texting within many Christian-evangelical circles, is a specific understanding of the text: The Salafiyya "in essence assumes that it is possible to interpret the Qur'anic text with complete objectivity without presuppositions or pre-conceived ideas" (Duderija 2007, 304). The failure to extract unequivocal meaning from the Qur'an is hence not attributed to the multivocality of the texts but to the limited capacity of human reason and understanding.

The Salafiyya as a modern socio-religious movement

The term Salafiyya took on a different meaning in the course of the mostly colonial encounter

consensus of the grand religious scholars without further specifying which scholars they actually meant. The group of venerated grand religious scholars can actually vary as we will see in the following chapters (see for instance Chapter 5). Simultaneously, they acknowledged differences of opinion (*ikhtilaf*) among the *salaf al-salih* and the grand religious scholars as legitimate. The range of *ikhtilaf* in their eyes delimits the range of possible non-heretical variations within their religion.

²¹ This hadith can be found in slightly different variations in a number of hadith collections, among others in the hadith collection of Abu Dawud Sulayman al-Sijistani (d. 889): *Sunan Abi Dawud, kitab 36 (kitab al-fitan wa-l-malahim), bab 1 (dhikr al-fitan wa-dala'ilihim)*, hadith 4255.

²² Those among the Salafiyya who accept *qiyas* as a jurisprudential source usually ascribe to the classical understanding of it. In this understanding, *qiyas* links a precedent from Qur'an or Sunna (*asl*) to a new case (*far'*) if they share the same operative or effective cause (*'illa*). The ruling (*hukm*) that applies to the precedent and is explicated in Qur'an or Sunna than also applies to the new case. One of the famous cases of *qiyas* is the extension of the Qur'anic prohibition of wine (Q 5:90) to intoxicating drugs in general. Rulings that are derived from *qiyas* are not considered to be certain knowledge and, like rulings derived from *ijma'*, they cannot form the precedent for *qiyas* (see Bernand 1986; Hallaq 1986).

with modernity and the perceived decline of Islamic civilization in the 19th and 20th century. “Enlightened Salafism” (Haykel 2009, 45–47) was the project of Muslim reformers who tried to create an Islamic Renaissance in order to deliver Muslims from the lethargy that they felt had befallen them. Intellectuals and reformist scholars like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), Rashid Rida (d. 1935), the Alusi family in Baghdad and Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (d. 1914) “propagated a newly invented model of the salaf, the righteous forefathers of Islam, which consisted of a combination of scripturalism and reason” (Weismann 2009, 267). They tried to find a third way between what they saw as the mind-dulling grip of Islamic traditions which had perverted Islam on the one hand and the threat of modernising forces which they feared would overwhelm Islam on the other hand. These Salafis called for a return to the Qur’an and the Sunna of the Prophet and to the “pure” model of the *salaf al-salih* in order to sideline those rigid traditions established in the course of centuries of Islamic thinking and the practice of *taqlid* and in order to propagate an Islamic revival independent of European and American influence. Simultaneously, they adopted some modern concepts, skills and technologies by selectively including them in their reconstruction of the Islam of the pious forefathers. Unlike the “pre-modern Salafis” they did not necessarily reject *ijtihad* in its encompassing sense and their most important aim was not to purify religious practice in order to exclude specific groups which are considered heretic. However, they shared the rejection of *taqlid* as blind imitation and the emphasis on *tawhid* with their predecessors. Contemporary Muslims following the Salafiyya are deeply influenced by the pre-modern forms of the Salafiyya as championed by the Saudi religious establishment. However, the modernist strand of the Salafiyya has remained alive and causes controversial debates among contemporary Salafi Muslims, both scholars and lay people (for a more detailed introduction into modern Islamist thought see Esposito 1983; Euben and Zaman 2009; Rahnema 1994).

The theological and jurisprudential debates within the Salafiyya and between different currents of Islam continue today. This is not surprising since Islamic jurisprudence and, to a lesser extent, doctrines are not fixed in a static document but the result of hermeneutic-interpretive practices throughout the centuries since the emergence of Islam. These debates do not take place in a vacuum, they are rather part of concrete socio-cultural and political practices of Muslims around the world. They trickle down into the life worlds and the practices of people while they in turn feed back into the debates. The Salafiyya is therefore not only a current of thought within Islam but also a socio-religious movement that seeks to change the social world surrounding them according to the model of the Prophet and his early community as

reconstructed from the sources. How and in which direction this change should take place according to Salafi beliefs varies and is together with theological differences the reason for the fragmentation of the Salafiyya. As a result, we see a variety of movements, networks, practices and beliefs appearing under the label “Salafi”, which at times seem to contradict each other. This confusion is aggravated by the fact that rivalling factions and persons claim the term exclusively for themselves.

Since the publication of his article “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, Wiktorowicz's (2006) categorisation of the Salafi movement into purists, politicians and Jihadis has become standard in- and outside academia. Wiktorowicz's main claim is that all three factions share a common creed (*'aqida*) but offer different interpretations of the contemporary contexts in which Muslims live which, in turn, leads to different Salafi strategies in order to solve the problems of the Muslim umma (215). The purists emphasise the purification of creed, beliefs and practices of Muslims. They reject political action or violence as a means to transfer the model of the *salaf al-salih* to contemporary life as long as the Muslim umma has not been purified by *da'wa* (inviting or calling to Islam) and religious education (*tarbiya*). They leave political questions to the ruler who is to be obeyed. Their focus on maintaining purity results into isolationism vis-à-vis anything that threatens to corrupt religion, i.e., non-Muslims and Muslims adhering to practices and beliefs that do not conform to the purists' construction of Islam. Politicians are those Salafi activists who engage politically in their local communities or countries by participating in political institutions, parties and organisations (e.g., the Islamic Salafi Alliance in Kuwait occupying seats in parliament) in order to induce change. The purists accuse them of heretical innovation since their form of political activism and participation is not grounded in either Qur'an or Sunna. On the other hand, politicians have a low regard for the purists' fanatic focus on details and trivia like the right behaviour in sexual intercourse that are irrelevant in the face of the daily suffering of Muslims under repressive regimes and the crises the Muslim umma has to cope with politically and economically. The Jihadis resort to violence against Muslim rulers and, in its global variant, against so called imperialist agents in order to trigger a revolution. They do not necessarily disagree with purists in matters of creed. However, they accuse them of having become agents of corrupt Muslim regimes like the Saudi monarchy.

Wiktorowicz's categorisation is a useful heuristic device that helps to identify important differences within the Salafiyya. However, these categories can also be misleading when handled rigidly. While it is true that Salafi Muslims agree on the major theological doctrines, they disagree on other doctrinal issues like the question who counts as a Muslim, how and when should a

Muslim be declared unbeliever (*takfir*) and what the consequences of that should be. Furthermore, Wagemakers (2012) shows in his research about the ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of the ideologues of Jihadi-Salafism, that an activist or ideologue can cross two or more categories. He describes al-Maqdisi ideologically as a Jihadi with strong roots in and tendencies towards quietist Salafism. Therefore, the Salafiyya is not only divided on some strategic positions but also on some theological questions. Hegghammer (2009, 257) criticises Wiktorowicz's classification as "inconsistent" because it mixes means and objectives. He develops a framework based on five main rationales for political activism (state-oriented, nation-oriented, umma-oriented, morality-oriented and sectarian) all of which can occur in a violent and non-violent form (Hegghammer 2009, 257–260; Hegghammer 2010, 5–7). In his view, the term Salafiyya designates a theological distinction from other non-Salafi Islamic theological currents that does not tell us anything about the political behaviour of the actors labelled as Salafi. Hegghammer's criticism, though too rigid in the way he separates ideology (or theology) from political practice, is a helpful corrective to induce researchers to look at (non-religious) factors outside theological debates that may influence the political behaviour of Salafi Muslims.

There is, however, a fundamental problem with the use of the categorisations and accompanying terminologies outlined above: the political or politics, one of the anchor points of the definitional efforts, is understood in quite narrow terms and mostly based on a realist understanding of the political. The realist notion sees politics as strategic action directed at the public realm with the aim to acquire instruments of power in order to overcome resistance. Weber (2004, 33), one of the classic proponents of such an approach, described politics as "striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state". While this understanding acknowledges the conflictual nature of politics, it does not further specify the notion of power: What is power? Where is it situated? And how can power be possessed? For Wiktorowicz and others attempting to differentiate between politics and other, by implication non-political, Salafi factions, power is situated in the institutionalised processes of decision-making and is accessible through specific forms of participation, be it by way of parties, lists, lobbies or other forms. However, politics in this sense is only one part of the political. In post-structuralist thinking, the political is not limited to institutionalised procedures of decision-making but describes in its entirety the hegemonic struggle of competing projects aiming to shape society and to establish a shared common will (Nonhoff 2008, 282). For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), hegemony can only be temporarily reached since there are always rival projects competing for influence. This inherent antagonism

constitutes politics and can reach into every sphere of life. The political is therefore also situated in practices which, at first sight, seem to be unrelated to politics. Life styles or social, cultural, aesthetic, bodily and religious practices can be political if they are part of the antagonism. To conclude therefore that purist or quietist versions of a religion are not political can be misleading, especially considering circumstances in Europe where bodily practices like veiling have become highly politicised, whether those actually wearing the veil consider themselves or their acts to be political or not (for a similar argument see de Koning 2012; Wiedl 2012, 12–13; on the issue of veiling and politics see Motzki 2004).

These thoughts lead to the conclusion that there are many crucial and less crucial differences between Salafi factions and that those become manifest in different forms depending on the social and cultural contexts in which Salafi Muslims live and act. A categorisation that might be appropriate for Saudi-Arabia or Lebanon might therefore not be helpful when it comes to different European countries. What kind of movements and factions crystallize in practice under the label of the Salafiyya and whether they are political or not should therefore be a question committed to empirical evidence collected in the course of research.²³

Re-mediations of Islam

Islam and Muslim practices have been affected by different forms of communication technologies in the course of their history. The advent of and the interplay with digital communication technologies is therefore rather the latest turn in a continuous process of re-mediation instead of a new spectacular phenomenon. The core idea of re-mediation is that a new medium in its beginning always incorporates older, already established media and is subsequently itself incorporated as part of the old media into new media in form of a chain of continuous re-mediation. New media therefore re-fashion to a certain extent older media and do not operate in a vacuum (Bolton and Grusin 1999). At a certain point a new medium turns into an old medium by becoming part of the taken-for-granted environment of everyday life and their “otherness” disappears: They turn into “natural” artefacts and are believed to deliver transparent and authentic reflections of a pre-existing reality (see Lister et al. 2003, 37–44). A case in point is the acceptance of photographs as an authentic and exact reproduction of what has been photographed. In contemporary Islam, books, audio-visual mediations of sermons on cassettes or

²³ The definition of the Salafiyya and the categorisation of its different factions has been at the centre of many debates within a research group of which I was part. My understanding of the terminology has been highly informed by ideas of the other participants. I therefore would like to thank Martijn de Koning, Joas Wagemakers, Roel Meijer, Zoltan Pall, Din Wahid, Martin van Bruinessen en Harald Motzki for sharing their thoughts.

television and Qur'anic recitations are examples of "older" media that have become accepted channels of mediation producing truth by mediating between the transcendental and the daily lives as experienced by believers.

The primary religious sources, the Qur'an and the Sunna, provide good examples of re-mediation. Most of the informants in this research think of the Qur'an and the Sunna in terms of books that were put in their final form by, in the case of the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad himself and, in the case of the Sunna, by the pious forefathers as well as by the grand Sunni scholars of the first centuries who were "on the path of the *salaf al-salih*". Religious sources relate that the Prophet ordered scribes to write down the revelation and to note the position of the single verses within the corpus of the revelation as a whole. Simultaneously, the revelation was transmitted orally whereby the Prophet memorized the verses revealed to him and passed them on to his companions. Most researchers agree that the Qur'an has not always been a bounded book (Krawietz 2002, 100–104). According to Krawietz (2002, 103), the early scribes jotted down the verses, which were revealed to Muhammad over a period of 22 years, piecewise on different materials like palm leaves, stones and patches. These notes were dispersed within the early Muslim community. The Prophet did not command a consolidation of all the pieces in one authoritative bounded volume like a book in his lifetime. Researchers disagree about the exact point in time when the consolidation of the Qur'an into one edited volume took place (see Motzki 2001). The Abbasid dynasty adopted the production of paper in the regions under their rule replacing expensive parchment and rare papyrus, which until then had been the material basis of the chyrographic culture of manuscript writing, in order to be able to establish efficient bureaucracy. As a result of the paper industry, books as fixed texts became dominant in the 9th and 10th century (Bloom 2001, 110–116). Written text, however, supported for a long time as a mnemonic aid the oral transmission of knowledge based on *qira'a*, the practices of reading out aloud the work of a teacher in the presence of the latter who corrects the student (Schoeler 2006).

The exact content of the Sunna remains contested since the authenticity of reports is difficult to verify for each case and since, secondly, Islamic scholars do not always agree among each other on this question. One of the contemporary famous hadith scholars popular among Salafi Muslims, Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999), actually disputed the authenticity of numerous widely accepted and conventionally used hadiths from authoritative collections (Kamaruddin 2004). The Prophet is said to have prohibited that anything other than the revelation should be put down in writing because he feared that the Qur'an, and the Sunna would be confounded in the future. In spite of his prohibition some of his companions wrote down what

they observed or heard from him apart from the actual Qur’anic revelation. In both cases, the Qur’an and the Sunna, we can assume that their mediation has taken different shapes in the course of their history from notes, to scriptures, to bounded and edited volumes, to printed books and, more recently, to digital codes aggregated into databases accessible via the interface of a software program or a simple digital document. A similar trajectory of re-mediation could be sketched with reference to oral recitations of the Qur’an. Analogue and later digital recording technologies have given rise to the circulation of audio-visual recitation performances relatively independent of the reciter, time and place. In spite of this dynamic the dominant code among my interlocutors is to understand the Qur’an and the Sunna as specific contents which have not changed since the revelation and the time of the earliest Muslims and have remained fixed in the specific medium of the book.

This short excursion into the different re-mediations of Qur’an and Sunna illustrates that the medium in which content appears is not neutral. Different media have different properties that afford specific practices. Writing down the revelation as notes on different pieces of material helped the companions to memorize the texts. Later on, with the expansion of Islam, the Prophet’s companions took their notes with them. In order to ensure that everybody has a complete version and that only one authoritative version of the Qur’an circulates, the revelation was later consolidated in an edited book as its main medium.

In general, a medium is also a gatekeeper. Its technological properties and cultural forms define who can access the knowledge as well as the process of knowledge production and meaning-making and who is excluded. The introduction of the technology of mechanical printing led to the establishment of Islamic publishing comprising new vernacular media like newspapers, magazines and books which were produced by a new generation of “Muslim publicists” (Hamzah 2006; J. W. Anderson and Gonzalez-Quijano 2004). These publications were not addressed to a classically trained audience conversant in the Islamic sciences. They were meant to be read by a broad public concerned with social and Islamic affairs. Via these venues, publicists like the reformer Rashid Rida were able to “islamise” public discourses by discussing issues such as political liberation from colonial repression and socio-economic reform “with the discursive resources at their disposal, and which originated from the fabulous conceptual and lexical reservoirs of *‘ilm* [C.B.: Islamic Science]” (Hamzah 2006, 8). The formation of Islamic publishing is a good example for how new media change existing media ecologies²⁴ by generating new

²⁴ The notion of media ecology tries to catch the medium and its environment by analysing how a specific medium impacts human perception, feeling, practices and more. It is based on the work of Marshall McLuhan (1964) whose famous dictum “the medium is the message” aimed to direct attention away from the content of a medium

practices, new actors and new spaces, for instance a public sphere (J. W. Anderson 2003).

Migratory trajectories: Muslim immigrant communities in Europe and Islam in computer-mediated environments

Islam “went online” three decades ago in the early 1980s when Muslims with the necessary skills and access to the Internet carried their interests in Islam into the web. Jon Anderson characterized them as “technological adepts” including

students who went or were sent abroad to study in institutes of engineering and applied science that spawned the Internet and, like their counterparts there, used the Internet to place their interests on-line and to engage others like themselves. (J. W. Anderson 2003, 894)

These early agents of online-Islam were and still are largely part of a mobile diaspora that encompasses students, skilled and non-skilled labour immigrants of diverse backgrounds, activists exiled for political reasons and asylum seekers. Many kept their ties to their homelands and cultures with all available means including new communication technologies. Simultaneously, they reached out via computer-mediated communication for a shared Muslim community.

They were later joined by authoritative content providers like religious scholars who were able to use their computer-related skills to provide legitimate advice and judge the authenticity of religious sources online (J. W. Anderson and Gonzalez-Quijano 2004, 62–65). What emerged was a more deterritorialized Islam that embarked on the process of becoming more user-oriented, modulated according to the technological context, multidimensional and set in cyberspace as its new social field. Since the turn of the century the larger Muslim diaspora populations started to enter this new social field with increasing access to new media technologies and the expansion of the Internet, trying to extend their home societies into their new living environments.²⁵

Technological adepts and religious content providers first in US-American Muslim communities and later elsewhere re-edited religious sources like the Qur’an, hadith collections, biographies of the Prophet (*sira*) and authoritative works of Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsir*) into digital databases that can be accessed nowadays in manifold ways: As wikis, DVDs, CD ROMs, through

towards the medium itself.

²⁵ While Muslims in Europe started to be online in the 1980s like their non-Muslim compatriots, access to the net in the countries of the Middle East has boosted since 2000 with the highest growth rate on a global scale of 1825.3% from 2000-2010. Reasons for the late start include socio-economic circumstances (computer literacy, price and availability of computers) as well as power-related considerations of the concerned governments who only reluctantly give up their control over information dissemination. Internet usage was around 29.8% in the Middle East in 2010. Comparable numbers in Europe and the North America are 58.4% and 77.4% respectively (Internetworldstats.com 2011).

interactive websites or as online databases accessible through search engines. These databases together with other Islamic and “islamised” material form the foundation of the interpretational work and conversations carried out by thousand of Muslim users in computer-mediated environments like online forums, chat rooms or e-mail lists. The list of new media usage could be extended to applications for mobile communication (e.g., integrated calls to prayer, Qur’an recitations on hand-helds), integrable program applications (e.g., browser applets for the Islamic calendar and the timing of the fasting month Ramadan or so called Islamic toolbars) and services like online fatwas, cyber da‘wa, Islamic web portals or video-sharing websites like IslamTube (see Harms 2007, 93-136; Sisler 2007, Sisler 2006). Lectures, counsel services and sermons are available as audio and video files on the web. All these services and applications create an Islamic environment that extends well into the private sphere when, for instance, help is offered on Muslim matrimonial sites for finding an adequate Muslim partner.

Within the last years the composition of those using new media technologies in order to engage with Islam and its meanings has diversified from early technological adepts and mobile, largely middle-class scholars, professionals and students to include young European-born or educated Muslims, political and economic refugees, Muslim student immigrants and transnational Islamist activists of all leanings and those left behind in the homelands. Reason and context of use among the newcomers differ widely. However, they share with their predecessor the experience of what has been dubbed as creolisation based on Benedict Anderson’s (2006, 49–65) account of the function of “creole pioneers” for the formation of nations in his seminal work *Imagined Communities* .

Creolisation refers to the mixtures occurring within and amongst societies in an age of migration and telecommunications and has its roots in the Caribbean context. In the context of the aftermath of the so called discovery of the Americas, creolisation described in the view of the European colonialists the process of organisational adaptation of “Old World” life styles to the “New World”. It referred not so much to the mixture or blending of different life styles and cultural attributes but to the adaptive effects of living in a new environment and of lacking authentic “home” to evoke and to project hopes, visions or feelings of belonging to (Palmié 2006). The perception of a lack of “homeness” or of authentic community is linked to the feeling of de-racination within parts of contemporary immigrant communities in Europe. The so called second and third immigrant generations are caught in this ambiguity: Having lost the authenticity of coming “from there”, which those who actually went through the physical act of migration still possess, and at the same time not being “from here”. In this sense of “being in-between” they are

creole and have to cope with the fact that they cannot simply “go home”. This general phenomenon produces different coping strategies and techniques in correspondence to the different social life worlds of the individuals. One of them is the creation of “imagined communities” whose members never meet face to face. Imagined communities are special-purpose communities of discourse that array in the continuum between otherwise separate communities of communication. This process of creating a communicative space “in between” (Bhabha 1994, 98) is an experience common to immigrant communities who were and are not able to transfer their previous world views and social practices unaltered to new localities. New media technologies provide part of the structures that help to create discursive communities.

With the involvement of new groups the context of the use of new media by Muslims has also transformed. New users bring new experiences, ideas and notions to a medium. In Europe, “new Muslim users” are entrenched in the context of specific geopolitical realities as for instance the so called War on Terror, in the reformulation of integration and immigration policies in almost all European countries, in a publicly more assertive Islam, in a polarizing debate functioning largely along a constructed binary logic of an increasingly mutually exclusive secular liberalism and Islam as well as in a long history of immigrant-host-country interaction with differing narratives (multiculturalism, assimilation, integration). In general, this discursive post 9/11 background and its material outcomes have put additional stress on identity formation and the constitution of the self, especially among Muslim communities in European countries in which “multicultural distress” is widely debated and acknowledged by parts of the population. Younger Salafi activists, a small sub-group of the diverse Muslim community in Europe, share this context with their co-religionists and belong to what Bayat and Herrera (2010, 20) have described as the “9/11 generation”.

The digital accessibility of religious sources as the Qur’an, vast hadith collections and religious commentary has opened new possibilities to religious laymen. The once only through intensive life-long study conquerable enormous text corpus is now search- and browsable along key words, topics and authors within seconds. Although often lacking the contextual expertise which enables religious scholars to evaluate, classify and engage with religious sources, Muslim activists on the web are encroaching consciously and unconsciously upon the privilege of the religious scholars to comment religious sources. Together with a certain sense of a mission this has led to new online expressions of Islamic activism which becomes most manifest in cyber *da’wa* and online fatwas (Harms 2007, 122). In this field, activist lay believers are competing with traditional religious authorities who have expanded their realm from mosques or study rooms to

Internet and television. Yusuf al-Qaradawi might serve as a case in point as the personification of the marriage between traditional religious scholarship and the use of the new media. He started out as a student of Islam at Al-Azhar University in Egypt and moved to Qatar in 1961 where he set up the shari'a faculty of the University of Qatar and the Center for the Study of Sunnah and Sira. In his interactive weekly show *al-shari'a wa-l-hayat* (shari'a and life) on al-Jazeera he deals with contemporary questions arising within the Muslim umma. He uses the Internet as a means to give advice and counselling to Muslims seeking answers to everyday problems on the Islamic portal IslamOnline.net (Gräf 2008).

It is in general difficult to come to general conclusions about the significance of cyber Islam or cyber Islamic environments for the development of Islam. Throughout history, media and new technologies have always had a profound impact on religion as a social phenomenon. They have impacted the ways in which religions and their authorities “represent, safeguard and transmit their teachings” (Beckerlegge 2001, 3). The manuscript culture that followed the introduction of paper in the Muslim world in the Middle Ages and the expansion of mechanical printing together with the rise of Islamic publishing in Muslim societies at the turn of the last century have left their imprint on the transmission of knowledge in Islam (see Bloom 2001; Hamzah 2006). The latest turn in the entanglement of media and Islam are digital technologies which have moved Islam into computer-mediated environments. Although one has to keep in mind that parts of Muslim populations do not use digital technologies in their religious practices, they are especially for Muslims in societies with non-Muslim majorities one of the possibilities to link up with the umma and to stay in touch with Islam. In the same vein, Vit Sisler stresses the potential role of Islamic jurisprudence in cyberspace in “offering [a] parallel and coherent normative framework in societies which do not recognize the Islamic law”. According to him,

Muslims in Diaspora, particularly in Western Europe, who live in the absence of institutionalized Islamic authorities, create substantial part of the fatwa market. Some sites specialize themselves in the Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities (*fiqh al-aqalliyat*) adapting the Islamic law to the new context. (Sisler 2006, 44)

In this context, Bunt (2003, 16) observes that the Internet “has alerted the wider Muslim world to minority groups and their ideologues, and generated interest and affiliations which have evolved at a rapid rate through the digital medium”. The Internet does therefore not provide an equal and exact representation of the Muslim universe but serves some Muslim groups more than others. Especially for those groups and networks that suffer from repression and harassment in offline environments the Internet provides spaces where they can meet, discuss and practice their faith the way they see fit without immediate interference from governments or constricting

social control. Muslims in Europe following the Salafiyya are no exception to the expression of Muslim religiosity in computer-mediated environments.

The Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands

The Salafiyya has taken root in most European countries in diverging ways and at different speed. In countries such as the UK, France and the Netherlands, Salafi preachers, groups and networks started to play a role as minority groups in the respective Muslim communities already in the 1990s while in others countries such as Germany this development took place roughly a decade later. The reasons for the differences are manifold and mainly relate to immigrant trajectories (i.e., the immigration of Muslim preachers or sheikhs inspired by the Salafiyya to these countries, the search for identity among second and third generation Muslim immigrants), public debates and the ways in which Muslim life is organised institutionally. It does therefore not come as a surprise that more extensive research has been conducted on the Salafiyya in the Netherlands (see de Graaf 2010; de Koning 2012; de Koning 2010; de Koning 2008; Roex, Stiphout, and Tillie 2010), France (see M.-A. Adraoui 2009; M. Adraoui 2008; Amghar 2008; Amghar 2007; Amghar 2006) and the UK (see Hamid 2009; Hamid 2008) than elsewhere in Europe. In-depth research on the Salafiyya in Germany has only started in recent years (see Baehr 2011; Wiedl 2012) and the scholarly output of it is to be expected to be published in coming years.

In general, ethnographic research on the Salafiyya in Europe beyond the framework of radicalisation studies still plays a minor, though growing, role within the extensive literature on Islam and Muslim life in European countries. Most research activities concerning the Salafiyya in Europe neglect the media dimension of Salafi activities or allude to it in passing. As of yet, research on online fatwas, the dissemination of religious knowledge and religious authority online (see Gräf 2010; Kutscher 2009; Mariani 2011) as well as the media use in Islamic outreach activities in the form of *da'wa* figure most prominently among literature on media and Islam in Europe (see Harms 2007; Racijs 2004; Scholz et al. 2008). As I have mentioned earlier, those who explicitly focus on online activities of Salafi Muslims are mostly interested in the role Internet plays in the process of radicalisation and ideological diffusion (see Rogan 2007; Rogan 2006; Sageman 2008, 109–124; Thomas 2008). This study aims to contribute to the growing scholarship on the Salafiyya in Europe and to help fill in the hiatus in research on Salafi activities online beyond the limited confines of the radicalisation paradigm.

For this purpose, I have chosen to focus on Germany and the Netherlands for rather practical reasons which include the accessibility of computer-mediated environments of German

and Dutch speaking Salafi Muslims and the opportunity to conduct fieldwork on- and offline. My language skills and the geographical proximity of Germany and the Netherlands made both countries an obvious choice. Furthermore, I wanted to include two countries in my research sample in order to be able to collect sufficient data. As became apparent during the preparatory stages of this research project, Salafi Muslims in the Netherlands were rather active on forums and to a lesser extent in chat rooms which also largely lacked a steady routine in terms of sessions and participants. In contrast, Salafi Muslims in Germany were quite active in a number of chat rooms with a relatively fixed schedule and regular participation. To include both countries in my research sample therefore meant to have access to a wider variety of CMEs and likewise to a bigger group of potential research participants and informants.

It is difficult to quantify the numbers of Muslims in the Netherlands and Germany and more so to locate them in one of the currents within Islam since there are no population surveys providing direct data about religious affiliations. Recent studies estimate that around 4 to 4.5 million Muslims live in Germany (roughly 5% of the total population) of which approximately 74.1% are thought to be Sunni (Haug, Müssig, and Stichs 2009; Pew Research Center 2009). Germany belongs to those ten countries with the largest number of Muslims living in a minority situation. According to Statistics Netherlands (CBS 2009, 37) roughly 825.000 Muslims live in the Netherlands which accounts for around 5% of the total population. Sunni Muslims form the majority of Muslims also in the Netherlands, however there are no reliable data available as to their approximate number. The same is true for the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands, who form part of the Sunni tradition. Numbers provided by media, research institutions and government authorities vary widely partly due to the fact that different definitions of the Salafiyya are used and that the term is alternatively employed in order to designate a subset of Islamism, Muslim extremism, Jihadism or Islamic orthodoxy.

Brettfeld and Wetzels conducted on behalf of the German Federal Ministry of the Interior broad qualitative and quantitative research on social, cultural and political attitudes among different Muslim populations from 2003 until 2007. They identified a group with “problematic patterns of attitude” of 14% of the total Muslim population in Germany who is either “distant to democracy and rule of law” and/or displays a “considerable acceptance of political religiously motivated violence” (Brettfeld and Wetzels 2007, 495). Reports from the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2008, 6) estimate that 1% of the total Muslim population in Germany are part of Islamist organisations which amounts to around 32.000 persons. Relevant policy circles usually claim that the Salafiyya is a growing tendency

within Islam in Germany (see Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2010, 215), an estimation that many Muslims following the Salafiyya in Germany (and in the Netherlands) share. More recently, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution assumes that around 3.800 Muslim in Germany belong to the Salafiyya (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2012, 2). However, they refer mainly to those who are politically active or engaged in jihad and do not mention more quietist factions in their recent analyses which might misrepresent the total number.

In the case of the Netherlands, the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) identifies four mosques annex foundations as centres of Salafi activity in the Netherlands (El-Tawhid foundation in Amsterdam, Al-Waqf al-Islami foundation in Eindhoven, As-Soennah foundation in The Hague and the Islamic Foundation for Education and Knowledge Transmission in Tilburg). They estimate the number of visitors to their Friday prayers at around 3.000 (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding 2008, 65). The National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, a body coordinating and facilitating government efforts in the area of counterterrorism, states that the impact of the violent Jihadi current within the Salafiyya has declined while political and apolitical variants have become more moderate. Both developments are mainly ascribed to the pressure of government agencies and the public since the murder of the Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh in 2004 and a lack of central leadership (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding 2008, 4–5). However, also here government authorities have noted a growth in Salafi activities like lectures, teaching circles and *da'wa* through which the influence of the Salafiyya among Muslim populations is on the rise (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst 2007, 39–40). In their research on the forms, size and the threat of the Salafiyya in the Netherlands, Roex, Stiphout and Tillie come to the careful conclusion, that about 8% of the Dutch Muslim population, equivalent to around 53.000 people, are sensitive to orthodoxy which may include the Salafiyya. They caution, however, that this does not mean that they are inclined towards extremism or political activism. Rather, they nourish a theocratic ideal (Roex, Stiphout, and Tillie 2010).

As already mentioned, these estimates might serve as a point of orientation but should not be taken for granted since different definitions are handled and many are based on a radicalisation paradigm trying to identify problematic behaviour in reference to the democratic system and rule of law. As Brettfeld and Wetzels (2007, 493) admit, not every instance of anti-democratic attitude of a Muslim can be ascribed to a specific version of Islam. It should also be kept in mind that the numbers we encounter within the reports focussing on Muslim populations might not be that striking any more if similar research on anti-democratic attitudes was

conducted under non-Muslim populations.

In both countries, Muslims who follow the Salafiyya form dynamic networks of activism, cooperation and, in case of disagreements, of contestation in which Salafi factions come to stand diametrically opposed to each other due to different views and interpretations (De Koning 2012, 158; Wiedl 2012, 21). These networks feature a multitude of stronger and weaker nodes and links on- as well as offline. The nodes in these networks are not only institutions like mosques or foundations but also, in addition, networks of preachers, popular religious scholars, events where Muslims following the Salafiyya engage and meet on a regular basis or computer-mediated environments (CMEs). Every node can itself be a network of sub-nodes. The links between the nodes can consist of strong personal ties, shared practices or hyperlinks linking one computer-mediated environment to another. As the links and associations can transform in any possible direction, networks are inherently dynamic as is the case with the networks of the Salafiyya in the Netherlands and Germany.

A number of foundations which cater also mosques dominate the Salafi network in the Netherlands and account for many activities like lectures, Arabic language classes, Friday prayers, Qur'an recitations, publishing material and more. Among them are mainly the El-Tawheed foundation in Amsterdam, the As-Soennah foundation in Den Haag, the Islamic Foundation for Education and Knowledge Transmission (*Islamitische Stichting voor Opvoeding en Overdracht van Kennis*, ISOOK) in Tilburg, Al-Waqf al-Islami foundation in Eindhoven and the Islamic Foundation for Culture and Well-Being (*Islamitische Stichting voor Cultuur en Welzijn*) in Tilburg. However, a number of foundations, youth organisations, informal circles and events with Salafi preachers serve as additional nodes in the network of Salafi activism (for a detailed description see Roex, Stiphout, and Tillie 2010, 27–51). Some of these 'offline' nodes have a strong presence in computer-mediated environments like websites, YouTube channels, Facebook groups, twitter accounts or discussion forums and chat rooms. Discussion forums and chat rooms are usually not run or administered by official institutions like foundations or mosques but by activists who do not understand themselves as representatives of one of the mosques or foundations. They rather affiliate with offline initiatives, discourses and events as they see fit. Furthermore, there are computer-mediated environments like chat rooms, YouTube channels and blogs of individual believers who carry their faith into CMEs without having strong links with the offline nodes of the Salafi network. De Koning (2012) divides the Salafiyya in the Netherlands into five sub-networks comprising the quietist "Selefie" (the Dutch phonetic spelling of the Arabic pronunciation of "salafi") network which follows the Saudi scholar Rabi' al-Madkhali (b. 1931),

the Ahl-u-Sunnah network (including ISOOK, As-Soennah Foundation and El-Taweed Foundation), the loose network of the al-Fourqaan mosque in Eindhoven (a break-away from the Ahl-u-Sunnah network), the network around the Dutch preacher Abdul-Jabber van de Ven and the Hofstad network of which Mohammed Bouyeri, the murderer of the Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh, is the most famous member. He estimates that the Selefie and the Ahl-u-Sunnah network account for the majority of Salafi activities in the Netherlands. In more recent developments, the well-known *imam* Fawaz Jneid of the As-Soennah mosque in The Hague, which is part of the As-Soennah foundation, was suspended in March 2012 from the mosque council and dismissed from his function. Furthermore, the Selefie network suffers from long-standing splits between those following particular scholars from Saudi Arabia and those following scholars from Yemen and threatens to fall apart into two or three factions based locally in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Tilburg.²⁶

In Germany, the strongest nodes of the Salafi network are made up by a number of preacher sub-networks who travel widely within Germany but also in European countries and beyond. These networks are linked to mosques and associations and often have their own Internet presences. Two of them have gained prominence in recent years. “Einladung zum Paradies” (EZP, Invitation to Paradise) was until its dissolution in summer 2011 the biggest network of preachers including the prominent preacher and convert Pierre Vogel (Abu Hamza). It operated mainly from the as-Sunna mosque in Mönchengladbach near the Dutch-German border. The EZP network included also the “Islamschule Braunschweig” (Islamic School Braunschweig), the first Islamic school in Germany following the curriculum of the University of Medina, headed by preacher and teacher Mohamed Ciftci (Abu Enes, Abu Anas, Ebu Enes). Another network, “Die Wahre Religion” (DWR, The True Religion) split off from EZP in 2008 over questions relating to *takfir* (declaring a Muslim unbeliever) and jihad. Furthermore, personal differences between Pierre Vogel and Ibrahim Abou Nagie, who initiated DWR, added to the doctrinal disagreements. DWR took a more pronounced view vis-à-vis those Muslim rulers who rule with other than Islamic law and who therefore violate the principle of *tawhid al-hakimiyya* while EZP preachers and followers were more reluctant to declare them unbelievers and to speak in favour of *jihad* against them. Furthermore, a few mosques, preachers and smaller associations including their online and offline activities feature prominently in the overall network like al-Rahman mosque in Leipzig and its imam Hassan Dabbagh (Abulhussain), al-Nur mosque in Berlin or “Dawa FFM” in Frankfurt. Many of those smaller nodes entertain affiliations or share personal ties with the two

²⁶ I thank Martijn de Koning for pointing my attention to these latest developments.

main networks like the association “Dawa FFM” established by Abdullatif Rouali who worked with Ibrahim Abou Nagie.

While the Jihadi current of the Salafiyya in the Netherlands has been represented by the Hofstad network in the past and rendered nearly non-existent by state policies in the aftermath of the murder of Theo van Gogh, its German counterpart is more difficult to pin down. Until 2011, Jihadi circles operated as small informal and clandestine groups and the broader public only got notice of them whenever an attack was prevented by police and security services or when members of these circles were found fighting in the global jihad in Afghanistan and elsewhere. In summer 2011, former rap star Denis Mamadou Cuspert (Abu Talha al-Almani) and activist preacher Mohamed Mahmoud (Abu Usama al-Gharib) set up the transnational association “Millatu Ibrahim” which openly disseminates texts of Jihadi ideologues and calls for support of Jihadi activists. Millatu Ibrahim was banned in June 2012 in Germany, however its activists continue their work and have started to cooperate with DWR in order to multiply their *da’wa* work in public. In May 2012, Salafi activists clashed for the first time with German police in the course of a demonstration of anti-Islam activists from the right-wing party “Pro NRW” in Bonn leaving 29 policemen injured. The state responded with repression including the ban of Millatu Ibrahim, nation-wide searches in private houses and mosque and launching criminal investigations against Salafi preachers and associations of all kind. This state campaign against the Salafiyya in Germany and the heightened and at times frenzied media attention to every move Salafi activists make have left the Salafiyya in Germany in upheaval. While former EZP preachers like Pierre Vogel still condemn violence they hold state, media and Islamophobia responsible for the clashes and praise the courage of those Muslims who stand up against the “islam haters” (*Islamhasser*).²⁷

Similar to the Netherlands, a number of youth initiatives, informal circles and local foundations attract Muslims who are inspired by the Salafiyya. Among them are quietist associations and initiatives who take their inspiration from the Saudi scholar Rabi‘ al-Madkhali and resemble the Selefie network in the Netherlands in that they identify themselves as apolitical. However, in contrast to the Netherlands, they have played a minor role in Germany as of yet. Computer-mediated environments, whether as online presences of offline institutions or initiated by individual activists without clear offline affiliations, play a similar role in Germany as in the Netherlands. In comparison, chat rooms seem to be stronger nodes in the German case in

²⁷ Wiedl (2012) has produced the so far most detailed and accurate account of the development and trajectories of the Salafiyya in Germany including an apt analysis of the latest events described here.

terms of regular participation and intensity of interaction than forums. The picture is somewhat different in the Netherlands where at least two forums show a high degree of interaction and participation and chat rooms are rather used to transmit lectures. There are strong transnational links between “Dutch” and “German” nodes. Preachers and religious scholars from both countries meet each other, take jointly part in events, relate to the same religious authorities in Muslim countries like Saudi-Arabia or advise each other. The same can be said for other European countries and beyond. During my fieldwork, for instance, I have encountered several young German Muslims who followed lessons at the Islamic Foundation for Education and Transmission of Knowledge (*Islamitische Stichting voor Opvoeding en Overdracht van Kennis*, ISOOK) of the local Salafi authority Ahmad Salam and at the Institute for Upbringing and Education (*Instituut voor Opvoeding en Educatie*, IVOE) of his son Suhayb Salam located in Tilburg and Utrecht, the Netherlands. Many participants in this research are also active in English and, though to a lesser extent, Arabic speaking computer-mediated environments.

As mentioned before, the Salafiyya encompasses different factions which are at times fiercely opposed to each other up to the point of declaring each other unbelievers. However, they are subsumed in the same “Salafi” network since they react strongly to one another and ascribe to the range of possible discourses and practices within the Salafiyya. Also, while ideological (theological and tactical) differences and the main issue of contention do at times play a role for the identity of some nodes like the preacher networks in Germany or the four centres in the Netherlands as well as for the relationship between these nodes, they are of less importance in the case of other nodes like local youth initiatives or individual blogs and chat rooms. The network is therefore not defined along ideological lines alone. Other affiliations and belongings like family, friendships, local networks and teacher-student relationships play a role and shape the network.

Research questions and overview of this study

As mentioned in the beginning of the introduction, this study is interested in the social and cultural implications of the engagement of Muslims following the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands with their religion in computer-mediated environments. In this sense, it follows in the footsteps of earlier research that has explored the intersection of religion and communication technology in diverse ways. The implication of religious engagement in CMEs for the Salafiyya can best be observed through the religious practices that are embedded in these environments. Four research questions have guided me during my fieldwork and data analysis:

- (1) How are religious knowledge and practices in the broadest sense transferred to and constructed in CMEs?
- (2) How do Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya construct devotional spaces and guard them?
- (3) What types of authority are constructed in CMEs and how are they generated?
- (4) How are Salafi subjectivities as well as communal identities presented, recognised and moulded online?

Chapter 1 of this study will introduce practice theory and grounded theory as the theoretical and methodological framework of this study. Both are complementary to each other in that grounded theory is one possible methodological extension of practice theory. This chapter will show that practice theory provides an adequate theoretical foundation for grasping and understanding the intersection of religion and media while grounded theory thoroughly roots the analysis in empirical data.

One main group of practices which is central to the religious engagement of Salafi Muslims in my study are space-making practices. Chapter 2 will therefore outline how Salafi Muslims create devotional spaces in Salafi chat rooms and discussion forums by keeping profane or “un-Islamic” influences at bay. With the help of aural and visual markers, rule enforcements and specific interpretive protocols the participants of the forums and chat rooms try to set a space apart in which they are able to at least partly enact the social relationships they aspire to and in which they can put the model of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih* into practice.

In Chapter 3 we will move to hermeneutic-interpretive practices which centre on the religious texts and produce meaning with the help of what Salafi Muslims call “Islamic argumentation”. I start by analysing the concept of knowledge as used by my interlocutors before turning to the practice of Islamic argumentation in chat rooms and forums. I argue that Salaf Muslims reinvigorate interpretive traditions of the Salafiyya by constructing *dalil* (evidence) in

chat rooms and forums. This process contains the possibility of transforming interpretive traditions, however small the change may be. The analysis furthermore establishes two, at times conflicting, ideal types concerning the attitude towards hermeneutic-interpretive practices: the critical consumer of knowledge and the active producer of *dalil* (evidence from the religious sources).

Chapter 4 focuses on narrative-performative practices which are rooted in the stories about the life of the Prophet, his early Muslim community and the pious Muslims and scholars of later generations. Styles deliver the aesthetic dimension through which the narratives “come to life”, that is, become sensible, experience-able and believable. Narrative-performative practices make sure that abstract notions of the divine, behavioural guidelines and the stories of the past become part of everyday reality of believers who strive to model their practices in accordance with the ideal model. While the hermeneutic-interpretive practices focus on the different venues in which the Prophetic model is unearthed from the religious sources, narrative-performative practices help to infuse this model into the dispositions of believers.

Chapter 5 in turn deals with the construction of authority and authenticity in computer-mediated environments. Scholars have pointed to the fragmentation, pluralisation or de-localisation of authority within Islam through the emergence of new alternative Muslim publics based on digital technologies that give rise to new Muslim voices (i.e., Echchaibi 2011; Mandaville 2007). This chapter argues that new or transformed forms of authority are emerging in computer-mediated spaces which are still linked to more established traditional forms of authority. These new forms of authority are not necessarily more progressive or liberating, as some scholars seem to suggest, but are based on practices in computer-mediated environments through which new hierarchies are established.

This study shows that the migration of religious practices of Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya to computer-mediated environments impact the Salafiyya as a religion in similar ways as older communication technologies like the printing press have done before. What we can usually observe in the case of digital technologies are not revolutionary changes or dramatic re-significations in religious practices but smaller shifts and gradual transformations. It is ironic that in their quest to revitalise the authentic model of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih* by engaging with their religion in new communicative environments, Salafi Muslims in the Netherlands and Germany actually induce changes which they would possibly be keen to fight as religious innovation in other circumstances.

Chapter 1

Theoretical and methodological framework: A praxeological approach to media and religion

Practice theory encompasses a body of diverse writings and works that has been influential in fields like philosophy, sociology and anthropology and has lately entered media and communication studies. As a subtype of cultural theories, practice theories “stand opposed to both the purpose-oriented and the norm-oriented models of explaining action” (Reckwitz 2002, 246) and accentuate symbolic and cognitive structures of knowledge through which agents perceive the world and act in it. Theories of practice differ from other cultural theories which emphasize the human mind, signs or discourses and interaction as the loci of the social by identifying practices as the smallest unit of analysis.²⁸

²⁸ Apart from practice theories, Reckwitz (2002) identifies three more strands of cultural theories each of which situates the social and, simultaneously, the smallest unit of analysis differently: (1) Culturalist mentalism, itself divided into structuralism and phenomenology, locates the social in the human mind as the place of knowledge and meaning structures (de Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Schütz, Husserl). (2) For culturalist textualism—sub-divided into post-structuralism/semiotics, symbolistic anthropology and constructivist theory of social systems—the social resides outside the human mind in signs, symbols, discourse or communication (Foucault, Geertz, Luhman). (3) Culturalist intersubjectivism stresses symbolic interactions between agents (e.g., speech acts) as the place of the social (Austin, Popper, Habermas). It should be kept in mind that Reckwitz's categorization of cultural theories is ideal-typical and rather a heuristic tool to clarify the position of theories of practice in the broader theoretical landscape than an exact representation of all social theories. Ortner (1984) provides an alternative systematic chronological overview from the viewpoint of an anthropologist writing in 1984. She positions practice theory in a genealogy of theoretical developments within anthropology since the 1960s.

What is practice?

Unfortunately, many authors do not define what they mean by practice. Reckwitz tackles this task by describing practice as

a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. (Reckwitz 2002, 249)

From a basic perspective, "practice is everything that is done" (Helle-Valle 2010, 192) or "anything people do" (Ortner 1984, 149). Schatzki defines practice as an "organic nexus of activity" (Schatzki 2001, 48) while Hobart provides a more elaborate definition by understanding practices as "recognised, complex forms of social activity and articulation through which agents set out to maintain or change themselves, others and the world about them under varying conditions" (Hobart 2010, 63). But also Hobart's qualification of practices leaves the reader slightly clueless since everything that somebody does can be interpreted and categorised either as an act of maintaining or changing something. His intention is, as he states himself, to stress agency and articulation. However, he thereby introduces a functionalist notion to the definition because the main characteristic of practices in his understanding is that they either maintain or change the environments of the agent. While a specific practice in a specific context might serve a specific function for the individual or in society as a whole, it is questionable whether this is their most central definitional marker since their function—if they have one at all—can change over time or vary according to context.

Reckwitz's definition therefore provides us with more cues about these "doings" and "activities" which help to understand the notion of practice amidst other notions like structure, agency and mind that have structured theories within the social sciences and humanities. According to him, practices are mental and bodily activities involving artefacts or things. As mental activities, practices evolve on the basis of what we already know and understand. The agent (or practitioner for that matter) is not only the carrier of bodily behaviour but also of certain implicit and explicit knowledge that guides the way she does things. Practice theory does therefore not differentiate between an inside of the mind and an outside of the body since a certain practice like reading a newspaper merges mental and bodily activities. Apart from mental and bodily elements of practices, Reckwitz mentions "things". It is almost trivial to point out that reading a newspaper necessarily involves a newspaper. Moreover, "things" and their use mould and form mental and bodily activities. A newspaper is therefore not only a passive object to be

used but enables and limits specific mental and bodily activities (Reckwitz 2002, 253; for an interesting account of the practice of “reading a newspaper” see Peterson 2010).

The interdependent relationship between artefacts (e.g., media or technologies), actors, practices and culture has been especially debated and documented in media and communication studies resulting in, to put it in an admittedly rather simplistic ideal-typical frame, two broad approaches to media, each with its own champion (for a more detailed discussion see Lister et al. 2003, 72–92): On the one hand, Marshal McLuhan (1964) and his followers basically understand media and technology as an extension of the human sensory system which filters what a person is able to perceive and experience from its environment and what a body actually can do. Therefore, media or technology shape human action and culture. On the other hand, in the eyes of Raymond Williams and his school, human agents remain in control of the production, uses and outcomes of technologies and media. Therefore, technology and media are basically and primarily socially shaped (Williams 1983, 130). Both approaches share that media or technologies as artefacts play an important role in what human beings (can and cannot) do and how they do it.

Furthermore, practices need to be somehow understandable to observers if they are to develop meaning in the social, that is, interactive, world. In this inter-subjective realm knowledge and understanding of practices are shared which, in turn, routinises practices. Routinisation in the sense of a “stable reproduction beyond the limits of space, time and single individuals” (Reckwitz 2002, 254) is therefore quintessential for making practices understandable to others and for passing on knowledge. Despite the emphasis on routine as the expression of a certain repetitive regularity which makes a practice “readable” for others, practices are at the same time highly context-dependent. The meaning of the same practice can change from one situation to another even when involving the same persons (for an instructive example see Helle-Valle 2010, 204–205). This hints at the necessity of a broader understanding of routine and context. While routinisation relates to the repetition of certain elements that makes a practice intelligible, practices themselves are not standardised and fixed units of action. Along with known and recognizable elements they can incorporate unusual or new elements depending on the context in which they take place. Therefore, a praxeological approach does not aim to categorize certain practices in a standardised system but rather to identify regularities and repetitions and, simultaneously, transformations in practices which can lead to socio-cultural change.

The family of practice theory

Theories of practice in general attempt to transcend the opposition between agency and structure or, to put it differently, subjectivism and objectivism ever since its first proponents “wished to liberate agency - the human ability to act upon and change the world - from the constrictions of structuralist and systemic models while avoiding the trap of methodological individualism” (Postill 2010, 6–7). The different strands that can be assembled under the umbrella of practice theory are not united by a common set of vocabulary. Rather, they all incorporate the elements of practice as defined above in different ways and relate them to social phenomena by using different terminology.

Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens and de Certeau figure prominently among the early generation of practice theorists. Bourdieu, one of the few of that generation who actually used the term “practice theory” (Bourdieu 1977), coined in his work the notion of “habitus” which carries a praxeological orientation. In an interview with the Socialist Review in 2000 on anti-capitalism, protest and resistance Bourdieu described habitus in the following way:

Of course people are structured by society. They are not, as free market theory holds, isolated individuals each deciding a course of action by making individual economic calculations. I developed the concept of ‘habitus’ to incorporate the objective structures of society and the subjective role of agents within it. The habitus is a set of dispositions, reflexes and forms of behaviour people acquire through acting in society. It reflects the different positions people have in society, for example, whether they are brought up in a middle class environment or in a working class suburb. It is part of how society reproduces itself. But there is also change. Conflict is built into society. People can find that their expectations and ways of living are suddenly out of step with the new social position they find themselves in. (Bourdieu 2000)

As we can see, Bourdieu situates habitus at the crosspoint of structure and agency. According to him, a habitus incorporates acquired, learned and trained forms of behaviour which tell people how to behave and act in certain contexts. This does not imply, however, that habitus is a static category. Faced with new situations and contexts in which a habitus does not produce an appropriate practice any more, conflict arises which can lead to more or less dramatic changes in practices which are subsequently sedimented by repetition and routinisation into the habitus. Habitus is therefore “a structuring... [and] structured structure” (Bourdieu 1984, 170). In Bourdieu’s understanding, changes to a habitus do not happen due to any consciously operating strategy, rules or values. The crucial operating element in transformation processes is what he calls practical knowledge. Peterson (2010, 140) summarises practical knowledge following Bourdieu as “a continuous assessment of situations and an improvisation of action on the basis of one’s sense of what will work”. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 82) have described this form of

knowledge with “a feel for the game”. It is important to note that habitus is not the same as practice since several habitus can be involved in one practice and several practices can share one habitus.

De Certeau locates the most powerful and influential practices in the minutiae of everyday life. In his analysis of walking in the city as a practice he shows how a walker actualizes space in the practice of walking set within an architectural landscape and map of streets:

And while, on the one hand, he makes only a few of the possibilities set out by the established order effective (he goes only here - not there), on the other hand, he increases the number of possibilities (e.g. by making up short cuts or detours) and the number of interdictions (e.g. by avoiding routes regarded as licit or obligatory). (De Certeau 2000, 107)

Neither a completely free agent nor a passive object of structure, the walker chooses from a menu of possible actions according to perceived needs. Practice is thus an aggregate or a network of pre-established orders and possibilities as well as choices and perceptions. In his work, de Certeau emphasises the potentiality of resistance through tactical choices people make within a framework of restraints which he calls “oppositional practices” or “tactics of subversion” that occur within power structures when possibilities are seized due to a particular combination of circumstances (De Certeau 1980, 5–10). He cites instances of an economy of gifts that persist in Western liberal economies although they are framed by the powerful as illegitimate as examples of oppositional practices (De Certeau 1980, 3–5). De Certeau’s work reminds us of two important aspects of theories of practice: practices do not represent a fixed matrix of action to which a person has to bow and which just like a structure does not leave any room to manoeuvre and, secondly, everyday mundane practices are the central locus of the reproduction of the social and of resistance to as well as transformation of authority.

In contrast, Foucault paints a somewhat sombre picture of the possibilities of resistance in mundane practices. He stresses the diverse ways through which practices discipline body and mind. Power is therefore not located in an entity external to the subject as, for instance, the state but is internalised through multiple practices whose repetitive performance reproduces power structures. In this context he conceptualised the idea of technologies of the self as practices which

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988, 18)

The desirability of certain mental or physical states is inspired and formed by different

regimes of power which violently impress themselves on the human body. Practices are in Foucault's version of a practice theory often specific techniques of governing in which with the help of the economy and sciences specific forms of subjectivity are promoted. These subjectivities present the legitimate models of life including consumption patterns, class and gender differences or economic paradigms like neoliberalism on the basis of which a person can mould her life. The gist of Foucault's argument is that people largely discipline themselves instead of an external instance forcing or repressing them (Foucault 2000; Reckwitz 2004, 35). The subject is therefore part of existing power relations and cannot form an external consciousness untainted by those.

This leads to the "paradox of subjectivation": "the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent" (Mahmood 2005, 17). The subject is constituted by the constant and reiterative performance of the, from the point of view of power relations, legitimate subjectivities (Butler 1990). This does not necessarily imply that resistance or, in the words of de Certeau, oppositional practices are impossible. However, they are based on a "capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable" (Mahmood 2005, 18). While the different forms and models of subjectivity promoted and dispersed by power relations foreclose specific practices or performances they are not able to fully determine them as total structures. Structures do not exist as an external reality but are constructed through the repetition of specific acts and practices. Each re-enactment or reiteration of a norm or social structure, according to Butler, carries the potentiality of failing and is in itself contingent (Butler 1997). Agency arises thus from repetition which potentially opens fissures and gaps.

One area where practice theory has become increasingly salient recently is the study of social movements and collective action, in particular the contributions of anthropology. In what has come to be called the "European school" of social movement theory theoreticians and researchers put an emphasis on the different processes through which identities and meaning are constructed within new social movements and on the struggles over cultural resources in the broadest sense (see for a more detailed overview Edelman 2001; Escobar 1992). These new social movements (NSM), Edelman argues,

emerge out of the crisis of modernity and focus on struggles over symbolic, informational, and cultural resources and rights to specificity and difference. Participation in NSMs is itself a goal, apart from any instrumental objectives, because everyday movement practices embody in embryonic form the changes the movements seek. (Edelman 2001, 289)

According to Touraine, the very essence of a social movement is the action its activists take in order to (re-) appropriate historicity. Historicity entails “the set of cultural models that rule social practices” (Touraine 1988, 8). Activists therefore take part in a struggle over meaning, knowledge and morality through which they challenge established cultural models that have become dominant (Escobar 1992, 404). Following in the footsteps of de Certeau, social movement researchers have come to recognize everyday life as the main site of meaning-making and the production of alternative cultural frames. Melucci therefore posits that social movements and collective action are better understood as networks submerged in everyday life. Within these submerged networks alternative frameworks of meaning are produced and lived almost invisibly from day to day (Melucci 1988, 248). Submerged networks are not happy spheres of alternative life styles free of dominant forces. Rather, in the tradition of what de Certeau has called “tactics of subversion”, people in submerged networks appropriate dominant cultural goods and resources and use them in their own way. Movements emerge from submerged networks only in specific periods of time and under specific circumstances when they challenge dominant cultural codes. In conclusion, a researcher will have to engage in an ethnography of everyday practices in order to get a grip on the cultural framework and the meaningfulness of certain practices for a social movement. Practices, in this vision of social movements, constitute social relations and are a goal in itself and not, as other social movement theories would have it, a means in order to achieve a specific goal like political participation or economic welfare.²⁹

With Butler, Mahmood and the new social movement theorists we have already moved to the contemporary generation of practice theorists omitting the work of many thinkers who have influenced practice theory. Since this brief account is meant to elucidate some core elements of practice theory in order to clarify the general epistemological approach of this work a more detailed account of all variations of practice theory would rather divert the attention away from the object of this study: the Salafiyya and their religious practices in computer-mediated environments. It is therefore time to move closer to the subject by explicating the relevance of practice theory for religious practices and media.

²⁹ In the so called “American” school of social movement researchers emphasise resource mobilization, political opportunity structures and framing as the main independent variables which account for action and success or failure of a social movements on their quest for political representation, socio-economic gains or other policy goals. For an comparison of the “European” and “American” approaches to social movements see Edelman (2001).

Employing practice theory in the field of media and religion

Media and practice

A distinct praxeological approach to media does not aim to disqualify existing scholarship or to introduce a new paradigm replacing older paradigms within the study of media. Praxis theory should rather be seen as a supplement to existing theoretical strands. In his introduction to the volume *Theorising Media and Practice* (Postill and Bräuchler 2010), Postill (2010, 12–19) carefully outlines in which areas practice theory has the potential to make a contribution to the understanding of media and where it might be of less use. According to him, practice theory is well equipped to address questions related to (1) the media in everyday life, (2) the relationship of media and the body in terms of mediated embodied practices and (3) media productions as fields. He argues that practice theory is of limited help to treat questions in the field of mediated processes such as global media events, media dramas and digital epidemics because events like the conflicts surrounding the publication of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper usually develop unpredictable dynamic and stir political conflicts across social and geographic fields. This dynamic can in its entirety not be captured by regular embodied practices though practices like posting on blogs and forums may be part of the overall dynamic.

The contributions to the same volume raise two theoretical issues that are at stake when using practice theory for media research—and research in other fields for that matter. First and most fundamental is the question what media practices actually are. Couldry understands them as “an open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media” (Couldry 2010, 36). Later in his contribution, however, he acknowledges that media related practices like audience practices and media consumption can be part of other practices. He cites the act of watching football which can be part of the practice of socializing with friends when watching together in a group, part of fan practices or just a time-filling practice when nothing better to do is at hand. While watching football is a non-substitutable part of fan practice, socializing and time-filling practices do not necessarily incorporate acts related to media. Therefore, although watching football on television is a media practice in one sense we might fail to understand this practice and overestimate the role of a medium if we ignore the broader context and meaning of it. As a consequence, researching a specific practice means first of all to identify the range of practices in which this specific practice as a single element is embedded (Couldry 2010, 45–46). Hobart similarly cautions in the same volume that

to collapse all these into media or media-oriented practices, what people are 'doing in relation to media' is to essentialise and prioritise the medium over all the other aspects of social action. By contrast, media-related practice is intended simply to provide an initial circumscription out of the whole range of identifiable practices in a society at any moment. (Hobart 2010, 67)

Hobart's comments and the case studies of other contributors to the volume illustrate that an *a priori* hierarchisation and construction of practices in the sense that, for instance, a medium plays a central role in a specific practice or that a certain practice anchors other practices and acts, can be deceptive and should always be tested during the research. This meant for the present study that the media practices of Salafi Muslims in the Netherlands and Germany first of all had to be "uncovered" and carefully described before turning to their analysis.

Secondly, and reflecting the above argument, a range of ontological and epistemological questions come to the fore. Hobart and Spitulnik remind us that practices are not a natural entity that exist out there and only need to be discovered by the researcher. From an epistemological point of view, practice is a "frame of reference that we use to interrogate a complex reality" (Hobart 2010, 62). According to Spitulnik, this in turn necessitates a sensitivity on the side of the researcher to critically understand her own research practices that produce knowledge and the way she frames the reality she is confronted with. She therefore pleads for a "deep epistemology" in applying practice theory to media through which the researcher becomes aware of the ways specific discovery procedures and conjectural weights shape the research process and its outcomes (Spitulnik 2010, 115–121).

While these discussion do not render the ambitions and aims of practice theory in the study of media and communication futile, they do produce fruitful caveats in order to better understand what practice theory with reference to media can do, cannot do and, on a meta-level, how it works as a theory in re-constructing the world.

Religious practices and media

In an article written in 1996, O'Leary speculates on the transformation of religious beliefs and practices as they encounter and merge with new technologies like computer-networks (O'Leary 1996). He was inspired by the works of Walter Ong who related historical transformations of the mode of thinking, of consciousness and, by extension, of cultural and social practices to the emergence of specific communication technologies. His main argument is that content and information changes when it passes through different media channels because each medium uses a different set of communication technologies which addresses each a specific complex of senses or "sensorium" (O'Leary 1996, 784). In the course of the development and use of different

communication technologies in different cultural settings, shifts in the sensorium and in practices occur (Ong 2000). Being himself a Jesuit priest, professor for English literature and a historian of religion, Ong was particularly interested in the changes that occurred in religious practices due to the shifts in the sensorium. He therefore focussed on the practices centred on the Bible (e.g., liturgy and bible reading) and related questions. “If”, so he asks,

we have moved far from the original culture in which the word acquired its basic meaning, yet we still do use the word, we still talk. How much is the word the same and how much different? To understand ourselves and the religious question as it exists in the modern world, we have somehow to understand man's past in which the word existed in a sensorium by now grown utterly strange to us. (Ong 2000, 16)

It is Ong’s sensitivity to the fusion of technology and religion in specific religious practices that connects him to the theorists of practice and their different approaches outlined before. Neither denying the agency of the believer nor the influence of a medium like the Bible or a technology like printing he is able to trace major changes and shifts that become visible in religious practices.

O’Leary speculates on a similar shift in sensorium and hence in religious practices evolving from the encounter of religion and computer technologies. Describing how his curiosity was raised when engaging for the first time in religious communication on various message boards of the Religion Forum of the CompuServe network in 1993 and later in chat rooms he writes:

What intrigued me about this type of connection to the network was that it allowed for group interaction of a sort not possible through basic email; people were not merely exchanging letters with each other but actually engaged in collective devotion, much as they would at church or in a Bible study group. For some regular participants this activity was a significant part of their spiritual life. (O’Leary 1996, 794)

The curiosity expressed by O’Leary about the specific forms of interaction in computer-mediated environments and the religious practices that take root in such environments is the point of departure of a broad spectrum of research and theorising on religion and media practices or, with a slightly different emphasis, media and religious practices. Most of the works in this area are focussed on different variations of Christianity. To a lesser extent other religions like Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Neopagan religions like Wicca have received attention. Helland introduced a much cited and used distinction between online religion and religion online in 2000 which he reviewed and refined in a later article (Helland 2005; Helland 2000). Religion online grasps those digital environments where people can receive or request information about religious matters. These are very often websites of religious institutions or organisations like churches. Although most of them also allow for some activity on the part of the visitor of the

website like posting a comment, requesting a prayer or asking a question, they are based on one-to-many communication. In contrast, online religion encompasses those digital environments that are based on interaction and allow participants to “do” their religion by practising and living it online (Helland 2005, 1–5). This is mostly the case in discussion forums and chat rooms or, to a lesser extent in blogs, YouTube, Facebook and the like. Many computer-mediated environments dealing with religion fall somewhere in between, allowing for interactivity but at the same time censoring and restricting what is possible and what is not. The decisive criterion for the distinction between online religion and religion online is, as Helland acknowledges, the answer to the question as to what actually constitutes practising religion online. If a Muslim uses the digital Quran on Tanzil.net in order to memorize the text, is this religion online or online religion? She does not interact with any other believers directly online, however she is engaged in a religious practice central to Islam (memorizing the Quran) and she makes use of the action of others online, that is, of those who collaborate to put the Quran, diverse Quranic recitations and translations on Tanzil.net, who develop various digital applications and who contribute in improving the website. From the perspective of practice theory, a fixed categorization of religious practices involving computer-mediated environments into online religion and religion online should rather be used as a heuristic device helping to explore the different elements that constitute a specific practice. In this case, practice theory would pose two questions which will be recurring in this study: How do artefacts (i.e., digital technologies) shape religious practices? And how do practices incorporate the online and offline sphere? The last question is actually already premised on the existence of an online sphere or “virtual world” distinct from an offline sphere, sometimes dubbed “real world”. We will return to this question at a later point in this chapter.

Within the framework of online religion as religion lived online the focus of most works has been on religious rituals which take place online like prayers (e.g., Casey 2006; Couldry 2009; Goethals 2003; Grimes 2002; Howard 2005; Jacobs 2007; Pantti and Sumiala 2009), on the constitution of religious communities and sacred spaces online (e.g., Campbell 2005a; Cheong et al. 2009; Howard 2011; Lövheim 2006; Lövheim 2005; Scholz et al. 2008) and, to a lesser extent though, on deliberative practices centred on sacred texts (e.g., Howard 2011). When turning to Islam and religious practices in computer-mediated environments, practices related to *da’wa* and fatwas stand out (e.g., Bunt 2003; Echchaibi 2011; Harms 2007; Kutscher 2009). Although these works focus on specific practices embedded or involving digital media, they do not necessarily subscribe to practice theory in the sense that the different elements of practices are taken into account and analysed. Rather, they engage in the analysis of texts found in different online

contexts (see for instance Brückner and Pink 2009). Likewise, works on online fatwas or online *da'wa* tend to textually analyse texts of fatwas in order to sketch out and order those discourses taking place in these environments. Others are concerned with the production of such websites (see Abdel-Fadil 2011; Gräf 2010; Gräf 2008; el-Nawawy and Khamis 2009). As mentioned earlier, research related to the Salafiyya and their use of digital media are often restricted to the question of radicalisation. In methodological terms, these studies usually analyse texts that circulate on forums, blogs and websites which subscribe to the Salafi creed by using different tools of textual analysis.

Complementary to this existing body of scholarship, this study is primarily interested in what Muslims following the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands actually do in computer-mediated environments in relation to their faith, how their religious practices online relate to the traditions of their faith and possibly transform certain aspects of it, why believers turn to computer-mediated environments in order to engage with their faith and, in certain cases, why and when they avoid or ignore CMEs. In this context, practice theory implies that religion is approached as a practice. Islam (or the Salafiyya for that matter) is therefore neither solely what is written in the Islamic religious sources, nor what has been constituted in its doctrines or what a Muslim says Islam is. Islam is rather approached as multitude of practices that are understood by the practitioner as “Islamic” and that relate to an Islamic reference system. By Islamic reference system I refer to the idea of one God (Allah) as the superhuman being to whom all worship is directed (*tawhid*), the religious texts, transmitted norms and orientations and bodily as well mental activities which practitioners identify as Islamic.

This approach to Islam is admittedly not free of ambiguity and circularity. It does not deliver a clear-cut universal definition of what Islam is and is not intended to do so either. There are situations in which a researcher will identify certain practices as “Islamic” while some or many practitioners would frown upon such a classification. The reference system and the practices can vary greatly across different local Muslim populations, groups and movements. A prime example is the division between Shi'a and Sunni Islam. Both share religious sources like the Qur'an. However, both groups additionally include texts and notions which the other side vehemently rejects. The fact that many Sunni Muslims, first and foremost Salafi Muslims, deny that Shi'ites actually are true Muslims and vice versa does not mean that the practices of one group should be regarded as less or more Islamic than the practices of the other group. Within this universe of Islamic practices, the Salafiyya occupies a specific place in that they “do” some things at a particular time and in a specific location differently than their co-religionists or even

Salafi brothers and sisters elsewhere on the basis of their particular use of the reference system.

This praxeological approach to Islam rather provides a point of departure from where the researcher can start to immerse herself into the notions fostered by her informants with reference to Islam and related practices. It is about what different Muslims make of Islam in their lives and what they share with their environment. The ambiguity that resides in this approach mirrors the plurality of Islamic practices and the numerous ideas of what Islam actually is. This ambiguity is part of the research data and should be analysed as such instead of being categorised into “right” and “wrong” definitions of Islam.

The role of technology: affordances and textuality

Practices of the Salafiyya in computer-mediated environments (CMEs) are not only shaped by the religious affiliation of its followers but also by the distinct technological features and communication properties of these spaces. The concept of affordances describes how certain technologies “afford” certain practices and relegate others to the domain of impossibility. Furthermore, communication shapes interaction and practices. Communication in those CMEs which formed part of this research takes largely place textually, whether written or verbal. This has certain implications for practices in these environments and the methodology employed in this research. In the following paragraphs I will discuss what affordances and the textuality specific to CMEs entail in terms of research and analysis.

The term “affordance” was coined by Gibson in his work in the field of Ecological Psychology. He understood affordance as those potentialities that the environment “affords” the animal, including humans, in terms of action. “The affordance of the environment”, he writes, “are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill” (Gibson 1986, 127). Affordances should not be mistakenly relegated to the natural environment or the material world “as if there were a world of mental products distinct from the world of material products” (Gibson 1977, 70). Rather, affordances exist at the intersection of the environment and the individual acting within this environment. For Gibson affordances are relative to the perception of each individual. Therefore, affordances are not static physical facts but change from individual to individual as their perception differs.

Since Gibson the notion of affordance has been adopted in many fields where the relationship between material contexts and practices or action plays a central role . Most prominently, it has affected the field of human-computer interaction (HCI) (see Hartson 2003; Norman 1988; Norman 1999) and of education and technology which explores how analogue and

digital technologies shape the process learning (for the latter see Dunleavy, Dede, and Mitchell 2009). Interaction design in particular employs the notion of affordances in order to understand how certain material artefacts and physical environments (i.e., devices and interfaces) induce or afford specific actions. Norman poses the question that intrigues researchers in this field as follows: “When you first see something you have never seen before, how do you know what to do?” (Norman 1999, 39). Part of the answer, he argues, are perceived affordances through which the material object provides critical cues for its operation and which the user needs to perceive as possible. Similar to Gibson, he argues that unlike cultural conventions which can be learned, affordances are perceived immediately, almost intuitively without needing a cognitive process of learning to intermediate. Again, the practice of reading a newspaper provides a good illustration of the role of affordances. The particular size and dimension of the newspaper usually affords specific body positions of the reader. Either she sits upright holding the newspaper in both hands in front of her or she sits bending over a table or any other item on which the newspaper is placed and spread out. While the act of reading itself involves primarily learned cultural conventions (meaning of the signs, reading the signs in a specific direction), the newspaper as an artefact imposes specific bodily positions.

Practice theorists usually refer to the role of artefacts in shaping and forming practices but do often not explicate how the material world relates to us and our practices. The notion of affordances can help practice theory to clarify this nexus. In this context, Hutchby’s notion of “communicative affordances” (Hutchby 2001, 13–33; for the similar notion of “affordance of sociality” see Gaver 1996; see also Örnberg Berglund 2009, 37), a sub-set of affordances, gives insight into how specific communication technologies for practices and interaction among people. Although Hutchby claims that technology shapes and regulates interaction, he is careful not to argue in favour of technological determinism in that he underscores that people can adopt a technology to their specific needs within a certain range of potentiality (Hutchby 2001, 14–16). In the same vein, Bradner, Kellogg and Erickson point out that the social characteristics of a group are just as important for understanding affordances as the properties of a technology are. According to them, affordance “is the relationship between the properties of an object and the social characteristics of a group that enable particular kinds of interaction among members of the group” (Bradner, Kellogg, and Erickson 1999, 154).

Conventions, experiences, perceptions and socio-cultural characteristics of a particular group are therefore essential for understanding how affordances work in their daily practices and interactions within CMEs. Let me return to the practice of reading a newspaper in order to

exemplify this point. In some socio-cultural contexts, reading a newspaper is a solitary, intellectual practice of one person who takes a break from the hustling and busy routines of daily life. In other contexts, reading a newspaper becomes a social event in which one person reads out the news in a more sociable setting (e.g., family home, market place) to others who join the circle of listeners, comment and discuss and may simultaneously be busy doing other things. The same practices can thus take on very different forms and meanings for those involved.

When we turn to practices in computer-mediated environments, we will notice that practices or actions in CMEs usually take place and come in the shape of texts. In the tradition of media studies, I use the term text here in a general sense referring to “an artefact or product [. . .], even an activity or performance (a dance), which has structure, specific qualities, meaning and which can be analysed and read” (Lister et al. 2003, 391). While the set up of a typical online forum “forces” participants into typed communication, chat rooms are a hybrid of typed and spoken words which leaves it to the users or, to be more precise, moderators and administrators as to how they want to use the communicative potentialities. Participants in Salafi inspired chat rooms are in general restricted to typing while lecturers or administrators retain the right to speak which they can grant to others on occasion. Most of the interaction is therefore typed. Typed text is the setting in which religious practices of Muslims following the Salafiyya to a large extent take place in these environments.

Texts in computer-mediated environments are entangled in what I call “double textuality”. First of all, interaction between participants in a forum—and partly in chat rooms—is typewritten. In those computer-mediated environments, to act is to type whereby ordinary language turns into an on-going performative speech act (O’Leary 1996, 800). This “textual talk” (Sundén 2003, 45) constitutes a conversational flow in which a contribution unfolds its meaning in relation to other contributions. Typing in this context is therefore not only a matter of information storage and retrieval but a matter of “being” and “existing”. Everything we would express with gestures, intonation, facial expressions and spoken words in face-to-face encounters must be expressed via typed text and standardized personal ascriptions like avatars, profile information and signatures³⁰.

Secondly, texts circulate as “objects” in these environments. These text-objects are not understood by actors as an interactive expression of a localize-able subjectivity, for instance a

³⁰ Those elements are chosen and created by the participants which is why they are personal. However, they are standardized for example in terms of size, type of profile information (like gender, age, place etc.) and position of the element in the layout of a post. Avatars for instance, usually appear on the upper left-hand corner and the signature below the post.

reaction of a specific poster on a posting in a forum. They are rather objects that are acted upon and that are often subjected to hermeneutic operations as for instance verses from the Quran. These text-objects are bounded since they do not need to be embedded in a conversational flow in order to develop meaning. Although contextual knowledge helps, adds insight or even could take the meaning of a text to an entirely different direction, the reader remains able to produce meaning from these text-objects without reverting to additional knowledge external to the text. Text-objects typically enter a conversational flow in CMEs via a hyperlink, as the result of a copy-paste action or as an embedded object. An embedded video clip from YouTube in a forum post would be an example of such a text-object.

The following example from one of the Dutch speaking forums in this research sample contains textual talk and two text-objects. The user Hafiz ibn Muhammad wrote a short text about the necessity to know the limits of your knowledge and that reading one book and gaining some knowledge does not turn a believer into a scholar. Following his introduction he embedded a video fragment from a sermon of the popular Egyptian scholar Muhammad Sa'id Raslan (b. 1955), who is famous for exhorting and moving fellow believers to tears for fear and shame, not to overestimate their religious credentials and faith.³¹

Al-salam 'alaykum wa-rahmat Allah,

since the boundaries between a scholar ('alim) and a student (talib al-'ilm) has become blurred because the latter started to talk about things about which they have not enough knowledge, this umma has been dragged to a deep abyss. Let everybody recognise his limits and not talk about things without knowledge. Reading one book, visiting some lessons and finishing a study does not generate authority on the field of Islamic issues. Not everybody who seeks knowledge does actually become a scholar and not every person who all of the sudden speaks in technical terms is a scholar. Fear Allah and recognise your limits!

See below a short but powerful fragment from a khutba [C.B.: sermon] of sheikh Muhammad Sa'id Raslan (hafidhahu Allah) [C.B.: may God protect him] about this issue (subtitles are in Dutch).

[link]Fear Allah and know your limits, oh student of knowledge![/link]

[Embedded video from YouTube]

For the original and complete khutba (in Arabic) click [link]here[/link].

Wa-l-salam.

The greeting in the beginning and the first two paragraphs as well as the last two sentences are textual talk, that is, self authored text which addresses fellow forum participants and is part of the ensuing conversation. The first link to a video on YouTube with the title *Fear Allah and Know Your Limits, Oh Student of Knowledge* guides participants to the first text-object. The same text-object is also embedded in the posting which means that participants can click on the

³¹ Islambegrijpen, forum, 22 April 2008: Don't act as if you were a scholar!

embedded object and the video starts playing in the frame of the posting. The second text-object is the link to the complete version of the sermon in Arabic on YouTube.

While text-object and textual talk are clearly delimited in these examples, there is not always a strict line to be drawn between textual talk and text-objects. As mentioned before, text-objects appear bounded. But they unfold a more specific meaning when embedded in a conversational flow. The textual talk that surrounds them in a posting specifies and restricts their possible range of meaning. On the other hand, textual talk can also turn into a text-object. It occurs quite often on forums that some postings are referenced in later conversation threads with the help of a link, the citation function or via copy/paste. In the case of the Salafiyya, these are first and foremost postings which explicate a topic in such a comprehensible and cogent way based on the Quran and the Sunna that its truth seems obvious and indisputable. They can become references for other conversations similar to encyclopaedia entries. As soon as a post or parts of it are referenced they potentially enter a process of becoming a text-object.³² This is by far less the case in chat rooms since the conversation there usually consists of rapidly typed one-liners due to the synchronicity of communication in chat rooms. In comparison to forums, which are also archives of older conversations, chat room conversations are far more ephemeral and not automatically stored unless administrators or participants make provisions for recording chat room sessions and publish them.

In spite of the fluidity between textual talk and text-objects, I suggest that this differentiation is important in order to understand interaction in online forums and chat rooms, most importantly with reference to authority and authenticity. Text-objects in general carry the air of being more neutral or objective since the link to their author's subjectivity has been weakened. Postings that are referenced elsewhere are a case in point. Those posters whose textual talk is often referenced, sometimes even across computer-mediated environments, gain authority in the process in which their posting turns into text-objects. The author does not necessarily disappear in this process—otherwise the authority of a text could not be bestowed on its author—but the text is not perceived as being embedded and inextricably linked with the author's subjectivity: It is not considered to be an expression of a personal subjective opinion. In the case of computer-mediated environments infused with Salafi thinking, the truth of the text is beyond the author's subjectivity, independent of it, and to be found in an objective, pre-existing

³² However, not every reference points to a text-object. The citations in CMEs, for instance, are similar to citations in e-mails. Texts from previous posts are cited in order to indicate that one is reacting on them. This form of citation does not per se indicate a particularly deep appreciation of what has been said (typed). It rather helps to create order in the conversational flow of a thread. Whether a specific reference is therefore part of textual talk or a text-object or both depends on the context in which it appears.

realm: in the divine revelations. The author therefore becomes a facilitator whose achievement is to make the Truth apparent and readable.

I will recap and illustrate my argument about text-objects and textual talk with an example taken from my data. A typical interaction among Salafi Muslims in discussion forums consists of a concrete question which then induces a variety of answers or reactions. The questions and the reactions on it form a thread. The answers often contain text-objects mostly taken from the religious sources. Some of them are actually present in the typed text (copy-pasted or embedded as a document) of the post. Others are absent but referred to via a link or an indication in a footnote-like fashion where to find them in the Qur'an or the hadith collections. Those reacting act upon a text-object, that is in our case mostly Qur'an and Sunna, in order to generate meaning from them. This process is referred to as "Islamic argumentation"³³, a term generally used by my interlocutors for the hermeneutic process of extracting meaning from the Quran and the Sunna (see Chapter 3, p. 131ff.).

For example, the question posted in one Dutch forum as to whether the epilation of one's eyebrow is permitted (*halal*) or forbidden (*haram*) in Islam induced a series of answers that related to several hadiths as well as verses from the Quran and presented their meaning in relation to the question. Basically, epilating eyebrows is not permissible because the prophet, according to one hadith ascribed to him, has cursed those women who epilate eyebrows and those whose eyebrows are epilated. The thread or discussion appears like a neutral interaction based on a specific hermeneutic approach to the religious sources. If we take a closer look at the "textual talk" of this conversation we observe certain elements that elicit certain reactions just like the intonation of voices or gestures in an interaction based on hearing and seeing. It is the choice of words, the use of punctuation and emoticons, or typographical markers like the use of different fonts (italics, capital letters, bold letters etc.) that make a seemingly neutrally typed text sense-able on a rich scale. For example, capitalised words are in most cases understood as shouting. Three dots at the end of a sentence often indicate that there remains more to be said but that this is left to the imagination of the interlocutor(s). This is in oral interaction often done by raising one's voice as if a sentence is not finished yet which keeps the listener alert and intrigued. Consider the following exchange taken from the same thread on epilation which later branched out into the question of how women are allowed to behave in public:

[Latifa:]

A woman is therefore not allowed to participate in movies. Nor is she allowed to sing and

³³ "Islamitische bewijsvoering" or "islamische Argumentation" in Dutch and German respectively.

to dance? Do you have evidence³⁴?”

[Abu Yahya:]

Is this a serious question???????????

[Latifa:]

DUHHHHHHHHHHHHH! And now I want an answer! Goodness gracious me . . . [CB:
original: “Sjonge, jonge, jonge..”]

[Abu Yahya:]

You must not take offence so quickly. Take it easy . . . I should say, just go participate in a movie and go wild dancing!

Rasul Allah [C.B.: the messenger of Allah] said in a sahih [C.B.: authentic] hadith: There is a part in your body, something that, if it is good, makes your whole body be good and something that, if it is bad, makes your whole body bad; this is the heart.

We observe a short interaction (textual talk) including a hadith (text-object) cited at the end. One poster is perceived as being offended and irony is used (“I should say, just go participate in a movie and go wild dancing!”). Some question marks express unbelief in something that somebody else has written (“Nor is she allowed to sing and to dance?” or “Is this a serious question???????????”) and the capitalised letters spring almost impatiently and aggressively into the readers’ eyes. All these details underline the performative quality of textual talk. This is not a mere hermeneutic-interpretive process but an interaction that speaks to mind and emotion.

The conversational quality of these texts therefore needs to be taken into consideration when analysed. For instance, authority is not only a question of citing the right sources and “getting the hermeneutics right” but also of dominating a conversation and of performing in a convincing manner. The communicative properties of forums and, in an even more blurred fashion, of chat rooms afford the aggregation of textual talk and text-objects in one fluent conversation. This implies for a researcher that different parts of the conversation should be analysed in different ways: Either with the help of conversation analysis which pays more attention to speech acts or with the help of discourse analysis which focusses more on the content of the text and its genealogy. If a text belongs to the category of both textual talk and text-objects both methodologies of analysis should be applied.

These thoughts have lead us from the theoretical framework of practice theory, its implementation in the field of media and religion and the affordances of technologies for media- and religion-related practices to the methodology of this study which will be explicated in the following concluding part of this chapter.

³⁴ With evidence the poster refers to texts from Qur’an or Sunna that state that women are not allowed to do these things.

Methodology: Grounded and multi-sited ethnography on- and offline

Research on practices in computer-mediated environments has to be sensitive to three issues among others. The first issue is to define the research field: Which websites, chat rooms, blogs, forums, YouTube channels and so on should be part of the research and for what reason? The delimitation of the field leads to the second issue: the relationship between the online and offline world and how they relate to each other. Another aspect to think about in research projects like the present one are ethical questions which deal with online and offline identities of the participants and the disclosure of the identity of the researcher in computer-mediated environments (for the following see also Becker 2012).

Mobile ethnography in multiple sites on- and offline

The computer-mediated environments relevant for this research were selected in a process extending over a few months in which I visited lectures, seminars and other events of Salafi preachers in the Netherlands and Germany where I could ask participants for their favourite digital environments where they engage with their faith. I used the recommendations as entry points into the vast network of CMEs that are connected to the Salafi web sphere of “dynamically defined digital resources spanning multiple web sites deemed relevant or related to a central event, concept or theme, and often connected by hyperlinks” (Schneider and Foot 2005, 158). In Schneiders’s and Foot’s conceptualisation, web spheres are delimited by a “shared topical orientation” (Schneider and Foot 2005, 158). In the present case, the shared orientation is the interest in the Salafiyya. Furthermore, Schneider and Foot point out that this delimitation is dynamic and can only be temporal since researchers continue to identify relevant computer-mediated environments in the course of their research and since computer-mediated environments change over time, new CMEs emerge while old CMEs cease to exist.

In order to catch those CMEs that are of relevance for Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands, I followed their recommendations and let them “span” the Salafi web sphere. By doing so, I made sure that I did not miss a blog, YouTube channel, chat room or any other CME enjoying popularity among Muslims following the Salafiyya. Within this web sphere of the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands, I selected three Dutch and two German discussion forums³⁵ since discussion forums serve as a relatively stable convergence point of diverse computer-mediated activities. Participants, for instance, announce chat room sessions, the

³⁵ The adjectives “German” and “Dutch” relate to the use of language as the main vernacular in a specific computer-mediated environment and does not allow to draw conclusions about the nationality of the participants.

launch of new CMEs and other activities on- as well as offline in forums. Those who have their own blogs or websites provide information about them or use their signatures at the end of postings to place a hyperlink. Furthermore, participants circulate text, video and audio files which they deem relevant for their faith and recommend websites which they consider to provide authentic information about Islamic doctrines and practices. The selected forums fulfilled the following criteria: (1) stability (active over a longer period of time), (2) interactivity (members reacting on each other's postings) and (3) related to the Salafiyya either through the administrators and moderators, explicit forum policies or via a high and active participation of Muslims following the Salafiyya. The membership of the selected forums ranged from 140 to around 14.000 participants as of June 2011.

Chat rooms were selected as a second set of CMEs in this study in addition to forums because they also offer a wide range of interactivity and a social environment in which interaction and religious practices are accessible for a researcher provided that administrators and moderators allow her to participate. However, in contrast to the selected five discussion forums, I did not follow a fixed set of chat rooms. Chat rooms are much more volatile and dynamic than Internet forums since, in comparison, it is relatively easy to set up a chat room and invite friends and acquaintances to it with the help of chat clients. During my actual fieldwork from January 2008 until December 2010, only some chat rooms sustained some kind of continuity among which are two, one Dutch and one German, that regularly provide online *durus* (lessons). Apart from these two chat rooms I included those chat rooms in my study which were announced by Salafi Muslims in the discussion forums and to which I was invited. Average participation in a chat room ranged from three (including the researcher) to over hundred participants.

As described in the introduction, Muslims following the Salafiyya are stigmatised in European societies and discourses for different reason which, in turn, makes them vulnerable to the actions of researchers. For this reason, I have followed an "ethics of care" (Berry 2004, 324) which emphasizes the respect and care for research participants and informants. An ethics of care is does therefore not promote a set out fixed rules but to be applied across different research context. It rather asks researchers to take the situation of participants into account and adopt accordingly measures to protect their integrity. This resulted in this study in the use of pseudonyms for both online and offline identities of participants. Exceptions are such celebrities who themselves engage in public debates and have self-consciously chosen to become public as a "representative of the Salafiyya" such as popular preachers and imams who appear in the national and local media. The same policy is applied to CMEs whose real name and web address

will be protected in this study. Although one could argue that those forums and chat rooms that are accessible for everybody are public spaces and everything posted there is therefore public, I argue that many participants do not experience these environments as public spaces. They think of them rather as communities shared with like-minded people and founded on a certain amount of trust, common norms and shared understandings. These CMEs as used by Muslims following the Salafiyya are in this respect similar to bible reading circles: in principal open to everybody but still intimate gatherings.

Furthermore, I have introduced myself to the moderators or administrators of all chat rooms and forums as a researcher giving them the possibility to reject my presence which happened only in three cases.³⁶ Whenever possible, I introduced myself also to the participants by either writing an introduction posting on a forum or by introducing myself to those chat room participants who contacted me or whom I contacted in one-to-one conversations. To introduce myself in the open window of a chat room often proved to be a counter-productive undertaking since those who came later missed my introduction and since the general purpose of the chat rooms, i.e., engagement with ones faith, became quickly undermined by discussions about my research and non-Muslims. The latter was not appreciated by the administrators and moderators who wanted to stay “on topic”. Instead of causing disruption I decided to keep my introduction to one-to-one conversations.

To study religious practices in computer-mediated environments often impels the researcher to engage in multi-sited ethnography in two ways: (1) the inclusion of different computer-mediated environments and (2) the inclusion of offline environments into the field. Let me start by explicating the first issue, the inclusion of several CMEs in one field. Religious practices occur in several computer-mediated environments which all have different communicative properties and afford different practices or behaviour. To empirically follow a certain set of practices implies to follow them to different sites and to pay attention to the way they connect different sites. Each computer-mediated environment can be understood in analogy to a field site in ethnographic research like a specific village or a specific neighbourhood with its own distinctive properties. However, what is at least as important in multi-sited ethnography, are the connections and links between these sites. Furthermore, CMEs are less bounded than traditional field sites due to the omnipresence of hyperlinks diverting action to other CMEs. For instance, if one is interested in the performance of identities in forums, a click on a link to a blog

³⁶ In one case I was barred from participation because I was not taking part because I was thinking about converting to Islam but in order to do research. In other two cases, the community wanted to keep their space for Muslims only.

in the signature of a person's posting will move the researcher to a new CME, a blog, with slightly different communicative properties. Likewise, a mouse click on the profile of a forum participant can propel the researcher to a different chat programme like MSN where she can engage in one-to-one synchronous chat with that specific person. Even when starting out from one computer-mediated environment like a forum, researchers following practices will have to engage in "mobile ethnography" (Marcus 1995, 96) in order to follow relevant hyperlinks and the practices of people online (Leander and Mickim 2003).

The method of identifying and "following practices" employed in this study in order to construct a multi-sited research project does not aim to holistically represent the Salafiyya as a movement or an ideology. The notion behind multi-sitedness in ethnography is to map out the terrain by following "the thread of cultural process itself" (Marcus 1995, 97). The "thread of cultural process" is not restricted to practices but can also, depending on the research interest, imply that a researcher follows things (goods or artefacts), discourses and symbols or people (Marcus 1995, 105–110). Furthermore, the selection of sites in this kind of mobile research often takes place gradually and cumulatively as Hannerz points out since along the way new insights develop and opportunities appear (Hannerz 2003, 207). Simultaneously, some sites will turn out to be less open or fruitful to a researcher as they appeared to be in the first place. The selection of sites and the construction of a mobile research project are therefore not restricted to a certain period in the beginning of the project but put the researcher on a trajectory which is formed by the experiences she makes during her journeys in different sites.

Secondly, research in CMEs does not only pose the question which CMEs should be included but also confronts the researcher with the question as to whether or not to include research offline. The scholarly debate over the role of offline research—and accordingly of offline field sites—for phenomena situated within the virtual/digital realm is still ongoing. Some argue that these phenomena should be studied in the natural environment they are situated in, which is the online or the virtual world. In their view, these virtual worlds are social contexts and legitimate sites of culture in themselves (Boellstorff 2008, 61). Others argue that the virtual world cannot be separated from the actual or offline world. The reasons for the latter position are manifold, however one figures prominently in media studies. A division between the virtual and actual world, it is argued, is not sustainable because the virtual world draws from the actual world and vice versa. Social dispositions acquired and incorporated in the actual world form social behaviour in virtual worlds (see Hine 2005a; M. White 2006).

While the latter is for sure a valid point, I argue that research interest and questions should

determine whether a researcher should include offline field or not in her research. For instance, when studying complete virtual worlds like Second Life as a social context in the same manner a researcher would study a community offline, offline research is in principle not necessary. Depending on the specific research question and the field, online sociality and self-hood can be studied through ethnography of a virtual world only. In these cases, the decision to restrict the field to CMEs does not deny that offline and online are closely interrelated. Rather, investigation into offline research is in these cases not necessary in order to answer research questions.

In other cases offline ethnographic research adds considerable insight. This is the case, I argue, when research questions focus on issues of embedding knowledge gained in CMEs in the social contexts of the offline world and the process of re-producing cultural content within a certain technology and social setting (M. White 2006, 17–34). Orgad (2005, 53) argues furthermore that a triangulation of online and offline research can prove useful if the “offline interactions with informants reveal something significant about their experience of Internet use that could not be obtained online”. However, the assumption that offline research yields more authentic or accurate information in comparison to online research is misleading (Orgad 2005, 52).

The definition of online and offline spaces is itself a controversial issue. Online spaces usually imply metaphorical spaces created by and within communication networks. Alternative terms which are often employed with slightly different emphasis are “virtual reality” or “virtual community”. The term offline is usually used to denote the physical reality that hosts the body, the materiality and the physicality of the Internet user. However, although virtual reality might be made up by invisible electronic and digital processes, it involves also the sensory of a physical human body and technological structures that transfer, decode and encode information (e.g., computers, cables, smart phones, modems, routers). Furthermore, some authors have contested the term virtual reality because it conveys a misleading sense of a fundamental break with other technologies and media as well as a break with the non-virtual reality. Boellstorff (2008, 55) argues with Lyotard that every form of social life is already crafted and the result of “human action that engages with the world and thereby results in a different world”. Therefore, human life worlds are per se virtual. In addition, the notion of an online or virtual space of an entirely different quality does not match research results from media studies. Especially research on gender construction and ethnicity in virtual spaces shows that online identities are acted out in relation to the physical world. Internet users borrow from what they know, from the familiar stereotypes and existing concepts of exclusion and inclusion (e.g., Green 1999; Marshall 2007). Brenda Laurel joins this line of argument by stating that virtual reality means “that you take

some subset of your senses with you into another environment” (Laurel quoted in Coyle 1993, 162). Within the site of the human body with its sensory organs virtual and physical reality merge and interact. With this in mind it becomes almost impossible to speak of two separate spaces or even worlds. Online environments are therefore different because they are marked by different forms of physicality, of time and of communication etc. but not because they are not physical or not influenced by social dispositions of those active within CMEs.

The approach followed in this study is one of multi-sited ethnography online and offline. While religious practices of Salafi Muslims in German and Dutch discussion forums and chat rooms are the focus of this study I have included offline field sites like lectures and seminars in mosques in order to generate comparative data against which to trace transformations of religious practices in CMEs. Religious practices of Muslims following the Salafiyya are not bounded to one virtual world like Second Life nor are the CMEs in which the participants in this study engage with their faith complete virtual worlds, in which one sleeps, marries, fights, develops friendships and more. In their eyes, what they do online is part of what they do and are offline. Furthermore, research in offline settings allowed me to establish trust and to present myself to the communities which in general are quite distrustful of outsiders who are quickly suspected to work for security agencies or media outlets chasing after stories on terrorism.

Methods of data gathering and analysis: Virtual grounded ethnography

The general methodological approach of this study concerning gathering and analysis of data is rooted in virtual ethnography and grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 1997; Glaser 1998), a set of inductive and flexible methodological strategies aiming to construct middle-level theories directly from data analysis which gives it a strong empirical foundation. Virtual ethnography is a label assigned to ethnographic methods for Internet related research that have emerged recently. The Internet is conceptualised as a socio-cultural context—in contrast to mere information distribution platforms—which in general is open to established ethnographic methods of data gathering like participant observation or online interviewing and surveys and also to natively digital methods. The later makes use of already existing computing techniques in order to gather data to be used in studies like recommendation systems, folksonomies³⁷, meta data of social networks or browser histories (Rogers 2009). The field of virtual ethnography is not a fixed set of methods but is still emerging and controversially discussed as methodologies are

³⁷ A folksonomy is a system of classification based on the collaborative practice of tagging online content. Tags are terms assigned to a piece of information in order to classify it.

applied and tested in concrete research practices in the field (for a discussion of different aspects of virtual ethnography see de different contributions in the volume of Hine 2005; Leander and Mickim 2003). In this reflexive engagement with methodological practices the following questions as formulated by Hine are central: “What methods [do] we aim to use to explore the social formations which arise through use of information and communication technologies and how [will] those methods [. . .] shape our understanding” (Hine 2005b, 9)?

This study, which focuses on religious practices of a specific group in CMEs, mainly employed established ethnographic methods like participant observation in chat rooms and discussion forums as well as in the offline field described before in addition to interviewing on- and offline as the main methods for gathering data. The application of virtual ethnography in this study has yielded the following sets of data:

- Field notes taken during participant observation in discussion forums and chat rooms.
- User-generated content from chat rooms and Internet forums like discussion threads, embedded text, video and audio objects or publicly accessible profile information of participants
- 32 informal (not-recorded or spontaneous) longer conversations (minimum 30 minutes) as well as 15 formal (recorded, ranging from two to four hours) interviews. Conversations and interviews were conducted on- as well as offline. Of the 47 interviewees 20 were female and 17 male. Their age at the time of the interview ranged from 17 to 40, while most (30 participants) were between the age of 20 and 25. Among the 47 were 9 converts to Islam (three ethnic Dutch, five ethnic German and one ethnic Greek). Of the remaining 38 the majority (23) had an Arabic or Berber ethnic background, mostly Moroccan but also Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian. Ten had a Turkish, three a Somali, one a Pakistani and another an Iranian (Shi'ite) background. Furthermore, I had numerous short conversations and brief exchanges with Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands on- and offline. They were usually limited to a specific topic or situation-bound. Whenever these conversations produced data relevant for my fieldwork I included the material in my field notes.
- Field notes taken from participant observation of offline events like lectures, rituals, community events to which I was invited by participants of the chat rooms and discussion forums or which were announced there.

The analysis of the data of this study is based on grounded theory. Grounded theory was initially developed by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in a time when Positivism and quantitative methods dominated empirical research. Qualitative methods were largely confined to descriptive case studies and had less influence on the development of explanatory theoretical frameworks (Charmaz 2004, 441). Theory is generated in several overlapping steps of data collection, coding and memo writing which merge into the final step of developing theoretical codes (Charmaz 2006, 11). This does not necessarily imply that grounded theory always yields

new fresh theory. It rather implies that a researcher tries to start from open coding with a consciousness that she might not know where the exploration of the data through coding will lead her in terms of theory. Grounded theory as a methodology of data gathering and analysis can either empirically support existing explanatory theoretical frameworks, add to them or modify them or come up with the foundations of a new mid-range theoretical framework which would then need to be confirmed and worked out in more detail by additional empirical research.

Grounded theory works well as a methodological extension of practice theory since it aims at identifying practices as the core social activity (Clarke 2005, 53). Its practice-orientation also translates into the coding activities in which researchers try to identify and subsequently categorize what people actually do by preserving action (Charmaz 2006, 47–57). Furthermore, grounded theory has since its inception in the 1960s gone through a development which to some extent parallels the formation of practice theory and is related to the post-modernist turn that both have passed through. First of all, both have adopted from Foucault the attention to power and disciplining techniques inherent in practices which produce subjectivities. Secondly, grounded theory has come to incorporate the role of non-human actors (objects and artefacts) like technologies in its notion of interaction and practice which is also a main consideration of practice theory, especially so in the case of media-related practices. And thirdly, in a similar fashion as practice theory, grounded theory has come to de-emphasize the opposition between structure and agency (objectivism and subjectivism) by including all elements in one ecology or situation in which everything “*both constitutes and affects* most everything else in the situation in some way(s)” (Clarke 2005, 72).

I have followed a grounded theory strategy with reference to coding as laid out by Charmaz (Charmaz 2006). The data of this study were first coded openly with the research questions in mind without using a fixed set of pre-established codes. The idea behind open coding is to free the analytical process as far as possible from preconceived ideas about what to expect to find in the data, to remain open to all possible theoretical directions and to mine the data itself for analytic ideas (Charmaz 2006, 46). The initial codes were then aggregated and selected during focused coding in order to reduce the amounts of codes to those that are analytically and conceptually most promising (Charmaz 2006, 57–60). Finally, focused codes were whenever possible related to each other in coding families which in turn are the germ cells of theoretical and analytical categories presented in this work (Charmaz 2006, 63–66). The different phases of collecting data and coding do not necessarily take place in a chronological order. Whenever codes opened up new questions in this research, additional data were collected from the research sites

until a state of “saturation” was reached. Saturation refers in grounded theory to a moment when “gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories” (Charmaz 2006, 133).

It is from this intensive and, at times, arduous process of coding that the chapters of this book emerged. In the following chapter we will move to production of devotional spaces online as the first set of religious practices central to the religious engagement of Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands in chat rooms and discussion forums. Space-making practices are simultaneously practices that lay the foundation to other practices because they literally “create the space” for other practices to take place.

Chapter 2

Creating devotional spaces in computer-mediated environments

One challenge of religious communities active online is to set up, maintain and manage a space where they can realize the social relationships they desire, where they have control over intruders and where they can create a space of and for themselves in order to engage with their religion. Howard calls this process in his study of religious expression and activities of evangelicals online “the formation of communicative enclaves where individuals could most freely engage in their ritual deliberation” (Howard 2011, 3). These enclaves or environments ideally provide the space for believers to feel safe, at home and unrestricted while practising their religion. Additionally, these spaces need to facilitate those practices and behaviour of which believers think that they are essential to their religion by providing a protected space for devotion and worship. In the offline world, physical visual markers (buildings with specific architectural elements) and diverse techniques are employed in order to elicit behaviour deemed appropriate for a devotional space and to keep the profane at bay (L. Jones 2000). In this vein, Jacobs considers the question as to “whether virtual signifiers can operate in an analogous fashion, demarcating sacred cyberspace from profane cyberspace” (Jacobs 2007, 1105) to be at the centre regarding religious practices in computer-mediated environments.

I prefer the term “devotional space” to the widely used terms “sacred space” or “sacramental space” (Campbell 2005b, 111) since the “sacred” and the “sacramental” are notions which are deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, at least in the way in which they are generally perceived and conceptualised, and which are sometimes difficult to adapt to the framework of other religions. Muslims following the Salafiyya do share the notion inherent in the sacred that important aspects of life, practices and elements of worship need to be kept “apart” from the profane and need to be kept pure, that is true to the original. In fact, their urge to keep religion free from illicit innovations and to follow strictly the model of the Prophet and his community in all aspects of life amplifies the notion of a religious or sacred realm in eternal antagonism with the profane since they seek to subsume everything, even the most mundane detail of everyday life, under the banner of religious devotional practices. Ultimately, in their ideal vision, everything should be subsumed under Islam and the profane as the non-religious realm, should cease to exist. However, the sacred as it is widely conceptualised also implies the idea of the divine or the transcendental becoming manifest in things, places or persons which are otherwise elements of the profane (see for instance Eliade 1987, 14–63). This notion of hierophany is problematic when applied to Salafi beliefs and practices since the veneration of things, places and

persons as “sacred”, that is, as a manifestation of the transcendental, contradicts their rigorous understanding of *tawhid*. The doctrine of *tawhid al-‘ibada* (unity of worship) safeguards that all practices of worships are addressed exclusively to God without any intercession. To consider places, things and persons as sacred yields power to them that is reserved to God. The averse stance of the Salafiyya towards this aspect of the sacred makes this term less helpful in order to describe the online spaces Salafi Muslims create and maintain.

Devotional space denotes environments dedicated to worship, religious observances, normative conventions, piety and devoutness. They are in need of protection from the profane in order to fend off pollution and to safeguard their effectiveness, that is the achievement of religious practices and devotion. Interferences and noise must be blocked out without diverting too much attention and energy away from the actual meaning of the space. If participants in a space are mainly busy to fight off intruders, behaviour and practices considered to be forbidden or polluting, the chat room or discussion forum loses its signification as a space for devotion. Simultaneously, the space must be devised and configured as a specific devotional space recognizable for believers and non-believers. In contrast to the offline world, online devotional spaces lack independent and fixed physical structures like those we can see in mosques, synagogues, churches or temples. However, structures that impress and mould behavioural attitudes and actions can also be constructed with the help of visual and aural markers, recurring discursive techniques and practices that clarify limits and help to form a community.

Online spaces³⁸ are therefore above all carved out by practices which form the online environment and produce repeating structures, definitions and sensible markers. This chapter will begin with an analysis of the devotional architecture displayed in chat rooms and discussion forums with a high number of active Salafi participants. The devotional architecture consists of aural and visual markers as well as the rules at work in Salafi discussion forums and chat rooms. Aural and visual markers convey to visitors and participants a first impression of the identity of the space they are entering and the etiquette governing the environment. Rules enforced by the moderators and administrators sanction behaviour and interaction deemed to be inappropriate for a devotional space in the eyes of Muslims following the Salafiyya. We will then turn to the

³⁸ Cultural geographers carefully distinguish between space and place. Space is usually defined as an abstract volume or area, “without meaning – as a ‘fact of life’ which, like time, produces the basic coordinates for human life” (Cresswell 2005, 10). Space turns into place when people invest meaning to it and become familiar with or attached to it (Cresswell 2005, 8–10; Tuan 1977, 73). Since the participants in this research carve out and set up their own CMEs as spaces in terms of a basic online structure and create their own “places” in them often in the course of the same practices, I have not adopted the terminological differentiation from cultural geography. I use the word space for both space and place.

interpretive protocols shaping the actions of participants. Interpretive protocols are norms and values cherished and nourished by the community and differ from rules and rule enforcement in that they are rather the results of communal endeavours and become effective through the force of the group rather than through top-down sanctions like banning and censoring. Furthermore, they include different strategies of in- and exclusion through which Salafi Muslims try to keep innovators, heretics and the bearers of corrupted practices and beliefs at bay.

Devotional online architecture: Islamic aural-visual markers & rules

In line with the notion of affordance, scholars of communication and technology have pointed to the different ways in which the design of CMEs influences interaction and practices of participants (Wright and Street 2007) and how “discourse architecture created by the interplay of technology and content can both enable and constrain [. . .] participation” (Q. Jones and Rafaeli 2000, 214). Chat rooms and discussion forums hosting a Salafi community display a specific Islamic architecture marked by visual elements and structures either put in their place by the moderators and administrators or imprinted by the participants’ use of, for instance, avatars and signatures in these environments. Aural markers like sermons, *anashid*³⁹ and Qur’anic recitations complement visual markers by guiding the behaviour of participants towards the desired model. In addition, moderators and administrators enact and enforce rules which are explicitly mentioned and regularly brought to the attention of participants or assumed to be implicitly known.

Islamic architecture and pious soundscapes

Islamic architecture in this study comprises first of all visual markers like symbols, avatars, the personalised signatures of participants and the graphic layout of a specific computer-mediated environment that invoke an Islamic framework or contribute to the general impression of an Islamic devotional space for Muslims following the Salafiyya. While these visual markers are much more present in discussion forums, chat rooms display aural indicators that communicate to visitors and participants the meaning of the space.

Both chat rooms and discussion forums with at least a significant participation of Salafi Muslims feature forum names, labels and user names which carry references to the early community and important concepts of the Salafiyya. Most names of chat rooms and discussion forums testify to their affiliation to the Salafiyya by using either the obvious label “Salafiyya” and derivatives thereof or terms like *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama’a* (followers of the Sunna and the community), *qur’an wa-sunna* (Qur’an and Sunna), *ansar* (supporters, followers)⁴⁰, *da’wa* (call or invitation to Islam), *ghuraba’* (the strangers)⁴¹ or *nasiha* (well-meant honest admonition or advice).

³⁹ *Anashid* (sg. *nashid*) are sung a capella without instruments and express Islamic ethics and virtues by telling stories or giving praise. This genre of music is called Islamic because most Salafi scholars regard the use of musical instruments as forbidden.

⁴⁰ *Ansar* is commonly used to designate the supporters of the Prophet in Medina who welcomed and helped him after his emigration from Mekka.

⁴¹ This term refers to two ahadith attributed to the Prophet according to which he compares the true believers to

Programmatic statements like “on the path of the salaf al-salih”, “authentic Islam according to Qur’an, Sunna and the understanding of the pious ancestors” or the names of popular religious scholars indicate to the visitor of a chat room that she will be entering a Salafi space. The user names in both forums and chat rooms do in most cases not reflect the names of the users in the offline world. Rather, participants choose the names of the companions of the Prophet or other famous personalities from the ranks of the *salaf al-salih* and Salafi scholars (e.g., Ibn Taymiyya). Furthermore, a *kunya* (e.g., Abu Maryam, Umm Tariq)⁴², Arabic names referring to the origin of a user like *al-Almani* (the German), *al-Hullandi* (the Dutch) or *al-Kurdi* (the Kurd) or names expressing the submission to God like *Diener des Barmherzigen* (servant of the merciful)⁴³. Names like *muslima fi sabil Allah* (Muslim woman on the path of Allah), *al-mufakkir* (the thinker) or *al-muwahhid* (literally: the monotheist, follower of the doctrine of *tawhid*) point towards the notions of self-identification cherished by the users.

These names and labels mould the environment in so far that they raise certain expectations about the space they denote, forms the attitude of first-time visitors vis-à-vis a chat room or discussion forum and frame content and behaviour thought to be appropriate for an environment carrying a specific name. A good illustration of the expectation effect of names and labels in my research is a situation I encountered when I was surfing rather aimlessly through a number of Islam-related chat rooms in order to get an idea about their orientation. The following excerpt from my notes recounts the situation:⁴⁴

It was 5 pm this afternoon and not much was going on except for two chat rooms carrying names like “dialogues of religions” in their titles. However, discussions in these “dialogue-forums” were quite predictable: they were dominated by Muslims who answer questions on their religion and wanted to provide evidence that the Qur’an is the word of God. Others, who also claimed that their religion or conviction is the Truth (mostly Christians and a few atheists) are asked to bring (scientific) proof. The word dialogue is quite misleading in these rooms, it is all about convincing the other that she or he is wrong. That can be fun but today it was rather dull and I got bored. So I wandered off.

My spirits lightened up when I saw a chat room entitled “Koran und Sunna” that had just opened. The subtitle was something with “Wahhabi”. “Finally,” I thought, “people on the search for a pure Islam.” As soon as I read or hear “Qur’an and Sunna” I am alert and sure to find Muslims who claim to walk on the path of the salaf al-salih. “Qur’an and Sunna” has become something like a sign guiding me to my destination. So I entered the room and was welcomed by sweet, tacky Arab pop music. Music?!

travelling strangers in a hostile world. The image of the stranger is very popular among Salafi Muslims who live as minorities in non-Islamic societies and states in order to identify themselves.

⁴² The *kunya* is usually derived from the oldest child put in a genitive construction with *abu* (father) and *umm* (mother). Many participants who use *kunyas* as user names do in fact not have children (yet). However, they imagine themselves in their near future as mothers and fathers and use the names they would like to give to their children.

⁴³ These names set forth the Muslim tradition of using one of the 99 names of God like *al-rahman* (the merciful) preceded by the term *‘abd* (servant, slave)

⁴⁴ Recorded in my notes on 2 May 2010.

On the participant list on the right hand side of the window, I saw a certain “Abu Lahab” who was marked as the moderator (which paltalk does with an @) and another non-Arabic name that sounded German (Hans Müller, Martin Schmidt or something similar...). The name Abu Lahab rang a bell but not loud enough to remember that this was the name of one of the Prophet’s uncles who was also one of his fiercest enemies and is still remembered with disgust by many Muslims.

After a short time I was greeted with a rose and a “salam” in the text chat window. I typed back: “Guten Abend!” (good evening). I was confused and somehow on my guard. The the following conversation ensued (rough transcription from my memory):

Abu Lahab: Why did you come here?
Carmen: I read the title “Koran und Sunnah” and wanted to drop by. But I did not expect music.... This is no quite in the tradition of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, isn’t it?
Abu Lahab: Hihihhi. Are you Muslim?
Carmen: No.
Abu Lahab: How come you know Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab?
Carmen: I have done Islamic studies at University.
Abu Lahab: Cool! Islam is sooooo beautiful
[C.B.: at this point he started to play a recording of a man’s enthusiastic recount of his conversion to Islam]
Carmen: Aha.
Abu Lahab: Do you think Islam is beautiful?
Carmen: Well, I am not a Muslim...
Abu Lahab: Hehehe.
Carmen: Are you?
Abu Lahab: No way. Look at my name. Check sura 111⁴⁵.
Carmen: Wait... Abu Lahab...
Abu Lahab: Check this: http://www.eslam.de/begriffe/a/abu_lahab.htm
[...]
Abu Lahab: That is me. And Umm Jamila his wife was also great.
Carmen: Okay. Got it. You are quite busy with Islam for somebody who is not a Muslim and obviously not about to become one.
Abu Lahab: I used to read a lot about Islam. Not any more.
[...]
Abu Lahab: I just want to screw people [verarschen]. I am waiting for my akhi⁴⁶.

Abu Lahab was able to fool me just with the title of the chat room and the expectations it raised with me. Being certain about what would await me in the chat room I was almost disappointed, if not angry to hear Arabic pop music. On the other hand, he also seemed to be disappointed since he expected that he would be admonished by a “brother” or “sister” about the consumption of pop music. He quickly lost interest in talking to me and stopped. Interestingly, he followed the Salafi habit of using the names of the great personalities of the early Muslim community as their online identity.

Apart from names, titles and labels, discussion forums of the Salafiyya are often characterised by a specific classification of their sub-forums. Discussion forums in general feature a hierarchical tree-like structure wherein the postings of users are the smallest unit. Every

⁴⁵ Sura 111, called the Palm Fibre (*al-masad*), curses Abu Lahab (father of flames) and his wife and predicts that Abu Lahab will perish in (hell)fire.

⁴⁶ Arabic for “my brother”, a term many Salafi Muslims use in order to refer to a “brother in faith”.

posting belongs to a discussion thread which organises postings reacting to the initial posting of the thread opener or topic opener in a chronological manner from the oldest posting on top until the most recent posting at the end. Every thread belongs to one of sub-forums which make up the forum and are set up by the administrator before the inception of the forum. They can be changed by those who have the administrative right to do so later on. Forums with administrators who are inspired by the Salafiyya typically feature, in addition to other sub-forums, sub-forums dedicated to *'aqida* (doctrines, creed), *manhaj* (method, program)⁴⁷, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), deviating sects (from the point of view of the Salafiyya), biographies and stories of the *salaf al-salih* and the Prophet. While *tawhid* (monotheism) is part of the *'aqida*, some forums run an extra sub-forum on this topic since the proper understanding of *tawhid* and its consequences is central to Salafi thinking. Furthermore, similar to other Muslim forums, users exchange recipes, chat about daily occurrences or discuss issues related to work and studies in the corresponding sub-forums. Most forums contain gender specific sections where women and men are able to discuss more intimate issues with which they do not feel comfortable in company of the other sex. As long as the administrators of a forum do not explicitly delete a thread the discussion will be archived automatically and remain accessible online.

The layout of postings consists of three elements. The window with the message occupies the centre and the biggest part of the posting and its most prominent feature. To the left of the message window we usually find the avatar, if the user has uploaded one and if the forum set-up allows for it, and personal information such as user name, gender, location and number of postings. Below the message, forum users can automatically insert a signature containing text, images, soundbites or hyperlinks to digital material outside of the realm of the forum. A forum signature works similar to a signature in e-mails in that it is automatically inserted into every posting once the user has created one. Signatures of Salafi forums often contain hadiths, excerpts from the Qur'an, prayers and links to websites which are considered to carry authentic knowledge.

In discussion forums of the Salafiyya, the use of images falls under more or less extensive restrictions depending on the extent to which the prohibition of images of animated things is put into practise. These rules refer to avatars as well as other graphic material used in postings and signatures. There is widespread agreement that images of animals and human beings should not

⁴⁷ Salafi Muslims use the term *'aqida* in order to designate the fundamentals of their faith like *tawhid*. The term *manhaj* refers to the way or "methodology" through which the *'aqida* is put into practice in everyday life and worship. They believe that the *'aqida* for the most part is found in the Qur'an while the *manhaj* is contained in the Sunna. For instance, prayer is prescribed as an obligation in the Qur'an but the Sunna explains how prayer should be practised in detailed.

be drawn by hand or sculptured on the basis of several reports attributed to the Prophet. As to images of animated beings made by machines like photographs, there is a difference of opinions among scholars. The administrators of one forum suspended the use of avatars in general since they wanted to prevent any imagery that might run counter to the Islamic prohibition of images and Islamic norms from “polluting” their forum. Two forums prohibit the use of images of animated things whether photographed or drawn by hand. Two other forums allow the display of animated things in avatars as long as they are photographs. All forums carefully watch out that all images follow the Islamic norms by rejecting erotic or pornographic imagery or material that is deemed to sully and insult Islam and Muslims.

Common visual markers found in forums are depictions of the Qur’an, offline Islamic architectural structures like the mosques in Mecca and Medina, stylized silhouettes of female and male Muslims in devout positions (e.g. praying or reading the Qur’an) or the black banner (*rayat al-sawda*)⁴⁸ often carried by a horse rider reminiscent of the early Muslim fighters under the leadership of the Prophet and the name “Allah” in various calligraphic renderings. Furthermore, some forums allow for what I call political avatars while others reject images that contain political slogans or express political views mainly in opposition to policies and actions executed under the heading of anti-terrorism. Depictions of wide and impressive landscapes and scenes of pristine nature with and without human beings used in avatars and signatures recall the perfection of God’s creation and invoke calmness and quietness.

Salafi Muslims explained in conversations that avatars are not meant to express their identity holistically but to reflect a condition, a feeling or a situation that form their lives at a particular moment. Most change their avatars in irregular intervals as soon as they feel that they have entered a new period in life, a new mood or have developed in a different direction. Umm Zayd, for instance, explained the avatar she was using at the time of our conversation—a globe with the word “*tawhid*” covering it from right to left in Arabic script—and her use of avatars in general in the following way:⁴⁹

mainly my state of mind at a particular moment. They do express . . . I have been seriously busy in recent months memorizing the Qur’an and learning stuff. I fell right now like . . . I have an objective guiding me. You always hear like ‘this brother has a lot of knowledge, that brother has studied, you have to go to this brother to ask questions’ . . .

⁴⁸ According to Muslim tradition the Prophet flew a solid black square banner next to a solid white banner (also known as *rayat al-uqab*, banner of the eagle) when going to battle or engaging in a raid (see Hinds 1996). This banner had been adopted by many Islamist groups in different variations (e.g., with the Islamic statement of faith inscribed in white) and is often used in audio-visual material of Jihadi groups. For this reason, Western observers have come to call this the “jihad flag”.

⁴⁹ Interview taken on 16 September 2009 in Amsterdam.

You never hear something like ‘go to this sister, we are going to ask her because we need knowledge.’ You just do not hear this. And I find this such a pity. [. . .] This tells you something about the period I am going through right now. At first, I had roses, white roses. A white rose between all these dark roses. I wanted to express something with this. That I am white among all the other Muslims. They are Moroccan, Turkish . . . Well, this does say something about your situation and your state of mind and so on.

Umm Zayd told me how she was trying to study Islam, that is the Sunna and the Qur’an at home while having a young child and taking care of the household. She longed for more knowledge not only for herself but also to share it with other women. To explain and teach *tawhid*, the most important Salafi doctrine, was her main interest. The right understanding of *tawhid* is essential for Salafi Muslims and flaws within a believer’s *tawhid* can have terrible consequences like falling outside the realm of Islam. Her avatar expressed for her this interest in *tawhid* and the need to spread it across the globe. Her older avatar, a white rose among dark roses, communicated a feeling which kept her busy at the time: being a white Dutch convert to Islam within a community of mainly Dutch Muslims with an immigrant background and born as Muslims.⁵⁰

In a similar vein, ‘Isa had a potato as an avatar at the time when I interviewed him via e-mail. On my question why he had chosen a potato to represent him visually on a forum he gave the following answer:⁵¹

The potato in my avatar was at the beginning an act of defiance responding to a comment of a female user on the forum. Some Muslims of Arab origin harbour unfortunately the erroneous belief that they form an elite within the umma and that they are always right due to their knowledge of Arabic. However, if in the course of an argument a non-Arab turns out to be right, some emotionally overpowered young Muslims are not able to restrain themselves and develop a sort of Islamic nationalism. I know this behaviour from my own adolescence. Young Arabs and Turks called the Germans in verbal quarrels “potatoes”. I have taken this appellation as an allegory. Allah (swt) says on different occasions in the Qur’an that He will bring the true believers from the darknesses to the light, for instance here: God is the protector of the believers; He brings them forth from the shadows (darknesses) into the light (Q 2: 257). Whoever wants to call me potato due to my origin should do so. But he should not forget what Allah says in the Qur’an: O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware (Q 49:13). I am and will remain a potato, but Allah does not care for my descent. If the potato has been brought forth from the darknesses of the earth to the light (meaning that she became a Muslim) she will be the most esteemed with Allah.

Just like Umm Zayd, ‘Isa chose an avatar that expresses his origin and descent which makes him stick out among the community of Muslims although the number of converts is on the

⁵⁰ In Dutch parlance, the word black is used to designate non-Western immigrants to the Netherlands and their offspring. The majority of immigrants originate from Morocco and Turkey. White is reserved for the “native” Dutch (and Western migrants).

⁵¹ E-mail interview from April 2010.

rise. He carries the, derogatorily used, appellation with pride and claims his place within the group of Muslims following the Salafiyya by using God's own words and relating them to the potato as a symbol for being brought to the light from the darkness.

I got to know Umm Fatima on a forum where she used the avatar depicting the Meccan mosque and the Ka'ba. She told me that she chose this avatar shortly before she left for Mecca in order to perform the *'umra* (the small pilgrimage) because, as she said, she was "in the mood for the pilgrimage" back then. However, when I met her for an interview she had changed the avatar several times since I had first noticed her on the forum.⁵²

- C.B.: You have told me that you use different avatars. How do they look like?
Umm Fatima: It is usually Medina, the mosque of Medina, the masjid al-nabawi. Or . . . I change it quite often, did you know this? I change my avatar . . . well, according to how I fell, I change it. Right now I have a sun.
C.B.: A sun? This is not specifically Islamic.
Umm Fatima: No. I often have images of nature. I find them gorgeous. Besides . . . Well, in the past I used to have jihadi images, you know. A woman with a gun, yeah, with flags and the Qur'an and the finger like this [C.B.: She raises her index finger to the sky]. I always used to have those.
C.B.: And why did you have those back then?
Umm Fatima: Because I really was radical. Back then, I did not have that much knowledge. I have the idea that the more knowledge I gained, the calmer I got and the calmer I got
C.B.: You would not use these avatars any more because you understand things differently now?
Umm Fatima: No [C.B.: shakes her head], I do not see it like back then any more.

Umm Fatima's responses to my questions show that avatars are not only an expression of a specific temporary mood, feeling or situation but, in addition, give an idea about how avatars evolve in unison with the development of thinking, perception and point of views.

Architectural structures of offline devotional sites are more static in comparison to online devotional sites in that they cannot be changed quickly and without major efforts. Furthermore, they are rather an expression of the official representation of a group, for instance a church council or the council of elders who take the decisions concerning the devotional architectural environment based on different models of legitimation. In comparison, visual online markers that make up Islamic architecture are easily adapted by the users, that is the lay believers, themselves. Apart from the graphic composition and design of forums and the use of titles and names in the set up, which are pre-set by the forum administration, most visual markers are created and put into their place by the individual forum participants. Within the limits provided by the rules, they contribute their own personal stories, thoughts and feelings to the architecture of an online devotional space by choosing avatars and creating signatures. The repetitive choices of specific

⁵² Interview taken on 5 June 2009 in The Hague.

visual elements in their expression of identity produce recognisable structures that give computer-mediated environments like forums a specific character and look and provide insight into what believers deem to be important in relation to their faith. Howard analyses the shape that the online church in his study of online activities of North-American evangelicals takes as an outcome of the “everyday believers’ repeated choices to connect” (Howard 2011, 7). He uses the term “aggregate volition” (Howard 2011, 7) for the dynamic that is fuelled by the different personal choices of believers in computer-mediated environment. In the case of Salafi forums in Germany and the Netherlands, aggregate volition shapes these forums as devotional spaces by accumulating the single choices of individuals in the use of visual elements into an “Islamic online architecture” that makes this place recognisable to both Muslims following the Salafiyya and those who are either Muslims of a different orientation or non-Muslims.

Chat rooms where Salafi Muslims engage with their faith do not exhibit characteristic visual markers since the use of avatars, icons, signatures and other images is not facilitated by the chat room technologies. Administrators of Salafi chat rooms typically prevent or forbid the use of the camera function embedded in the software provided by the chat clients because this function can be easily misused by intruders and, in addition, violate the exigencies of gender segregation. The only exception are some chat rooms, where preachers appear on camera while they provide a lecture or give lessons. However, chat rooms do employ aural markers in order to mark the space, remind visitors of where they are and invoke the desired behaviour among participants. Forums actually feature aural markers as well but they play a rather minor role in moulding and forming forums into devotional spaces. Examples are *anashid*, Qur’anic recitations and sermons inserted into postings or accessible via a click on a link in the signatures of participants. However, these audio files in general request an extra action by participants—that is, a click with the mouse—in order to come into effect. Due to the microphone function, chat rooms favour oral markers and do not require additional action by the visitor of a room. Apart from the chat spoken live into the microphone, chat room owners and moderators play Qur’anic recitations in pauses or in order to discipline the chit-chatting in the typed chat window. Munir, a moderator in one of the most popular German-speaking chat rooms described why he uses recitations in the following way:⁵³

- Munir: There is a verse, remain silent if the Qur’an is recited. That means that you are supposed to remain quiet, to do nothing. And if they start typing . . .
C.B.: That would be the same as speaking?
Munir: Exactly. Then I say it is enough.

I could witness this efficacy of Qur’anic recitation as an aural marker to remind chat room

⁵³ Interview taken on 1 April 2010 in Darmstadt, Germany.

participants of the appropriate behaviour many times. Munir usually played sermons when waiting for the lecturer or during pauses when everybody was expected to leave the keyboard in order to perform the prayer. But participants often got impatient when waiting for a long time and started chatting in the text window. Munir usually responded by playing a recitation from the Qur'an and posting the verse he mentioned in our conversation: "And when the Koran is recited, give you ear to it and be silent; haply so you will find mercy" (Q 7:204) in the text chat. Participants immediately retreated from any activities in the chat room and continued to wait. This did usually not mean that they stayed entirely silent or were listening attentively. During these episodes, private messaging used to peak as I could guess from the messages I received and as was apologetically corroborated by participants I could ask.

Moderators often chose recitations conveying a deeply moved state of mind of the reciters: voices that turn into whispers and are overwhelmed by the beauty of the words they recite or silent sobbing and then slowly picking up the recitation. These performances illicit immediate response from those listening who in spite of the command to remain silent during recitations start typing short supplicatory prayers (*ad'iyah*) and phrases like "*ma sha' Allah*" (What God has willed), "oh, how beautiful", "this makes me cry", "*Allah akbar*" (God is great) and more. Moderators do not intervene to stop these comments from pouring into the text chat window. Sermons that are thought to move the listener generate similar responses in chat rooms.

Sermons and *anashid* are also employed in order to calm a waiting audience, to fill longer breaks or to prepare the arriving audience for what is going to come. In the latter case, they welcome the arriving participant and create a sphere of veneration, respect and humility appropriate for the performance of devotional practices. My experience with the mock-Salafi chat room tells a lot about how an aural environment is identified with a specific religious orientation. In this case, my expectation in terms of sound were disappointed when I heard Arabic pop music upon entering the room. However, these sound-bites are not solely an aural interlude inserted to fill a gap. In some chat sessions, a recorded sermon or a *nashid* are played in order to be discussed or in order to be shared with others in the chat room. Participants usually choose excerpts they consider to be particularly powerful, convincing and moving. I will discuss the performative qualities of these practices—that is, sharing and listening to sermons and *anashid*—in Chapter 4. In this context, however, suffice it to underline the ways that aural markers contribute to chat rooms by evoking a specific behaviour in harmony with the devotional character that participants, moderators and administrators aim to attribute to their space. They create a "pious soundscape" (Hirschkind 2006, 123–125) made up by various acoustic

elements that produce moral affect and intensifies the importance of specific styles of speech and comportment thought to embody the abstract notion of pious devotion.

The “Salafi soundscape” in chat rooms is, however, less a result of aggregate volition like large parts of the visual architecture in forums since the microphone as the bottleneck through which sound needs to pass in order to be audible to all chat room participants is controlled by administrators or moderators. If they do allow participants at all to take turns at the microphone they can decide on the spot if what they hear is appropriate and take related measures. Avatars and, for that matter, other graphic material can also be censored by forum administrators but they tend to “disappear” within the mass of avatars and postings on forums with several hundred or thousand users as long as they do not grossly infringe upon the rules and upon what the community considers decent (e.g., pornography or depictions of the Prophet). It is usually only upon the request of fellow participants that forum administrators take a closer look at a user’s avatar and other graphical elements. In comparison, chat rooms are under tighter controlled since moderators and administrators follow all communicative strands, typed and spoken, in real time and are able to censor sounds immediately. Therefore, soundscapes in Salafi chat rooms are rather the result of conscious decisions and control of a small number of people than of a multitude of users and their choices as is the case with aggregate volition.

Managing a pure space: Rules and rule enforcement

Computer-mediated environments are not only characterised by a specific architecture and soundscape. They are in addition discursive rooms managed by administrators and moderators who formulate and enforce rules. Their responsiveness to critique and suggestions of forum and chat room participants varies. However, in order to maintain a vibrant and well-visited chat room or forum, they cannot simply act at their own discretion following their own evaluation and perception. Moderators and administrators of Salafi chat rooms and discussion forums are in varying degrees susceptible to participants’ comments and aim to justify their actions. Forum administrators usually post the forum rules and related issues like critique and user comments on the rules in a specific sub-forum accessible for everybody. In case the rules are changed, they post a notification thereof. Chat rooms usually do not afford a similar action since text chat is not archived. Some chat rooms feature a link to an external website, where forum rules are explicated in writing. In other cases, chat rooms do not explicate the rules in writing but handle rules that are verbally repeated time and again by the moderators and administrators via the microphone.

More specifically, all chat rooms and forums requested participants to cite evidence from the religious sources in order to support their claims. Those who fail to do so are not only reprimanded by the moderators but also by fellow believers for whom it is important not to be misguided by the “mere” opinion of a Muslim. Ideally, everything needs to be authenticated through Qur’an and Sunna. Evidence should be provided by a direct quotation or by a foot-note style reference. The moderators I spoke to underlined that they see it as one of their tasks to check the evidence. In the larger forums, this commitment is frustrated by the sheer amount of postings and other tasks involved in the function of a moderator. Munir, who is the moderator of a smaller forum and a chat room, explained in an interview what evidence is and how he understands his role as a moderator:⁵⁴

- Munir: Evidence is if, for example, I have a text and I say, I refer to this fatwa of sheikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya, to his book Al-Fatawa al-Kubra, page 2, and so on and so on.
- C.B.: It is actually like a footnote?
- Munir: It is just, as it were, so that you know, okay, all is clear. We also check the evidence provided [C.B.: on our forum]. If a text is published we read it and we check it.
- C.B.: You do this as a moderator?
- Munir: Yes, I have to do this.
- C.B.: What a lot of work!
- Munir: Yeah, but it is all about religion. If it was about recipes for cooking, I would not care.
- C.B.: But it is a lot of work, isn't it?
- Munir: If somebody writes something, for instance, you are allowed to buy a house with a mortgage including the payment of interest rates. He says, this is halal or I just write a book saying Sheikh al-Islam says this and that. The lay believer comes and reads this. And he believes this. Somebody who is more knowledgeable will say ‘hey, what is your source?’. And this means, we try to help those who do not have a lot of knowledge about religion so that he can see: Alright, this is with references to sources and the references have been checked. Because we represent something. We say that we try to provide authentic knowledge about religion and for this we have to [C.B.: work].

Like other moderators and administrators, Munir is very adamant about his obligation to check evidence which he interprets as his responsibility as a moderator of a forum that claims to provide authentic knowledge. Later in our conversation, he described how he uses a large digital data base comprising the religious sources and the search function in order to verify postings on the forum. Other moderators restrict the control of evidence to apparently questionable quotations and sources or if other participants draw their attention to a case of false evidence.

Furthermore, forums and chat rooms handle a variation of norms of conduct with the aim, among others, to avoid *fitna*. *Fitna* (literally: temptation, intrigue, conflict, dissension) covers a wide semantic field and is usually employed to refer to situations of chaos and problems in

⁵⁴ Interview taken on 1 April 2010 in Darmstadt, Germany.

human relationships. According to Salafi belief, *fitna* is on the one hand the result of disobedience to the divine revelation and, on the other hand, causes further disobedience and spreads chaos. *Fitna* is therefore a self-replicating force that threatens the entire Muslim community. Many Salafi Muslims I have interviewed or spoken to identify the origin of *fitna* with the first war of succession during the reign of the fourth caliph and the Prophet's son-in-law 'Ali ibn Abi Talib which took place between different Muslim factions. This war is often called "the first *fitna*" and marks the fragmentation of the Muslim community into different strands. Apart from dissension and rupture within the Muslim community, *fitna* also refers to sexual temptations arising between men and women when they have contact outside of the realm of the allowed. *Fitna*, in this interpretation, stands for illicit sexual desires sparked by Satan and tearing the well-formed order of the Muslim community with the family at its core apart.

According to the understanding of most Salafi Muslims in this research, the prevention of *fitna* is even more pressing in computer-mediated environments facilitating contact between members of the opposite sex as well as unrestricted communication in general and the reach of traditional religious authorities. Preachers and scholars of the Salafiyya therefore regularly issue warnings about specific CMEs. For instance, in his video message distributed on YouTube under the title *Fitnabook*, the German preacher Abu Alia advised Muslim members of Facebook to delete their profiles and stay away from the temptations offered by the communicative properties of Facebook (Abu Alia 2010). He supported his call upon the Muslims in Germany in a conversation by stating that he has seen how several marriages broke up due to the unconstrained use of Facebook by the husband. He goes on:⁵⁵

Well, I know that Facebook does have advantages, you know. But this is, as I have said, my personal opinion. Ultimately, Internet and those kinds of forums or so they are like a household knife: you can stab somebody with it but you can also use it to butter your bread. And too many bad things have happened with it. You also have to understand Facebook, the ulterior motives of Facebook. Facebook, we think it does not do anything. I only post my data on it. You actually exhibit you entire life there, you enter it on very private terms, you delve very deeply into it. You can get a lot of information about a person, you know. You are always in contact with people. Therefore, it can, especially with Muslims who have certain barriers, these barriers can be transgressed very quickly. Very quickly.

What he has in mind when describing the dangers of Facebook, is *fitna*, that is, chaos, and rebellion against the will of God. At the same time he acknowledges, as do others, the advantages of digital technologies and Internet, not the least for preachers like him whose popularity is partly built upon the skilful use of digital technology in order to convey their message, gain a group of followers and sustain their image.

⁵⁵ Interview with Abu Alia taken on 3 February 2011 in Mönchengladbach, Germany.

One strategy to counter *fitna* in Salafi CMEs is thus to ensure with the enforcement of specific rules that gender relations conform to Islam as interpreted by the Salafiyya. Most administrators and moderators try to make sure that communication between men and women in the public areas of chat rooms and discussion forums stays “sober” or “to the point”⁵⁶, which means refraining from flirting as well as “soft” speech and overtly friendly talk between the sexes. Communication between women and men should focus on religious questions and aim at increasing knowledge of Islam. One forum asks woman to participate in the publicly accessible windows only when they have a pressing question or an important contribution to a discussion. More intimate questions are referred to sub-forums dedicated to brothers or sisters only.

While discussions with male and female participation are tolerated in the publicly accessible zones private messaging in forums and chat rooms between members of the opposite sex is strongly discouraged even if the messages strictly relate to religious questions. Most forums have come to restrict private messaging in general and between members of the opposite sex in particular in the course of the research. Two forums have turned off the private messaging function between the sexes, one forum grants the right to private messaging only after 500 postings. In order to be able to preclude or control private communication between members of the opposite sex, one forum and two chat rooms explicitly request participants to use unambiguous nicknames clearly indicating their gender. In contrast to forum administrators, chat room administrators cannot easily turn off or manipulate private messaging since this is a general default function provided by chat clients.⁵⁷ They can only encourage participants to notify cases of misconduct to them so that they can approach the incriminated participant and, if necessary, ban the trespasser. Munir, himself a moderator in a chat room, confirmed that he often receives request to at least temporarily ban a participant from a chat room but that he only acts upon evidence:⁵⁸

Munir: They report to us and I say ‘Okay. I believe you but please send me the log file so that I know what has happened.’ Because, maybe she has some kind of a problem with a boy or man and she writes to me and says ‘hey, this guy approached me. . . .

C.B.: And you get implicated.

Munir: Exactly. In these cases I say ‘I believe you but please send me the log file. If you

⁵⁶ The Dutch and German terms used are respectively “zakelijk” and “sachlich”.

⁵⁷ Chat clients are pieces of software which are either browser based or need to be installed separately. Others are add-ons to forum software. They serve as a host for chat rooms. Before entering a chat room the user needs to log into the chat client. The user interface opening after logging in indicates among other things which befriended users are logged in and provides a menu with chat rooms from which the user can choose. Accordingly, I use the terms “chat client” for the software, “chat rooms” for the environment set up by users of the software in order to meet with others on a regular basis and “chat session” for a single meeting or a gathering in such a chat room.

⁵⁸ Interview taken on 1 April 2010 in Darmstadt, Germany.

do not have the log file I cannot ban him.' Because she can tell me whatever pleases her. I cannot react on that. So she asks why. I give her the verse: if you have, give evidence.⁵⁹ If you have a proof I can react. If you do not have a proof I am sorry. Next time, if he approaches you again, send me what he has written.

Forum participants can call upon the help of administrators and moderators in a similar way. While they are able to control who is able to send private messages to whom by manipulating the relevant settings they usually have no access to the content of the private messages itself.

In addition to rules pertaining to the interaction between men and women chat rooms and forums feature other rules with which *fitna* must be held at bay. Polite manners which include the prohibition of gossip are a concern of all Salafi chat rooms and discussion forums. More recently, they have taken the habit to increasingly prohibit non-Muslims or Muslims of a different orientation to proselytise in order to fend off critique offered against Islam or, in the case of Muslims, against the Salafi interpretation of Islam. They are allowed to defend themselves when being critiqued and questioned. However, the line between the defence of one's beliefs and advertising them is a tightrope to walk and often a question of interpretation. On the same note, the Salafiyya is very diligent in distinguishing between, according to their understanding, aberrance and truth which motivates them to, as they say, advise fellow non-Salafi Muslims about the right way of practising Islam and to make aberration public so that it does not spread. Concomitantly, they are also careful to safeguard solidarity with other Muslims, even if they belong to so called sects, as they label them. Both objectives, to repudiate false beliefs and to unite the *umma*—that is, to avoid *fitna*, amounts to squaring the circle and leaves a grey area filled by the moderators, administrators and active participants with authority among the members.

Moderators are in general very diligent in implementing and enforcing the rules with participants even encouraging them to do so. One forum moderator explained that she spends on average eight hours per day on reading forum postings, answering questions of forum participants, warning or blocking participants and censoring postings if necessary. One forum offers a protocol in which decisions to ban members, delete discussion threads and censor postings are enlisted and briefly justified. One of the chief concerns of administrators and moderators is to ensure that discussions stay within the legal realm set out by Dutch or German national law. This is first and foremost relevant for forums where threads are archived and can serve as evidence. The prohibition of the Salafi group "Millatu Ibrahim"⁶⁰ in Germany in June

⁵⁹ Munir refers to Q 2:111: "[. . .] Produce your proof, if you speak truly."

⁶⁰ The term *millat Ibrahim* literally means the faith or creed of Abraham. Muslims venerate Abraham as a prophet, a firm believer among pagans and as a model for mankind.

2012, for instance, has prompted the administrator of one forum to post a warning explicating that the distribution of material of this group is prohibited and that threads containing such material will be deleted as soon as possible.

These diverse techniques of rule-giving and rule-enforcement create what Coleman (2008) in his discussion of youth e-citizenship calls “managed” as opposed to “autonomous” spaces. Following Coleman’s notion, Freelon defines managed spaces as “those [spaces] whose technological affordances implement tight control over civic debate with a bias toward institutionally approved subject matter” (Freelon 2011, 202). What he calls “institutionally approved subject matter” are in the case of Salafi chat rooms and discussion forums practices, discourses and expressions which are thought to reflect the model of the Prophet and the pious ancestors.

In this section, I have first discussed the visual architecture and the soundscapes consisting of those aural and visual markers which are characteristic of computer-mediated spaces of the Salafiyya. Both Islamic aural and visual architecture and the regulation of behaviour through rule enforcement fend off pollution and help to keep the space “pure”. Apart from these “obvious” rules spelled out in writing or verbally, computer-mediated environments are further regulated by interpretive protocols. As the following section shows, interpretive protocols give participants clues about expected behaviour and is enforced by the community itself rather than through an official institution like the administration of a forum or a chat room. They complement “institutional” rule-enforcing and help to maintain the Islamic character of Salafi chat rooms and discussion forums in order to ensure that the profane cannot contaminate rituals and practices that take place there.

Interpretive protocols

Spaces constructed by people are governed by predominantly implicit interpretive protocols which convey the norms of expression, behaviour and interaction relevant to a space as well as the sentiments and ideas about the world that are central to the community. Hirschkind describes interpretive protocols at work in YouTube channels featuring Islamic sermons in the following way:

[...] I focus primarily on the interpretive protocols that are emerging around Internet-based Islamic sermons, evident in the styles of discourse, evaluation, and self-presentation performed by *khutba*-site visitors. Much as one might study the norms of religious expression governing the space of a mosque (and recognizing that norms are always contested and at times ignored), my aim is to explore how the Internet is being refashioned by some of its Muslim users as a unique devotional space with its own forms of expression and argument. (Hirschkind 2012, 7)

As he states, interpretive protocols are part of those practices of participants of online environments which generate a distinct moral framing. Similar to the visual and aural elements of discussion forums which are in their totality the expression of an aggregate volition, interpretive protocols are as well rather produced by the cooperative action of Salafi participants in forums and chat rooms instead of being the result of rule-enforcement by administrators and moderators. In his discussion of aggregate volition Howard argues with Durkheim that society is an ongoing active cooperation between its individual members through which society (re-produces its norms and and brings them to the consciousness of its members (Howard 2011, 18–22). Writing in the early 1910s, Durkheim insisted that

[t]his is because society cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled together and act in common. It is by common action that it takes consciousness of itself and realizes its position; it is before all else an active co-operation. The collective ideas and sentiments are even possible only owing to these exterior movements which symbolize them, as we have established. (Durkheim 1965, 418)

In relation to computer-mediated environments this means that common action and collective cooperation transport collective ideas and sentiments to all participants, who are drawn into the collectivity, conform to the interpretive protocol and thereby re-produce the collectivity, as well as to intruders, strangers and newcomers who are not familiar with the norms of a community.

I have so far emphasized the unifying force of interpretive protocols which shape the community and impregnate a space. Yet, challenges to the interpretive protocol at work in a specific computer-mediated environment are integral part of its re-production, whether the challenge is subtle and faint or blunt and threatening. The greatest challenge to an existing

interpretive protocol are processes in the course of which counter-norms or different views on the world receive increasing support and finally establish a hegemony by overruling the established norms and views they contradict. However, change for the most part cuts slowly into interpretive protocols through small alterations and variations which occur during the process of reproduction and slightly transform what people think and how they understand the world.

In the following section we will focus on the core values and norms which are modelled after the Prophet Muhammad and his companions and collectively asserted within forums and chat rooms. Then we will move on to two concepts, *hisba* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, which define the limits to the inclusion of persons, beliefs and practices and thereby delineate the community. The last section of this sub-chapter will briefly look at cases in which the spaces are contaminated by un-Islamic influences and in which the production of a devotional space has ended in failure.

Adab al-da'wa: Exposing the perfect model to others

Salafi Muslims place a lot of emphasis on dealing with fellow Salafi Muslims, other (non-Salafi) Muslims and non-Muslims in a “right” way—that is, according to the way the Prophet and the pious ancestors have done—which they usually described with the term *adab* (good manners, decency, etiquette) or *adab al-da'wa* (the etiquette of pious exhortation, the well-mannered way to invite to Islam). It is important to keep in mind that *adab al-da'wa* is not merely an etiquette in the sense of “the precise rules of interpersonal behaviour” (Curtin 1985, 409) but concerned with the internalisation of these social virtues as part of the ethical disposition of a Muslim.⁶¹ Therefore, well-mannered behaviour in the case of the Salafiyya is also an objective in itself since God, after all, wants Muslims to emulate the fine and good manners of the first community and to incorporate them in their everyday practices. This section will focus on *adab* as an etiquette or protocol which exposes the perfect model to others, reminds others of how they should behave and promotes the singularity and perfection of the Muslim way of life led on the true path. I will return to the performative quality of practices related to *adab* in Chapter 4.

The character traits attributed to the Prophet and his community are in part reminiscent of the manners of noble knights and the ideal masculinity that were attached to the concept of chivalry during its revival in Europe, namely Britain, and nourished by a certain nostalgia in the second half of the 18th century.⁶² Abstract universal ideals like generosity, justice, politeness,

⁶¹ Cohen argues along the same lines, though in an entirely different context—the decline of politeness and the changes of qualities attributed to masculinity in Britain at the beginning of the 19th century (Cohen 2005, 314).

⁶² For more detail on the revived notion of chivalry in 19th century Britain see Cohen (Cohen 2005). She refers to the figure of Mr. Knightly in Jane Austin’s novel *Emma* as the embodiment of “the new gentlemanliness” inspired by

courage, love of God and prowess were championed as core values of chivalry and were supposed to be exposed in the behaviour of men. The Salafiyya attributes similar values to the Prophet, his companions and those that followed them though they nourish a quite different understanding and concept of gender relations which share the idea of respect against women but rejects any notion of gallantry, adventure and romantic love.

The universal features of *adab al-da'wa* which are usually enumerated by Salafi Muslims appeal instantly to every person. The values usually included are humility, clemency, veraciousness, politeness, tactfulness, gentleness, kindness, fear of God (*taqwa*), sincerity (*ikhlas*) and patience (*sabr*). Furthermore, the pursuit of religious knowledge or, in other words, of the truth is seen as a core norm to which everybody has to comply according to her or his abilities. In extension, a Muslim should only talk “with knowledge” by grounding claims in Qur’an and Sunna and refer in thoughts, words and actions to both sources⁶³. The following excerpt from a video shared on YouTube and recommended to me by Salafi informants in Germany as a good introduction to the correct *adab* emphatically describes the good traits of a preacher or caller to Islam (*da'in* or *da'iya*, pl. *du'at*) mirroring the manners of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih*. The character traits explicated in the video are considered to be a model not only for preachers but for all Muslims.⁶⁴

Another, very important character trait is politeness, gentleness, caution and also patience which also has immense influence. Thus, in any case, do not act to the contrary. Don't be overzealous, don't be harsh, impolite or even violent. We find evidence for the gentle call in sura 2, verse 159: “It was by some mercy of God that thou wast gentle to them; hadst thou been harsh and hard of heart, they would have scattered from about thee.” And in sura 20, verse 44: “Yet speak gently to him, that haply he may be mindful, or perchance fear.” This happened when Allah talked to Musa [C.B: Moses] and Harun [C.B.: Aaron], peace be with them, and sent them to the Pharaoh. It is therefore an obligation that a Muslim makes use of this mild way and does not turn to be to harsh and thereby makes sure that the people run in droves away from Islam because of his brutal and two-fisted method. The person thus should use good words, so that he touches the heart of a

chivalry.

⁶³ According to Salafi understanding, true worship must be done by the heart (conviction, *i'tiqad*), the tongue (words, *qawl*) and the body (deeds, *amal*). A Muslim who lacks one of these conditions, for instance, who is convinced of Islam and testifies for it in words but does not adapt his acts to Islam, is considered in the eyes of some Salafi Muslims a *kafir* (unbeliever)

⁶⁴ Most Salafi Muslims I have encountered in my research in Germany and the Netherlands handle a rather inclusive understanding of *da'wa* and of the tasks of a *da'iya* by subsuming almost every act and behaviour that can be observed by other Muslims and non-Muslims under the call to Islam. The idea is that, being Muslim, their behaviour shapes the reputation of Islam in general and, more importantly, can help to redefine Islam in the sense of the Salafiyya thereby excluding other, from the Salafi point of view heretic practices, beliefs and interpretations from the public notion of Islam. The Salafi *da'wa* in Germany and the Netherlands, thus, aims at interspersive hegemony and power of definition among the Muslim community and in the public debate about Islam. Every act and every word of a Salafi Muslims turns into a testimony for the “right path” and the “Truth” and exposes the perfect model of Islam to an environment inhabited by non-Muslims or Muslims who are erring. This line of thought leads to the conclusion that every Muslim following the true path, that is the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih*, is, ultimately, a caller to Islam.

person and so that this person feels drawn closer to Islam. Because, as already mentioned, with contrary behaviour one rather makes sure that people develop disgust for Islam when they see how you behave. And this ultimately causes division instead of unity. Gentleness embellishes things, the lack of gentleness disfigures things. As the Prophet, may God honour him and grant him peace, said: “He who is deprived of gentleness is deprived of kindness.” Therefore, gentleness is very important! (SalafiiMuslim 2010)

Gentleness and politeness must be the norm for interactions with Muslims and non-Muslims alike so that every word and every interaction reaches the heart of the recipient. This does not imply that the truth should be bent so that the more inconvenient sides of it are disguised. However, the manner of behaving should be gentle and friendly even if the truth, as in the case of the message conveyed by Moses and Aaron to the Pharaoh mentioned in the quote above, may incite fear.

Humility (*khushu'*), not to be confounded with cowardice, is another attribute of the ideal Muslim which figures prominently in Salafi literature referring to behavioural norms. *Khushu'* is cultivated and internalised in multiple ways: knowing your place in relation to God, being aware of human flaws and feeling that you are only a small part of God's amazing creation. This notion of humility is grounded in the absolute submission to God's will and should also be expressed in everyday practices. The modesty and humility attributed to the Prophet, the epitome of the most excellent manners, is the topic of many chat room and forum conversations and deeply moves participants. Participants habitually relate to each other how the Prophet visited old or sick people and helped them, how he refused to accept praise for his character and leadership and how he remained patient and steadfast even in the most adverse circumstances due to his submission to God's will verging on self-effacement.

Khushu' goes hand in hand with *taqwa*, the fear of God, for one has to fear God and His splendour in order to entirely submit oneself to Him and to become His slave. *Khushu'* does not originate from the love of mankind but from the love of God and the fear not to fulfil one's duties towards God in the correct way. To be filled with *khushu'* is therefore tantamount to be humble towards God. The norms governing interaction among Muslims and human beings are derivations of the relationship of the believer with his or her Creator. To be humble towards a sick person or to love a person is done “for the sake of Allah”. The phrase “I love you for the sake of Allah” is a common way to express sympathy in chat rooms and forums of the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands. However, this kind of “love” or “sympathy” is strictly separated from the notions of romantic love or affection nourished among unbelievers because they do not stem from the love of God. Morality and ethics therefore are not autonomous notions but are results of a correct understanding of Islam, especially *tawhid*, and a derivative of the believer's relationship with God.

To do something wrong is therefore not only simply immoral but represents a flaw in the perpetrator's relationship with God and understanding of Islam. Furthermore, humility and fear of God ensures that behaviour, action and reasoning are guided towards the right direction. This means that a believer who does not feel fear of God and humility might mechanically be doing what Gods wants him to do due to habit and custom but he or she does not have a "properly disposed heart—a figure for something like 'the right attitude'—which is necessary in order to learn from the Quran, to achieve sound judgement in one's engagements with it *as a Muslim*" (Hirschkind 2006, 135).

Khushu' and *taqwa* need to be cultivated and are expressed in the physical acts of the body like crying. In the following example, the participant GermanMuslim asks his fellow forum members why it is that he does not cry when listening to the Qur'an. He muses about the different reasons—lack of *taqwa* or the fact that he does not understand the content of Qur'anic recitations since he does not master Arabic—and asks how he can change this, that is, how he can learn to cry while listening to the Qur'an. Mahmud, one of those who react with advice, explains the relationship between humility and fear of God:⁶⁵

You need to acquire khushu' first, you are not born with it. This applies as well to all other traits like tawakkul (trust, reliance on God), taqwa and so on. One of the salaf said: I have been praying for 60 years but it was only after 30 years that I began to have khushu' in my prayer. You have to develop khushu'. There used to be an article in German which mentioned some steps to develop khushu'. Perhaps somebody can post it.

[GermanMuslim wrote] Could it be because I understand scarcely anything when I listen to the Qur'an?[/]

This is one reason without a doubt. Many of us only focus on the beautiful voice of the reciter and not on the content. You can observe this in the tarawih prayer⁶⁶: the imam recites the verse about menstruation and the praying people behind him cry. Allah al-musta'an [C.B.: May Allah help us]. Keep yourself busy with the German translation so that you always have the approximate meaning of the Qur'an at hand. Allah demands from us in the Qur'an to do tadabbur. That means to reflect about the verses of the Qur'an and not simply just reading them.

[GermanMuslim wrote] How can I fear Allah more? By doing more optional deeds?[/]

If you want to fear Allah, you will have to attain ma'rifat Allah – knowledge about Allah. Increase your knowledge about your Creator, read or listen to lectures about Allah and His names and attributes and think about Allah and His creation. Remind yourself of the fact that you will die and think about what happens at the grave and about Judgement Day. Know that Allah will hold us accountable for our deeds on that day when there will be no secrets and that He will punish our disobedience. And I swear to Allah, if one becomes truly conscious of these things and has certainty about it the prayer and not only the prayer but the entire life will change. The problem is however, that we do not have certainty about what is awaiting us after death. We read about it, we hear about it, we talk about it but it has not reached our hearts yet. If it had we would understand the statements of the sahaba [C.B.: companions of the Prophet] who wished to be a lump of earth or a bird who are spared from these occurrences and who are not thrown into the

⁶⁵ Al-Sunna, forum, 27 July 2010: Crying.

⁶⁶ The *tarawih* prayers are prayed in the nights of the Ramadan.

fire. Finally, stay among righteous brothers and sisters who fear Allah so that this will rub off on you.

The key element of the technique to evoke and instil *taqwa* and *khushu'* in a person is the striking and haunting visualisation of the torments of the grave (*'adhab al-qabr*). According to Salafi belief, two angels will arrive at the grave of the newly buried who will make him sit and ask him successively the following questions: Who is your lord? What is your religion? Who is your prophet? Those you give the right answers, will remain in blissful expectation in their graves until the Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyama*) when the souls will be joined by their bodies, resurrect naked, barefooted and uncircumcised and walk in front of God. Scales will be set up upon which their deeds will be weighed and judgement done. Those who fail the questioning of the angels will suffer terrible torments in the grave until they are resurrected in order to appear in front of God. Numerous chat room sessions and forum threads are dedicated to these events and paint them in vivid colours, sometimes with links to graphic and audiovisual material about the torments of the grave.

Khushu' and *taqwa* are expressed differently in computer-mediated environments than in the offline world since the physical effects of both feelings like crying, closing the eyes in pain and bowing the head in humility do not belong to the communicative repertoire of chat rooms and discussion forums.⁶⁷ Both need to be expressed in words, whether spoken or written, which describe the emotion and reaction of the believer. Typed exclamations like “*ma sha' Allah*”, “*astaghfir Allah*” (I seek forgiveness from God), “*subhan Allah wa-ta'ala*” (Glorified and exalted be God) or supplications (*du'a*, pl. *ad'iya*) often follow a contribution invoking the fear of God or humility. Others use words in order to convey their emotions and describe their reactions. Also, a certain state of mind expressed by lowering yourself and remaining sober in the face of praise is considered to be part *khushu'* and fear of God for self-satisfaction is considered to be an open door for Satan to make a believer loose *taqwa*. The speaker of the video who expounded the character traits of a caller to Islam ends with a statement in which he humbly declares that he himself lacks the knowledge of a *da'iya*:

And now a note about myself. I am myself not a caller to Islam. I do not do *da'wa*. That means, I do not call myself such. I am merely somebody who uploads fatwas of scholars or somebody who commands good and forbids wrong. But as to true *da'wa*, I leave this to people who have more knowledge than me. (SalafiiMuslim 2010)

Most Salafi Muslims, however, would without hesitation identify his actions as *da'wa* and not subscribe to his differentiation between a *da'iya* and somebody who commands good and

⁶⁷ Hirschkind describes the ethical responses of the body of listeners to (cassette) sermons in detail in his study of cassette sermons in Cairo (Hirschkind 2006, 67–104).

forbids wrong. Revealingly, the subtitle of his channel is “Da‘wat al-Salafiyya” which indicates that he subsumes his videos under the category of *da‘wa*. However, his motivation is not to put the correct label on his activities but to be humble and fearful of God. The same is done by forum posters and chat room participants who cite the phrase “Allah a‘lam” (God knows best) or a variation of the phrase “anything correct is from God and anything wrong is from myself” in order to remind everybody that knowledge is provided by God and that believers are merely the lucky recipients of this knowledge which they hardly deserve.

Adab al-da‘wa as described so far applies in principle to both men and women. However, in line with the notion of gender segregation and in order not to arouse wrong feelings of love, attraction or other forms of illicit thoughts and emotions, women are expected to tone down their behaviour in most chat rooms and forums where both sexes mix. In some cases, women are expected to restrain from active participation with questions being one possible exception as Umm Fatima recounts from her experience:⁶⁸

Al-Nur forum is now free, men and women are both active there. But it is super business-like. I also participate there. For instance, somebody posts an article about which I can ask questions. This is only purely about the question and then “thank you, I hope that somebody will answer. Finished, ‘alaykum al-salam.’ And this is how it goes. [. . .] There is no pleasant chatting.

Being too sociable is often confounded with flirting and therefore frowned upon by many Salafi participants in chat rooms and forums. It should be kept in mind, however, that the majority of chat rooms and forums does not restrict the active participation of women to posing questions in order to suppress flirting. In most cases, women can participate in the same way as man. However, they are in general expected to show more restraint in terms of socialising with and friendliness towards the opposite sex. Furthermore, it is usually men—or male users to be more precise—who undertake the tasks of warning others of wrong behaviour and belief. In many conversations, women explained that they felt that they lacked the knowledge in order to do so and that men in general have much more religious knowledge. Female participants are more encouraged to advise their fellow believers when it comes to “female” concerns like veiling, raising children or the different Islamic rules that apply to menstruation.

The default position of *adab al-da‘wa* is to employ good manners to attract people to Islam and to be as inclusive as possible by addressing and involving non-Salafi Muslims and non-Muslims while at the same time exposing Islam as the true path. In the following section we will move to the limits of the inclusive norms of *adab al-da‘wa* that shape Salafi devotional spaces in

⁶⁸ Interview taken on 5 June 2009 in The Hague.

computer-mediated environments.

The limits of inclusion: Hisba and al-wala' wa-l-bara'

The call for gentleness and politeness does not imply that a Muslim should not spell out inconvenient truths and should not show a certain rigour when it comes to defending Islam as the (only) true path. When this truth is threatened, a Muslim must be uncompromising and unconciliatory reject any pollution of Islam. In the same video cited before, the speaker describes the limits to politeness in the following way:

But what happens if I know somebody who is narrow-minded and does not want to listen? Should I not go for a more severe tone? Yes. As Allah says in sura 66, verse 9: 'O Prophet, struggle with the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and be thou harsh with them. And dispute not with the People of the Book save in the fairer manner, except for those of them that do wrong.'⁶⁹ Thus, the hadith and the Qur'anic verses tell us when we should be strict and when we should be gentle. But the approach of the caller to Islam should be based on tactfulness, gentleness, patience, knowledge and *ikhlas* [sincerity, honesty]. Harshness should only be applied if it is absolutely necessary and only in the case that the caller will not attain his goal and if he assumes that he, if he chooses a more severe and serious tone, will be able to call the person in question to the truth or to the right path. (SalafiiMuslim 2010)

Exceptions to the general norm of politeness apply if the people one interacts with "stubbornly" refuse the call to Islam. Harshness or strictness can in these cases become a tool to, on the one hand, denounce wrong acts, norms and concepts and, on the other hand, to create a sense of urgency by evoking the consequences of his or her heretic beliefs, acts and words which will impress the recipient to such a point that he or she might take the opportunity to turn to the truth.

The crucial aspect, however, is to find the point at which harshness should replace politeness. This is a fiercely contested issue among Salafi Muslims in forums and chat rooms. In the following example taken from a Dutch forum, the user Abu Rawda opened a discussion thread with the title "A forum is not a human being" in which he laments that people tend to misunderstand what one writes and quickly get upset.⁷⁰ Among those who react is Nadia who recalls a situation from the same day where she was attacked for what she had written during a discussion in such a harsh and fierce way that tears were coming to her eyes. She acknowledges that it might be frustrating for many to constantly correct stupid mistakes of others but this should be done in a mild manner. Upon her posting, Abu Rawda asks:

Al-salam 'alaykum,

⁶⁹ The speaker merges in this quote two verses. The part beginning with "And dispute not with the People of the Book [. . .]" is taken from chapter 29, verse 46.

⁷⁰ Islambegrijpen, forum, 13 February 2007: The forum is not a human being.

ukhti [C.B.: my sister], can you in this case give some advice on how to shape the message in a nice way based on Qur'an and Sunna (in other words: the truth), without hurting your counterpart and, simultaneously, making the person aware of the fact that she or he is wrong?

al-salam 'alaykum.

In essence, he asks as to how one can take account of the emotional needs of a person in a conversation while pointing to a fault that needs correcting. Abu Rawda furthermore asks that the advice be based on Qur'an and Sunna and not run counter to the rules of interaction and behaviour explicated in them. Nadia answers:

[citing the preceding post of Abu Rawda]

I really see your good intentions . . . There is not really advice to give or so. I think that you know yourself how you write something . . . but, above all, no haha's because with this you show that you laugh at somebody and that does hurt . . .

Let me give a quick example . . .

(I am not really sure whether this story is 100% true but I believe it is)

There was a man who was praying in the same mosque as the Prophet (saw). They had finished praying or so and the Prophet (saw) said: "Go back and pray again." This happened about three times. Probably because the man prayed too fast and so on. However, the Prophet did not laugh at him, did not react frustrated, not angry, not offensive. He explained in detail and in good harmony . . . do you understand? Therefore, why should somebody here among Muslims take the position of the cock of the walk and snap at people on the smallest occasion.

I may have over-reacted but the discussions here are not in good harmony. PATIENCE IS YOUR STRENGTH AND YOUR POWER . . . therefore, above all, do not start beating the keyboard as soon as you see somebody writing something stupid. [smiley]

Nadia mentions that she would like to see more harmony or balance in the discussions which to her means that discussants should not immediately attack as soon as they detect a mistake and that people should be left in their dignity and not be derided. She narrates a story of the Prophet in which he observes something wrong (a man praying too fast) and simply sends him back to re-do his prayer until he does it the right way without becoming offensive. This unpolished integrity of the Prophet—unpolished in the positive sense of being sincere without sugar-coating matters—and his resoluteness in correcting faults without hurting people are the ideal model for correcting fellow human beings and as such the topic of numerous booklets and treatises circulating in the Salafi web sphere.⁷¹ Salafi preachers use their lectures regularly to refer to hadiths telling how the Prophet has dealt with wrong practices in his surrounding. Aboe Ismail, a well-known Dutch preacher collaborating with the al-Sunna mosque in The Hague recounted one of those story in a lecture at a mosque in Ede in order to show that "you can achieve a lot with a friendly, calm and patient attitude". The following excerpt from my notes

⁷¹ The most popular is *The Prophet's Methods for Correcting People's Mistakes* written by the Salafi scholar Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid (1960) and translated from the Arabic original (*al-asalib al-nabawiya fi 'ilaj al-akhta'*) which can be found in different version as a downloadable file on the Internet.

taken during the lecture recap his argument:⁷²

Aboe Ismail underlines that issues should be sorted out in a calm manner. He mentions a hadith from the Prophet and his reaction to a man who pees in the corner of a mosque: The Prophet's companions want to hit the man and evict him from the mosque. The prophet holds them back, waits until the man has finished and explains to him why one should not pee in a mosque. The man accepts the religion of the Prophet and becomes a Muslim. He makes du'a' for the prophet but not for the companions. Thereby the companions missed the credit they could have gained for Judgement Day.

In his version of the story, the Prophet appears as the ultimate educator who waits for the best point in time in order to approach the man, explains why it is wrong what he does and earns the gratitude of the person who is happy that somebody enlightens him. The companions who wanted to use physical violence are punished by missing out on the credit of having done a good deed which could have helped them on Judgement Day.

The question as to when exactly politeness should change to harshness remains an unresolved issue in practice in spite of the assertion of the speaker in the video cited before that "the hadith and the Qur'anic verses tell us when we should be strict and when we should be gentle" (SalafiiMuslim 2010). This unresolved question lies at the origin of many debates and discontent in Salafi chat room and forum as the preceding forum excerpt on how to properly correct a fellow forum member testifies. Resoluteness and firmness in one's religion and the necessity, at times, to correct wrong practice and call to Islam in a harsh way can not only collide with the norm of politeness but also with the prohibition of gossiping among Salafi Muslims. Scholars have spent a lot of ink in order to explicate the fine line between gossiping and exposing wrong practices and beliefs of a specific person. The following conversation taken from a discussion forum highlights some of the intricacies surrounding this matter. The thread was opened after a preceding discussion had been closed and subsequently removed by one of the moderators due to inappropriate use of language and the rifts this could potentially cause within the community of the forum. However, one of the participants in the discussion, Fatima, felt discontent to leave the discussion where it ended when it was closed and felt the urge to post a contribution on the meaning of gossiping as defined in the religious sources addressed to one of her contestants in the closed thread, Musa. She opened a new thread entitled "For Musa" by posting the following text:⁷³

Reacting upon what you have claimed earlier about gossiping and slander:

⁷² Excerpt from my notes taken during the lecture of Aboe Ismail at the Mouahidien mosque in Ede, the Netherlands, on 30 May 2009. His lecture dealt with the story of Yusuf (Joseph), how he patiently endured his lot and how contemporary Muslims can learn from him.

⁷³ Islambegrijpen, forum, 28 January 2010: For Musa. The bold highlights in the quotes have been preserved from the original.

The Muslim has to guard his tongue and avoid things that have been forbidden. Among these **forbidden** [C.B.: emphasis here and in the following quotations in the original] things which people take often lightly are ghiba (backbiting), buhtan (slander) and namima (malicious gossip).

Ghiba or backbiting means **speaking about a Muslim in his absence and saying things that he would not like to have spread around or mentioned**. Buhtan or slander means saying things about a Muslim that are not true, or in other words telling lies about him. Namima or malicious gossip means telling one person what another said in order to cause trouble between them.

I do not know how you define gossiping or what truths you should want to spread about three persons that are known to people, but it is simply forbidden. You must not speak negatively about somebody who is not present. Point. You cannot justify this with the flimsy excuse of warning.

Fatima provides a definition of backbiting, slander and malicious gossiping in order to clarify that speaking negatively about an absent person is backbiting and therefore simply not done. The first two paragraphs of her posting are copy-pasted in English from an essay-style text entitled “The Harm of Gheebat” which circulates the web and is accredited to a “Brother Isma‘il”. After her first posting she sends a second contribution providing a hadith attributed to the Prophet which serves as evidence for her claims.

It was narrated from Abu Hurayra (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Messenger of Allah SAWS (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: ‘Do you know what ghiba (backbiting) is?’ They said, ‘Allah and His Messenger know best.’ He said, ‘**Saying something about your brother that he dislikes.**’ It was said, ‘What if what I say about my brother is true?’ He said, ‘If what you say is true then you have backbitten about him, and if it is not true, then you have slandered him.’

Narrated by Muslim, 2589

I think that you speak English well enough to understand this as well. I will stop here.

Wa-l-salam

With the evidence provided in form of a hadith, Fatima has closed her case and underlined her message that talking badly about a third, absent person is *haram*. However, Musa, the addressee of her messages, is not up to acquiesce to it. He counters with a long posting arguing that gossiping and slander are indeed forbidden but that there are cases which are to be identified as an act of cautioning or warning others of the evil a person has committed or is still committing.

[Fatima wrote:] I do not know how you define gossiping or what truths should want to spread about three man that are known to people, but it is simply forbidden. You must not speak negatively about somebody who is not present. Point. You cannot justify this with the flimsy excuse of warning.[/]

You have posted this text while I was technically not present and therefore you have joined in gossiping according to your own understanding. Given that many of your postings carry a negative tone and that you talked about third persons without their direct presence, you have been gossiping all the time. Just stop then with talking about the leaders of the Muslims and what they all do to the Muslims. Just stop talking about Wilders [C.B.: Dutch politician] and Bush (gossiping about unbelievers is neither allowed) if you are using this strict definition! You entirely ignore my other arguments with

reference to public discussions about politicians and so on.

I do not give any definition but forward the words of the scholars. Read the words of al-Nawawi or Ibn Qudama and his summary of the *ihya*⁷⁴ in order to realise how much exceptions there are for gossiping.

You can consult every possible fatwa site of any scholar.

[C.B.: The following 4 paragraphs appear in English in the original] But the fact that there is no *ghiba* in the case of a *fasiq* (an evildoer who openly commits sins) is indicated by the proven report which says that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) saw a funeral passing by, and those who were with him spoke ill of the deceased person, and he (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "It is due." Then another funeral passed by, and they spoke well of the deceased person, and the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "It is due." They asked him what he had meant by saying it is due, and he said: "The one of whom you spoke ill, Hell is his due, and the one of whom you spoke well, Paradise is his due. You are the witnesses of Allah on His earth." and he did not rebuke them for speaking ill of the deceased person of whose evildoing they were aware. This indicates that if a person commits evil openly, there is no *ghiba* in his case.

<http://www.islamqa.com/en/ref/106413/>

Excerpts from the work of Ibn Qudama:

Someone who sins openly, and has no qualms about his sins being mentioned.

However, it is not permissible to mention any of his secret sins.

"There can be no backbiting of one who casts off the mantle of modesty." [Suyuti, *Al-Jami' as-Saghir*, 2/519, from Bayhaqi.]

http://qa.sunnipath.com/issue_view.asp?id=212

Words spoken out of legitimate and reasonable concern are not considered *ghiba*. So criticism made in this manner would not be *ghiba*,

http://qa.sunnipath.com/issue_view.asp? ... 88&CATE=37

Talking about political injustices and the like is certainly not from this, especially when there is a good reason. However, it is unbecoming of a Muslim to delve into the personal life of even non-Muslim leaders

http://qa.sunnipath.com/issue_view.asp? ... 48&CATE=88

Gossiping is a sin which according to the scholars is greater than extramarital sex. Pay attention to it before you charge others with it.

Musa mockingly applies the definition of gossiping (talking negatively about an absent person) provided by Fatima to their conversation in order to show its absurdity. Since he was absent from the forum thread at the time she posted her text she has gossiped. Furthermore, he states that publicly talking about politics would become impossible when applying her definition because politicians are not present when people talk about them. He then lists the exceptions by excerpting from a range of fatwas mainly from the medieval scholar Ibn Qudama. According to them, referring to the bad deeds of a *fasiq* (sinner, evildoer) as bad, pointing out sins that have been committed openly and criticism that is based on legitimate and reasonable concerns like political concerns are not considered *ghiba*. However, talking about the personal life of a public

⁷⁴ Musa refers here to the book *Mukhtasar Minhaj al-Qasidin* (Abridgement of the Road of the Pursuers) by Ibn Qudama al-Maqdisi (1147-1223) which is a summary (or abridgement) of Ibn al-Jawzi's (1116-1201) *Minhaj al-Qasidin wa-Mufid al-Sadiqin* (The Road of the Pursuers and the Instructor of the Truthful) which is itself an abridged version of one of the major works of the scholar Ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1059-1111), *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*. Salafi Muslims prefer the abridged versions since both al-Jawzi and al-Maqdisi are thought to have cleaned the work of al-Ghazali of weak hadiths. Hence the reference to "the summary of the *ihya*" in Musa's post.

figure like a ruler is not part of the legitimate interests. However, Fatima does not back down and compromise.

[Musa wrote:] You have posted this text while I was technically not present and therefore you have joined in gossiping according to your own understanding. [/]

First of all, it is not my understanding since I have cited words from the scholars. Secondly, you can not possible have missed that this topic is entitled with your name and is addressed to you. Furthermore, I think it is quite logical that you can not do more on a forum than to post in a way that a fellow member can react. Thirdly, I do not see anywhere that I have called you something that you are not. I have cautioned for things that are very dangerous within Islam and you contradicted this warning after which I have reacted with the applicable sources. If you classify a hadith as gossip en slander, then you have not understood things well.

[Musa wrote:] Given that many of your postings carry a negative tone and that you talked about third persons without their direct presence, you have been gossiping all the time. [/]

For the sake of the argument: If I really have done this . . . does this then justify that you follow me in that? Is it not your obligation to change munkar⁷⁵ and to inform me about this? In this case I would have said: Jazaka Allah [C.B.: May Allah reward you] and I would have edited my posting. All of this has not happened. It is therefore nothing more than dry reasoning [smiley]

[Musa wrote:] Just stop then with talking about the leaders of the Muslims and what they all do to the Muslims. Just stop talking about Wilders [C.B.: Dutch politician] and Bush (gossiping about unbelievers is neither allowed) if you are using this strict definition! You entirely ignore my other arguments with reference to public discussions about politicians and so on. [/]

There is a huge difference between denouncing an act or a person. There is also *hikma* [C.B.: wisdom] for issuing warnings.

[Musa wrote:] But the fact that there is no ghiba in the case of a fasiq (an evildoer who openly commits sins) is indicated by the proven report which says that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) saw a funeral passing by, and those who were with him spoke ill of the deceased person, and he (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "It is due." Then another funeral passed by, and they spoke well of the deceased person, and the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "It is due." They asked him what he had meant by saying it is due, and he said: "The one of whom you spoke ill, Hell is his due, and the one of whom you spoke well, Paradise is his due. You are the witnesses of Allah on His earth." and he did not rebuke them for speaking ill of the deceased person of whose evildoing they were aware. This indicates that if a person commits evil openly, there is no ghiba in his case. [/]

Are you trying to accuse the three sisters in the preceding topic of *fisq* [C.B.: sinfulness, debauchery]? If yes, is the best way to do this to vent your gall on a forum instead of warning them as you have claimed earlier? And is it still a matter of gossip and slander if we express them all under the guise of warnings? Brother, for me it is not about discussing in itself. I would like that somebody would halt me if I lapsed into gossiping. What you want to do with that I have said is up to you.

[Musa wrote:] Gossiping is a sin which according to the scholars is greater than extramarital sex. Pay attention to it before you charge others with it. [/]

This is true. Given the gravity of it everybody ought to be attentive so that you to not fall into it and everybody ought to stay away from it as far as possible.

She rejects the reproach that she has been gossiping and frames her acts as "warning" and

⁷⁵ Wrong, evil. *Munkar* is part of the expression (and obligation) "*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*": commanding good and forbidding wrong.

“reacting with applicable sources” (a hadith). She then changes her tactics by accepting the accusation that she has been gossiping for the sake of argument and, in turn, accuse Musa to have followed her in this and to not have warned her and corrected her as it would have suited a Muslim. She therefore did not get the chance to improve her posting, that is, her behaviour. She then uses a popular argument among Salafi Muslims when they want to clear themselves of gossiping, namely that they denounce or criticise an act or a bad deed and not a person. While the latter would without a doubt be gossiping, drawing attention to a bad deed or a sin of a person is tantamount to warning others not to follow this person in it and to give the incriminated person the opportunity to change behaviour and acts. She tries to close on a somewhat reconciling note by agreeing to the last sentence Musa wrote and by extending his statement as an advice to everybody. A moderator closed this thread after a few more reactions were posted because people were writing off topic or kept repeating that everybody should simply behave politely.

The urge to correct wrong practice and expose faults in belief stems from the wide concept of commanding right and forbidding wrong (*al-amr bi-l-mar‘uf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar*) which is particularly popular in Salafi theorising and practice. The term *hisba* is used to refer to the obligation of every Muslim to forbid wrong and command good, and, simultaneously, to the function of the person, the *muhtasib*, who supervises moral behaviour and commercial activities in a town in order to make sure that those activities comply with the divine will.⁷⁶ It’s main textual sources are two verses from the Qur’an:

Q 3:104: Let there be a community (*umma*) of you, calling to good, and enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong; those are the prosperers.

Q 3:110: You are the best community (*umma*) ever brought forth to men, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in God. [. . .]

And, furthermore, a hadith attributed to the Prophet explicates how the duty of *hisba* is to be fulfilled:

Whoever sees a wrong, and is able to put it right with his hand, let him do so; if he cannot, then with his tongue; if he cannot, then in his heart, and that is the bare minimum of faith.⁷⁷

The classic Sunni interpretation of this hadith maintains that to change evil with one’s heart, that is, to deny the evil in the heart, is the obligation of every Muslim while the other two

⁷⁶ For an overview over the two meanings of *hisba* see Cahen and Talbi (Cahen and Talbi 1971). For a detailed study of the concept “commanding right and forbidding wrong” see Cook (Cook 2003). Salafi Muslims like to refer to Ibn Taymiyya’s study of *hisba* (Ibn Taymiyya 1980) which he interprets as a universal duty targeted at the behaviour of Muslims in public.

⁷⁷ This is hadith is found among others in the popular hadith collection *The Book of Forty Hadith (Kitab al-Arba’in)* of the Damascene hadith scholar Muhyi l-Din al-Nawawi (d. 1278) in which it appears as the 34th hadith.

possibilities, changing evil with one's words and hands, is rather reserved to Muslim scholars and rulers respectively. The rationale behind this division of work is the spread of chaos and loss of authority if every Muslim would engage in *hisba* by hand (punishment or violence) and word (verbal and written denunciation). However, one does not need a lot of imagination to guess that *hisba* has been turned at various points in the history of Muslim activism from a conservative notion restricting the prerogative to act on its behalf to scholars and rulers to an activists programme with a broad repertoire of action from vigilante groups raiding liquor shops and cinemas to *da'wa* activities like preachers calling upon Muslim women to don the veil.⁷⁸ The Salafiyya has revitalised the notion of *hisba* as an obligation of individual Muslims to increase the moral health of their environment by, for instance, address those who commit *munkar* which stands for everything that Islam has forbidden.

As we have seen in the case of gossiping and the norm of politeness, the exact execution of *hisba* is contested. More quietist Salafi Muslims fear that the average Muslim does not have enough knowledge to command right and forbid wrong and should therefore restrain from doing so actively, that is with words or with hands, at least as long as his or her knowledge is inadequate. Others understand it as their individual obligation to exhort and to correct the practices of others in order to spread true Islam and purge society from deviant practices and beliefs. Ideally, Muslims should be open to warnings and corrections addressed to them, evaluate them to the best of their knowledge and, if deemed correct, change their behaviour and practice. Others, then again, turn *hisba* into a revolutionary programme which justifies violent action against the “evildoers” and Muslim as well as non-Muslim authorities.

Discussions like the one exemplified in the discussion thread about gossiping and exceptions to it are common in Salafi chat rooms and discussion forums because the obligation to warn and purge one's own actions and beliefs as well as the practices and beliefs of others of sin and evildoing is as strong as the prohibition of gossiping so that both collide regularly. The obligation of *hisba* and the corresponding values of uprightness, strictness and rigour poses a constant challenge to the norm of politeness. Forums and chat rooms are shaped by the way participants following the Salafiyya negotiate between both exigencies, that is to be at once polite and uncompromising when it comes to the right practice and Islamic beliefs. The interpretive protocols of the computer-mediated spaces discussed in this study vary therefore as to the exact interpretation of these often conflicting norms. Some take a rather uncompromising stance while

⁷⁸ For a good study of the role of *hisba* in social action see Meijer's analysis of the Egyptian Jama'a Islamiyya in which he shows that *hisba* can even turn against the authorities resulting in a low-level warfare of Islamist activists against the Egyptian authorities (Meijer 2009b).

others tend to give precedence to politeness over *hisba* in order to attract more people to Islam and to avoid *fitna* and discord among the Muslim community.

Another concept at work within the interpretive protocols of Salafi chat rooms and forums, which is as ambiguous and multifaceted as *hisba* when it comes to putting it into practice, is *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*.⁷⁹ *Wala'* and *bara'* are mentioned several times in the Qur'an and have in general come to mean loyalty (*wala'*) and disavowal (*bara'*) in spite of alternative meanings in the Qur'an. The roots of this concept are to be found in the tribal culture of pre-Islamic times and inter-tribal relations. From a Sunni point of view heterodox Islamic sects, among which the Kharijites, the Ibadites and the Shi'a, were those who first and most actively adopted the concept in early Islamic history. In opposition to them, early Sunni scholars like the name-giver to the Hanbali school of law, Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), declared *al-walaya* (loyalty) and *al-bara'a* (disavowal) a religious innovation (*bid'a*) (Wagemakers 2009, 83–85). It was not until the works of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) that this concept was positively re-framed and became incorporated into Salafi theorising and belief. “By turning *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* into a tool that keeps Muslims away from un-Islamic practices,” writes Wagemakers, “he [C.B.: Ibn Taymiyya] applies it against religious innovations instead of seeing the concept itself as such” (Wagemakers 2009, 87). The Salafi scholar Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1793) and his followers built their idea of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* on the writings of Ibn Taymiyya who himself never used the term but wrote extensively on the need to dissociate and keep away from unbelievers and their corrupted practices and to abstain from wrong *wala'* like adopting habits in clothing and life-style from non-Muslims. Otherwise, one would become like non-Muslims. Most importantly, the 18th and 19th century adaptors of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* linked the concept to *tawhid* by formulating that the unity of God, to which Muslims submit in the *shahada*⁸⁰, obliges Muslims to disapprove and show hatred to everything that contradicts Islam, that is, the will of God, His rights and His attributes. Thus, to show and practise *wala'* and *bara'* in right manner turned into a necessary attribute of a Muslim (Wagemakers 2009, 86–91).

The most recent turn in the century-long process of re-framing *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* has emerged from the writings of the influential Salafi-Jihadi ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (b. 1959), who links *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* not only to the concept of *tawhid*, as others have done

⁷⁹ For an insightful detailed study of the origins of the concept, its various meaning in Islam and contemporary Salafi interpretations see Wagemakers study of the Salafi ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (Wagemakers 2012, 148–160) and his article in which he traces the evolution and transformation of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (Wagemakers 2009). The following explications of the concept are largely based on these texts.

⁸⁰ The pronunciation of the Islamic creed, “there is not god but God and Muhammad is his Prophet”, is the basis of *tawhid*.

before him, but also to *takfir* (excommunication, declaring somebody as unbeliever). First of all, he re-introduced the notion of *al-isti'ana bi-l-kuffar* (asking non-Muslims for help) into the debate by equating it to a form of *wala'* which, in his interpretation, is forbidden based on Q 5:51: "Oh believers, take not Jews and Christians as friends; they are friends of each other. Whoso of you makes them his friends is one of them. God guides not the people of the evildoers." By doing so he had particularly the Saudi rulers in mind who called in the help of US-American military in the Second Gulf War and cooperate economically and militarily with the US. He considers this kind of loyalty to a non-Islamic government a severe flaw of *tawhid* (Wagemakers 2012, 153–155). Secondly, he interprets following man-made legislation as a form of worship of rulers who have introduced it. Since a Muslim must not worship anything except God this is considered *shirk* and *kufir* which places the person outside of the realm of Islam. Indeed, a Muslim has to declare hatred (*bara'*) for these idols, their laws and their followers. The highest form of disavowal is jihad against these legislators (Wagemakers 2012, 166–174).

In short, *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* means, in what has come to be the Salafi understanding of it, to be loyal to God, Islam and Muslims and to disavow or dissociate from everything belonging to other religions and non-Muslims, most importantly among them being polytheism (*shirk*), unbelief (*kufir*) and religious innovation (*bid'a*). For this reason, Wagemakers aptly describes this concept as a "tool to separate right from wrong and insiders from outsiders" (Wagemakers 2012, 149) which is why it bears a great resemblance to *hisba*. While *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*—showing loyalty to God, his followers and His religion and hating, in the sense of rigorous rejection, pretty much everything else—seems to be a straightforward obligation on the surface, it raises a lot of question marks and ambiguity when applied to everyday life of, in particular, Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands. Furthermore, Muslims following the Salafiyya differ on the exact meaning of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*. While most see it as an obligation, some understand it as and apply it by fighting religious innovation without linking it to unbelief and taking the following steps to *takfir* and *jihad*. Others use it as a litmus test for the true faith of a person. Since in their view *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* is an integral part of the *shahada* and *tawhid*, those Muslims who do not practice it, that is, who do not distance themselves from anything un-Islamic and show loyalty to Islam and Muslims are guilty of *kufir*. For instance, to continue meeting with non-Muslim friends in cafés or restaurants can be interpreted as an unwillingness to practice *bara'*. Another group takes this latter argument a step further and declares those Muslims guilty of this *kufir* unbelievers against which a jihad might possibly be waged (for more on the performance of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* see Chapter 4, p. 206ff.).

After this brief account of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* it should not come as a surprise that this notion often infringes upon the norms of politeness and patience and stands in inherent tension with *adab al-da'wa*. Furthermore, living as a minority among unbelievers, having them as family members, class mates, colleagues or superiors does not alleviate this obligation. Many Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands therefore feel uneasy to apply the more uncompromising interpretation of *wala'* and *bara'* in their everyday live and chose for the toned-down version of rejecting any religious innovation and dissociate from un-Islamic behaviour without referring to it as hatred and without engaging in *takfir*. Accordingly, forums and chat rooms differ in the way that participants interpret and practice *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* and discussions on this obligation keep recurring, like the one exemplified in the following. ProudMuslima announces in the opening post her decision to leave the forum for the following reasons:⁸¹

[. . .] I have decided that I won't stay here any longer because I find it completely disrespectful how people here talk about unbelievers. As if these people are nothing more than garbage [. . .] There are actually people who are wonderful people in spite of being unbelievers and only Allah subhanahu wa-ta'ala knows whether they will find their way. You cannot see into their hearts. [. . .] I myself do also not like many things. But it is not my life they lead. I only think that we have to respect one another since we live together here. [. . .]

I have problems with these kinds of views. The only things that should interest us is Allah, our iman [C.B. faith] and that we become good human beings or Muslims.

Or do you think that Muhammad (saw) behaved in the same way? I do not think so.

Wa-salam.

The reactions to her post differed widely from regret that she wants to leave, support of her impression of disrespect towards unbelievers to references to *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* as an obligation for Muslims. Dawud, for instance, underlines that there are different categories of unbelievers and that they are not always to be treated with hostility and hatred:

Al-Salam 'alaykum wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu,
you are absolutely right, sister.

There are categories for the kafirun [C.B.: unbelievers] . . . and we treat them and talk about them accordingly. A Muslim respects all human beings. Above all family relations, it doesn't matter whether they are Muslims or not, are treated with respect and the relations are nourished.

"God forbids you not, as regards those who have not fought you in religion's cause, nor expelled you from your habitations, that you should be kindly to them, and act justly towards them; surely God loves the just." 60:8

I dislike the at times exaggerated accounts of the kuffar [C.B.: unbelievers] just like you . . . but in spite of this I stay.

For him, this is a lamentable situation which, in contrast to ProudMuslima does not push him to leave the forum. He cites a verse from the Qur'an stating that acting kindly and justly

⁸¹ Al-Sunna, forum, 29 April 2009: I say good-bye.

towards unbelievers who have not fought against Islam or expelled Muslims from their settlements and houses is not forbidden. He belongs to those Salafi Muslims who focus on showing loyalty to Allah and his religion while disapproving acts and practices that are *haram*. However, they do not extend *bara'* to the person committing an illicit act or showing unbelief. Furthermore, they take those Qur'anic verses like the one cited by Dawud as their point of departure, that is, as long as the unbelievers do not incite or act against Islam there is no reason to show enmity and hatred for them. The following poster, al-Mutawakkil, takes a diametrically opposed view in the tradition of the 18th and 19th century scholars mentioned before:

Bi-sm Allah al-rahman al-rahim

I understand quite well what you mean but the cause of Allah should be more important in sha'a llah [C.B.: God willing] and it is the word of Allah that you see them as unbelievers and that you show hatred and enmity towards them.

Sure, this is difficult for somebody whose family belongs to the kuffar . . . also for me it is unbelievably difficult because in my family me and my brother are the only Muslims. It is hard for me, beyond words, but what does a Muslim not do for Allah's benevolence?!

The two sons, Husayn and 'Abdallah, of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab said:

Whosoever says, "I will not show enmity towards the munshrikin⁸²" or, in spite of harbouring enmity against them, does not declare them unbelievers, or says, "I have nothing against those who say 'la ilaha illa llah'⁸³ even when they commit kufr and shirk or harbour hostility against Allah's religion" or "I am not against those who worship graves", he is not a Muslim.

(Al-Darur al-Saniya, volume: 10, p. 139-140)⁸⁴

"You have had a good example in Abraham, and those with him, when they said to their people, 'We are quit of you and that you worship besides God. We disbelieve in you, and between us and you enmity has shown itself, and hatred for ever, until you believe in God alone.'" (60:4)

May Allah wrap you in his mercy and rightly guide your family . . . Amin Amin Amin

Al-Mutawakkil approaches *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* from a different angle and cites the sons of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab who belong to those scholars who turned *wala'* and *bara'* into an obligation for Muslims which, if rejecting to properly live up to it, turns them into non-Muslims. To practice *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* properly includes declaring those "nominal" Muslims as unbelievers who commit *shirk* and *kufr* and show enmity towards them. Salafi Muslims who ascribe to this interpretive tradition of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* usually use verse Q 60:4 as cited by al-Mutawakkil as a point of departure. This verse emphasizes the model of Abraham and his followers who dissociated from their own people because they worshipped idols and refused to follow God

⁸² This is a typo. The right word is mushrikin: polytheists

⁸³ First part of the *shahada* (Islamic creed) in Arabic: There is no god but God.

⁸⁴ This is a typo. The full title is "Al-Durar al-Saniyya fi-l-Ajwiba al-Najdiyya" (The Splendid Pearls of the Answers from Najd). It is a collection of texts of Salafi scholars from the time of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and his sons and followers until the lifetime of the editor of this 16 volume collection, 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Qasim al-'Asimi al-Najdi al-Hanbali (d. 1975) (Ibn Qāsim al-'Āṣimī al-Najdī al-Ḥanbalī 1996).

alone. In addition to dissociation they declared that their relationship would be governed by hatred until they decide to submit to God. Interestingly, this verse belongs just like the verse cited by Dawud in the same thread (Q 60:8) to the first nine verses of sura 60 (*al-Mumtahana*, the tested woman) in which God explicates how Muslims should behave towards unbelievers. However, in spite of citing from the same section of a sura both follow different and, at times, contradictory interpretive traditions which are based on the emphasis of one of the verses while the immediate textual context, that is, the entire passage, is ignored.

Al-wala' wa-l-bara' is realised in chat rooms and discussion forums in a collective dynamic process which shapes the core mood and disposition of the space in relation to outsiders. The following excerpt from my notes taken during a session of a chat room which I had been visiting for some time illustrates some of the dynamics at work and the effect they have on “outsiders” who do not adhere to the Salafiyya:⁸⁵

As usual the session was kicked off by a lecture of the imam. Afterwards Tawhid took over. He lectured on something I could not really follow. Then he invited questions. I have no clue how many were sent to him but he did not answer them afterwards. After a pause he suggested that we should all go to another room. The room was populated by many users familiar to me from other chat rooms and by a few users whose nick names did not suggest any adherence to the Salafiyya. Everybody was allowed to talk and could ask for the microphone. Salafi Muslims started to ask questions about other religions, atheism or other Islamic currents and tended to answer these questions themselves by showing how wrong they all were. In the beginning, everybody was calm and, in an almost scientific manner, tried to bring evidence in order to prove the mistakes and aberrance of other beliefs. However, in the course of 15 minutes with non-Salafi participants starting to raise their voices and disagreeing, the mood became increasingly aggressive filled with an irrepressible urge to expose the irrationality of the non-Salafi participants. For me as an observer, the situation grew slowly unbearably. When MuslimKing took the microphone and started ranting against Christians, ridiculing their beliefs and contrasting it with Islam, the true religion, I felt so disturbed that I had to leave the room although I do not consider myself a Christian. He challenged non Muslims aggressively to engage in the discussion. People laughingly agreed to his remarks about Christianity and cheered him. I left the room because he would not stop challenging Christians and other non-Muslims to speak. More and more users with a conspicuous non-Islamic nick name left the room. After a few minutes I ‘felt’ that people were staring at me. Under this gaze I grew uncomfortable.

Al-wala' wa-l-bara' and *hisba* were both put into practice by first of all clarifying the Truth or the right model of Islam and by then calling upon others the refute it and to expose their own beliefs. This challenge served to strengthen the truth claim of the majority in the chat room which were followers of the Salafiyya. In the course of the debate, Salafi participants dissociated from “wrong” beliefs and denounced those following *kufr* (unbelief), everybody from Christians and Sufis to the Shi'a and atheists. *Bara'* was expressed by ridiculing the “unbelievers” and “polytheists” and creating a space hostile to any claim or act emanating from non-Salafi

⁸⁵ Excerpt from my notes taken during a session of Islam Lessons, chat room, 17 March 2010.

participants.

Both concepts, *hisba* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, serve to guard the limits of what is tolerable according to the Salafiyya for a true Muslim in his or her social environment and terminates the reach of *adab al-da'wa*, in particular of norms such as politeness and patience. The exact interpretation of these concepts and the realisation of them, however, leads often to fierce debates among Salafi Muslims depending on the different interpretive traditions circulating among Salafi Muslims and everyday situations and experience. Diverging interpretive traditions, as we will see in the course of this study, are in most cases the central reason for inter-Salafi hostility and fragmentation into different groups. To practise *hisba* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* in its most exclusionary form in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands where “unbelief” lingers at every corner and in private homes as in the case of converts is demanding and boosts the impression of marginalisation among those Salafi Muslims.

Contamination of devotional spaces

Communal endeavours to set a devotional space apart from the profane can also fail. Obvious instances are participants who do not adhere to the rules and disturb the order until they are banned or a discussion thread is forcefully closed. Other instances include intrusions from within the software that create “noise”. For example, the most popular chat client used by Salafi Muslims largely finances itself through an advertisement banner that runs in the lower part of the chat window. Some of the ads display images and objects that are forbidden for Muslims like alcohol and nudity. Administrators and moderators try to fix these disturbances. They search the web to find applications or, as some do, write scripts adapting CMEs to their needs and blocking intrusions.

However, in some cases, the interpretive protocol does not work to the point to establish a devotional space free of interference from the heretic, unbelieving and polytheist world. This usually happens when moderators are not able to enforce rules characteristic for Salafi forums or fail to properly understand and impose them while participants are not motivated to help to keep the space in accordance with Islamic norms, values and concepts. A case in point in my research was a Dutch-speaking chat room named “Saved on the true path” to which I was invited one day by a participant with whom I was taking part in the session of another Salafi chat room. I followed her invitation and arrived in a room with a small number of participants listed but only two or three active at the same time.

Birol, the moderator plays a lecture of Yusuf Estes, a popular American preacher.

Algharib, lecturer in another Salafi chat room enters. After some time, the lecture stops and Birol starts talking on the microphone eager to get a discussion off the ground and to encourage others to join. He seems to be quite insecure. He asks several times whether something is a sin, whether it is halal or haram and so on. Nobody feels summoned to answer his questions. Among other things he asks several times whether it is okay to play recitations from the Qur'an without wudu', the ritual ablution before praying. After some time Aboe_Khaima eventually answers yes but Birol remains insecure since an imam has told him the opposite.

While he is busy finding an answer to this question another conversation develops in the main window. Birol is confused by it not knowing whether the typed chat lines are addressed to him. He does not understand the word na3m (na'm)⁸⁶ which is commonly used for yes. In order to stay on the safe side, he decides not to play Qur'anic recitations. Instead he plays 'Father and Son' by Cat Stevens which is the first time that I hear pop music in a proclaimed Salafi chat room. Cat Stevens is followed by a Turkish song with pop style elements. I cannot understand the words except for 'Allah'. Nobody speaks or reacts while the songs are played. Are they listening? Between the songs Birol takes by accident the microphone and I can hear him humming while typing on his keyboard. He then drops the microphone. Obviously, he is multi-tasking since he was not typing in the chat window of his chat room.

Tamamut, having just entered the chat room, remarks: 'This includes instruments?!' But nobody reacts, neither Algharib, who is otherwise a rather uncompromising moderator in his own chat room when it come to rules and Islamic behaviour. After a long while people start leaving and Birol plays Arabic music, which, as he types, he does not understand but finds it beautiful. The music Birol is playing becomes an issue because somebody finds it boring and ugly. A discussion on the difference between anasheed and music starts but is not concluded in any way. The music goes on for another while.

Before I decide to leave, Birol mentions that he has to go 'microwaving for a sec' ('*ff magnetronnen*') and leaves the microphone open. He is away for a long time and nobody takes the initiative to take over the microphone.⁸⁷

Although Birol's chat room was advertised to me as a Salafi chat room by a Salafi Muslim, he did not succeed in creating a devotional space in which Salafi Muslims can engage with their faith. His insecurity and numerous questions on basic issues indicate that he was inexperienced with the Salafi understanding of Islam. Furthermore, he sowed confusion by understanding things wrongly or by not being able to follow the flow of the different conversational threads. The death blow was dealt to the chat session when he started to play "un-Islamic" music and did not pay any heed to the possibility that it might be considered wrong. The Salafiyya fiercely opposes instrumental music of whatever genre as un-Islamic and forbidden. This is considered to be basic knowledge. When he left his computer nobody was motivated to take over and "purify" the space by imposing Islamic notions of behaviour based on the practices of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih*. This task must have felt too overwhelming and not rewarding knowing that there are other Salafi chat rooms where one can go to.

Other moderators and administrators in this research decided to temporarily suspend a

⁸⁶ It has become common in typed Internet or mobile phone communication in Arabic to replace those letters who do not have a phonetic equivalent in the Latin script with numerals and thereby facilitating quick typing. Most prominently, the letter 'ayn is usually rendered with the number 3 as in *na3m*.

⁸⁷ Excerpt from my notes taken on 7 December 2009.

chat room or forum since they felt that the behaviour displayed by participants did not match their understanding of Islamic norms any more. Abulhussain, lecturer in one of the most popular Salafi chat rooms in German, stressed that he had stopped on several occasions when he had the impression that people were not properly listening to him and not doing “their homework”, that is internalising the lessons and growing in their faith. In another case, the forum administration decided to call a closure of the forum since their space was not used as devotional space any more and disputes and quarrels had taken over in their impression. They posted a text in which they presented the argument for their decision. They wrote among other things the following:⁸⁸

The prevailing shortcoming of this forum have been mentioned quite often and are known to most of you but in spite of this we want to explicate them again in order to clarify why this step [C.B.: closing the forum] has become necessary. The main problem is and has been talking without knowledge. Everybody expresses his guesses and presents his opinion and discusses matter over which he has no idea. Furthermore, people engage with useless topics. People continue back-biting about the same persons over and over again and call them names but nobody is able to produce constructive criticism. Least but not last, discussions are dominated by quarrelling and one can get the impression that some have registered only in order to attack other people and to argue and discuss with them.

The forum was re-opened some time later. However, at that point the moderators and administrators felt that the interaction was too much geared towards checking the soundness of beliefs of others so that the focus on worship and devotion got lost. In other words, there was too much *bara'* and not enough *wala'*, that is loyalty to God through worshipping him in the right way.

Blocking off un-Islamic influence and encouraging correct religious practices is a constant challenge in forums and chat rooms which some moderators and administrators fail to live up to for different reasons. This leads to the contamination or pollution of those devotional spaces they are supposed to protect. Interpretive protocols strengthen the devotional character of the forums and chat rooms. However, in some cases, the interpretation of a belief tradition becomes contested to such an extent that the collectivity cannot reproduce itself along one interpretive line and falls apart. The scenario of *fitna* is therefore a very real and concrete one for Salafi Muslims which they feel has marked their history, their everyday experience with other Muslims and the umma and, just as well, their engagement with their religion in chat rooms and discussion forums.

⁸⁸ Al-Sunna, forum, 23 June 2010: The forum will be closed.

Conclusion

The production of devotional spaces in which Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya devote themselves to the practice of their religion starts with the construction of visual and aural markers through which visitors perceive the space upon their first entering. These markers, be they names, sounds, avatars or a graphic lay-out, provide the first clues about the identity of the devotional space and raise expectations with participants as to what they will encounter in this space and as to how people will behave. Devotional online spaces of the Salafiyya are managed spaces with specific rules and rule-enforcement that shape interaction and further accentuate the identity of a space. Both Islamic architecture consisting of visual and aural markers as well as rule-enforcement built a fence with which polluting influence from the profane, that is, non-Islamic world, are to be filtered out.

Interpretive protocols are brought to the fore and come into effect through on-going collective cooperation and produce norms and values with reference to interaction and discourses which are not necessarily enforced by top-down punitive mechanisms like banning a member. They are rather the expression of the collective and are enforced through the collective as a form of aggregate volition. *Adab al-da'wa* includes behavioural norms that are attributed to the Prophet and his companions like patience, politeness and steadfastness. These norms are challenged by two concepts, *hisba* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, which aim to keep unbelief, polytheism and religious innovation at bay and induce aversion towards those who are identified to be the carriers of unbelief. Salafi Muslims interpret both concepts in ways that differ from each other and thus often clash in chat rooms and discussion forums when participants defend different interpretive traditions in reference to these two concepts. In spite of this interpretive inconsistency within the Salafiyya, both concepts fulfil the important function in the making of a community of defining the in-group and opposing it to an out-group which should not be dealt with on the basis of *adab al-da'wa* but on the basis of rejection, enmity and, in some interpretations, outright hatred.

Applied in chat rooms and discussion forums, *adab al-da'wa* is in general a “default position” for interaction between participants following the Salafi understanding of Islam as well as in the encounter with non-Salafi Muslims and non-Muslims. However, if outsiders are sensed to pose a threat to the purity of a devotional space or if a fellow Muslim is increasingly erring in his practise and belief, *adab al-da'wa* makes place for *hisba* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*. At what point exactly the turn to hostility is made is decided by the interpretive dynamic at work among the

community of a chat room or forum.

Chapter 3

Unearthing authentic knowledge: Hermeneutic-interpretive practices of the Salafiyya in computer-mediated environments

When asked what they actually do online one of the most common answers of Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands is “gaining Islamic knowledge” or “searching for Islamic knowledge”.⁸⁹ In the course of this research, the term “knowledge” turned out to be central. Many Salafi informants seemed to gear their entire life towards the acquisition of religious knowledge. Others admitted that the quest for knowledge was a quite difficult and at times onerous undertaking but regarded this as a flaw in their religious life and stressed that they tried to do their best in this regard. The practices leading towards the appropriation of knowledge were often called “Islamic argumentation”⁹⁰. This chapter will study the notion of knowledge and the transmission of knowledge as practised under Salafi Muslims in discussion forums and chat rooms in the Netherlands and Germany.

I conceptualise these practices as hermeneutic-interpretive practices because their main element are the religious sources, the Qur’an and the Sunna, from which meaning is derived. The hermeneutic element of these practices refers to the underlying principles, notions and understandings that are at work when believers interpret their sources. For instance, their notion of truth or implicit as well as explicit rules applied when interpreting the sources are part of the hermeneutics of interpretation. The interpretive aspect then refers to the act of drawing out the implications of a text for contemporary readers and establishes the meaning of a text for the presence.

As Chapter 4 will show, knowledge practices among Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands are not restricted to hermeneutic-interpretive practices alone but additionally involve a narrative-performative dimension. This dimension of knowledge practices focuses on the different ways that inform people how to be in the world, how to interpret their surrounding and how to feel about certain things. They are performative because they can be learned, rehearsed and include certain elements that are reminiscent of rituals. Both hermeneutic-interpretive practices as well as narrative-performative practices are part of the process of learning how to become an authentic Muslim. The former set of practices identifies the cognitive

⁸⁹ The corresponding words used by my informants were “*islamitische kennis opdoen*” in Dutch and “*islamisches Wissen suchen*” in German. Instead of “*suchen*” (to search, to look for), German participants also used verbs like “*aneignen*” (to appropriate) or “*erwerben*” (to gain, to acquire).

⁹⁰ “*Islamitische bewijsvoering*” in Dutch and “*islamische Argumentation*” or “*islamische Beweisführung*” in German.

categories and interpretations of how a good Muslim according to the Qur'an and the Sunna (and by extension according to God) should be and teaches to differentiate between *halal* (allowed, permitted) and *haram* (forbidden). The latter group of practices leads to specific subjective consequences by training what the hermeneutic practices yield as the ideal model.

There are no clear-cut borders between hermeneutic-interpretive and narrative-performative practices though. Many activities can belong to both groups of practices. Islamic argumentation, as Chapter 4 will show, is not only a hermeneutic-interpretive practice but also a performance. The present and the following chapter therefore do not aim to neatly sort knowledge practices into two alternative groups of practices, i.e., hermeneutic-interpretive and narrative-performative, but rather analyse them separately in terms of their hermeneutic-interpretive and narrative-performative dimensions.

Before plunging into the manifold ways in which Salafi Muslims gain knowledge from the religious sources through hermeneutic-interpretive practices in discussion forums and chat rooms this chapter will begin with the notion of knowledge from the point of view of Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands. Subsequent to the analysis of Islamic argumentation in forums and chat rooms, I will discuss the role of interpretive traditions and the dangers of human reason in the endeavour of Salafi Muslims to derive meaning from their religious sources.

Authentic knowledge: Searching for the truth

Knowledge turned out to be one of the most common terms used by my informants. Whether we discussed their activities online, talked about their religious engagement or simply chatted about our future, gaining knowledge was a reliable and regular feature of many conversations. However, the term knowledge is at least as much confusing as it is handled and employed in an almost self-evident manner. Most interlocutors were caught off guard when I asked them what they actually meant by “knowledge”. Their answers and musings as well as their practices relating to knowledge gradually unfolded the concepts and ideas Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands associate with knowledge and with the practice of gaining knowledge which is so central to their lives.

The following presentation is therefore not a summary of coherent theological thinking by the religious scholars of the Salafiyya. Rather, we will encounter a vernacular theology of the meaning of knowledge from the point of view of Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands which at times includes ambiguities and inconsistencies. As a vernacular theology, this ethnographic reading of knowledge “is at once context specific and informed by broader social and institutional fields” (Elisha 2008, 167). While official scholarly theology does play a role, it is mediated by local practice, context and the reflections of the believers. Therefore, the succeeding paragraphs reveal a specific vernacular “Salafi” ontology of knowledge in that they explicate what actually counts as knowledge in the eyes of the believers, how, according to them, knowledge should be acquired, how knowledge is related to mankind, to God and to the course to the world in general.

The nature of truth: Islamic knowledge

Abu Jamal: Well, my father said: ‘You have to go to the mosque.’ I went to the mosque, I grew. But I saw many things which . . . ‘Why do you do them?’ ‘It has to be this way.’ Then I went searching, searching, searching. ‘Hey, but the Prophet didn’t do this!’ ‘Yes, but we are this and that. We are Hanafi⁹¹,’ they say then immediately. ‘We do it this way.’

C.B.: How old were you back then?

Abu Jamal: 12, 13, 14.

CB: This young?

Abu Jamal: Yes. I have always been eager to simply get to know the truth. I didn’t want like ‘Yes, I am Pakistani and Pakistan is right’ or ‘Moroccan, Morocco is right.’ No. You have to follow the Truth.⁹²

Abu Jamal relates his unsatisfying early experiences with gaining religious knowledge in

⁹¹ The Hanafi school of jurisprudence within Islam.

⁹² Interview taken on 7 October 2009 in Amsterdam.

his early teenage years in one of the Muslim communities in Amsterdam. Asking local religious authorities in the mosque why something is done in a specific way, the answers remain elusive: It has to be this way. The knowledge he learns there seems to lack any rules and grounding in the proof-texts. Becoming increasingly doubtful about what he is learning he starts to look for answers by himself, mostly on the Internet. He discovers that the Prophet, the ultimate bearer of religious knowledge, did things differently than what he has been taught in the mosque and by his parents as part of the religious tradition of the family. Confronting the authorities in the mosque with his “discovery” the answer is that within the *Hanafi* school of jurisprudence things are simply done this way. For Abu Jamal, who witnesses diverse and often contradicting religious practices in the local Muslim community, this answer is not enough. He wants to know which practices are right and not simply follow something because this is what the *Hanafi* school prescribes or how Moroccans or Pakistanis do it. He wants to know how God wants him to do things. This is the Truth for him.

The life stories of Abu Jamal and other informants varied in manifold ways. However, their quest for the Truth, the lack of answers to religiously pressing questions and the unwillingness of the Muslim environment to confront the fact that their practices contradict the Prophet’s kept recurring as main themes. Since they told their life stories in retrospective, they might have aligned them unwittingly or with intent to a “Salafi” storyline, accentuating elements that are valued among Salafi circles and obfuscate those which do not fit neatly into the storyline. Leaving the question as to how accurate their accounts were aside, the fact that they for the most part included these elements in their life narrations shows that they deem them to be essential for a true understanding of knowledge.

Two core assumptions lie behind the Salafi conception of knowledge.⁹³ There is only one right and valid system of knowledge which is the one and only Truth. Secondly, the Truth is found in religion, that is in Islam. The first assumption is understood to go without saying and is part of the nature of things. Nobody mentioned doubts about the existence of one general Truth which is in principle attainable by human beings. The second assumption was usually accepted after a period in life, often during teenage years, in which different religions and, in some cases, philosophies had been investigated. They were all found to be contradictory, inferior or illogical with one exception, Islam. Islam emerged as the winner out of the contest of different life

⁹³ In the following paragraphs I will delineate the notion of knowledge circulating among Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands (and possibly elsewhere). This is therefore not the view of the author. In order to increase readability I will in large part leave out remarks pointing to the fact that I am presenting the point of view of Salafi Muslims.

concepts due to the clarity of its argument and the purity of its sources which in the case of the Qur'an are understood to be God's words untainted by human intermingling in contrast to the Bible of the Christians, as informants related.

Knowledge is therefore knowledge about the Truth which is Islamic knowledge. This knowledge is first and foremost contained in the two revelations, the Qur'an and the Sunna. To follow authentic hadiths is not as simple as it appears since those which have been fabricated or which are inaccurate must be singled out from among the corpus of transmitted hadiths. The common believers (*'awamm*) inspired by the Salafiyya lack the expertise to identify these reports. They leave this task to the hadith scholars (*muhaddithun*) who have over the course of the centuries assembled large volumes of hadiths classified along different systems of gradations from authentic to false. It is not uncommon that hadith scholars disagree on the classification of a hadith. Most interlocutors therefore confess to follow the judgement of the majority of hadith scholars. Those authentic reports that refer to what the prophet has done, said or silently tolerated (and, in the inverse, not done and not said) are to be accepted as part of the revelation like the Qur'an. Christian describes the status of the reports about the life of the Prophet as follows:⁹⁴

And there is only one human being whom we sort of follow blindly and this is the Prophet Muhammad. Even his caliphs 'Umar, Abu Bakr and 'Uthman and 'Ali can have been wrong on certain issues. But the Prophet, *salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam*⁹⁵, he didn't do anything out of his own desire. Everything he did, he so did based on the revelation. God has revealed it to him. And therefore, if there is a report that shows that he has done this or that, then there is no doubt about it.

While even the closest companions of the Prophet can err on some questions because they have not been blessed with the revelation it is always a safe bet to follow those hadith which are labelled as authentic by hadith scholars. However, the interpretation the *salaf al-salih* gave to the revelation follows after the authentic reports of the Prophet in the hierarchy of sources. A common dictum used by Salafi Muslims is the sentence "Qur'an and Sunna according to the understanding of the *salaf al-salih*".

Although it is common knowledge among the Salafi Muslims that only one Truth and, thus, one Knowledge exists they do not negate the existence of differences of opinion (*ikhtilaf*)⁹⁶ and contradictions among scholars. *Ikhtilaf* is usually attributed to the restricted powers of comprehension of even the most learned man. Often interlocutors argued unwittingly along the

⁹⁴ Interview with Christian and Abu 'A'isha taken on 3 February 2011 in Mönchengladbach, Germany.

⁹⁵ May Allah honour him and grant him peace. Salutation (*salawa*) said after the name of the Prophet Muhammad.

⁹⁶ See footnote 16 in the Introduction.

line of the *bi-la kayfa* doctrine⁹⁷: differences of opinion and contradictions exist because even the most learned scholars are just humans and limited by human intellectual powers. If we are not able to understand something, according to the stance of Salafi interlocutors, or if something is contradictory we have to take it as it is. If it comes from the Qur'an or if it is an authentic hadith it is the Truth. Another strategy in order to deal with *ikhhtilaf* is expressed by Umm Zayd in the following excerpt:⁹⁸

- C.B.: I do not have any question left. Is there something you would like to share? Or do you think that I have missed something important?
- Umm Zayd: Let me think. That is a good question . . . Yes, something which I should quickly mention is that . . . yes, that I did my best in order to articulate everything as best I can. But that perhaps many things have not been described correctly or that the message didn't come across or that something is not entirely right but I thought it was. And that there are these days so many different sorts, or better currents which all do it differently. But that there is actually only one Islam and one way. But everybody has added a different touch to it, an individual way. But there is, so to speak, only one Qur'an. There is only one meaning of the Qur'an but people understand it sometimes differently. And the same is true for the hadiths. There is only one way that is correct, so to speak. But we cannot always recover it because the persons [C.B.: the witnesses] are dead. No matter how learned the scholars are, they have not lived with them. They cannot just quickly inquire how it all took place. Therefore, there is only one way, only one truth . . . we just have to do our best in order to get as close as possible.

Umm Zayd and others with her accept that the authenticity of the reports about the life of the prophet is a controversial issue among religious scholars which is why differences in opinion on religious issues appear. Since the eye witnesses are long dead and cannot be asked any more, she takes a quite practical stance by saying that the only thing left to do is to make your own decision to the best of your knowledge.

The possibility that the religious sources might be the origin of these contradictions is vehemently rejected with the help of so called scientific exegesis (*tafsir 'ilmi*) of the Qur'an and increasingly also employed with respect to hadiths. This form of exegesis, a rather modern phenomenon, includes a number of works that try to prove that the Qur'an contains scientific knowledge to which the Prophet could not have had access and which for a large part has only been discovered in modern times by the natural sciences. This proves, the argument continues, that the Qur'an is inspired by God, that it is scientifically sound and that it contains still more knowledge which we are not yet able to recognise as such with our limited means and intellectual capacity. For Abu Jamal the scientific evidence found in the Qur'an is the ultimate proof that it

⁹⁷ See Introduction, p.11.

⁹⁸ Interview taken on 16 September 2009 in Amsterdam.

actually is God's Word and not the Prophet's:⁹⁹

C.B.: But others could say 'if it exceeds our powers of comprehension it could just as well simply be wrong.' If I was an opponent or a Muslim who follows a different way than you do I would say 'you are now just saying that we cannot understand it and therefore we should not inquire any more. But we should actually continue to think about it and discuss.'

Abu Jamal: Yes, this is true. But this is for example just one part of Islam. The other part, Islam contains different ways to approach things. You can approach Islam from a scientific point of view [. . .]. Therefore okay, in the sciences for example, things known by now, the separation between the two seas, nothing runs across them. Well, the Prophet Muhammad could not possibly have made this up. Or the sun and the moon follow a calculated path, surat al-rahman. He could never have . . . and many other things. Then you encounter thousands of scientific proofs and there are thousands more which have not been discovered yet by modern science because the means are not there yet. And this makes you think like 'hey, he could not have made this up'. Therefore, who could have devised this? Well, this is the Creator because He knows what He has created.

Abu Jamal provides two examples of supposed scientific information contained in the Qur'an which are quite often cited along with others and which give him the confidence to accept the Qur'an as God's words and as the Truth even in cases where its meaning is not clear to him. The first refers to a verse in the Qur'an stating that God has released the two seas which meet together and that there is a barrier between them that neither of both transgresses (Q 55: 18-19). Modern science, the arguments of Salafi activists (and others) go, has discovered that where two seas meet, for instance the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic ocean near Gibraltar, they do not mix as if a barrier existed between them due to their different degrees of salinity and density. The second example refers to the verse stating that the sun and the moon follow calculated fixed paths (Q 55:5). In this verse the Qur'an is supposed to anticipate that celestial bodies are tied to orbits which neither the Prophet nor his contemporaries could have known.¹⁰⁰

The question at this point is not whether *tafsir 'ilmi* is actually able to prove that the Qur'an contains scientific truth that could not have been known at the time of the Prophet. Rather, the way that Salafi Muslims use scientific evidence tells us something about their conception of knowledge. Their conception features an approach to knowledge reminiscent in

⁹⁹ Interview taken on 7 October 2009 in Amsterdam.

¹⁰⁰ Many websites and print publications in which Qur'anic verses are linked to modern scientific discoveries have been designed and distributed. An example is the widespread brochure *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam* (Ibrahim, n.d.). In 1984, the International Commission on Scientific Signs in the Qur'an and the Sunna (*al-hay'a al-'alamiyya li-l-i'jaz al-'ilmi fi l-qur'an wa-l-sunna*) was founded with the help of the Muslim World League. It has organised several conferences since its inception and invited non-Muslim scientists to testify for the scientific character of the Qur'an. On the other hand a growing number of networks and individuals is trying to dismantle the arguments put forward by advocates of *tafsir 'ilmi*. Especially scientists and self-proclaimed anti-Islam or anti-religion networks are taking up the challenge (see for instance The Answering Islam Team 2012). Youtube features many videos of proponents and opponents of *tafsir 'ilmi* with, for the most part, lively comment sections.

some aspects of logical positivism, a movement belonging to the philosophy of science which was influential in the first half of the 20th century. Within logical positivist thinking, authentic knowledge can only be derived from empirical observation of the natural world and strict mathematical logic which can be used on empirical observation in order to infer knowledge. This notion of knowledge put them in opposition to metaphysics and its non-empirical inquiry into the nature of existence as well as to idealism and its belief that reality and our knowledge thereof is mentally constructed and immaterial. At the origin of logical positivist thinking stood the observation that natural sciences and mathematics had developed in an astonishing pace solving many questions and puzzles while philosophy was lagging behind.¹⁰¹

While Salafi Muslims in general do not spend great thought on mathematical logic when it comes to find the Truth they do grant empirical observations of nature as brought forward by the natural sciences the role of the ultimate arbiter between authentic, reliable knowledge and corrupted, unreliable knowledge. Ultimately, this includes that even the question of authenticity of the Qur'an as God's word is decided by knowledge generated by natural sciences.¹⁰² This form of strict empiricism makes them unlikely allies with logical positivists. However, in strong opposition to logical positivist thinking, Salafi Muslims treat natural sciences as auxiliary sciences meant to prove the authenticity of the Qur'an and the veracity of its content. Even the notion of *bi-la kayfa*, which is rather unscientific since it discourages further investigation into contradictions and would be decidedly rejected by logical positivists, is fit into an empiricist language by claiming that the contradictions will be resolved and become empirically sound knowledge as soon as human beings have reached a higher level of intellectual comprehension. Thus, in stark contrast to positivist thinkers, Salafi Muslims postulate *a priori* that the Qur'an contains only sound scientific information.

In this sense, the Salafiyya departs from many religious movements and currents of thought by, perhaps inadvertently, dislocating Islam from the realm of metaphysics and relocating it in the realm of empirical realism. Islam is understood as an empirical science which, even if contradicting other non-Islamic empirical sciences, is regarded as superior because it contains the knowledge natural sciences only recently have started to discover independently. Accordingly, Salafi Muslims regard philosophy as fruitless speculation—i.e., not yielding any

¹⁰¹ The purpose of this account of logical positivism (also called logical empiricism or analytical philosophy) is to elucidate the notion of knowledge within the Salafiyya. It does not do any justice to the complexity of its thought. Neither do I want to imply that Salafi Muslims are positivists. For more on logical positivism see Friedman (1999) and Creath (2011).

¹⁰² Muslim opponents of *tafsir 'ilmi* use this point to accuse proponents thereof of subjecting God and His word to the command of natural scientists.

Truth—about the nature of things without any empirical grounding and act condescendingly towards it. One common feature of discussions in chat rooms or forums with non-Salafi Muslims and non-Muslims is to accuse opponents of engaging in wild and ungrounded philosophy and negating hard empirical facts. The Salafi aversion to engage in thinking and argumentations about metaphysical issues is not alien to followers of logical positivism who for the most part do not see any use in metaphysical philosophy.¹⁰³

Fitra: The natural inclination towards God

These ideas of the nature of knowledge only make sense if God exists and if He possesses all the characteristics attributed to Him by the Salafiyya. Many interlocutors and participants in this research recounted that they have not always been aware of this. Some did not believe in God at all before turning to Islam and others had in their own view a distorted idea of God and how human beings should act towards Him. They describe their discovery of Islam in retrospective as a return to what they had already been when they were born: Muslims in the true sense of the word, that is, somebody who has submitted to the will of God alone. Kamil recaps this concisely when he talks about the role of his parents in his life as a Salafi Muslim: “Our prophet says in a hadith that every human being is born as a Muslim but his parents raise him to be something else.”¹⁰⁴ He accuses his parents, Shi‘ite Muslims¹⁰⁵, of having led him away from his natural disposition of being a Muslim. Similarly, but yet from a different point of departure, Abu ‘A’isha, born into a Christian family, had to “return” to Islam:¹⁰⁶

- C.B.: And the turn of events was your conversion?
Abu ‘A’isha: Well, returning, not converting. I did not let myself be converted. I returned to what I was supposed to be. Well, the thing is that I have been born as a Muslim.
- Christian: Fitra.
Abu ‘A’isha: As somebody submitted to God. I then submitted to God again. Because, before that, I thought that I was submitting to God, you know. I prayed and did everything. But also to Jesus and Mary and to the images of the saints. Not directly to God. And I didn’t have this connection to God. Well, I felt myself, back then I felt that God does not listen to me. This is the way Christians do. Well, I think some prayers were also stupid you know. I have also prayed for a girl friend. Sometimes you know [C.B.: laughs]. Then I prayed ‘I want this girl’ or something like this.

¹⁰³ It should be mentioned here that logical positivists have a much more complex and detailed understanding of philosophy than Salafi Muslims. They do not reject philosophy in general but their enterprise is to subject philosophy to the same strict empiricist and logical criteria that have allowed the natural sciences and mathematics to develop in a much quicker pace than philosophy.

¹⁰⁴ Online interview (via MSN) from 24 January 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Kamil, like most other Salafi Muslims, considers Shi‘ite Muslims to be heretic due to the critical stance of the Shi‘a towards many companions of the Prophet. In his eyes they are not Muslims.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Christian and Abu ‘A’isha taken on 3 February 2011 in Mönchengladbach, Germany.

Fitra, the term injected by Christian, is a notion commonly used by Salafi Muslims to describe their belief that human beings are naturally inclined to worship one God. Every human being possesses *fitra* at birth. However, the corrupted environment in which a child grows up like family traditions subdues the *fitra*. The human being then loses touch with this natural instinct to worship God alone. *Fitra* does therefore not leave a human being or simply cease to exist. It rather gets buried under an overwhelming amount of corruption, falsehood and lies. ‘Isa expands the concept of *fitra* from the natural disposition to worship one God to some basic features of human life:¹⁰⁷

By inner predisposition I was referring to what is called al-*fitra* in Arabic. It is the inner predisposition of every human being to practice some sort of worship and allegiance. There are some aspects of Islam which you very often do not even have to learn because there are part of a predisposition of human beings. Things like, for instance, gratefulness, searching for meaning in life, searching for a partner and having a family These are all basic predispositions, with which we have been provided since birth. Islam, meaning the predisposition to worship the Creator, the Guider and Sustainer, has been with us since birth.

He includes worshipping one God in the category of “innate” practices like looking for a partner, being grateful, searching for the meaning of life and founding a family. Worship is in his view a basic human need like procreating. Therefore, there is no need to prove that this should be done or to discuss about it just like there is no need to discuss the practice of founding a family which is just done because it is part of human nature.

But *fitra* as an instinct that worshipping one God is natural and therefore good is not sufficient. It instils the knowledge of the existence of one God and His right to be worshipped in human beings but it does not say what God expects from mankind, how He should be worshipped and how He wants us to live. Human beings are by themselves unable to know this. Therefore, God has sent messengers and the Qur’an as Abu Abdullah explains:¹⁰⁸

He (the human being) has received the will to choose. God has not left him alone. He has created him in a way that he has a need for God and that, owing to his *fitra*, reason and creation, he has an impregnable feeling that there has to be a Creator. But he can never know by himself what God wants from him. This is why God has sent His messengers in order to teach mankind and the jinn¹⁰⁹ about the reality of existence: who has created the creation? What is the aim of this? What is the human being? What is the aim of His creation? And what comes after death? And so on.

¹⁰⁷ E-mail interview from April 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Interview taken on 9 June 2010 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Abu Abdullah agreed to be interviewed offline. However, he did not want the interview to be recorded. We agreed that I would send him an interview report based on my notes taken during the interview to him in order to proofread. He added a few paragraphs and returned the report after Ramadan 2010. He is considered to be a *talib al-‘ilm* (student of knowledge) among fellow Salafi Muslims and he regularly gives lectures which are widely visited.

¹⁰⁹ Invisible beings that interfere with the lives of mortals, either harmful or helpful.

The messengers, i.e., the Prophet Muhammad and those who came before him, have tried to teach human beings what God wants from them. God's will can nowadays still be found in their messages and the stories about their lives. However, the Qur'an is the only message that has survived as God's pure and immaculate word while all other messages or revelations as, for instance, contained in the Bible, have been corrupted and defiled. It is therefore self-evident that the Qur'an and the stories about the life of the Prophet Muhammad are the only sources of authentic and pure knowledge or, to put it differently, the Truth. Metaphysical reasoning and arguing is therefore futile because the answers are already given by God and are accessible to mankind.

Protecting Muslims with knowledge

Apart from the supposed natural drive towards knowledge—if you knew for sure that God exists would you then not want to know what He wants from you?—knowledge also fulfils a specific function within the Muslim community. It protects Muslims in several ways from corrupting influences. Living in a society which does not mirror the first Muslim community around the Prophet bears the danger of practising Islam in a wrong way. This can have severe consequences in cases where faults in *'ibada* (worship and devotion), the relationship between a believer and God, occur. If somebody's *'ibada* is corrupted he or she is in imminent danger to fall outside Islam and, in consequence, to suffer in hell in the hereafter.

Being a Muslim by birth or by conversion is therefore not enough. Most Salafi Muslims know and often cite several hadiths according to which the Prophet is supposed to have said that his community will divide into 73 sects of which all but one will go to hell. Being asked which group will not go to hell, he is supposed to have answered: “The one which follows what I and my companions are upon.”¹¹⁰ Muslims have to make sure to the best of their knowledge that they follow the practices of the Prophet and his companions in order to belong to the saved group (*al-firqa al-najiya*) described by the Prophet. Gaining knowledge is therefore of paramount importance for making a difference between Truth and Falsehood. One core element of learning or gaining knowledge is to ask for *dalil* (evidence) by which Salafi Muslims understand a reference to Qur'an, Sunna or to the exegetic work of one of the great religious scholars in case that the revelation sources are not by themselves clear. For Abulhussain, the most important aspects of

¹¹⁰ The hadith is found in different variations in several collections. The one cited here is found in the collection of Abu 'Isa Muhammad al-Tirmidhi (d. 892): *Jami' al-Sahih, kitab 36 (kitab al-iman 'an rasul Allah etc.), bab 18 (ma ja'a fi iftiraq hadhihi al-umma)*, hadith 2852. For an interesting discussion of this hadith with reference to Islamic heresiography see van Ess (2011, 1:7–64).

the classes he provides is to learn to ask for evidence. This immunises Muslims against bad influence and false knowledge:¹¹¹

Because if a person has taken religion with knowledge and somebody comes to him and says 'do this or do that', this person will tell him: 'Stop. Where is your evidence? Why? Who has said this? Which great scholars have explained this?'

The primacy of evidence makes the believer alert and, up to a degree, suspicious of knowledge that somehow seems to be out of tune with the Salafiyya. Abulhussain even claims that learning and gaining true religious knowledge prevents violence because young Muslims who only follow evidence would never fall for al-Qa'ida or other jihadist networks. He calls those who are in his eyes misled and propagate combat on- and offline condescendingly "milk teeth children" (*Milchzähnekinder*), young people who lack the wisdom, knowledge and experience that can only be gained in the course of a life with increasing age.

In his lectures and classes Abulhussain speaks out against Salafi factions that engage in *jihad* as propagated by al-Qa'ida. He does not reject jihad¹¹² in the sense of combat in general. However, al-Qa'ida and other contemporary jihadist groups contravene in his eyes the proper rules of *jihad* and have brought a lot of misfortune over the Muslim community. According to him, true knowledge does not only protect from hell-fire but also contemporary European societies from frustrated and misled young Muslims who are erring on the wrong path. Abulhussain does not tire to underline this aspect:¹¹³

[...] one person reads something in the Qur'an and he wants to give a fatwa immediately or he wants to give a judgement right away. And this is our problem with these young people who have gone completely mad nowadays. He reads something in the Qur'an and thinks that it is just the way he thinks, that it is just as he interprets it and then he does it. And this is a big problem. And the path of the salaf [C.B.: al-salih] is actually in these cases a security valve because we say: 'Come on, come on, come on. Stop, stop, stop. Here, what you have read is not interpreted this way.' And this is why I repeat again: with true knowledge, authentic knowledge we could avoid many problems here in this country [C.B.: Germany] and in the entire world.

¹¹¹ Interview taken on 8 February 2010 in Leipzig, Germany. Abulhussain (Hassan Dabbagh) is the imam of the Rahman mosque in Leipzig, Germany, and provides regular classes in a chat room. He has received much attention by local and national media due to his outspokenness. He has often been dubbed "*Hassprediger*" (hate imam) by German media and policy circles. He believes that he has nothing to hide and refused to be given a pseudonym. Since he is a public figure and knows about the consequences of becoming known as a Salafi, I have decided to use his true name.

¹¹² The term *jihad* is the verbal noun of *jahada* (3rd form) which means to strive for something, to make an effort for something or to devote oneself to something. The meaning of *jihad* ranges from spiritual effort to violent struggle for the cause of Allah. Motzki (2002) provides a detailed overview over the use of violence in *jihad* and related Islamic rules. In terms of warfare, Salafi Muslim in principle accept classical *jihad* regulated by rules developed in the course of the centuries since the inception of Islam by Muslim religious scholars. See for more details on classical *jihad* Bonner (2006). Although all Salafi Muslims accept *jihad* as a potential violent activity, there is immense debate and in-fighting between different Salafi factions over when, where and how exactly *jihad* should be put into practice.

¹¹³ Interview taken on 8 February 2010 in Leipzig, Germany.

He like many other Salafi preachers I have met in the course of this research, who reject the idea of jihad as championed by al-Qa'ida and the like, understand their activities also as a mission not only to save the individual Muslim from hell-fire and protect the community from intruding false knowledge but also as a service delivered to the non-Muslim society they live in. For this reason they often react furiously when confronted with the reproach to be hate mongers.

Essential aspects of acquiring knowledge

Learning and acquiring knowledge needs to be done with great care in order to make sure that one is not taken in by false prophets and their knowledge. This danger is greater for those who have grown up in corrupted environments, be they Islamic or non-Islamic. An absolute precondition for learning the Truth is therefore to be absolutely sincere in this enterprise. Sincerity (*ikhlas*) means that one needs to free oneself of desires (*ahwa'*), prejudices and worldly interests which all obfuscate the Truth because they stand in the way between human beings on the one hand and God and His knowledge on the other hand. The believer needs to secure openness vis-à-vis God and be receptive towards his message. At the extreme this can mean that a believer needs to detach himself from his peer group, family or friends. Abu Abdullah thinks that most people are not able to detach themselves from what they are used to and that this forecloses their failure in the search for knowledge.¹¹⁴

Most people remain faithful to their environment, religion, traditions, habits and so on with which they are familiar. They are even not prepared to think or to believe that the truth could well be completely different from what they always have believed.

This openness needs to go so far as to be willing to rectify one's path. Sincerity and openness are indispensable for the entire process of learning, that is, for the entire life of a believer. In the imagination of Salafi Muslims, a believer grows in religious knowledge and wisdom with increasing age. Life-long learning implies that there is always a chance that one learns new aspects of the Truth to which acts and behaviour need to be conformed. To know the Truth but not acting accordingly is regarded as dishonest and knowledge without any implications for the Muslim practices is considered useless. In order to underline this point Umm Nadir told a joke which was received with great laughter in a group of women who regularly meet and read the works of the great scholars considered to be reliable within the Salafiyya: "Who acts without knowledge? Christians. Who has the knowledge and does not act according to it? Jews. Who has knowledge and acts according to it? Muslims."¹¹⁵ Salafi Muslims take pride in their

¹¹⁴ Interview taken on 9 June 2010 in Rotterdam, Germany.

¹¹⁵ Extract from my notes taken during the meeting on 22 November 2008.

efforts to put knowledge into practice and to convert everyday life situations into a stage where this knowledge is rehearsed and performed. Apart from acquiring and practising knowledge, believers need to spread the authentic knowledge they possess. Abu Anas, who runs the Islamschule Braunschweig (Islam School Braunschweig) where he instructs Muslims about the meaning of Qur'an and Sunna according to the understanding of the *salaf al-salih*, emphasized at the end of a meeting with his students that “we have to pass on what we learn.” In order to illustrate ways of spreading knowledge he cited the examples of his students in Aachen who have assembled around 50 interested Muslims in order to teach them and others who teach in a chat room around 15 people.¹¹⁶

However, sharing and spreading knowledge bears the danger of introducing innovation (*bid'a*) into Islam. Abu Abdullah cites the 20th century Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in order to make this point clear: “What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.”¹¹⁷ Muslims therefore need to share their knowledge but be aware of their limits and not attempt to answer questions that are too intricate for them. The following hadith attributed to the Prophet is commonly cited by preachers, students of knowledge and religious scholars before providing a lecture or a class: “The most evil of things are newly introduced matters, for every newly introduced matter is an innovation, and every innovation is a deviation, and every deviation will lead to hell fire.”¹¹⁸ This sentence serves as a reminder that a Muslim should be diligent when sharing knowledge with others. Innovation stands diametrically opposed to what Salafi Muslims understand as pure and true knowledge contained in the sources. Everything that has been added after the life of the Prophet or over-stretches the interpretive flexibility of the sources is an innovation and must be steadfastly rejected.

One way to secure that one does not leave the realm of authentic knowledge is to “talk with evidence”. This key phrase employed widely among Muslims following the Salafiyya exerts that a person needs to link his or her religious knowledge to the religious sources and give *dalil* by either providing the reference to a source or by citing the corresponding text. The request or

¹¹⁶ Recorded in my notes taken during the meeting on 5 February 2011.

¹¹⁷ Interview taken on 9 June 2010 in Rotterdam, Netherlands. The quote from Wittgenstein is taken from the preface to his book “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus” (Wittgenstein 1983, 27).

¹¹⁸ This hadith has been included in many different hadith collections. Dutch and German preachers usually recite this sentence in Arabic “*sharr al-'umur muhdathatuhu wa-kull muhdatha bid'a wa-kull bid'a dalala wa-kull dalala fi nar.*” The hadith can be found for instance in the collection of the hadith scholar Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, *Sahih Sunan al-Nasa'i*, in which he examines the authenticity of the hadith collected by the hadith scholar al-Nasa'i (d. 915), as hadith 1578.

admonition to “talk with evidence only” is an almost integral part of chat room and forum interaction. Evidence is understood to be neutral and objective in the sense that it is not formed by personal opinion as Kamil explicated when I asked him what “talking with evidence” actually means and what evidence is:¹¹⁹

It means that, when I make a statement about religion, I have to prove it with the meaning of a Qur’anic verse or a hadith because you are not supposed to spread your own opinion which is, in fact, how groups and sects are created. But you should only spread what is based on the true creed, the creed upon which the salaf [C.B.: al-salih] were.

Kamil as well as others believe that they can access the religious sources in an objective and neutral manner because the texts contain information which can be apprehended by everybody as long as the reader is sincere and resists the temptation to let his own opinion, desire or aims tint the reading of the texts. Islamic groups and movements who deviate (*inharafa*, noun: *inhiraf*) from the way the Salafiyya understands the sources are accused of being guided by their own desire or political goals. Furthermore, “talking with evidence” also means that one does not blindly copy what religious scholars say but rather that every Muslim is obliged to check according to his intellectual power whether they provide evidence for their claims from the religious sources, i.e., Qur’an, Sunna, interpretation of the *salaf al-salih* and according to most Salafi factions the consensus (*ijma’*) of the great religious scholars or *al-salaf al-salih*. In case that these sources do not yield any information, some Salafi Muslim resort to a narrowly circumscribed notion of *ijtihad*.

This does not mean that everybody can understand the meaning of all Qur’anic verses or hadiths immediately by reading them. Some informants with some training in the Islamic sciences, divide the texts of the Qur’an into different categories ranging from those verses whose meaning is clear and unambiguous (*muhkam*) to those whose meaning is obscure without further contextual knowledge (*mutashabih*). Contextual knowledge comprises knowledge of all revelatory sources in order to take account of intra-textual relations between different verses and also hadiths. However, Salafi Muslims are often faced with hadiths which have been declared authentic by the great scholars but whose content seems to contradict another hadith. Contradictory hadiths threaten the truth claim and the exemplary role that Salafi Muslims accord to the Sunna. If the Sunna contains contradictions, how can one credibly say that it contains the Truth and provides believers with guidelines about how to practice Islam in its purest form? The notion used to satisfy the need for consistent, that is, non-contradictory, religious sources is *jam’* (joining, reconciliation). Abu Hamza (Pierre Vogel), one of the popular Salafi preachers in

¹¹⁹ Online interview (via MSN) from 24 January 2010.

Germany, explained the practical implication of *jam'* for believers in a lecture on the authority and the preservation of the Sunna. According to him, there is no contradiction within the Sunna or among authentic hadiths because apparently contradictory hadith can be joined in a way that the contradiction ceases to exist. The true meaning of a hadith never contradicts another hadith or the Qur'an.¹²⁰

Other elements of contextual knowledge used by Salafi Muslims in this research to understand ambiguous Qur'anic verses are the reasons for the revelation of a verse (*asbab al-nuzul*). They can help to elucidate the meaning of verses because the Prophet received many verses as an answer to an urgent question or as an advice. On a linguistic level, the (true) meaning of the Arabic words has to be established. Salafi Muslims harbour the idea that, linguistically, Arabic was flourishing in the time of the Prophet. In the following centuries until nowadays, the linguistic skills of the Arabs have deteriorated to the point that the pure and true meaning of many words is obscure to them.

As we have just seen, Salafi Muslims do not claim that all religious sources can be understood right away by "simply reading" them nor do they think that they are all self-explanatory. However, whenever I have asked my interlocutors how they arrive at the meaning of the texts from the Qur'an and the Sunna they usually describe the process as "literal reading". Abu Jamal tries to clarify how he reads the sources literally taking the context into account in the following quote:¹²¹

- C.B.: Okay, you should therefore not take everything literally. You actually have to look at the context?
- Abu Jamal: Always, always.
- C.B.: This is weird because according to what I have heard Salafi Muslims read Qur'an and hadiths literally. But this is not entirely true since you look at the context, for example how a verse has been revealed?
- Abu Jamal: Yes, well literally, let's say for instance, if we do not have any evidence from the hadiths and the Qur'an that we should understand a text differently, then we actually take it literally. For example, the hand of Allah. Allah, God, has a hand. We understand it like 'okay, it is a hand. How? We do not know.'

If the meaning of a text is not transparent by "simply reading it", Salafi Muslims consult accessible exegetic works of trusted religious scholars, friends known for their (religious) knowledge, local Islamic authorities or they search the Internet in order to arrive at a sound interpretation. Most interlocutors, however, react surprised when hearing my question. The dominant understanding of the religious sources is that the texts are univocal, carrying only one

¹²⁰ From my notes taken during the lecture on 6 February 2010 in Berlin. For more details on the notion of *jam'* in Islamic jurisprudence see Krawietz (2002, 380).

¹²¹ Interview taken on 7 October 2009 in Amsterdam.

meaning determined by God and revealed to His messenger, the Prophet Muhammad. The only reason for which a person does not understand the texts when reading them is a lack of contextual Islamic knowledge. The more “Islamic” knowledge a person possesses the more obvious and transparent the texts become. However, it is maintained that the fundamentals of Islam are clear in the sources and can be understood by everybody as Fatima relates:¹²²

The fundamentals of Islam are very clear. There can be some smaller aspects about which there is difference of opinion. But this does not relate to the religious doctrines. The doctrines are very clear. You usually encounter them in the Qur'an, that you have to worship only Allah and nobody else, that Muhammad *salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam* is his Prophet, that there are angels and that there have been prophets before like 'Isa [C.B.: Jesus] . . . This is all very clear, the 'aqida [C.B.: creed, doctrine] and also the basic rules, prayer and so on.

This Salafi approach to textual hermeneutics relates textual ambiguity to the lack of knowledge on the side of the reader and not to the possible polysemic quality of a text (for a similar point in relation to evangelical Christians see Bielo 2008, 11). Reading a text figuratively by for instance identifying metaphors and interpreting them does not make any sense in the Salafi “hermeneutic ideology”. Reading involves perceiving the text via our senses and the cognitive transformation of the perception into knowledge. The cognitive process leading from perception to knowledge makes use of already existing (learned) knowledges, experiences and memories which help to interpret the perceived information into meaning that guides our actions and behaviour (Schiffman 1972). Reading in this broad understanding is therefore a cultured technology involving different learned dispositions, the sensory apparatus of the body and the workings of the mind. Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands harbour an understanding of reading quite to the contrary of the one just outlined before. In their eyes, reading needs to be purified of all the influences of culture, experiences and individual dispositions, at least when reading the religious sources containing the revelation, in order not to manipulate and corrupt the sources by outside influences and desires. In the same line of argument, doubts and doubting is the result of a lack of knowledge and originate in human reasoning which follows desires and is subject to corrupting influence.

However, God does not leave the believer alone erring between the true meaning of the revelation and corruption. In many chat rooms, forums or in various offline settings where gaining knowledge is the central activity it is common to speak (or type) short supplications (*ad'iya*) asking God to help to see the truth and to avoid falsity. It is ultimately in the hands of God whether He guides a person towards the truth or not. In line with this belief in the necessity of

¹²² Interview taken on 18 September 2009 in Leiden, the Netherlands

divine guidance, a common advice to me as a non-Muslim researcher was to open up towards God, to invoke Him, to trust in Him and to except His will so that my research project would reveal the Truth and satisfy scientific criteria.

Another remedy against doubts and errancy is to not only learn hadiths and Qur'anic verses by heart and to understand their proper meaning but also to be fulfilled with the love for the Qur'an, the Prophet and religion. Abu Anas, director of the Islamschule Braunschweig, complained in a discussion that in Islamic countries as well as in Germany, mosque staff teach young kids how to recite the Qur'an by heart. However, they would not teach the love, the deep faith and what their religion is all about. Therefore, when these kids reach puberty they are not interested any more in reciting texts they do not understand because it is not in their heart. They stop praying and start to do forbidden things. He has a different approach to teaching Islam. He starts with the fundamentals, the most basic and clear principles and makes them understand and love Islam for its Truth.¹²³

The quest for Islamic knowledge is a difficult one not so much for the complexity of the topic or the inaccessibility of parts of the sources but rather for the numerous temptations and pitfalls causing believers to stray away from the path leading to salvation. Qur'an and Sunna contain the Truth, i.e., the ideal model of a pious Muslim life and if a believer has the intention to follow the Truth and embark on a mission of life-long learning, he or she will with the help of God practice the faith in its authentic form and belong to the saved group.

¹²³ From my notes taken during a street party of Salafi Muslims in Mönchengladbach, Germany, on 2 July 2010.

Unearthing the authentic model: Islamic argumentation

This quest for Islamic knowledge appears in chat rooms and discussion forums in the guise of Islamic argumentation. Islamic argumentation is not about deductively arriving at the meaning of a text in the first place but about the identification of proper practices and behaviour.¹²⁴ In this sense, the Salafi approach towards the divine texts is rather instrumental since they communicate to the believers how God envisions the life of a pious and devoted Muslim including intentions, ideas, feelings and sensory responses for instance when listening to Qur'anic recitations or performing acts of worship. Texts from the religious sources that do not seem to carry information about the will of God accessible for human beings are “left” without further inquiry as the notion of *bi-la kayfa* already suggests.

Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya place themselves in the tradition of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih* by moulding their behaviour according to the practices that are authorised as Islamic knowledge. In the understanding of my interlocutors, Islamic knowledge is not something to be constructed from the religious sources. It is rather to be found in the religious sources and only needs to be discovered with the right tools. Islamic argumentation is in their understanding thus the process of “unearthing” the Truth from the religious sources in order to produce authentic Islamic knowledge. Wiktorowicz therefore calls this process “an archaeology of divine texts” (Wiktorowicz 2006, 210). Just like archaeologists endeavour to uncover an artefact from the past by removing dirt and other less important artefacts which have accumulated on top of it layer by layer, Muslims following the Salafiyya are on a quest to remove everything which has falsely been added by humans to the true meaning sources in the course of the centuries that have followed their revelation. In their own eyes, they unearth the true meaning of the divine message of the Qur'an and the Sunna by digging through the layers of illicit religious innovation, dangerous human reasoning and erring beliefs.

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, the failure to “know” the Truth is ascribed to the ignorance of people or their inability to read the sources properly and not to the possibility that the sources might be “wrong”, not contain the information needed or fail to provide useful and meaningful knowledge. Only with the help of Qur'an and Sunna, so Salafi Muslims claim, can the lives of the Prophet and the pious ancestors be accessed and be emulated in contemporary everyday life. Salafi Muslims therefore need to link their acts, their behaviour and, in fact, their

¹²⁴ Bielo (2008, 17) and Malley (2004, 117) argue in a similar vein regarding the Bible reading practices of evangelical Christians in the United States of America.

being to the lives of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih* via Qur'an and Sunna.

This is done with the help of Islamic argumentation in the threaded discussions of an online forum or during a chat session in a chat room. Islamic argumentation is usually induced in one of the following ways: (1) asking a concrete question relating to a specific life situation (e.g., I would like to marry. How do I do it Islamically correct?), (2) giving a general statement on geopolitical or local events or on the moral state of the society (e.g., corruption, promiscuity), (3) posing a question relating to religious texts or practices (e.g., the authenticity of a hadith or the exact elements of ritual practices like prayer, fasting, veiling), (4) commenting on innovations and misguided behaviour polluting Islam (e.g., the faults of heretical practices of other currents within Islam) and, though seldom (5) asking for the relevance and the meaning of a text from the religious sources.

The situation which has triggered the initial question or comment in a forum or a chat room is then related to a situation in the life of the Prophet or his companions. This is accomplished with the help of digitalized versions of the Qur'an and hadith collections which are scanned through in order to find an equivalent situation or a statement from God and in order to establish the link between the perfect model and contemporary life. While the Qur'an is searched for general guidelines hadiths are expected to deliver concrete examples from the life of the Prophet and his early followers that shed light on how to put the more general statements of the Qur'an exactly into practice. As soon as this link is placed, that what Muhammad and the early Muslim community have done, said, tolerated or, in the inverse, have not done, not said, not tolerated, must be translated into the contemporary situation.¹²⁵ A twofold link is thereby established between the contemporary life situation of the believers and the text: first of all, finding the applicable situation in the life of the Prophet, his companions and early followers and, secondly, linking the practices of them as they are described in the religious sources back to the current situation. Some chat rooms and Internet forums with strong Salafi participation make it obligatory to use textual references to Qur'an and hadiths. To produce a *dalil* or evidence means to successfully establish the twofold link between contemporary life and the religious sources.

Chat rooms and discussion forums feature different communicative properties and therefore afford different practices and actions. Accordingly, the way Islamic argumentation

¹²⁵ Muslims following the Salafiyya have the inclination to extend the term Sunna to stories about the lives of the companions of the *salaf al-salih* due to their supposed un-mediated access to the revelation. For instance, a report about the behaviour of a companion of the Prophet can appear as a *dalil* in the course of Islamic argumentation among Salafi Muslims. However, the doings and sayings of the Prophet have a higher status since they are considered to be part of the revelation itself unlike the stories about the *salaf al-salih*.

actually takes place and proceeds as a practice varies in both computer-mediated environments.

Islamic argumentation in discussion forums

Islamic argumentation takes place in all sub-forums of forums in which Salafi Muslims are active, including those who are not explicitly “Islamic” like sub-forums about housekeeping or lifestyle. For Salafi Muslims, who strive to emulate the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih* in every aspect of life, also very mundane issues like housekeeping are an integral part of the model of a pious Muslim life and related practices need to conform to this model. However, for the most part Islamic argumentation takes place in sub-forums related to *fiqh* and *manhaj* because Salafi Muslims tend to place their questions in these sections.

Among the many questions asked, there are some that keep re-appearing due to either the complexity and intricate details of the topic or the ambiguity surrounding it. The Islamic prayer rituals (*salawat*, sg. *salat*) belong to those “evergreens” about which Salafi Muslims do not tire to ask detailed questions on forums and in chat rooms covering any possible case. The prayers are the epitome of submission under the will of Allah expressed in the prostration (*sujud*) which is part of the body movements during the prayer. Everything that belongs like the *salat* to the realm of *‘ibada* (worship, devotion) must be practised with extra care according to the model of the Prophet since mistakes and innovations within the realm of *‘ibada* bear the danger of nullifying one’s religion. Worship does not only include the actual rituals of worship but extends, in the words of a popular citation circulating on Salafi websites and attributed to the medieval scholar Ibn Taymiyya, towards the “obedience to Allah by carrying out what He has commanded on the tongues of His messengers”(Salafipublications 1998). Deviating from the model set out by the Prophet in questions of worship then means in reality to be disobedient to God. From this emanates the urgency and eagerness with which Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands set out to appropriate and internalise the prayer rituals. Converts and Muslims coming from non-practising families who have not imbibed all the elements of the prayer ritual from their infancy often feel insecure and seek help.

Hundreds of transmitted reports attributed to the Prophet contain pieces of information about the different body movements, the time span within which prayers have to be accomplished, the preparation and conditions for praying through which a believer achieves the state of ritual purity, exemptions from the prayer obligation, the rules for postponing prayers and the texts uttered silently or loudly during the prayer. The following example of Islamic

argumentation¹²⁶ refers to the *tarawih* prayer which is not obligatory like the five daily prayers but for which similar conditions need to be fulfilled. The *tarawih* prayers are prayed in the nights of the fasting month Ramadan only by those who fast and are expected to yield *hasanat* (good deeds) that weigh in in favour of the believer on Judgement Day when good and bad deeds are weighed against each other on a scale. The topic opener, Umm Ridwan, is afraid that she might not be in the state of ritual purity which is necessary for fasting and the *tarawih* prayers. Since the beginning of Ramadan she has been taking anti-conception pills with the aim to subdue her menstruation, during which a woman is considered to be ritually impure, in order to fast the entire Ramadan. Anti-conception is not permissible among Salafi Muslims for the sake of avoiding a pregnancy. Most Salafi scholars have, however, declared the pill permissible in cases where women are eager to perform obligatory acts of worship like fasting.

[Umm Ridwan:]

Dear brothers and sisters in Islam

you take the pill so that you do not get your period, so that you can fast the entire month and, particularly, so that you can do the *tarawih* prayers in the mosque. But now, during the time when you should have your period, you loose some of that brown slime/fluid, and you feel your stomach rumbling despite the use of the pill. Is this nevertheless a menstruation and do you have to eat and are you not allowed to pray? Or can you ignore it and go on fasting and praying?

I have to add that my first week of Ramadan was also the week of my menstruation. Everything worked well with the pill. And now again [C.B.: it is time for my menstruation again] but I actually loose some brown slime. (folks, sorry for the unappetizing details)

Can somebody please give me an answer AS SOON AS POSSIBLE??

The topic starter wants to know whether the slime she looses is considered to be menstrual blood according to Islamic law. She thus poses indirectly a “*haram-or-halal*” question because her interest in the exact definition of her condition stems from her eagerness to fast and perform the *tarawih* prayers. She therefore needs to know whether she is permitted to fast and pray given that she is losing brown and yellowish slime and should be having her menstruation at that point of time were it not for the use of anti-conception pills.

[al-Maghribiyya:]

It is first of all a sin to stop your menstruation during Ramadan. You even get *hasanat* if you have your period during Ramadan. You can pray and therefore also fast as soon as you do not get any coloured blood or slime any more. But ask a scholar, for example an imam.

In the first reaction to the topic opener, al-Maghribiyya claims that stopping the period is forbidden during Ramadan and that she gets extra *hasanat* for menstruating during the month of fasting. She neither quotes from religious sources nor from the exegetical corpus of scholars who are held in high esteem among Salafi Muslims; and therefore she fails to produce *dalil*. The topic

¹²⁶ Al-Manar, forum, 7 September 2010: Use of the pill and menstruation: An answer needed as soon as possible.

opener reacts immediately emphasizing that she is aware that it is always better to let nature do its work but that she would like an answer from people who have extensive knowledge about these questions:

[Umm Ridwan:]

It is better to let nature go her way, I know. And that you have to be entirely clean and only then you are allowed to pray and to fast, I know that too. But I still would like to know from people who know a lot about this whether this is a real menstruation or just an interval bleeding (breakthrough bleeding). And if you have to fast or not??

But anyway thank you for your answer sister.

[Bilal:]

There are many laws for menstruation but we will in sha'allah only refer to those which attract most questions.

First of all, al-salat: the prayer

All sorts of salat, obligatory or sunna¹²⁷, are prohibited for women during the menstruation. It is an obligation for a woman to do the prayer if she can complete one rak'a¹²⁸ during the prescribed time of the prayer. This becomes clear with the help of the following two examples:

Example 1: A woman got her menstruation directly after sun set. However, she had been clean for a period of time which would have sufficed to do one rak'a of the maghrib prayer.¹²⁹ As soon as she has cleaned herself of her menstruation she must catch up on her maghrib prayer.

Example 2: The menstruation of a woman stops before sun set and within a period of time that is enough for her to do one rak'a of the fajr prayer. As soon as she has entirely cleaned herself, ghusl [C.B.: full ritual washing], she must catch up for the fajr prayer.

If in both of the example the time had not sufficed to do one rak'a of the prayer then it would not have been obligatory because the prophet salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam said: "Who gets one rak'a of the prayer within the prescribed time, he already has the prayer" (Bukhari).

This hadith demonstrates that everybody who does not do one rak'a within the prescribed time span, has not obtained the prayer.

Questions: Suppose that a woman can do one rak'a of the 'asr prayer on the right time, is she in this case obliged to do her zuhr prayer with the 'asr prayer? Or if a woman can do one rak'a of the 'isha' prayer in the prescribed time, is she then obliged to do her maghrib prayer with the 'isha' prayer?

There is a difference of opinion among scholars about these questions. The correct point of view is, however, that she only has to do the individual prayer of which she is able to achieve a specific [C.B.: act of] prayer. This means only the 'asr prayer and only the 'isha' prayer. This is based on the hadith of the prophet salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam: "Who can obtain one rak'a of the 'asr prayer before sunset, has the 'asr prayer." (He salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam did not say "then the person has the zuhr and the 'asr prayers).

(From: "The natural blood of women" from: Ibn al-'Uthaymin rahimahu llah [C.B.: may God have mercy on him]¹³⁰)

¹²⁷ Sunna in this case means that a prayer has been practised by the Prophet or was part of his habitual practice without being made obligatory.

¹²⁸ Rak'a is a unit within the prayer ritual containing a set of movements (standing upright, bowing, standing up) which is followed by *sajda* (prostration). Each prayer consists among other things of a specific number of *raka'at* (pl. of *rak'a*) accompanied by specific prayer texts and Qur'anic verses.

¹²⁹ The *maghrib* prayer is the fourth of the obligatory five daily prayers and is usually prayed after sunset (*maghrib*). The other prayers starting with the first prayer of the day are: *fajr* prayer (must be prayed between the beginning of dawn, *fajr*, and sunrise), *zuhr* prayer (must be prayed shortly after midday, *zuhr*, and before 'asr prayer), 'asr prayer (must be prayed in the afternoon, 'asr) and the fifth prayer, 'isha' (evening, must be prayed at night after the time for *maghrib* prayer ends and before dawn, *fajr*).

¹³⁰ Usually cited after mentioning a deceased person.

Wa-salam ‘alaykum wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu [C.B.: May the peace and mercy and blessings of God be with you]

Bilal copy-pastes parts from a fatwa collection of the Saudi scholar Muhammad Salih ibn al-‘Uthaymin (d. 2001), one of the scholarly champions of the Salafiyya, containing some rulings on menstruation and praying. However—though the topic is the same—the rulings do not apply to the question of the topic opener and therefore fail to provide analogical cases from the religious sources as is required by *dalil*. Rather, the rulings refer to the five obligatory daily prayers each of which has to be performed within a prescribed period of the day. The questions asked in the fatwa collection deal with cases in which a woman is menstruating for the most part of the prescribed time span except for a small period of time during which she would be able to perform one *rak‘a* of the prayer in question. The ruling is that as soon as a woman is able to do at least one *rak‘a* within the prescribed prayer time—that is, before she starts or after she has stopped bleeding, she is obliged to catch up on the prayer. In all other cases she is not allowed to perform the prayers due to her state of impurity and the prayer is therefore not obligatory for her any more. None of the following posters nor the topic opener responded to this post because it was not of relevance in this discussion though it presented in itself a valid and accepted ruling.

[Jamila:]

Astaghfir Allah [C.B.: I seek forgiveness from God/ God forbid] dear sister. Talk with knowledge and not without knowledge. Who has convinced you to believe this? To declare something haram, this is something big, dear sister. I can tell you however that the mufti ‘Abdallah al-Muslih has talked about this on Iqra TV¹³¹ and it is permissible for a woman to take the pill in order to fast an entire month. Hopefully, the brothers and sisters will show you how terrible it is to declare something haram. Read surat tahrir and its translation dear sister. wsl [C.B.: wa-salam, and peace [upon you]]

Jamila refers to al-Maghribiyya and calls out to God to protect everybody from the mistake committed by this poster. According to her, poster B has declared something a sin and therefore forbidden which the Saudi scholar ‘Abdallah al-Muslih has declared *halal* on a religious TV channel. Since he is a renowned Muslim scholar she acts on the assumption that he has provided valid *dalil*. Furthermore, she advises her fellow Muslim sister to read a chapter (*surat al-tahrir*) from the Qur’an dedicated to the issue of *tahrir*, to declare something forbidden. However, since she is not able to reproduce the *dalil* from the television show herself she hopes that other forum users will flesh out the right answer. This is done by the following poster, Abu Muhammad, who succeeds to present a conclusive answer and thereby brings Islamic argumentation to a full circle in this case. He, first of all, joins Jamila in admonishing al-Maghribiyya because, he writes, declaring something *haram* without giving evidence for it is an even greater sin if there are

¹³¹ Iqra TV is owned by the Saudi Arab Media Corporation and was launched 1998 focussing on religious and social programming.

rulings of scholars which posit the opposite and which are based on *dalil*.

The use of *tahrim* by average believers (*‘awamm*) without any specific education in the religious sciences is a terrain difficult to navigate for most and one of the pitfalls of Islamic argumentation. On the one hand, Salafi Muslims are called upon to be sincere and candid when it comes to religious matters and rulings and to correct each other in order to safeguard the pure model of the Prophet from being soiled by innovations. On the other hand, to declare something *haram* or a sin which is marked neither in the religious sources nor in the legal rulings from acknowledged scholars as *haram* can quickly become itself an innovation depending on the significance of the act. Those acts which fall under the category of *‘ibada*—that is, worship extending from the obligatory rituals to uncompromising obedience to the word of God expressed in Qur’an and Sunna—need to be supported by *dalil*. This includes for instance all changes brought upon a ritual like adding a *rak‘a* to a prayer or leaving out one day of fasting during Ramadan. Apart from additions or omissions an act of worship can also be changed by modifying of details thought to be clearly described in the religious sources. For instance, in Salafi circles it is believed that the religious sources demand from women to completely cover their hair. Covering only part of the head and leaving some hair uncovered is disobedience vis-a-vis the will of God and is thus *haram*. On the other hand, there is a difference of opinion among Salafi scholars whether it is compulsory (*mafrud*) or only recommended (*mustahabb*) to wear the facial veil (*niqab*). To declare that *niqab* is an obligation for every Muslim woman would be a sin since the sources do not unambiguously specify this. Acts that in contrast do not fall under the category of *‘ibada* but under the category of *mu‘amalat* (relations among humans) are *a priori* permissible as long as they are not declared *haram* by either Qur’an or Sunna. To declare an act within the field of *mu‘amala* which is not mentioned in the religious sources—for instance, riding a car—*haram* without *dalil* is not permissible and a sin.

To categorise acts appropriately and to be aware of relevant prescription from Qur’an, Sunna or jurisprudential literature is a tedious and time-consuming art which can only be mastered in approximate perfection by the grand religious scholars. The categorisation into *‘ibada* and *mu‘amala* is often elusive. Hence, the average believer struggles to walk the tightrope between justified admonishing and committing a sin by qualifying an act as *haram* or *halal* without a valid *dalil*.¹³²

[Abu Muhammad:]

Bi-sm Allah al-rahman al-rahim [C.B.: typed in Arabic letters in the original]

¹³² For more detail on the notions of *‘ibada* and *mu‘amala* see Bousquet (1971) and Bernand (1993) respectively.

Al-salam ‘alaykum wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu

First of all, it is an even bigger sin to declare something haram while the grand scholars have been asked about this. As you say yourself, go and ask the scholars. And many women went to the faqih [C.B.: jurispudent] and ‘allama¹³³ Salih ibn al-‘Uthaymin rahimahu Allah who spoke often about these questions. Because if you say that it is a sin to stop menstruation this means that this has been declared haram either by Qur’an and Sunna or by the grand scholars without any ikhtilaf among them.

Tayyib [C.B.: well, anyway], in the fatawa [C.B.: Arabic plural of fatwa] collection of the grand ‘ulama’ called fatawa al-mar’a, fatawa which deal with women situations, a question is asked as to whether it is permissible to use the pill and it has been answered. It is permissible to use the pill for a woman also during the month of ramadan. But she must be sure that this will not yield disadvantageous physical problems.

And concerning the colour of the menstrual blood, it must be really reddish, like menstruation blood. The colours as for instance yellow or brown are not considered to be menstruation blood. This is based on a sahih hadith of the sahabiya [C.B.: a female companion of the Prophet] Umm ‘Atiyya radiya Allah ‘anha [C.B.: may God be pleased with her]¹³⁴. Therefore, after you have done ghusl and you see yellow or brown, this is not considered to be menstruation blood as has been transmitted.

This is also mentioned in the fatawa al-mar’a of sheikh al-‘allama Ibn Baz rahimahu Allah, the former mufti of Saudi-Arabia.

Idhan [C.B.: therefore, thus] dear sister, I hope that you herewith in sha’llah know what the hukm [C.B.: ruling] is about the use of the pill given that an answer has been given by the ahl al-‘ilm [C.B.: people of knowledge] and explicitly by the grand scholars of this century rahimahum Allah [C.B.: may God have mercy on them].

Allah a’lam¹³⁵

After putting al-Maghribiyya somewhat harshly in her place Abu Muhammad continues to provide *dalil* by citing from a popular fatwa collection “*fatawa l-mar’a*” (fatwas concerning women) by the scholar Ibn al-‘Uthaymin who was cited before with a different text by Bilal. He cites by summarizing the ruling in his own words and not, as Bilal did, by copy-pasting texts without further introduction or explication. His main points are that the use of the pill during Ramadan is permitted and that menstrual blood must be red. All other colours are not considered to indicate a menstruation and therefore Umm Ridwan can continue fasting and perform the *tarawih* prayers.

He does not cite the entire *dalil* produced by Ibn al-‘Uthaymin in his fatwa but is satisfied with announcing the ruling. He only mentions that a hadith transmitted by one of the female companions of the Prophet, Umm ‘Atiyya, proves that brown or yellow slime does not count as menstruation, however without reproducing its wording. Those who want to make sure that the ruling is sound have to interrogate the fatwa collection themselves.¹³⁶ While Salafi Muslims

¹³³ ‘Allama (highly learned) is employed as a honorific for scholars.

¹³⁴ Honorific used after mentioning the names of the companions of the Prophet

¹³⁵ God knows best. Often cited at the end of an answer to a religious question.

¹³⁶ According to the hadith in question, Umm ‘Atiyya is supposed to have said: “We did not attach any importance to the brown or yellow colour after purity [C.B.: *tuhr*, the state a woman is in after the period has stopped. Muslim scholars regard the white discharge after the period as a sign that a woman has stopped menstruating].” This hadith is found in the collection of the hadith scholar Abu Dawud: *Sunan Abi Dawud, kitab 1 (kitab al-tahara), bab 120*

usually insist on *dalil* in the form of a direct reference to or quotation from Qur'an or Sunna, the practice of referring to a ruling of an honoured and respected scholar without explicating how he in turn has produced *dalil* from the sources is ubiquitous in forums. Ibn al-'Uthaymin belongs to the select group of authoritative scholars dealt with in awe and held in high esteem among most Salafi factions. The fact that only his ruling is summarised but not the evidence from Qur'an and Sunna suggests that their rulings are trusted in such a way that Salafi Muslims do not feel the need to scrutinise their juridical and exegetical works with the same careful and critical attitude employed with less renowned scholars or students of knowledge. In his one but last sentence, Abu Muhammad first underlines that his answer is based on the rulings of the "people of knowledge" and the "grand religious scholars of this century" seemingly drawing from the commanding authority of the religious scholarly establishment. However, the last sentence, "Allah a'lam" (God knows best) serves as a reminder that every knowledgeable person is fallible and that only God is all-knowing. The last posting in the thread written by Jamila affirms the ruling provided by Abu Muhammad and praises him for clarifying the dangerous matter of pronouncing something prematurely and misleadingly *haram*:

[Jamila:]

I really hoped that you or any other person would come and support my answer. I was already afraid in place of our Turkish sister [C.B.: reference to al-Maghribiyya¹³⁷]. To declare something haram without knowledge is dangerous.

wa-hamd Allah [C.B.: the praise of God] for your answer.

The following short example of Islamic argumentation gives an impression of how *dalil* is produced by quoting directly from the sources. The topic opener, AllahForever, is afraid that his new job in a restaurant might include acts that are *haram*. The succeeding two posters deliver a series of hadiths dealing with the issue of alcohol.¹³⁸

[AllahForever:]

Bi-sm Allah al-rahman al-rahim

al-salam 'alaykum

I have found a job in a restaurant.

The tasks will be the following:

I stand behind the bar and fill glasses with drinks including alcohol.

Permitted or forbidden act, please with evidence.

[al-Bosnawi:]

Al-salam 'alaykum wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu,

"Allah curses those who drink alcohol, distribute it, sell it, buy it, produce it, let

(*fi l-mar'a tara al-kudra wa-l-sufra ba'da al-tuhr*), hadith 307.

¹³⁷ Al-Maghribiyya means Moroccan (woman). Why Jamila refers to her as Turkish sister is not clear from the context of the forum.

¹³⁸ Al-Sunna, forum, 20 May 2009: Permissible job?

somebody else produce it, transport, let somebody else transport it and use the profit from it.” (al-Tirmidhi)”

Al-salam ‘alaykum wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu

[al-gharib:]

Al-Salam ‘alaykum

‘A’isha, may Allah be pleased with her, narrated: ‘When the last verses of the surat al-baqara were revealed, the Prophet, may the peace and blessing of Allah be upon him, recited them in the mosque and proclaimed the trade of alcohol as illegal.’ (Bukhari)

Narrated Jabir ibn ‘Abdallah (r) [C.B.: short for radiya llah ‘anhu]: I heard Allah’s messenger (s) [C.B.: short for salla llah ‘alayhi wa-sallam], in the year of the Conquest of Mecca, saying, ‘Allah and His messenger made illegal the trade of alcohol, dead animals, pigs and idols.’ The people asked, ‘O Allah’s messenger! What about the fat of dead animals, for it was used for greasing the boats and the hides; and people use it for lights?’ He said, ‘No, it is illegal.’ Allah’s messenger further said, ‘May Allah curse the Jews, for Allah made the fat (of animals) illegal for them, yet they melted the fat and sold it and ate its price.’ (Bukhari)

Ibn ‘Abbas (r) narrated:

When the Prophet was in the year of the Conquest of Mecca he said: ‘Allah and His messenger have made illegal selling of alcohol, dead animals, pigs and idols.’ (Bukhari)

There are still more hadiths which prohibit alcohol and selling alcohol and where those who produce, distribute and consume it are cursed by Allah (swt) [C.B.: short for subhanahu wa-ta’ala, glorified and exalted be He]. And most certainly falls your task, which you in sha’a llah will not perform, within the area of the cursed trade with alcohol. There is no other possibility to understand or interpret this in a different way! Therefore, ‘obey!’ and ‘follow!’

wa-llah a’lam

al-salam ‘alaykum

In this case Islamic argumentation is achieved without reverting to exegetical and juridical works of scholars by directly quoting from the sources which clearly state that selling and distributing alcohol is forbidden. While Muslims are usually aware of the prohibition of alcohol in Islam, many are not aware that involvement in the production, trade and transport of alcohol is just as *haram* as its consumption. Al-Bosnawi does not comment on the hadith he posts since the meaning is supposed to be evident. Also al-gharib opens by reproducing three hadiths accredited to the Prophet in which he is supposed to have said that God has cursed the trade with alcohol. The posting ends with a paragraph reminding AllahForever that the sources are clear and that working in a restaurant involving serving alcohol belongs without a doubt to the prohibited jobs. He urges him emphatically to obey and follow the will of God.

In both cases, Islamic argumentation is a quite focussed undertaking without any additional chit-chatting geared towards the common project of finding the correct Islamic practice. However, both threads emanate the spirit of diligent collaboration and sternness intermingling with a concern to stay true to the model of the prophet and, thereby, to the will of God. This concern often transmutes into a rigorous harshness with which potential trespassers are addressed—in the last example, AllahForever is for instance pre-emptively warned to obey

and follow—and brought to their senses. The shared aim to collectively construct *dalil*, finding the right ruling and, thereby, following in the footsteps of the Prophet, however, usually outweighs the admonishing and, in extreme cases, purgatory character of many postings. Situated outside of scholarly institutions, the deliberation is rather informal and unstructured involving men as well as women. They all co-participate in the collective endeavour to increase the knowledge of God's will and to keep impermissible innovations at bay.¹³⁹

Islamic argumentation in chat rooms

Chat rooms used by Muslims following the Salafiyya provide the possibility to either chat by typing text or by talking using the microphone function. The web-cam function is usually not employed due to gender segregation with exceptions where the head of the preacher appears in the web cam during his lecture. In the lower part of the chat window, users can type their messages and edit them with the help of some basic editing features like colours and font attributes or emoticons. Upon clicking the “enter” key on their keyboard, the message will appear in the main window above the editing field where the entire typed conversation can be followed. With every new typed line appearing on the lower end of the conversation a typed line on top of the window disappears. Chat clients in general do not possess an automated archiving function nor a citation function like discussion forums. The list of participants including the administrators and moderators appears in the right half of the chat window. The user names of administrators and moderators are highlighted by specific colours or the sign “@” preceding the name. Some chat clients display further symbols appearing before or after a user name indicating for instance whether a user is talking on the microphone with a small microphone or whether a user has not been active for some time in the chat room by the abstract rendition of a sleeping face. A banner with advertisement often runs below the editing field. Software developers of free chat clients use advertisement to finance themselves. Users, whether administrators or participants, are usually not able to influence the choice of adds. An exception are chat add-ons to forums which do not automatically include advertisement banners. Users entering the chat room are welcomed with an automated message appearing in the main window. Likewise, chat room participants are informed by an automated message in the main window as soon as somebody leaves. Many Salafi chat rooms restrict the use of the microphone to the lecturer or owner of the chat room who structures the discussion. Women are expected to abstain from using the microphone. Chat clients provide furthermore the possibility to befriend other users

¹³⁹ Hirschkind describes Islamic deliberation in public in Egypt (e.g., during a cab ride) in a similar way (Hirschkind 2006, 110).

who have an account, and thereby a user name, with the chat client to follow them and to write private messages.

In recent years, different genres of chat rooms where Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya try to gain Islamic knowledge and socialize with like-minded Muslims have crystallized varying in terms of discussion style, hierarchies and control of communication. Online *durus* (lessons) follow the structure of a lecture with a subsequent question and answer session. The lecturer is the only one using the microphone and usually exposes a specific topic or teaches from the Qur'an, a hadith collection or an exegetical opus by one of the Salafi scholars. The lecturers are assisted by moderators who take care that the main chat window stays "clean", that is, that no typing occurs during the lecture except for the Islamic greeting for those who enter. They ban those who do not adhere to the rules and are the contact persons for the chat room participants. Questions can either be asked in the main window or have to be sent to one of the moderators who sort and forward them to the lecturer. Depending on the style of the lecturer and his relationship with chat room participants the atmosphere ranges from calm and detached to sociable and respectful. Salafi online study groups consist of a group of Salafi Muslims who enter a chat room in order to talk about a specific topic or text. In contrast to online *durus*, they lack an obvious hierarchy although some participants usually prove to be more adept in answering questions or explaining something. The room is regulated by the owner who is usually also the moderator. Rules are less strict and a certain amount of socializing and chatting is tolerated. Participants are only banned if they disturb the communication or insult others. The discussion flows on the eagerness and enthusiasm of the participants to help others with questions and to share their knowledge. Some chat rooms are reminiscent of the German notion of *Stammtisch* (regulars' table, regular get-together). These chat rooms open regularly but lack any programme in terms of a topic for discussion or a lesson. There are rather places to hang out with "brothers" and "sisters". People who are logged-in usually drop in to see who is there and to chat. The chat is difficult to understand for outsiders since many participants know each other from the offline world and the conversation often refers to older conversations, events and occurrences on- and offline. Newcomers are usually directly addressed and questioned about their religion. Islamic argumentation plays a role but is less goal-oriented and rather an accidental product of the discussion. A "Salafi online *Stammtisch*" or hang-out place gives room to socialise and chat informally with other Salafi Muslims in a safe environment. The last genre can be dubbed "debating club". Chat rooms falling in this genre often carry the word "dialogue" in their names. They are set up by Salafi Muslims in order to debate with non-Muslims, mostly Christians and

atheists, or with Muslim groups who in the eyes of Muslims following the Salafiyya have strayed away from the true path. The aim is to convince the other side from their wrong-doing or wrong-thinking and to celebrate the clarity and thereby the superiority and beauty of Islam.

Islamic argumentation preferably occurs during question-and-answer sessions of online *durus*, online study groups and, to a lesser extent, in Salafi online *Stammtische*. The following example from a Dutch speaking chat room set up for female converts belongs to the study group genre.¹⁴⁰ The women know each other from the corresponding forum for female converts and have regular informal offline meetings or meet each other at events like lectures and seminars of popular preachers. The topic of each chat session is normally specified beforehand in the forum where participants can also express their own ideas and concerns they would like to discuss. The participants in the chat session from which the following example originates discussed questions referring to the prayer. The chat session which lasted for about two hours took place in typed text. The chat excerpt translated below covered a time span of eleven minutes. Eight women participated actively in the chat extract while three (including the researcher) were passively following or lurking. During the entire chat session between six to fourteen users were logged in.

farida: just quickly another little question. I perform my prayer right now sitting on a chair due to my huge belly but I find this also very hard. what else can I possibly do?
minni: you do not expect this when walking through a zoo
fatima: you may also lie down
sarah: there is a big mosque in noord [C.B.: quarter in Northern Rotterdam] where they are apparently allowed to do the adhan [C.B.: call to prayer] on Fridays
fatima: if sitting becomes too difficult, best would be on your right side if this is possible
farida: I try to carry on as long as possible but how do I do it lying down?
sarah: do you have that book from bommel¹⁴¹?
sarah: there you find a good piece about prayer for people who are not able to sit any more
farida: oh yes wait, with your eyes, right? oh this goes further than, I mean, well this is for people who are not able to sit etc
welcome to converts.net, marina_!
fatima: yeah and bend your head a bit
minni: there is a thread about pregnant women and praying
minni: <http://forum.converts.nl/viewtopic.php> . . . [C.B.: link made anonymous]
um-rashid: I have al-hamd li-llah [C.B.: praise to God] always been able to pray, also during my pregnancy
um-rashid: so no idea actually
marina_: al-salam 'alaykum sweeties [heart]
sarah: that is actually true. I have not been able to do it the last two weeks
um-rashid: I do not see this a lot here
felicita: I have also problems when praying. You see, I feel quite dizzy and sick. al-hamd li-llah I manage always to do the prayer
farida: subhan Allah [C.B.: glorified be He]. I really hope that there is no need but gosh, this belly makes one think that I am 40 weeks pregnant and the little one always presses

¹⁴⁰ Converts.net, chat room, 11 October 2009

¹⁴¹ Abdulwahid van Bommel worked after his conversion to Islam and studies in Turkey as imam of several mosques in the Netherlands. He has authored many books in Dutch about the fundamentals of Islam like the prayer ritual and for young Muslims living in the Netherlands.

against my ribs

Um Tariq: I also simply did it with a chair my prayers

felicita: ‘alaykum al-salam marina [smiling face]

marina_: [heart]

Caroline left the room

farida: yeah, I use a chair right now but I feel quite often very dizzy

minni: wa-‘alaykum al-salam great that you are here

marina_: are we talking about pregnancy??

minni: about performing the prayer when you are not able to do the movements any more

fatima: praying, but among other things also during your pregnancy

sarah: I see a bunch of books from the little muslim¹⁴² at islamproducts [C.B.: webshop]. are they all good or just the one dealing with the prayer?

felicita: I always open the balcony door so that fresh air comes in

um-rashid: about praying in general

farida: in sha’a llah I will be able to carry on another 10 weeks but khayr [C.B.: good, well]. I doubt it

fatima: ps I have googled van bommel, but I don’t know him

minni: I find them all great. there are all easy little books

marina_: thank you sweetie! you said chat, I said tahala! haha, oh, does prayer change when you are pregnant?

sarah: okay

minni: bommel is not reliable

sarah: so perhaps I just buy them then

minni: this has been stated several times on the forum

sarah: 12 small books for 35€

minni: also a lot of fun for the kids to learn

Um Tariq: yeah, I have myself also fun books hihhi

minni: what are you referring to marina

sarah: well I have not come to a conclusion yet, how we are going to do it

um-rashid: in sha’a llah it will work Farida

marina_: it was written prayer during the pregnancy.. but what has to be done differently?

minni: well, if your belly gets in the way

minni: or to heavy

marina_: or are we talking about bellies in general.. haha. oh, okay.

farida: in sha’a llah um rashid in sha’a llah

minni: Farida is pregnant

marina_: ma sha’Allah [C.B.: What God has willed] me too [heart] but some of you already knew that

Um Tariq: my pregnancy finished three months ago

Um Tariq: I miss it now

Um Tariq: [sad face]

um-rashid: does it work sitting on the ground perhaps?

farida: hahaha Um Tariq

marina_: but was is Farida’s problem? or is it something unpleasant?

Um Tariq: hahaha

farida: sitting on ground has not been possible for a long time. I have been praying on a chair the last seven weeks.

marina_: Aaah subhan Allah Farida, will it be your first child or do you already have children?

fatima: and for example on the edge of your bed?

um-rashid: subhan Allah

farida: my uterus grows mainly upwards and not to the side. the little one presses therefore against my ribcage

marina_: OUCH!

farida: my second in sha’a llah

marina_: ooh okay. in this case I don’t know . . . but I hear often that your second child

¹⁴² “De kleine Moslim”, book series for Dutch-speaking Muslim children over the basics of their religion.

gives you quicker and more often a bigger belly as a gift. wa-llah a'lam. how far are you now?

um-rashid: khayr in sha'a llah, are you due on 'id al-adha [C.B.: Festival of Sacrifice]?

farida: 30 al-hamduli'llah marina and I actually have a belly of a woman of 40 weeks

marina_: subhan Allah

farida: the little one will come on 15 december in sha'a llah and I have an awful lot of problems with praying sitting down

marina_: you are 30 weeks I guess then... subhan Allah, that seems so hard to me.. I am now 27 weeks and I find my belly too small. but when I listen to others this is a blessing. miskina [C.B.: poor one] [heart] may Allah ta'ala [C.B. exalted] make it easy for you in sha'a llah amin.

Um Tariq: yeaah, in sha'a llah everything will work out fine sister [heart]

fatima: oh just wait, all of the sudden, all of the sudden you have a belly with which you are not on first-name terms

fatima: this comes all of the sudden from nowhere

marina_: in sha'a llah not....

farida: amin sister for your du'a' [C.B.: supplication]. may Allah make it also for you easy. amin

fatima: you wake all of the sudden up with it

marina_: aaah baraka llah fiki [C.B.: may God bless you]!

marina_: ahahahah,

fatima: really

fatima: one morning you will think about my words..... wahahahaha

Welcome to converts.net, Caroline!

farida: yeah, this is it really subhan Allah my belly appeared all of the sudden

minni: I have a small piece

marina_: really?

minni: 'Imran ibn Husayn said: 'I was suffering from piles, so I asked the Messenger of Allah and he said, "pray standing, if you are not able, then sitting down; if you cannot do so, then pray lying down."' (al-Bukhari, Abu Dawud and Ahmad)

'Imran ibn Hussain also said: 'I asked him about the prayer of a man while sitting, so he said: He who prays standing, that is better, he who prays sitting, his reward is half that of the former. He who prays lying down (and in another narration: reclining), has half the reward of the one who sits.' This applies to the sick person, for Anas said, 'The Messenger of Allah (salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam) came out to the people while they were praying sitting due to illness, so he said: Verily, the prayer of one who sits is (worth) half of the prayer of the one who stands.'

Once he (salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam) visited a sick person and saw him praying (leaning) on a pillow, so he took it and cast

minni: so he took it and cast it aside and said: 'Pray on the ground if you can, but otherwise make movements with your head, making your sujud [C.B.: prostration] lower than your ruku' [C.B.: bending].' (Tabarani, Bazar, Ibn Samak in his hadith book (62/2) & Baihaqi)

Ibid Khattabi said: 'The meaning of 'Imran's hadith is intended for a sick person who is able to undergo hardship and stand with difficulty. Hence the reward of praying sitting has been made half of the reward of praying standing: encouraging him to pray standing while allowing him to sit.' Ibn Hajr said in Fath al-Bari (2/468): 'This deduction is valid.'

marina_: it is there but not really present. al-hamd li-llah, but Farida are you almost due?

marina_: minni... YOU said 'small' piece

minni: stop whining you [grinning and rolling smiley]

sarah: hhh

marina_: [smiley sticking out its tongue]

Um Tariq: sisterssssssssss

Um Tariq: I leave

Um Tariq: to my bed in sha'a llah

minni: a month later you will ask again do you still have that piece. then you need it haha

Um Tariq: I have to get up early tomorrow

farida: thank you minni it is very clear. I am afraid that I have to give up hasanat

Islamic argumentation here proceeds straight forward: Farida who is pregnant has

problems executing the bodily movements required for the Islamic prayer ritual due to her, as she puts it, huge belly. She has started to do them in a sitting position which is permissible. However, since she has ten more weeks to go, she is afraid that she will not be able to carry on doing the prayers while sitting and asks what the next possibilities are. The succeeding contributions referring to Farida's question tell her that she can also pray while lying down and suggest a specific book containing a section about the way sick people can pray. Minni posts a link to a discussion thread about pregnancy and praying on the forum. In the following the women for the most part exchange their experiences during pregnancies and give advice like sitting on the ground, sitting on the edge of the bed or on a chair and letting in fresh air. Farida elucidates that her baby is pressing against her ribs which makes it difficult to sit without becoming dizzy.

After a few minutes, Minni posts three reports attributed to the Prophet expounding that the preference goes out to doing the prayer standing and then successively to sitting and lying. However, the rewards or *hasanat* which a Muslim receives for praying divide in half correspondingly. The last hadith signifies that those who cannot do the movements at all, neither from a sitting or lying position, should imitate the movements by bending their heads. After the quotation of the three hadith, Minni inserted a paragraph with interpretive remarks from scholars explaining the moral grounds of the gradual reduction of rewards. According to them, the rewards are reduced in order to encourage sick people to undergo the hardship and to pray standing.

This contribution of Minni can be found in the exact same wording in the threads of three Dutch forums with Muslim participation discussing the issue of prayer and sickness. The text is a translation from the English translation of the book *Sifat Salat al-Nabi* (the characteristics of the Prophet's prayer) of the influential hadith scholar Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999). In this book, al-Albani provides an overview of authentic reports attributed to the Prophet on the topic of prayer and comments on them. He structures his book following the course of the prayer. In one of the sub-chapters with the title "The Prayer of a Sick Person in a Sitting Position" he files the hadith cited by Minni. The abbreviation "Ibid" (short for *ibidem*: the same place) with which the last paragraph of Minni's answer begins, betrays that the paragraph was a foot- or endnote in the original source since *ibidem* is used in foot- and endnotes to provide a reference to a source which has been cited in the preceding note. Usama Hasan's translation of al-Albani's book contains the three hadiths with the last paragraph as a footnote (al-Albani 2005, 5–6) introduced by "Ibid.". A further comparison of the Dutch text and the English translation suggests that the

former is largely a translation of the latter.

Minni does not mention al-Albani, who is very much revered in Salafi circles and whose work is frequently quoted, as the source of her posting. When quoting from al-Albani's work Salafi Muslims usually do not forget to underline that the quote comes from his work in order to bolster the authority of their posting or contribution. The fact that Minni does not do so indicates that she is not aware of al-Albani as the author and that she has copy-pasted the text from one of the three forums where he was not mentioned either. This extract of al-Albani's book has thus turned into a text-object, that is a fragment floating in the Internet detached from its original context and author (see Chapter 1, 53ff.). While others went on talking based on their own experiences or what they have read in the past and what they thought would be the right way to do, Minni was the only one who went the whole long way and looked for *dalil*. It is only then that Islamic argumentation was completed satisfactorily and that the discussion proceeded to other issues.

The conversation splits into several intermingling conversational threads which are at times difficult to follow if one does not concentrate or enters the chat room at a later point like Marina who asks whether the topic is pregnancy. The deliberation lacks in this case the structure and focus we have encountered in the two threads exemplified in the precedent section. Some participants continue discussing as to which books can be used to teach their children how to pray while one of them is searching in a web shop for a specific book that had been advised to her earlier on during the chat session. At times, the meaning of a contribution remains elusive and incomprehensible like Marina's reaction "you said chat, I said tahala!". It is not clear whom she designates with "you", what "tahala" means and where this conversation took place. Marina had entered the chat room just a minute before which could mean that she refers to a conversation which took place elsewhere. Since the person she addresses does not answer, participants are left in the dark. The result is a sort of conversational messiness and ambiguity which often contrasts with the austerity and seriousness employed in Islamic argumentation as the prior examples from forums have shown.

The communicative properties of chat rooms afford short sentences and quick typing while contributions cannot be revised once the enter key has been hit. It is therefore not uncommon that important cues helping to understand a text are left out or not represented in a comprehensible way due to mistakes. Ambiguous contributions are usually ignored since it is difficult to ask a question referring to an earlier posted comment because chat rooms lack a citation function whereby one can copy-paste a posting in one's own contribution with one click

as is done in forums or e-mails. Furthermore, the typed lines keep disappearing from the top main window with the speed of the conversation. Following the conversation and participating in it can be a quite hectic and at times frenzied activity with increasing speed which works to the benefit of clear, short and articulate contributions. To inquire about the meaning of a posting is only done if there is time and if the contribution is important for the conversation.

This excerpt provides furthermore a glimpse into the small-group sociability which emerges in chat rooms in which Salafi Muslims engage collectively with their faith. The informality of the language, the flat hierarchies in comparison to the above examples from discussion forums and the warm as well as responsive way in which participants interact with each other create an environment where the women feel at ease. Joking and teasing like Fatima's comments on the small belly of Marina and her warning that she should just wait and will be surprised by an enormous belly one morning in the above example envelop the interaction in jolliness and a sort of motherly care since those who have already gone through one or more pregnancies take the non-initiated under their wings. It is a feeling of togetherness which is also sensible in the women's sections of Salafi offline gatherings (Friday prayer, lectures, seminars etc.).

Other chat rooms generate a different dynamic of interaction and hermeneutic-interpretive practices which is partly due to a different incorporation of the technological properties of chat rooms into practices. Chat rooms belonging to the genre of online *durus* reflect the classic division into audience and lecturer of offline lectures and sermons. The microphone function is reserved for the lecturer, the activities in the main chat window are more or less strictly monitored and moderators take an active role in controlling and steering the activities. One of the oldest and most continuous Salafi chat rooms in Germany perfectly illustrates the genre of online *durus* and their specific sociability and practises. The chat room, Islamic lessons, has been run by the imam of a mosque in Eastern Germany since 2001 and attracts on normal days 40 to 60 participants many of which take part on a regular basis. The imam Abulhussain, who is concomitantly a well-known preacher in Germany, provides the lectures for the most part himself but is occasionally assisted by a student of knowledge, Abu Najib, who replaces Abulhussain if he is not available or takes over the question-and-answer sessions from Abulhussain after the lectures. The lectures take place every evening of the work week after 'isha' prayer and follow an outlined programme including lessons in Arabic, *tajwid* lessons (art of Qur'anic recitation) and explication of the Qur'an, hadith collections and exegetical works in 'aqida and *fiqh*. Most of the lessons with the exception of Arabic and *tajwid* lessons follow the

exegetical works of the grand religious scholars revered by the Salafiyya like *Kitab al-Tawhid* from Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) or *Al-Jawab al-Kafi* from Muhammad ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350). Many lessons take simultaneously place offline in the mosque of the imam. Participants online can hear the sounds and noise emanating from the mosque and transmitted into the chat room via the microphone of Abulhussain.

The lectures are followed by a question-and-answer session for which participants can send their questions via the private message function to a female or male moderator. They collect the questions and forward them to Abulhussain who then reads the questions out aloud on the microphone and answers them. Gender segregation is a continuous practical concern of many Salafi Muslims in the Netherlands and in Germany. Therefore, many questions in these sessions revolve around issues of gender segregation and its implementation in a society which does neither provide the corresponding infrastructure nor show empathy towards the segregation of gender. Many believers like the author of the question in the following example¹⁴³ are therefore in a quandary since they are practically forced to sin.

Abulhussain:

[C.B.: reading the question from the screen of his computer into the microphone] In Islam there is supposed to be gender segregation. What if you are working, and here in Germany it is everywhere like this, and the men and women are mixed? Are you in this case committing a sin on a daily basis when you are working mixed, meaning with the other? [C.B.: end of reading]?

Of course, gender mixing is completely normal here in Germany. This applies to men and women, this applies to men and women. And I really regret it of course that these questions usually relate to women. Is a woman allowed to work with men? But how should . . . The question should actually baraka Allah fikum [C.B.: may God bless you] be: Are men also allowed to work with women? As a male, a man takes the liberty of working with women. But a woman is not allowed to work with men. Actually, this is from the point of view of Islamic law not correct. Women work with women and men work with men.

In any case, here in Germany it is however something we cannot avoid baraka Allah fikum. This is . . . a Muslim should try to work as much as possible with people of his sex. But if he cannot realise this, then he should have as little contact with the other sex as possible if there is no gender segregation. Of course, if you are able to put this into practise. But there are certain functions where you have to stay with the other and so on. And this is true for almost all functions here in this country. In any case, there is the rule from our Prophet Muhamma salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam, saddidu wa-qaribu, saddidu wa-qaribu. What does saddidu wa-qaribu mean? It means that if you cannot obtain an objective by one hundred percent then you have to pick an aim as close as possible. If you cannot work with this religious framework so to speak, then we try to practise what comes closest to our religion.

Now, is it a sin? Of course not. We cannot say that it is a sin because it is not your fault. Either you will stay at home the entire time, not going outside at all and not meeting people or have contact with people or you have to do something. And there is only work nowadays for men and women with gender mixing and not with gender segregation. May Allah subhanhu wa-ta'ala make us firm.

¹⁴³ Islam Lessons, chat room, 27 March 2009.

Abulhussain addresses several issues he thinks are important in relation to the question and does not directly engage with Islamic argumentation by, for instance, immediately constructing an appropriate *dalil*. He first of all reminds male participants that questions of gender segregation also pertains to them and not only to women. Then he describes the situation in Germany where gender segregation is absent from the workplace and where one has to stay at home and avoid contact with others in order to fulfil the obligation of gender segregation entirely. He then cites in Arabic from the following hadith attributed to the Prophet:¹⁴⁴

Indeed, this religion is easy, and whoever makes religion a burden it will overpower him. So seek what is appropriate, come as close as you can (*saddidu wa-qaribu*), receive glad tidings and seek help [C.B.: with Allah] in the morning and at dusk and during the late hours of night.

He does not simply give a translation of the hadith and but rather relates it in his own words to the case: try your best to realise the religious rules but if conditions are adverse, try to come as close as possible. This hadith is often used among German and Dutch Muslims following the Salafiyya as a “hadith of last resort” in order to overcome the ambiguities and to navigate predicaments when trying to emulate the model of the Prophet in every detail while living in societies where Muslims, let alone Muslims following the Salafiyya, are a minority.

Islamic argumentation during online *durus* is a less rigorous and more narrative practice as the example above shows. *Dalil* is not produced any more by providing a full quotation or a citation of a text from the religious sources which relates to the situation but consists for the most part of an interpretation of the current situation and the formulation of an “Islamic” solution which is bolstered with vague references to Qur’an and Sunna, approximate quotations from them or a re-narration of events described in a hadith or verse from the Qur’an. The sources of the texts are usually not provided and the quotation itself is very often partial as in the example above. Whether Islamic argumentation in these cases turns out to be successful and convincing without adhering to the strict exigencies of *dalil*, which stands at the centre of Salafi self-understanding in comparison with other currents within Islam, depends on the authority, the moral affect and the style of the oral performance (see Chapter 4 and 5). Citation functions, hyperlinks and copy-paste functions which put their imprint on Islamic argumentation in discussion forums and, though to a lesser extend, on text chat are absent in oral-aural communication in chat rooms in the genres of online *durus*. In some cases, in order to clarify misunderstandings, participants copy-paste texts from the religious sources into the chat window. Having said that, oral-aural communication in chat rooms affords a narrative style

¹⁴⁴ From the collection of al-Bukhari: *Sahih al-Bukhari, kitab 2 (kitab al-iman), bab 30 (al-din yusr)*, hadith 39.

through which the speaker in a chat room is able to expand on the description of issues, consequences, situations and moods relevant for a particular question and to picture possible solutions climaxing in a description of the word of the Prophet or a recitation from the Qur'an. This narrative style afforded by oral-aural communication technologies draws its authenticity not so much from the accuracy of citations and references to the religious sources but their incorporation into a larger narrative on living as a Salafi Muslim in Germany or the Netherlands.

In contrast to the preceding example in which the prayer during pregnancy was discussed in a typed chat session, this example from an online *durus* differs clearly in terms of authority and sociability. The lecturer, here Abulhussain, holds control of the activities in the chat rooms and does not grant any room to deviating views or chatting during his lecture. Questions which doubt his authority or knowledge or questions considered to be too intimate or politically controversial are ignored. As a gatekeeper, Abulhussain sets the agenda, governs social interaction and behaves as a teacher towards his students. Nevertheless, his chat room is the most popular German-speaking chat room among Muslims following the Salafiyya and radiates a sphere of camaraderie and fellowship with imam Abulhussain as the mentor of those who seek knowledge. He inspires almost every evening between 40 and 60 participants to log in and follow through the lessons and question-and-answer sessions for between one to sometimes up to four hours.

However, the role of the participants is far from passive. In the tradition of sermons, the lectures of Abulhussain cultivate a specific ethical response and inspire fear and love of God. The listeners in the chat room accompany him in the main chat window with typed devotional formulas like invocations, supplications (*ad'iya*) and words of moral support if he recounts the hardship of the Muslim community in Germany. It is not the kind of cognitive collaboration witnessed in discussion forums and typed chat where everybody interested takes actively part in formulating *dalil*. As I will analyse in more detail in Chapter 4, the listeners collaborate rather affectively by opening up their hearts and minds to the lecture and let it resounds in their own imagination (see Hirschkind 2006, 84–88).

Reinvigorating Qur'an and Sunna: Literalism, transitivity and interpretive traditions

Muslims who follow the Salafiyya become lyrical when praising the simplicity of Islam and its rules including the inherent logic which, as many converts underline, often gives the final impulse to accept Islam as the Truth. Part of this logic is the idea to read the sources literally without any figurative or metaphorical intricacies and hair-splitting. However, when engaging enthusiastically in Islamic argumentation in chat rooms and discussion forums (or elsewhere) many run quickly into problems: Qur'an and Sunna often remain silent about specific questions, the relevant texts are not easy to comprehend in order to deduct behavioural guidelines from them and different opinions circulate which all claim to be bolstered by *dalil*. Concomitantly, the notion of *dalil* idealises a direct and literal reading of the revelatory sources as the purest form of evidence. Since literal reading does not always yield enough clues about what one should do in a specific situation religious experts like students of knowledge, religious scholars or simply Muslims who have some knowledge of the sources and instruments of interpretation step in and function as intermediaries between the revelation and the believer.

Islamic argumentation is therefore often much more ambiguous and sometimes puzzling than the description of the technicalities of *dalil* and the notion of literal reading of the texts adopted by Salafi Muslims suggest. However, this ambiguity inherent in reading the sources literally gives them the leeway to play an active role in the construction of *dalil* which goes beyond of what informants often describe as “just reading”. When the literal reading of the sources does not yield a satisfying answer, believers have the choice to consult a scholar, to start looking for analogies in the sources or to start deducting answers from general statements. This poses the question as to when a believer should turn to a scholar. According to Abulhussain, a believer needs to be able to realistically evaluate his knowledge when it comes to the religious sources and be sincere about what he is able to understand by himself and what not. When I asked him whether it is possible to look for answers in Qur'an and Sunna without consulting a scholar he emphatically nodded his head. However, there are individual limits to the capacities of a believer:

Furthermore, we have other categories like al-mu'awwal [C.B.: in need of interpretation] and al-mujmal [C.B.: ambivalent] and the like. This means there are specific ayat and hadiths which we cannot understand directly. This is why we need instruments, instruments of knowledge. This means first of all, that we need to know how the prophet *salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam* explained something, how his companions explained it, how the salaf, the three generations, explained it and how the scholars interpreted it. If a person possesses the appropriate skills, he can search himself and then take a decision. But if you do not have the skills, then you simply have to ask somebody who has

knowledge.¹⁴⁵

The same idea is formulated by Umm Zayd who prefers to read the sources herself but admits that it is sometimes necessary to consult scholars.

- C.B.: This then means for you that you look yourself at the text literally? You do not only ask somebody?
- Umm Zayd: Well, you can ask somebody but this person needs to link back to a source, from which book he has taken it. If you can look it up yourself that is actually even better. But if you really do not understand it, you really need to get an explanation from somebody who has studied it.
- C.B.: If the text remains obscure?
- Umm Zayd: Or if it is about something which is not . . . For instance, something about which opinions differ. About . . . if you have to cover your face or not. We cannot find anywhere specifically that it is obliged. Rather that it is something very good and that all the women of the Prophet *salla Allah 'alayhi wa-sallam* have worn it [C.B.: the facial veil, *niqab*]. But we cannot trace this to anywhere in the sources. So therefore, we nevertheless need to weigh it and ask scholars and so on.

Both Abulhussain and Umm Zayd describe an active role of believers who read the sources themselves, employ their knowledge, decide when to consult which scholar or weigh the answers of the different scholars in order to make a decision. Many Salafi Muslims do therefore not simply reproduce answers given in the religious sources or in the exegetical masterpieces of the religious scholars. Rather, they reinvigorate certain beliefs and notions associated with the Salafiyya by constructing *dalil* from the sources, making a choice between interpretational works and verifying the evidence provided by the 'ulama' and all that under the claim of reading the sources literally.

Literalism and transitivity

Recent research from the area of the anthropology of Christianity has paid specific attention to the practice of Bible reading, most notably as it is done in bible study groups in North America. Brian Malley developed in the course of his fieldwork among an evangelical community in the US, Creekside Baptist Church, the notion of transitivity in relation to text interpretation. Following the argument of Malley the link between text and idea (interpretation) is established through the assumption of transitivity. This assumption, according to Malley,

makes interpretive traditions possible because it allows propositions to be regarded as interpretations of a text even when they are not identical to the text. (2004, 84)

Transitivity allows transferring an interpretation to a text (the interpretand) across several attributions. It establishes relations between the text A and ideas B and C of the following form: A is related to B, B is related to C, therefore, A is related to C (Johnson-Laird 2009, 430).

¹⁴⁵ Interview taken on 8 February 2010 in Leipzig (Germany).

These transitive relations between texts and possible meanings extend the interpretand beyond its strict literal content.

The following example taken from a discussion thread about the permissibility of hair removal illustrates some of the ways by which transitivity plays a role in Islamic argumentation.¹⁴⁶ The initial question put by Umm Suhayb was:

Is it [CB: epilating] allowed or not? I have recently heard that a scholar on TV has said that you are allowed to modify it [CB: the hair] for your husband.

Apparently, the initial question was triggered by the TV appearance of a religious scholar who declared that epilating one's hair was allowed. The ensuing debate comprised 81 contributions, part of which raised related questions, and was bolstered with *dalil*. The initial question was basically satisfactorily answered in post number 25 which included a fatwa from the "Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta'¹⁴⁷" (*al-lajna al-da'ima li-l-buhuth al-'ilmiyya wa-l-ifta'*), an official Saudi institution where Islamic scholars produce fatwas. According to the fatwa there are three different kinds of hair: hair which the Qur'an and the hadith explicitly forbid to be removed (e.g., eyebrows, beard), hair that needs to be trimmed or removed (e.g., pubic and armpit hair) and hair over which the sources keep silent (e.g., legs, arms). Up to this point in the discussion, no disagreement occurred since the sources offer clear-cut casuistics: Muhammad has explicitly said something about different kinds of hair and what should be done with it. The twofold link, from the contemporary situation to a situation described in the sources and from the practices as laid out in the sources back to the contemporary practices were relatively easy to follow and difficult to challenge.

It is from the contextual information given by Umm Suhayb, the scholar on TV who was cited saying that epilation is generally permissible, that a controversial discussion branched off. The following comment of a senior member of the forum, Abu Yahya, triggered a new debate about the permissibility of film, music and dance for women:

There are scholars who say that music, alcohol, gold for men are allowed and that women may sing and dance and even participate in films. There are scholars who say that a woman does not need a mahram¹⁴⁸ in order to travel [. . .] and I could go on like this for hours. What I want to say by this is that you always have to examine the statements with the Qur'an and the Sunna.

This statement summarizes in a nutshell the very essence of Islamic argumentation and what the role of a Muslim should be: while it is in general preferable to listen to scholars the

¹⁴⁶ Al-Manar, forum, 19 February – 22 May 2009: Epilating?

¹⁴⁷ Verbal noun of *ifta'*, to issue a legal opinion.

¹⁴⁸ A *mahram* is a relative with whom sexual relations are forbidden (*haram*).

individual believer, nevertheless, carries the responsibility to verify to the best of his or her knowledge that the scholars' statements are based on Qur'an and Sunna. While the initial question of this thread about hair removal found a relatively clear twofold link because hair-removal is explicitly mentioned in the sources and what should be done is explicated, the discussion on women dancing, singing and participating in movies, which started after Abu Yahya's comment, was more intricate. A female participant, Maryam, criticized Abu Yahya because the sources do in her eyes not explicitly forbid women to sing, dance or participate in films if they stick to the rules of decency explicated in the sources (e.g., covering parts of her body). In the course of this discussion she was attacked by the majority for stubbornly refusing to obey God and that, as one discussion participant phrased it, "what is obvious". Hadiths and verses from the Qur'an were cited; however, only one hadith transmitted by the hadith collector al-Bukhari (810-870) and attributed to the Prophet contained a direct reference to musical instruments (*ma'azif*):

From among my followers there will be some people who will consider illegal sexual intercourse, the wearing of silk, the drinking of alcoholic drinks and the use of musical instruments, as lawful.

This report from the Prophet does not clearly prohibit musical instruments in the sense of "musical instruments are in general forbidden" and it does not focus on musical instruments as such. In fact, the remainder of the hadith¹⁴⁹, which was not pasted into the posting, is concerned with disobedience. The text places musical instrument in the category of acts (illegal sexual intercourse and drinking of alcohol) that are forbidden in the Qur'an. One interpretation therefore could be that the use of instruments is forbidden just like those acts. In orthodox Sunni Islam, however, the permissibility of music has historically been a disputed topic as has been the authenticity of this hadith. Religious scholars in general agree that music inciting debauchery, indecency or sin is prohibited.¹⁵⁰ Some Sunni scholars understand the hadith as dispraising the acts and behaviour of a specific group of people who commit illegal sexual intercourse, drink alcohol and listen to music and wear silk. In their view, instruments are only under certain

¹⁴⁹ The full hadith as cited in al-Bukhari's collection (*Sahih al-Bukhari, kitab 74 (kitab al-ashriba), bab 6 (ma ja'a fiman yastahillu al-khamr wa-yusammih bi-ghayr ismihi)*, hadith 5649) is: "From among my followers there will be some people who will consider illegal sexual intercourse, the wearing of silk, the drinking of alcoholic drinks and the use of musical instruments, as lawful. And there will be some people who will stay near the side of a mountain and in the evening their shepherd will come to them with their sheep and ask them for something, but they will say to him, 'Return to us tomorrow.' Allah will destroy them during the night and will let the mountain fall on them, and He will transform the rest of them into monkeys and pigs and they will remain so till the Day of Resurrection."

¹⁵⁰ While Salafi scholars maintain that music instruments are in general forbidden, others maintain that the sources do not support this view. For a fatwa against the use of music instruments see Muhammad ibn Adam al-Kawthari (2005) and for a view in favour of music instruments the fatwa on *IslamOnline.net - Ask the Scholar* (IslamOnline 2004).

conditions prohibited and one of them is the accompaniment of drinking alcohol and fornication. These scholars underline that there are strong indications in form of authentic reports that the Prophet and the members of the venerated first three generations actually listened to music accompanied by instruments.

The rest of the evidence cited from the sources against women singing, dancing and participating in movies include statements on male and female chastity, piety, decency, on the avoidance of idle and useless talk, on not openly displaying beauty and, more general, on returning and surrendering to God. While the preceding hadith can be registered as literal evidence for the prohibition of musical instruments, there was no clear literal evidence of a general inadmissibility of singing, dancing and participating in movies—the latter surely being difficult, however, no analogy to something comparable from Arab-Bedouin society in the 7th century like poetry performances was mentioned. Nevertheless, almost all discussants believed and ferociously insisted that singing, dancing and participating in films are not allowed and that the sources they cited clearly forbid these practices. The intriguing question in this context is as to why forum posters who believe that every single action needs to be in accordance with the model as literally laid out in the sources in fact insist on something for which they cannot provide literal evidence from the sources which establishes a direct link between the sources and the current situation. Most discussants except for one were convinced that the cited hadiths and Qur’anic verses on chastity, piety and the surrender to God's will actually *said* that dancing, music and participating in movies are forbidden for women. The only concessions made on the basis of various hadiths was that the *daff* (frame drum) can be beaten on festive occasions and that women can sing among themselves.

This dissonance between cited evidence and belief is intriguing and is not uncommon in Islamic argumentation. The idea put forward by the Salafiyya is that Islamic practices and behavioural rules for all areas of life are derived deductively from the texts of the Qur’an and the Sunna. The opposite idea might, however, be at work here: Certain interpretive traditions—in our case, dancing, singing and participating in movies are forbidden—are transmitted as cognitive schemata from text-reader to text-reader and the essence of the hermeneutic activity is to establish the link to one or more proof-texts inductively and not to deduce the meaning from the text itself (see also Malley 2004, 73). The interpretation of the text is therefore not based on a strict deduction but on a chain of inferences so that the proposition “The Qur’an and the hadiths say that women are not allowed to sing, to dance and to participate in movies” can be upheld and even considered to be literally evident in the text.

Three proof-texts from the discussion may serve as a good demonstration how transitivity works in Islamic argumentation and how it relates to literalism. One poster quoted the following verse in which God addresses Satan in order to prove that singing is prohibited (Q 17:64):

And lead to destruction whomsoever of them thou canst with thy voice; and assault them with thy horsemen and thy foot, and share with them in their wealth and their children, and promise them! But Satan promises them naught, except delusion.

The transitivity established in this *dalil* relates singing to the seductive voice in the verse and the seductive voice is attributed by God to Satan. Therefore, singing is what Satan does in order to seduce mankind and make them go astray from the path of God.

Another poster constructs a *dalil* for the prohibition of singing, dancing and participating in movies from the following hadith attributed to the Prophet:¹⁵¹

There are two categories among the inhabitants of Hell whom I have not encountered. The first are people who carry whips like the tails of cows and beat the people with them. The second are women, clothed yet naked, drawn to licentiousness and enticing others to it, their heads like the swaying humps of camels – they will neither enter Paradise nor even smell its fragrance, though its fragrance can be found to a great distance.

In this *dalil*, the poster identifies singing, dancing and playing in movies with the naked and licentious women described in the hadith. The Prophet forecasts in the hadith that these women are among those who will not enter paradise. Therefore, women who sing, dance and participate in movies will be among the inhabitants of hell.

Salafi participants in my research were quite eager to trace the correct meaning of single words in order to understand a verse or a hadith correctly. The following quote from the Qur'an (Q 31:6), which was also used as *dalil* for the prohibition of singing, contains the term *lahw al-hadith* which in the eyes of Salafi Muslims clearly refers to music: "Some men there are who buy diverting talk [C.B.: *lahw al-hadith*] to lead astray from God without knowledge and to take it in mockery; for such there will be a humbling chastisement." Again, the majority of the discussion participants thought that this verse obviously and literally forbids singing. The effort to determine the meaning of single words in place of taking larger discourse segments or other influential factors into consideration for the interpretation of a text has been identified as one core element of literalism by anthropologists of Christianity (see Simon Coleman 2006; Crapanzano 2000). The "emphasis on the discrete lexeme" (Bielo 2008, 15) is characteristic of the endless discussion of words and their meaning among believers who claim to read the religious sources literally and is simultaneously part of establishing transitive relations between interpretive traditions and a segment from the proof-texts. As the examples above show, the

¹⁵¹ From the hadith collection of Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (d. 875): *Sahih Muslim*, kitab 37 (*kitab al-libas wa-l-zina*), bab 34 (*al-nisa' al-kasyat al-'ariyat al-ma'ilat al-mumilat*), hadith 2128.

established meaning of a specific word or term from Qur'an or Sunna presents the connecting link between an interpretive tradition and the texts.

Reconstructing dalil and transforming interpretive traditions

In the above example, the participants quoted texts from the religious sources from which they believed that they literally forbid singing, dancing and participating in movies and worked inductively by taking the interpretive tradition, that is, the prohibition of singing, dancing and participating in movies, as a point of departure. As a result, interpretive traditions therefore are quite often transmitted without the exegetical context which links it to the text although the demand for *dalil* suggest otherwise. This concerns especially those interpretive traditions which are taken for granted like prohibition of music and movies or the prohibition of the celebration of birthdays. These interpretive traditions circulate the Salafi web-sphere and seem to be self-evident matters for most Salafi Muslims and go without saying. However, as soon as somebody asks for *dalil* on these matters, the reconstruction and search for adequate proof-texts begins.

In the course of the hunt for proof-texts, believers sometimes come up with hadiths and Qur'anic verses that are usually not part of the line of argumentation of the venerated scholars. During the discussion about movies, singing and dancing the hadith on the women "clothed yet naked, drawn to licentiousness and enticing others to it, their heads like the swaying humps of camels" is usually quoted in works pertaining to prohibited and admissible ways of dressing and styles of hair but not in relation to singing, dancing and movies. This indicates that forum participants do not passively take over *dalil* as explicated in the works of the religious scholars but at times add new proof-texts.

In other cases, Salafi discussants question evidence conventionally linked to an interpretive tradition and thereby doubt the link to the text which, in extension, nullifies in their eyes the interpretation. In the following discussion¹⁵², the initial poster, Bint Rashida, expresses her doubts concerning a fatwa from the popular and venerated scholar Ibn al-'Uthaymin:

I have a lot of doubts about the following fatwa which is translated on "Islam-qa". I would like to ask non-Muslims to not react, please. I am not in the mood for discussions, I am only asking for clarification. I do not want more. I am not a big fan of posing this sort of questions on a public forum but since I do not know anybody with knowledge this is the only way.

What is the reason why divorce is in the husband's hands?

What the ruling on one who divorces his wife for no reason?

Praise be to Allah.

¹⁵² UnderstandIslam, forum, 20 November 2008: Searching clarification about a fatwa from Ibn al-'Uthaymin on divorce.

The reason why divorce is in the man's hand is justice, because the husband is the one in whose hand is the marriage contract, so he is the one in whose hand is the dissolution of this contract [C.B.: emphasis in the original]. And because the husband is in charge of the woman, as Allah says (interpretation of the meaning): "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other" [Q 4:34]. As he is in charge, then the matter is in his hands. This is what is implied by common sense. And because the man is more perfect in reason than the woman, and more far-sighted, so you do not see him choosing to divorce unless he sees that there is no alternative.[. . .]

Sheikh Muhammad ibn al-'Uthaymin (may Allah have mercy on him).
Fatawa 'Ulama' al-Balad al-Haram (p. 299, 300)

Bint Rashida has underlined the passage that poses most problems and added in succeeding postings that she does not understand why divorce is the prerogative of the husband. The evidence provided in the fatwa (Q 4:34) does not say anything about divorce. Neither does the argumentation that it is common sense and that men are more perfect in reason and more far-sighted than women appeal to her. Upon request she explicates her doubts:

The underlined part, this is what I question the most. It is the first time that I read or hear that divorce is the right of men. As far as I know, there are examples from the hadith that women sought divorce from their husbands with the Prophet (salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam). I wonder therefore what this refers to and on what exactly it is based. And further, I do not understand that the marriage contract (obviously?) is in the hands of the men. The marriage contract is signed by both man and woman. Both of them give their agreement, don't they? Where then comes this from all of the sudden? I do not understand from where they take these arguments, I find also the two following arguments quite puzzling.

Al-Wahabbiyya joins her and explains that she has often read and heard of the right of the men to divorce but that she has never come across good evidence. She further sketches out what this would mean for women:

One of the practical problems is that a man treats his wife in an uncivilized manner (for instance, physical and mental abuse) and does not want to divorce although they live in discord with each other. According to this fatwa, the woman would not have a leg to stand on.

Amina copy-pastes excerpts from another fatwa from Ibn al-'Uthaymin in which he differentiates between *khul'*, that is, the possibility of a woman to get a divorce against payment¹⁵³, and *talaq* (divorce)

Khul': definition and how it is done. [C.B.: link to fatwa site "Islam Q&A"]

Quote:

With regard to the way in which it is done, the husband should take his payment or they should agree upon it, then he should say to her "*faraqtuki*" (I separate from you) or "*khala'tuki*" (I let you go), or other such words.

Talaq (i.e., divorce) is the right of the husband, and does not take place unless it is done by him, because the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "*Talaq* is the right of the one who seizes the leg (i.e., consummates the marriage)" i.e., the husband.

¹⁵³ The payment is usually the entire or part of the *mahr* (dowry) which the groom gives to the bride and is negotiated by both sides in the marriage contract.

(Narrated by Ibn Majah, 2081; classed as hasan by al-Albani in *Irwa' al-Ghalil*, 2041).

Al-Wahabbiyya agrees to the fatwa and says that she has heard of it. Subsequently, she posts another hadith which she has found while searching for evidence from the sources:

But I have found another hadith:

Also, a woman came to the Prophet Muhammad seeking the dissolution of her marriage, she told the Prophet that she did not have any complaints against her husband's character or manners. Her only problem was that she honestly did not like him to the extent of not being able to live with him any longer. The Prophet asked her: "Would you give him his garden (the marriage gift he had given her) back?" she said: "Yes". The Prophet then instructed the man to take back his garden and accept the dissolution of the marriage (Bukhari).

According to all three female posters, this last hadith proves that it is the right of a woman to ask for divorce if she has good reason to do so and if she is willing to pay back the *mahr*. In this case, it is not simply the choice of the husband to accept her request or not any more. Rather, he must be ordered by an Islamic court to divorce. Finally, they come to the conclusion that the wording of the fatwa copy-pasted by Amina—"then he should say to her 'faraqtuki' (I separate from you) or 'khala'tuki' (I let you go), or other such words"—is too weak since the husband should be ordered to divorce under these circumstances and not only be recommended to do so.

During their deliberation the three posters reject to accept the *dalil* employed by one of the venerated masters of religious knowledge, Muhammad ibn al-'Uthaymin, as well as by other scholars who argue in favour of the prerogative of the husband in this matter. Further, they construct their own *dalil* which does not entirely do away with the interpretive tradition in question since he still has to utter the final words "I let you go". However, in their understanding they have a right to these words and are not dependent on the discretion of their husband.

The links between text and situations are thus dynamic and constantly negotiated although the forum posters and chat room participants are usually not aware that they are engaging in direct interpretive work. In this way, each generation mobilizes, reinvigorates and reconstructs interpretative traditions partly anew and, as the last example shows, can even transform beliefs to some degrees.¹⁵⁴

Containing the dangers of human reasoning: Constructing vs. verifying dalil

As outlined in the introduction, many researchers categorize the Salafiyya into three broad ideal types: quietists or purists, politicians and jihadis. However, when handling these categories too

¹⁵⁴ For a detailed analysis of the reconstruction and transformation of interpretive traditions among Evangelicals see Malley (2004, 73–126)

rigorously as “real types” instead of “ideal types”, they can blind researchers vis-à-vis the discovery of other possible differences (or similarities) among Salafi factions in their own research data. One of such a dividing line that runs across the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands is the understanding of the role of the lay believer in hermeneutic-interpretive practices. The preceding chapter has for the most part highlighted the active role of believers in re-invigorating the interpretive traditions of their religion. There are, however, Salafi groups and networks who view the construction of *dalil* by lay believers critical.

They underline that those who engage in Islamic argumentation carry an immense responsibility on their shoulders without possessing adequate knowledge and, ultimately, they might be responsible for unwittingly spreading false knowledge and, at worst, introduce innovations to Islam. Muslims following the Salafiyya pay in general heed to clarify that the pure and perfect model of Islam come from God and his Prophet Muhammad while innovations are the result of human opinions. Also, lay believers who actually practice Islamic argumentation admit that every human effort to understand the sources is error-prone. German and Dutch Salafi Muslims habitually cite the phrase “If it is correct, it is from God; and if it is wrong is from me and Satan”¹⁵⁵ in varying wordings at the end of a *dalil* and thereby indicate that, ultimately, all they do is to use their knowledge of Islam with the best intentions but that they are fallible as human beings.

The immense responsibility inherent in Islamic argumentation and the fear of committing mistakes lead some Salafi Muslims to the point to abstain from the active production of *dalil*. Munir who in his free time gives Islamic lessons to young children in a middle-size town in Germany explains this responsibility in the following way:¹⁵⁶

Munir: I always try to understand something as good as possible. Even if I think I got it right I still ask. In order to be sure.

C.B.: You are actually quite careful.

Munir: Yes. Well if I say something wrong and I give a wrong judgement and he practices this . . . Well, I think, I usually imagine a messy situation. That means that I explain a religious matter in a wrong way, so I imagine, and this person learns this and then he teaches this to his children and it remains in his family.

C.B.: And in this case, you would be responsible? Even if you had good intentions?

Munir: Yes, nobody is allowed to talk about religion without knowledge.

C.B.: Are you afraid of this?

Munir: Yes, that is a big thing. I cannot just say the Prophet . . .

C.B.: No, I get it.

¹⁵⁵ This phrase is attributed in a hadith to the companion Ibn Mas‘ud. In this hadith he is questioned about the rights to inheritance of a woman who married without a fixed dowry. He clarified that he could only give his own opinion and said the cited phrase at the end of his ruling. His ruling was then confirmed by the Prophet who had given the same ruling on a different occasion before. This hadith can be found in the collection of Abu Dawud: *Sunan Abi Dawud, kitab 12 (kitab al-nikah), bab 32 (fiman tazawajja wa-lam yusammi sadaqan hatta mata), hadith 2116.*

¹⁵⁶ Interview taken on 1 April 2010 in Darmstadt, Germany.

Munir: This is a revelation. I cannot just open the Qur'an, read a verse and say it means this and that. This is not possible. I cannot take a verse out of its context. I do not know when the verse was revealed, for which reason, what is meant by it. This is why you always have to read. I have for instance learned from an imam for three weeks the explanation of the surat al-fatiha. What it means. Only surat al-fatiha, what is meant by it.

Although Salafi Muslims claim that many things, especially the fundamentals of the faith like *tawhid*, are unmistakable and cannot be interpreted differently from the sources many hesitate to provide an opinion on a question without referencing scholars and their knowledge. Munir cautiously takes care that he does not spread “wrong” knowledge by checking with scholarly works and by taking lessons from a local imam himself. Abulhussain likewise underlines the dangers inherent in engaging in hermeneutic-interpretive practices as a lay believer.¹⁵⁷

C.B.: And if I as a normal average Muslim take the Qur'an or hadiths, how may I interpret them? How may I read them?
Abulhussain: Well, if you have the knowledge and you are able to interpret the Qur'an according to the rules of Islam, go ahead. You do it and you will stand in front of Allah subhanahu wa-ta'ala and then you will have to justify yourself if you have made a mistake.

In his answer, Abulhussain paints a quite daunting image: trying to justify in front of God the interpretive mistakes one has committed on Judgement Day. A way to avoid this miserable situation is to consult people with the appropriate knowledge instead of constructing *dalil* more or less autonomously by selecting appropriate proof-texts from Qur'an and Sunna.

This stance restricts the active role of believers in hermeneutic-interpretive practices and encourages them to follow the lead of the “people of knowledge” (*ahl al-'ilm*). One Dutch-speaking forum changed its policy accordingly in begin 2010 when the administration posted the following advice to its members:¹⁵⁸

Bi-sm Allah al-rahman al-rahim
Al-salam 'alaykum wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu
Al-Nur Team advises her members in particular and the Muslims in general to return with all the questions at all times to the 'ulama' (the scholars).
Allah most high says after all in the Qur'an:
Quote:
“Question the People of the Knowledge, if you do not know”¹⁵⁹
Our team does its very best in order to give members of this forum the opportunity to return with their questions to the scholars of this age. This is the reason why we have set up a question form under the title “Ask the scholars” (see above).
Our advice to the brothers and sisters is therefore also not to post their questions on the

¹⁵⁷ Interview taken on 8 February 2010 in Leipzig, Germany.

¹⁵⁸ Al-Nur, forum, 7 March 2010: The importance of returning to the scholars!

¹⁵⁹ Q 21:7. The Arabic original uses the term *ahl al-dhikr*, the “people of remembrance” (of the revelation), instead of “people of knowledge”.

forum so that there is no possibility granted to other members to answer the questions. We are convinced that constantly returning to the scholars is a characteristic of the *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama'a* and this is how we ought to practice our religion.

Do you have a question? Then fill in the form!

May Allah grant you and us success!

Al-Nur Team

There is hardly any room in the vision of the forum administration for the collective deliberation of believers over religious questions as was practised in the preceding examples since everything should be relegated to the scholars. Islamic argumentation does not take place any more on this forum since 2010. The forum moderators and administrators call scholars in Saudi-Arabia in order to pose the questions handed in via in the question forms. They try to preserve an audio recording from the consultation. Alternatively, they ask Salafi Muslims studying in Saudi-Arabia to consult a local scholar on a specific question because they entertain the idea that the true scholars who transmit authentic knowledge are to be found in Saudi-Arabia. The answers and the respective audio fragments are then posted on the forum for everybody's benefit.

In their view, they are not practising *taqlid* in the sense of following one of the four Sunni schools of law (*madhhab*) without questioning them. Rather, they assess their knowledge realistically and revert with their questions to the scholars who are known for their authentic knowledge irrespective of their *madhhab*. Instead of constructing and searching for *dalil* themselves they see their role rather in the verification of *dalil* provided by the scholars. Ideally, that is, if they have the time and the facilities, they read the fatwas carefully in order to make sure that the rulings are based on references to Qur'an and Sunna and that, in the case of several possible references, the proof-texts are weighed against each other. Furthermore, if different opinions on a question circulate with even strong evidence, it is up to the individual believer to make a choice. The role of the lay believers is therefore not reduced to complete passivity as mere receivers and followers of rulings. Their scope of activity ranges from actively verifying the *dalil* of a scholar to choosing among different scholars and scholarly opinions to the best of one's knowledge.

This attitude towards hermeneutic-interpretive practices can be described as a critical consumerist attitude: Interpretations of the proof-texts are consumed while the choice for a specific interpretation is critically scrutinized regarding the soundness of the evidence provided and the qualifications of the interpreter. This ideal type, the critical consumer of scholarly knowledge, contrasts with the the active producer of *dalil*. Both ideal types of Salafi knowledge

production among lay believers are not an exact description of the reality but rather mark the two outer ends of a range of possible hermetic-interpretive practices among Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands.

Conclusion

Gaining knowledge is for Muslims following the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands one of the most important occupations teleologically geared towards uncovering the perfect model of a Muslim life from God's word and the sources about the life of the Prophet and his community. Knowledge is conceptualized as the Truth contained in Qur'an and authentic hadiths (Sunna) and endowed with universal validity in both socio-moral and scientific matters. The strict empiricist understanding of knowledge or the Truth among the Salafiyya relegates Islam to the realm of empirical realism and excludes metaphysical inquiry into the sources. Their quest for Islamic knowledge is depicted as an innate human propensity because every human being possesses *fitra*, the natural inclination towards God, at birth and is only in the course of his or her upbringing diverted from the true path.

Acquiring knowledge is done through Islamic argumentation of which the construction of *dalil* is the core element. When constructing *dalil*, Salafi Muslims draw a twofold link from contemporary life to the religious sources and from the religious sources back to present-day life situations while they claim to read the sources literally. Islamic argumentation in chat rooms and discussion forums is an intensive collaborative effort whereby the form of sociability ranges from serious and strict to warm and easy-going. The differences that occur in Islamic argumentation in discussion forums and the different chat room genres can partly be attributed to the different communicative properties afforded by computer-mediated environments. The extent to which Salafi Muslims actively participate in Islamic argumentation in chat rooms and discussion forums ranges typically from, on the one hand, those who set out to look for suitable proof-texts and to establish the link between them and contemporary life themselves and, on the other hand, those who relegate the construction of *dalil* to the scholars and restrict themselves to the verification of scholarly argumentation and to selecting between different scholarly opinions.

Contextual knowledge is only employed as long as it is knowledge about the religious sources themselves, that is, the reasons of revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*), the time of revelation and knowledge of the other revelatory texts. "Literal reading" is thus construed as a process untainted by culture, experience or individual disposition. However, we can better grasp the hermeneutic ideology of the Salafiyya as "transitive literalism" through which interpretive traditions are transmitted from one generation to the next and from one network to the other relatively independent of proof-texts. The most important hermeneutic-interpretive activity is then to attribute the interpretive tradition to a proof-text and to establish a—if not literal then

well transitive—relation between the two. This work of attribution re-invigorates interpretive traditions and opens simultaneously a leeway for their transformation, however subtle and marginal it may turn out to be.

Chapter 4

Becoming authentic Muslims: Narrative-performative practices and the creation of Salafi subjectivities

In the preceding chapter I have analysed how Salafi Muslims derive Islamic knowledge from the sources by searching, producing or verifying *dalil* which is the key element of Islamic argumentation linking contemporary life situations and questions to the religious sources. However, hermeneutic-interpretive practices are only one dimension of knowledge practices that serve to unearth the model of the Prophet and his early community and infuse it into the lives of contemporary Muslims. Knowledge practices additionally involve a narrative and performative dimension through which “social actors come to know and inhabit the world” (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell 2008, 27). In this sense, the Salafiyya can also be regarded as fostering specific narratives and performances “through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies and making sense [...]” (Meyer 2009, 7). This extension of knowledge practices beyond a strictly cognitive and hermeneutic-interpretive dimension involves a strong performative notion since performances have the power of directing what we do by inducing feelings about and meanings to specific acts. As we will see, young Muslims do not only learn about the perfect model in chat rooms and discussion forums but also rehearse and perform the model in these environments.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, hermeneutic-interpretive and performative-narrative practices are not mutually exclusive categories but describe two different dimensions of practices that involve learning or the creation of knowledge in its broadest sense. In extension, this means that a specific practice can display both dimensions as I will show later in this chapter. The hermeneutic-interpretive dimension relates to the cognitive categories and interpretations of how a good Muslim according to the Qur’an and the Sunna should be. The narrative-performative dimension emphasizes the specific subjective effects of the incorporation of the ideal model into a believer’s concept of her- or himself through training (Luhmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted 2010, 67). Before we move to the details of narrative-performative practices of the Salafiyya in chat rooms and discussion forums the following section will clarify some core aspects that are central to the understanding of narrative-performative practices.

The performance of narratives

As their name already suggests, the practices I will be dealing with in this chapter involve narratives as one central element. Narratives string together single discourses, events and symbols in a story in order to generate meaning and, simultaneously, to overcome the unpleasant feeling of ambiguity and contradiction we are faced with in everyday life. Narratives are in general presented as a universal mode of communication and the constitution of sense (H. White 1984, 1). While content, styles and mediating channels may vary across different socio-cultural environments, the tendency to narrate or to tell stories is inherent to humanity. They are an integral part of life because “social life is in itself *storied*” (Somers 1994, 613–614).

Whenever narratives become part of a specific practice—i.e., whenever they are performed—they are interwoven with specific styles and aesthetics which are the carriers of stories and, at the same time, integral part of them. As Van de Port aptly writes with reference to television and videos, styles have the strange power of transforming seeing into believing by coordinating “all the channels through which meaning is communicated in such a way that unity is achieved at all levels of experience between what is being said and how it is being said” (Van de Port 2006, 455). Styles thus comprise the aesthetic dimension of narratives in that they complement the narration into a sense-able performance that does not only impress its audience on a cognitive level but also via the senses. Both narratives and styles are therefore essential parts of narrative-performative practices. Before turning to this aesthetic dimension, I will discuss in the following the different elements that compose a narrative and their effect on the individual and society.

Narratives: Relating stories of the past to contemporary life

Narratives turn events into episodes of a storyline. In opposition to simple categorizations, which produce categories not related to each other, narratives need a context of (life-)episodes and sequencing (Somers 1994, 617). Furthermore, in contrast to a sequential account of events, a narrative is a teleological account and produces as such an explanation to events, behaviour and actions that are part of the story from the perspective of the storyteller (White 1984, 1–2n2). Hence, emplotment does not only merely furnish the inner structure or form of a story but essentially produces meaning exactly through imposing a structure on a given set of events. As White argues,

[t]he production of meaning, in this case, can be regarded as a performance, because any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of

being told as any number of different kinds of stories. Since no given set or sequence of real events is *intrinsically* “tragic,” “comic,” or “farcial,” but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story-type on the events, it is the choice of the story-type and its imposition upon the events which endow them with meaning. (H. White 1984, 20)

Without emplotment, a narrative would be a set of events in form of a chronicle or of a symbol standing for one event like the cross stands as a symbol for the crucifixion of Jesus. However, the meaning of the crucifixion reveals itself in the whole story of the life of Jesus, emplotted and structured in a sequence of events climaxing with the betrayal of Judas, the crucifixion, the despair of the disciples and, finally, the resurrection. However, the same events from the life of Jesus can be given an entirely different meaning if a different plot structure is imposed as, for instance, in Monty Python’s film and comical adaptation of the story of the crucifixion *The Life of Brian*.

Narratives are therefore not neutral and unbiased accounts of events. Narrators infuse knowingly or not their own sense of interpretation into a story by, for example, changing sequencing and emplotment. In the process of narrating (narrativisation) socio-structural factors, dispositions as well as intentions of the storyteller and cultural traditions are woven into the story and (re-)structure a narrative. The dynamic quality of narratives keeps their script open to changes added and built in by the narrator, however subtle they may be. Narratives are thus “structuring as well as structured structures” (Viehöver 2001, 179). They are structuring because they provide the audience with meaning, central categories and emotions and they are at the same time structured because the narrator structures them in the process of narrativisation. This explains the double function of narratives as “moments of reproduction (integration, distinction and mobilisation) as well as moments of transformation and critique” (Viehöver 2001, 179). The structuring quality of narratives is not limited to knowledge about past events which they present in a specific interpretive light. They furthermore moralise reality (Viehöver 2001, 182) by infusing themselves into the behavioural orientations of people. Narratives generate a specific normativity which helps people to orient themselves in a world of overwhelming possibilities of actions. In this sense, they work hand in hand with the interpretive protocols that provide the guidelines of appropriate moral conduct in the devotional spaces of chat rooms and discussion forums (see Chapter 2, p. 87ff.).

In addition to the individual cultural and social dispositions of the narrator, narratives are shaped by the broader socio-political field in which they are embedded. Somers uses in this context the term “relational setting” which she defines as “a pattern of relationships among institutions, public narratives, and social practices. As such it is a relational matrix, a social

network. Identity-formation takes shape within these relational settings of contested but patterned relations among narratives, people, and institutions.” (Somers 1994, 626). To recount Somers’ line of argument, the identity of an individual is fundamentally shaped by his or her place in the social network constituted by patterned relations in which narratives, institutions and people are embedded. The distribution of power defines to a large extent which kinds of narratives will dominate and circulate within a given social network or field. The extent and nature of any given repertoire of narratives available for appropriation is historically and culturally specific; the particular plots that give meanings to those narratives cannot be determined in advance. Thus, actors dispose of a socio-culturally limited repertoire of stories with which they become familiar in the course of their life (Somers 1994, 629–630)

Narratives fulfil diverse functions within the broader purpose of meaning-making. Ontological narratives arrange life, specify social belonging and localise the individual. They tell us who we are and help us to learn and know what we should do. Public narratives are linked to the practices of specific collective actors (e.g., family, church, governments, social movements, companies) and are mostly topic-specific. Their arena is the public sphere where they compete with each other. Meta-narratives carry grand stories, origin myths or cosmologies as found for instance in ideologies, religions or cultural traditions of society. The Enlightenment or modernization paradigms exemplify such meta-narratives which circulate in many different settings. And finally, conceptual narratives refer to concepts and analytic models constructed and used by, among others, scientists (Viehöver 2001, 183–184).

Ontological narratives which interact with subjectivities and communal identities and meta-narratives are one important element of the construction of Salafi communities and subjectivities within chat rooms and forums. In addition, the process of narrativisation, of (re)telling the story, in chat rooms and discussion forums strengthens collective ties and the perception that everybody is working together on something better and more desirable or, to put in Salafi terminology, everybody works together to follow the true path of the Prophet Muhammad and the *salaf al-salih*.

Most narratives circulating in Salafi chat rooms and discussion forums are based on stories, biographies, anecdotes and hadiths of the Prophet, his companions and the succeeding generations that stayed on the “true path”. The hadiths of the strangers (*al-ghuraba*) is a prime example of an ontological narrative that forms and moulds the identity of Salafi Muslims today. Many different audio-visual and textual expressions of his narrative have been produced by connecting it to different geo-political events or to local contexts. They all provide an

interpretation of the reality as perceived by many Muslims and knit a powerful story of the marginalized people suffering from injustice but continuing firmly on their path against all odds. The two hadiths ascribed to the Prophet on which the *ghuraba'* narrative is based depict the true Muslim as a travelling stranger in this world who resigns to destiny. The believers are solaced in their isolation from fellow humans—an isolation chosen in order to follow God's righteous path which pushes them to the margin of the godless society—with the glad tidings that Islam began as something strange and will end as something strange.¹⁶⁰ This narrative is often visually underpinned with graphic material from conflicts and wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, ex-Yugoslavia, Chechnya or the Palestinian Territories or evoke the desolate state of humiliated Muslims in the non-Muslim West. It tells simultaneously the story of the marginalization of upright Muslims, the repression they face, their resoluteness and their superiority as people continuing uncompromisingly on the path of the *salaf al-salih*. The sombre, wailing and evocative voices of some *anashid* videos using this narrative convey a sense of urgency with regard to the state of the umma straying away from the path of Truth while only a small minority continues to submit entirely to God.¹⁶¹

Narratives help Salafi Muslims to internalise the knowledge unearthed from the religious sources but do not only serve as mere representations of a situation. The notion of the *ghuraba'*, for instance, is not only understood as a metaphor of the current situation many Muslims identify with. To belong to the *ghuraba'* is a state of being and of inhabiting the world and a way of describing the course of life of a true Muslim with a specific plot at the end of which the strangers will be victorious, that is, recognised by God as the only true believers. The term *ghuraba'* and its derivatives as well as the two corresponding hadiths are employed in avatars, nicknames and signatures which are used by users in chat rooms and online forums to personalize their identity. Furthermore, the *ghuraba'* are constantly evoked in interaction. Consider the following excerpt from a discussion thread entitled “Persecuted by the German state, security service, kuffar”¹⁶² which contains a statement from the thread opener, ‘Abd al-Rahman, after having related several instances of harassment, surveillance measures implemented by the German Ministry of Interior, interrogations and rude behaviour towards him: “Unbelievable those kuffar [C.B.: unbelievers]

¹⁶⁰ From the hadith collector Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (d. 875): “Islam initiated as something strange, and it would revert to its (old position) of being strange. So glad tidings for the stranger!” *Sahih Muslim, kitab 1 (kitab al-iman), bab 65 (bayan anna al-islam bada'a ghariban etc.)*, hadith 232. From the hadith collector al-Bukhari: “Abdallah ibn ‘Umar said, Allah’s Apostle took hold of my shoulder and said: Be in this world as if you were a stranger or a traveler.” *Sahih al-Bukhari, kitab 81 (kitab al-riqaq), bab 3 (qawl al-nabi salla llah ‘alayhi wa-sallam: kun fi l-dunya ka-annaka gharibun etc.)*, hadith 425.

¹⁶¹ Examples can be found by typing “*ghuraba'*” in the search field of search engines and video-sharing websites.

¹⁶² Al-Sunna, forum, 24 September 2009: Persecuted by the German state, security service, kuffar.

but, well, we should be glad that we belong to the strangers and say al-hamd li-llah [C.B.: praise be to God]”.

‘Abd al-Rahman refers to the narrative of the *ghuraba*’ and places himself in their tradition suffering from the injustice he has to endure due to his uncompromising attitude in relation to the Truth. Ensuing reactions, altogether ten postings, caution him to be careful and not to be naive since “they are everywhere”. At the same time the discussants encourage him to stay on the true path and not let “them” make him go astray. Also, it is made clear that nothing else should be expected from the *kuffar*. Ramla writes:

It is known that these people act like this and even more. Yet, akhi [C.B.: my brother], one thing you should know and always remember, they can only harm you if Allah let’s them and on the basis of what has been written for you [C.B.: destined for you].

We see in this short example, that the discussants perform as *ghuraba*’, as people alienated from the society of unbelievers (*kuffar*) they live in. This feeling of alienation comes close to what Protestants mean when saying “being in the world but not of the world”¹⁶³ (De Koning 2011, 187). It describes the fine line between, on the one hand, being actively and properly involved in this world, which means to live in this world according to the will of God and following the model of the Prophet and, on the other hand, making sure that one does not fall prey to the corruption and seduction of this world. The latter requires believers to remain pure and detached from the evil attached to a worldly life. This performance is not restricted to offline spaces, e.g., street, workplace or school, but extends to computer-mediated environments. The choice of words, the framing of events, the understanding of one’s own life and the interpretation of the behaviour of others are all related to the state of the *ghuraba*’, in which, in fact, a good Muslim should live.

Salafi Muslims like to circulate narratives based on the stories about the lives of the Prophet, his companions and other pious Muslims, preferably scholars. Chat rooms and forum participants regard them in general as sources of inspiration and as a practical guide giving meaning to the abstract texts of the Qur’an and doctrines. For Umm Fatima, these stories have a very practical and at times reassuring function. Upon my question what these stories mean to her she answered:¹⁶⁴

A source of inspiration. Also a source that helps you not to not give up so easily when things become more difficult, you know? You take these things with you into daily life, when you go out and be busy, for example with your prayer, in your everyday activities. They very often contain advice which you just take and which makes it easier for you to

¹⁶³ This phrase is based on several verses from the Bible (see John 15:19, John 17:14, James 1:27, 1 John 2:15 and James 4:4) which tell believers not to be of the world and that by loving the “things in the world” (1 John 1:27) one will lose the love of God.

¹⁶⁴ Interview taken on 5 June 2009 in The Hague.

practice. I mean, then I know that they [C.B.: the early community around the Prophet] did it this way and that they also found it difficult at times. In this makes it a bit . . . Sometimes, if books are your only source, it can be quite difficult and hard to practice [C.B.: the religion]. But when you read and hear how the *sahaba* [C.B.: companions of the Prophet] did it or how the people surrounding the Prophet put it [C.B.: the revelation] into practice you can give an interpretation to it and it becomes easier for you because you know you are not the only one who is doing it that way.

Online performances deeply rooted in these narratives of the Prophet, the *salaf al-salih* and other righteous Muslims induce feelings with reference to certain issues. Knowing that she walks and acts in the tradition of these pious Muslims reassures Umm Fatima and gives her the strenght to go on.

Making the abstract “real”: Aesthetics and styles

The preceding example of the *ghuraba'* anticipates the discussion in this section by providing an illustration of how narratives are performed. Styles and their inherent aesthetic dimension turn narratives into narrative-performative practices thereby rendering narratives sensible and experience-able. Interlocutors described to me the overwhelming feeling making their body shiver in the face of the beauty of the Arabic language or of the message when listening to Qur'anic recitations or *anashid*. Touched by the mercy and kindness of God they cry and smile at the same time. I was able to observe similar reactions in the context of lectures in mosques or elsewhere where the *da'iya* (preacher, a person calling to Islam) evokes the exemplary and perfect life of the Prophet. Through these performances narratives adopt a specific style or aesthetic dimension which elicit sensual experiences.

For religions and other meaning-making systems that refer to the abstract or the transcendental it is important to make their claims and stories real or believable. God, for instance, must be experience-able for the believer and become part of everyday reality if He is not to remain a hypothetical possibility. Narrative-performative practices like rituals addressing the sensory of a community of believers aim to induce the reality of God. The community is not built on the abstract notion of God but is felt and experienced through practices as Meyer explains:

Indeed, in order to [. . .] be experienced as real, imaginations are required to become tangible outside the realm of the mind, by creating a social environment that materializes through the structuring of space, architecture, ritual performance, and by inducing bodily sensations . . . In brief, in order to become experienced as real, imagined communities need to materialize in the concrete lived environment and felt in the bones. (Meyer 2009, 5)

In a similar vein, de Certeau argues that signifying practices are part of narratives authorising specific modes of perception. In his ethnographic discussion of walking in the city as

a social practice, he examines walking as a signifying practice or, in his own words, as “perambulatory rhetorics” following the lines of a narrative or a myth¹⁶⁵ (De Certeau 2000, 108–110). He underlines different functions of perambulatory rhetorics from which two are of interest here: the believable and the memorable. The believable is that which “authorizes (or makes possible and believable) spatial appropriations” while the memorable is that “which is repeated (or remembered) of a silent and convoluted memory” (De Certeau 2000, 112). He thereby identifies important functions of narrative-performative practices in general. They teach what to perceive of the environment as true and how to perceive it (the believable or possible) and how to inhabit these environments according to “tradition” (the memorable). In this sense, narrative-performative practices turn abstract notions, stories or ideas into something real, i.e., believable and experience-able, and facilitate their appropriation.

Narrative-performative practises which are collectively shared can further strengthen the communal ties between the believers by providing a shared pool of signifying tools to draw from. In this context Meyer introduces the notion of sensational forms which describe relatively fixed and authorized modes of organizing access to the transcendental (Meyer 2006). Sensational forms are shared among believers and create thereby links among themselves and with God as, for instance, the communal prayer. This notion of sensational forms highlights an important aspect of narrative-performative practices: a community is very much impacted by the shared avenues via which the senses are tuned, the bodies moulded and experiences induced via narrative-performative practices such as rituals or listening practices as in the context of Qur’anic recitations.

Styles are essential to induce experience and sensations into the abstract notions of God and the divine. Maffesoli describes styles as a “forming form” (Maffesoli 1996, 5). A style is a form that gives people a distinctive and recognisable appearance and therefore identity. Especially sociology and symbolic anthropology emphasise style as a form by understanding it as signs and symbols that belong to a social sub-group. As such, style is voiced in fashion, mannerism or language and mostly ascribed to subcultures (for the relation between style and subculture see Hebdige 1979). Furthermore, styles are “forming” in that they shape and modulate subjectivities with the help of techniques of the self so that the individual may become part of community. The techniques of the self included in styles form and shape a person up to the point that a certain aesthetic becomes a natural part of the individual. In her article on the role of the prayer among

¹⁶⁵ Myths are a sub-category of narratives. Myths are told as true, fact-based stories and involve the doings of God, Gods, ancestors or other supra-natural beings. They disclose the manifest reality of the workings of the supra-natural (on myth as religious language see Eller 2007, 82–108).

the women of the mosque movement in Cairo Mahmood shows how different bodily techniques hone the women into the, according to their understanding of Islam, right habitus of praying and a pious life (Mahmood 2001). Meyer (2006, 24-25) contends that styles are at the core of religious aesthetics because they bring about a desired subjectivity and are, if widely shared, a strong link among different members of one community.

However, styles and narratives have to form a unity when combined in narrative performative practices in order to be convincing and believable. As Van de Port stated in the quote in the beginning of this sub-chapter, styles comprise all the channels through which meaning is communicated. They aim at achieving unity between what is being said and how it is being said (Van de Port 2006, 455). The unity between styles and the meaning they carry, if achieved, makes people feel comfortable within a certain discourse or narrative. For instance, many lecturers in chat rooms and contributors to forums command a style of narrating with the help of the written or spoken word that people identify with the style of the Prophetic *da'wa* or *adab al-da'wa* which I have introduced in Chapter 2 (see p. 88ff.).

Pulling the strings of this discussion together, narrative-performative practices are rooted in popular narratives mainly about the early Muslim community around the Prophet Muhammad and later pious and outstanding Muslims. These narratives are incorporated into practices when they are appropriated and performed as the example of the *ghuraba'* suggests. Styles deliver the core aesthetic dimension to the performance of narratives because they turn the narrative into a visceral perception and render it sensible, experienceable and believable. Most Muslims following the Salafiyya would insist that there is nothing sensational or aesthetic about the Salafiyya and their religious practices since their approach to the world emphasizes logic—though within the boundaries of their understanding of knowledge (see Chapter 3, p. 115ff.)—and the production of knowledge which proponents of the Salafiyya understand as an exact science of the sources. However, upon a closer look, an aesthetic world reveals itself that is built upon narrative elements and communicated with the help of styles.

In the following sub-chapter, I turn to the Salafi performance of religious rituals in chat rooms and discussion forums. Religious rituals are prime instances of narrative-performative practices in that they involve patterned collective acts following a specific script and, secondly, in that they recall specific narratives bestowing meaning beyond the confines of the ritual itself. Also, I look at the ritualisation of practices in computer-mediated environment. Some of the religious practices we have encountered in the preceding chapters like Islamic argumentation develop specific patterns and sensational forms in forums and chat rooms through which they

are increasingly ritualised. The second sub-chapter analyses the performance of difference through which Salafi Muslims correct wrong practice and dissociate from heresy, unbelief, sin and the bearers thereof. They do so by putting *hisba* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, which we have encountered in Chapter 2 (see p. 102ff.), into practice. The last sub-chapter focuses on the ways by which devotional practices of everyday life are transferred to forums and chat rooms or come into being and evolve in these environments as practices natively embedded in digital technologies. Circulating Islamic material is a prime example of “vernacular *da'wa*” while the consumption of this material is part of the cultivation of right dispositions and beliefs.

Religious rituals in computer-mediated environments

Religious rituals are a sub-set and, simultaneously, a typical representation of narrative-performative practices. In the tradition of practice theory, I approach rituals as constructed in the sense that they are constantly reproduced in practices involving actors, their disposition, socio-cultural experiences, available resources and relevant artefacts. This means that rituals are not pre-existing fixed sets of acts ordained by a transcendental being and outlined by religious experts but practices that are repeatedly reproduced and constructed within the margins of what are considered to be essential parts of specific rituals. Rituals differ from other narrative-performative practices in that ritual communication is inherently phatic, that is, it is structured by formulaic conventions (Jacobs 2007, 1111). Furthermore, rituals involve an entry into specially designated zones of time as well as space and the attentive and dynamic engagement of members of a collective, which in turn strengthens and renews the communal spirit (Goethals 2003, 257). The five daily Islamic prayers (*salat*) illustrate the way rituals have their own sense of time and space. Each of the five prayers has to be executed within specific time spans in the course of an entire day which produces a specific temporal pattern for those believers who fully commit to the obligation to pray. Those who pray need to face the Ka'ba in Mecca (*qibla*) and perform specific bodily movements in a specific chronological order combining time and space in their movements. Muslims following the Salafiyya strongly recommend to do the prayers in congregation whenever possible. This is done in rows by “closing ranks”, that is, putting the left foot against the right foot of the neighbour to the left and the right foot against the left foot of the neighbour to the right.

Furthermore, religious rituals are “codified interactions in which the partner or audience is a religious/supernatural being or force” (Eller 2007, 115). This implies that these beings or forces can be communicated to and that they actually respond, pay attention or react to the ritual. Islamic rituals like the prayer, the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), speaking the *shahada* (Muslim declaration of belief) or saying a *du'a'* (supplicatory prayer) are directed towards or involve God and are interpreted as forms of worship of God. Since rituals are worshipping practices, the purity or the right performance of rituals are of great importance—anything else would be religious innovation—and changes, however small, are vehemently decried and fought. Rituals, especially when collectively performed, are thus paramount to Meyer’s sensational forms which I discussed in the beginning of this chapter. She defines sensational forms as “relatively fixed” modes that authorise and organise access to the transcendental. They depend on formalized

practices in order to be recognisable and repeatable by other community members (Meyer 2006, 9–13).

In this sense, rituals are relatively stable with changes creeping in very slowly in the course of endless repetitions over a long period of time. The relatively stable quality of rituals notwithstanding, it should be kept in mind that there is a “continuum of ritual behavior” (Eller 2007, 114) ranging from liturgies as the most fixed and formalized type of fully-fledged rituals to increasingly ritualised practices that do not follow an entirely fixed script like reading the scriptures.

Whenever rituals move to new environments and are translated to new settings, the window of opportunity for ritual transformation opens widely in comparison to the repetition of a ritual in its habitual surrounding. The performance of rituals in computer-mediated environments such as chat rooms and forums represents such a moment in which rituals are transferred from habitual settings into new environments. Grimes, acting on the assumption that religious rituals involve various components with reference to action, language, times, places, objects, sounds, beliefs and more, argues that “the component of ritual that is emphasized varies from rite to rite, tradition to tradition” (Grimes 1999, 267; for a similar argument see Langer et al. 2006). This leaves us with two important implications for the analysis of transfer processes of rituals: first of all, the essential components or segments of a ritual need to be identified on a case-by-case basis. Secondly, in the course of the transfer process, these segments can potentially be transferred separately and need to be re-embedded and re-aggregated in the new environment (Radde-Antweiler 2008b, 103–104).

The following sections deal with some cases of ritual transfer to Salafi chat rooms and discussion forums and show how and why some succeed while other transfer attempts produce ambiguous results or simply fail.¹⁶⁶

Successful ritual transfer

Successful ritual transfer does not necessarily mean that the ritual in question remains unchanged. Rather, it means that all essential elements of a ritual are reproduced and re-assembled meaningfully in a new environment and that the ritual as a whole is recognised and enacted by the community of believers.

Conversion rituals performed by Salafi Muslims in chat rooms illustrate such a successful

¹⁶⁶ The following discussion of ritual transfer is based on an article I have published earlier (Becker 2011a).

transfer.¹⁶⁷ Conversions to Islam in and via media that facilitate spoken conversation like mobile phones and chat rooms are not an unusual phenomenon any more in Germany and the Netherlands. Within the Islamic tradition, a conversion is in general performed by speaking out the Islamic statement of faith (*shahada*) in front of Muslim witnesses. The *shahada* has to be spoken out aloud with the right intention. Essential segments of this ritual are thus witnessing, speaking the *shahada* out aloud and having the right intention. Salafi religious scholars emphasize that the *shahada* should best be spoken in Arabic, the language of the Qur'an. However, if the convert is not able to say the few words in Arabic—something which has not occurred in this research—she or he may say the *shahada* in any other language. Many converts prefer the mosque and the presence of an imam in order to publicize their commitment to the new religion. This is, however, not a condition.

The following example of a conversion took place in a popular German chat room maintained by Abulhussain, a preacher and imam of a mosque in South-Eastern Germany.¹⁶⁸ Abulhussain, whom we have already encountered before, provides online *durus* (lessons) to an average audience of 50–60 participants. Some of his classes take place in his mosque and in his chat room simultaneously. The participants in this chat room hear what is spoken in the mosque via a microphone while the participants in the mosque can, if they wish, follow the text chat in the chat room on Abulhussain's computer. Nobody else except for Abulhussain is allowed to use the microphone function of the chat room. The rest has to type-chat under the watchful eyes of the moderators. During a lecture in May 2010, Abulhussain was informed that a “sister” in the chat room, Katharina, would like to convert. He asked her to “raise her hand” and soon the icon of a raised hand appeared to the left of her nickname. The imam decided that the conversion should be done on the telephone while chat room participants and those in the mosque should listen and bear witnesses. Abulhussain called the potential convert and put her on speakers. Typed exclamations like “*ma sha' Allah*” (What God has willed) and “*subhan Allah*” (‘Glory to God’) appeared in the window of the chat room.

Katharina:	Hello.
Abulhussain:	Hello.
Katharina:	I am somehow confused now.
Abulhussain:	That is not a problem. I hope that the others are able to hear, those who are in the chat room.
Katharina:	Yes.
Abulhussain:	I will ask, just a moment. Can you all hear baraka Allah fikum, those who are in the room? Yes, they can hear.

¹⁶⁷ Salafi Muslims prefer the term “reversion” in order to express that a person returns to his or her *fitra* (natural disposition).

¹⁶⁸ Islam Lessons, chat room, 6 May 2010.

Katharina: They can hear what we say on the telephone?
Abulhussain: Yes, yes, and the brothers in the mosque. We are in the mosque and there are brothers here who listen. They will be witnesses. I have heard from brothers and sisters that you would like to accept Islam?
Katharina: Yes.
Abulhussain: Yes. Do you know what you are doing?
Katharina: I know what I am doing. Well, of course, I am not one hundred percent familiar with everything. But I know what I am doing and I want it.
Abulhussain: Okay. My questions. I have a few questions because when somebody accepts Islam in my presence I always ask questions. That is, first of all, Islam is about believing in Allah, in Allah alone. That we only worship him, that we submit to Allah. Do you agree to this?
Katharina: I agree to this.
Abulhussain: Okay. And further, in order to submit to Allah we follow the Prophet *salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam* by practising what he has taught us.
Katharina: Yes.
Abulhussain: Do you agree to this?
Katharina: Yes.
Abulhussain: Okay. Has somebody forced you to accept Islam?
Katharina: No! For heaven's sake!
Abulhussain: Okay. Has somebody put a sword to your neck?
Katharina: No.
Abulhussain: So that you accept Islam?
Katharina: No.
Abulhussain: I say this because most people always say that Islam was spread with the sword. Yes, because of this. Has somebody offered you something? Money-wise or so so that you accept Islam?
Katharina: No.
Abulhussain: Okay. *Khayr. Tayyib* [C.B.: good, well], this is a one-time decision. There will be no going-back any more. Do you agree to this?
Katharina: Yes.

After having made sure that the witnesses can fulfil their function and are able to hear the voice of himself and Katharina, Abulhussain questioned her for several minutes in order to affirm her sincerity. At the same time he used the opportunity to denounce those who claim that Islam is imposed on people with violence. Whenever he has the occasion, Abulhussain likes to make it a point that Islam does not need to employ such means since, as he says, people are flocking voluntarily to him in order to convert. He then explained the meaning and the consequences of the *shahada*:

Abulhussain: Okay. If you want to accept Islam you should say the statement of faith, that is, there is nobody who is truthfully and rightfully worshipped except Allah and nobody who should be followed in this worship except Muhammad, the messenger and servant of Allah. Do you agree to this?
Katharina: Yes.
Abulhussain: From all your heart?
Katharina: From all my heart.
Abulhussain: Of your own free will?
Katharina: Of my own free will.
Abulhussain: You can now change your mind if you want to.
Katharina: No, I do not want to change my mind.
Abulhussain: Sure?
Katharina: Sure.
Abulhussain: Okay. Then repeat after me: *ashhadu*
Katharina: *Ashhadu*

Abulhussain: an la
 Katharina: an la
 Abulhussain: ilaha
 Katharina: ilaha
 Abulhussain: illa
 Katharina: illa
 Abulhussain: Allah
 Katharina: Allah
 Abulhussain: wa
 Katharina: wa
 Abulhussain: ashhadu
 Katharina: ashhadu
 Abulhussain: anna
 Katharina: anna
 Abulhussain: Muhammadan
 Katharina: Muhammadan
 Abulhussain: rasulu
 Katharina: rasulu
 Abulhussain: Allah
 Katharina: Allah
 Abulhussain: You have become a muslim.

The actual conversion finally starts upon her emphatic affirmation of her decision: Abulhussain speaks the *shahada* bit by bit in Arabic giving Katharina time to repeat. The congregation in the mosques welcomed her with “*Allahu akbar*” (God is great) exclamations while chat room participants typed the same phrase as well as *dhikr*¹⁶⁹ and supplicatory phrases. People expressed their joy and offered Katharina assistance and guidance on her newly chosen path as a Muslim. Witnessing which is usually linked to seeing a certain act, in this case the person speaking the *shahada*, was successfully relegated to the aural sense and turned into hearing the words of the *shahada*. None of those participants in the chat room who I was able to ask doubted the authenticity of the conversion. The woman on the telephone had “in reality” become a Muslim, although none of the witnesses actually saw the woman uttering the *shahada*. Participants in chat rooms acknowledge the problem of identity play and sincerity. The same problem, however, also pertains to offline environments since the intention of the believer in uttering prayers or the *shahada* cannot ultimately be verified by any perceivable sign. This problem is usually relegated to the relationship between the believer and God. After all, so the belief, God knows the true intentions of a person. If somebody is lying and cheating, it will fall back on him or her on the Day of Judgement.

This instance of a conversion in a chat room illustrates that the Islamic conversion ritual as practised by the Salafiyya can successfully be acted out through the affordance of a chat room and mobile technology: due to the double mediation of her voice, via mobile phone and the

¹⁶⁹ *Dhikr* (remembrance of God) is part of the ritualistic context of prayer but is also practised in daily contexts by Muslims in many diverse forms among which calling the name “Allah” is the simplest form.

microphone of the chat room, the chat room participants could fulfil their role as witnesses, the lack of co-presence notwithstanding, since they could hear her voice (for a similar argument see Bunt 2009, 88–90). Had she instead typed the *shahada* in the chat room window, so I was told in conversations, the ritual would not have been accepted. This indicates why conversation rituals do not take place in asynchronous, text-based CMEs like discussion forums. The imam questioned her in order to check her intentions as far as this can be done by a fellow human being. The ritual was performed by the entire community of the chat room and people accepted the ritual by typed exclamations.

The conversion ritual is a very incisive ritual since it signifies a social conversion from the community of non-believers to the community of believers (Bulliet 2007, 323), indicated by the welcoming exclamations of the witnesses. In this sense, the chat room turned temporarily into a liminal space, in which a person is detached from a fixed social position in her community, enters a liminal phase of ambiguity and is re-embedded in a new position in the community (Turner 1969, 94–130). Liminal spaces “open up possibilities to rethink and revitalize the values and order of society” (Lövheim 2006, 257). The remainder of the conversation between Katharina and Abulhussain highlights the deep changes that are effected by the conversion and the entry into a new collectivity.

- Abulhussain: And all of us here in the mosque and in the room, on the Internet, congratulate you. I will give you now the good news. Can you talk?
- Katharina: Yes.
- Abulhussain: The good news, the glad tidings for you are that everything which you have done before, before this moment, everything which you have done earlier before this moment is in sha’allah deleted. These are the bad deeds you have committed. And if you practise Islam the right way and if you do good in Islam, then everything which you have done in terms of good deeds in the past will be accepted in your favour because with us these deeds count.
- Katharina: Yes.
- Abulhussain: And for us you are born anew. And since you are born anew I advise you to perhaps please choose a new name. Have you already done this?
- Katharina: No, I haven’t. I have not thought about this yet.
- Abulhussain: Yes. But may Allah subhanahu wa-ta’ala bless you and may Allah subhanahu wa-ta’ala guide you on the way so that you may learn your religion. Slowly, and try to learn first the basics of Islam. That is that you have knowledge about Allah, knowledge about the Prophet Muhammad and knowledge about Islam with evidence. And that you understand Islam in the right way. May Allah subhanahu wa-ta’ala give you all the best. But my question: How did you arrive at this decision?
- Katharina: Well, I have occupied myself off and on over many years with Islam. Because many people were so quickly against it and I have always thought: ‘Well, this cannot be it. You have to at least think about it.’ And a friend whom I have met here, in the place where I live, she has given me a lot to read about Islam and I came to the conclusion that this is the right way . . . yes.
- Abulhussain: Great. May Allah subhanahu wa-ta’ala endorse the way upon which you

have found Islam. You should follow him and practise your religion with clear arguments after you have done this great thing. Be careful so that you do not loose this again. Because also in Islam you should work hard so that you can make the best of it.

Katharina: Yes.
 Abulhussain: Okay.
 Katharina: Okay. Thank you so much.
 Abulhussain: Not worth mentioning. And welcome to our family, one and a half billion people.
 Katharina: Yes.
 Abulhussain: Okay. Al-salam 'alaykum.
 Katharina: Al-salam 'alaykum.

Through her conversion, Katharina stepped out of her old life and left the bad deeds behind, as Abulhussain gladly tells her. All people in my research who converted to Islam or, while having been born as Muslims, started to practice it according to the Salafiyya at a later age chose a new Islamic-Arabic name indicating the finality of their decision and the end of their old life. Katharina now has to gain knowledge in order to become firm in her religion and do her best not to loose it.

He furthermore reminds her of her new belonging to the community of one and a half billion Muslims. The collective experience of liminality produces “communitas”, a specific sense of egalitarian community that is embedded in the experience of comradeship, homogeneity and a common endeavor to transform social relations and reality in line with an ideal (Turner 1969, 96–97). This sense of egalitarian solidarity and comradeship reaches a peak in Salafi chat rooms whenever a person converts because the participant-witnesses are moved by the sign of divine intervention—the Salafiyya nourishes a strong notion that God guides humans and their acts and leads to the Truth whomever He wills—and by the affirmation of their values, beliefs and endeavours living amid a sea of unbelievers.

Likewise, another ritual is performed in a similar self-evident fashion in chat rooms and forums with Salafi participation:¹⁷⁰

[Jamila:]
 [...]

 May Allah ease your pain, and may Allah give you patience. May Allah grant you janna al-firdaws [C.B.: paradise].

[Jabir:]
 I really got goose pimples from this. May Allah stand by him and relive his pain in sha'allah. May Allah cure him quickly. May Allah forgive all his sins and give him a place in paradise in sha'allah. Amen.

This brief exchange on a discussion forum between two participants referring to a fellow Muslim awaiting a decisive surgery in a hospital is an instance of an act of worship known among

¹⁷⁰ Al-Manar, forum, 24 November 2009: A brother in hospital.

Muslims as “making *du‘a*”. A *du‘a* (pl. *ad‘iya*) is a prayer in which God is invoked to intervene in a situation or to give his blessings. *Ad‘iya* are interwoven with everyday activities like going to the bathroom, wishing others well or arriving at a new place. Their origin is often accredited to the Prophet himself and they should ideally be internalised and performed automatically. When I asked on a forum what a *du‘a* actually is, Abu Ahmad answered: “With a Muslim, this is quite automatically the result of deep faith.”¹⁷¹ This brief example of a Muslim act of worship invoking the presence of God in a computer-mediated interactive environment exemplifies a ritual which is performed in a new medium without much change to the ritual and its single element itself except for the substitution of speaking by typing. Informants whom I could ask during my research as to whether *ad‘iya* “spoken” in a forum or in a chat room are as effective in terms of worship as *ad‘iya* spoken offline in everyday life, reacted astonished: “Why shouldn’t it?”

In contrast to the conversion ritual, speaking a *du‘a* for somebody else does not induce a social conversion and produce liminality. However, both rituals enacted in computer-mediated environments actively strengthen bonds among the members of the Salafi community, who take part in the same socio-ethical project, and between the immediate Muslim community on the one hand and God on the other hand because He is the addressee of these practices and His existence turns simultaneously into a perceivable reality: Katharina becomes a Muslim due to God’s guidance and the pain of the brother in hospital is relieved due to God’s intervention.

Speaking the *shahada* when converting to Islam and speaking a *du‘a* are thus successfully and without great effort translated to chat rooms and discussion forums though some elements of the rituals change in the course of the transfer. The act of witnessing is transferred from eyes to ears alone and physical co-presence is replaced by being simultaneously logged-in. In the case of *ad‘iya* in a forum, speaking turns into typing on a keyboard. The individual bond between those who speak a *du‘a* for somebody in a chat room or on a discussion forum and the beneficiary is mostly “imagined”. They do not know each other by seeing but participate in the same ethico-religious project of emulating the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih* down to every mundane detail. I am not suggesting that those who speak a *du‘a* on behalf of somebody offline have seen the recipient physically. Rather, computer-mediated environments provide an opportunity to ask many people to speak *du‘a* together for a certain cause which increases the possibility that people speaking a *du‘a* and those benefiting from it do not know each other.

¹⁷¹ Al-Sunna, forum, 26 October 2009: What exactly is a *du‘a*?

Blurred ritual transfer

Blurred ritual transfers are characterized by an attempt to adapt a ritual to a new environment in which the transfer of essential ritual elements yields mixed results. While the communal norm that the ritual is supposed to uphold is still valued among community members, the pattern and script of the ritual in the new environment remains unclear to believers and is sometimes contested. The attempts to reproduce gender segregation in chat rooms and discussion forums with Salafi participation provide insights into blurred or ambiguous ritual transfers.

Gender segregation is not one ritual per se but rather an aggregation of ritual acts that aim to regulate the interaction between men and women like the act of veiling and of lowering the eyes in the presence of a member of the opposite sex. The idea of gender segregation is closely linked to the notion of *'awra* (the parts of the body that must be covered). *'Awra* is a rather complicated issue since the religious sources do not always clearly state which body parts actually belong to the *'awra*. What makes the practice of gender segregation even more difficult is that the exact definition of *'awra* depends on the situation (e.g., praying), who else is present (e.g., husband/wife, relatives, strangers) and in which place one is (e.g., public or private). Salafi religious scholars with few exceptions rule that the female *'awra* in public spaces involves the entire body except for the face and the voice. Women are allowed to speak in public, for instance, in a mosque, but neither too loud nor with a soft and alluring voice. The mixing of the two sexes in public spaces is in general forbidden and women are only allowed to travel longer distances with a *mahram*, a male relative with whom sexual intercourse would be considered incestuous.¹⁷²

It is difficult to find equivalents for the diverse ritual acts that fall under the category of gender segregation in chat rooms and forums. Acts of veiling lose their prominence since the use of web-cams for women and personal depictions are in general prohibited. The use of the voice is regulated since women usually do not use the microphone function of chat rooms. However, two questions remain ambiguous: How should men and women interact in the public windows of a chat room and the public threads of a discussion forum? And how should a man and a woman interact one-to-one in these environments? Most scholars strongly discourage computer-mediated contact between men and women in the public spaces of discussion forums and chat rooms if it is not necessary in a religious sense, i.e., if the conversation is not geared towards the increase of knowledge of Islam. We have seen in Chapter 2 (see p. 84ff.) that forum and chat rooms rules forbid private messaging between men and women or limit it to a minimum and call

¹⁷² To a woman's *maharim* (pl. of *mahram*) belong among others her father, grandfather, brothers, nephews (sons of her brothers), uncles (of her own family), father-in-law, stepfather and stepson.

upon participants of both sexes to refrain from flirting and every kind of behaviour which could be interpreted in this direction in the open chat windows and discussion threads. In addition to rule enforcing, Muslims inspired by the Salafiiyya attempt to practise gender segregation in chat rooms and discussion forums by translating single ritual acts into these environments.

A number of individual ritual acts comparable to donning the veil and lowering the gaze have taken shape in chat rooms and discussion forums. Cleaning contact lists of and barring them from users of the opposite sex have become standard among participants in my research. Ten women specified that they had cleaned their contact lists of their chat programs of all male acquaintances even if those had been good, long-standing friends. Furthermore, women have increasingly picked up the habit of using the signature in forums to state that they do not wish to receive private messages from brothers. I have not come across a similar statement in signatures of male forum users. Private messaging between a woman and a man who is not her *mahram* is considered to be *haram* since, according to a hadith attributed to the Prophet, Satan will be present and make use of this opportunity to sow illicit sexual desire and, thereby, *fitna*, against the best of intentions of man and woman.¹⁷³

In order to regulate gender mixing in CMEs at a communal level, numerous variations of the story of a woman who engages in a private messaging or chatting with an unrelated stranger in a chat room with disastrous results circulate the web and are popular items posted on forums, forwarded to e-mail lists and linked to chat rooms. According to the general storyline, the woman is talked into communicating via telephone and into revealing her identity. Becoming used to the daily conversations with the interesting male stranger, she is finally seduced into meeting offline. The stories usually only hint at what happens to the female protagonist during the meeting. At the end, she ends up either with a child stemming from an extramarital relation, in prison or traumatised and alone because Satan has used this opportunity to sow *fitna*.

The practices of circulating and re-telling or re-writing these stories are ritual acts aiming at strengthening the faith and serving as a moral guideline in a world full of dangers and temptations (De Koning 2008, 242). It has a ritual dimension in that the retold stories follow the same narrative plot and repeat specific formulations. The titles under which these stories are circulated and their beginnings usually suffice for the readers to recognise the narrative and to know how to react to it with *ad'iya*, exclamations of disbelief and appeals to fear God and show *haya'* (modesty, shyness). The workings of the divine are represented in the deterministic end of

¹⁷³ See for instance in the hadith collection of al-Tirmidhi: *Jami' al-Sahih*, kitab 8 (*kitab al-rida'*), bab 16 (*ma ja'a fi karahiya al-dukhul 'ala al-mughribat*), hadith 1171.

the narrative: as God has foreseen, the sinners lured by Satan into illicit sexual behaviour will bear the consequence in this life and the hereafter. The circulation of this narrative in all its different versions aims to uphold the collective values of being shy and feeling shame in the presence of the other sex. The topic-opener, TheSeeker, of a thread entitled “Wear your hijab the right way before it is too late” articulates the importance of shame in the conduct between men and women the following way:¹⁷⁴ “Covering teaches modesty, modesty teaches shyness, shyness closes the doors of fitna because fitna can lead to kufr [C.B.: unbelief]!” The Dutch word *schaamte*, which was used by TheSeeker, is used by Salafi Muslims to express a feeling of discomfort if the dominating notions of decency and virtual conduct are in potential danger. It is a virtue that works preventive in order to anticipate, identify and prevent any potential opportunities for Satan to benefit from a specific situation. Re-telling and re-reading this stories serves as a reminder and keeps attention given to this virtue at a constant level as I will analyse in more depth in the last section of this chapter on vernacular *da’wa*.

In spite of numerous fatwas and calls to restrain from digital communication with the opposite sex many Salafi Muslims lack a clear idea of gender segregation online which indicates that some practices which seem to almost go without saying in the offline world are not easily adapted to a new, in our case computer-mediated, environment. While emphatically agreeing that gender segregation is a core aspect of the sociality envisioned by the model set out by the Prophet and *the salaf al-salih*, most interlocutors could not explicate how this should be done in discussion forums and chat rooms. Like Simone’s reaction to my question on how men and women should communicate online shows, gender segregation is mostly implicitly practised following a vague notion of how a woman and a man should communicate.¹⁷⁵

- Simone: I know actually that communicating via Internet . . . well, this is a bit . . .
I actually do not know how it works, gender segregation online.
- C.B.: Well, you are active on a women-only forum.
- Simone: Well yes. But men are active on Islambegrijpen.nl for example and I
used to participate there without any fear.
- C.B.: And private communication? I mean, when nobody else is present. For
instance msn chat?
- Simone: I would not know how the scholars think about it.
- C.B.: Do you communicate at all with men?
- Simone: No, right now . . . As I think about it, there are no men among my
contacts. Well, my husband and my brother. But that is all.

While Simone was conforming to the prohibition of private messaging almost by accident, others had to “clean” their contact lists in chat clients after becoming convinced that it was

¹⁷⁴ Al-Manar, forum, 10 August 2011: Wear your hijab the right way before it is too late

¹⁷⁵ Interview taken on 27 January 2010 in Breda, the Netherlands.

forbidden.

Interestingly, four couples in the research sample got to know each other with the help of social media, two of them on forums. The first contact took place in each case with the help of private messaging. Three of them emphasized that private messages between men and women are forbidden. However, in their own views, they merely informed and asked each other about their marital status and their potential willingness to marry. After both sides had made the intention to marry clear, they asked each other questions about their future plans and their religious ideas. When they found them matching, the whole affair was restored to conventional channels. That is, parents were informed and a meeting at the house of the woman in the presence of her father or male family members took place. They found each other also physically attractive, which is considered to be a legitimate concern of potential marriage partners. The agreement of the father was obtained and the marriage took place following Islamic law. When recounting their experience, they were careful to clarify that they knew of the danger of the presence of Satan and therefore kept the conversation on-topic and business-like and changed to the offline world as soon as they knew enough of each other in order to pursue the following step, that is, to meet in the presence of a *mahram*.

Gender segregation and its corresponding ritual acts are confirmed and emphatically supported by Muslims following the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands. Simultaneously, it seems that computer-mediated environments offer new venues for some of their pressing questions that limit the reach and translation of gender segregation in chat rooms and discussion forums. Among these central concerns rank finding a suitable marriage partner, asking questions and learning. Many women have underlined in conversations that men in general have a higher degree of knowledge of religion. If they want to grow in their religion, they think that they need to consult brothers in order to be able to ask questions and to learn. Many women do not have the possibility to visit lessons in their immediate surrounding either because there is no such offer or family and household obligations render it difficult to visit, for instance, lessons in the evening. When talking to Umm Fatima about the effect of Internet on Muslim women, she stated the following:¹⁷⁶

Umm Fatima: Also, because us women, we are always at home. Almost all Salafis whom I know are at home. They do not study, they do not work. All these women have kids, they stay at home. It is therefore for us very important to gain knowledge and we can follow everything via Internet, you know? There, we can follow all lessons or, if there are new articles or if a new conference has taken place and was recorded, we can also

¹⁷⁶ Interview taken on 5 June 2009 in The Hague.

- listen to those.
- C.B.: Would you call this emancipation? Or an independent way to gain knowledge?
- Umm Fatima: Yes, exactly! We do not need men in order to go to the mosque, in order to accompany us. We just have Internet and we look for it ourself.

For these women, forums and chat rooms offer the possibility to find a husband who is firm in his faith and possesses the right *'aqida* (creed, doctrine) and to combine their roles as mothers and wives with their urge to gain knowledge about religion and get religiously correct answers on their questions. Many women in my research affirmed that they felt good about going about their own ways on the Internet searching for knowledge and learning instead of having to ask their husbands to accompany them to mosques, classes or lectures offline every single time. The religiously legitimate endeavour to increase knowledge of Islam, however, can easily collide with the norms of *haya'* and gender segregation. 'Isa acknowledges that it is a fine line to walk if one wants to uphold the right of women to gain and transmit religious knowledge and practise the religious obligation of gender segregation:¹⁷⁷

One has to grant women their rights. Concerning gaining as well as transmitting knowledge. However, Muslims are weak and promptly use the possibility to approach the other sex. An Islamic medium should not provide this possibility. The way it is practised on the forum is on the edge but still defensible.

'Isa refers to the forum al-Sunna, where he is active. The forum allows communication between men and women in the forum threads, however, private messaging between the sexes is not possible. Furthermore, the forum features separate sub-forums for brothers and sisters where believers can discuss more intimate questions. While gender segregation is an assemblage of ritual acts in offline settings where women cover automatically when going into a public space or when it is self-evident for men to avoid female spaces, it is less obvious what the appropriate behaviour in CMEs should be in order to reproduce the norms of gender relations as understood by the Salafiyya. In Islam, gender segregation is based on who is supposed to sense which part of the body of which person in which space. The ambiguity of gender segregation in CMEs is related to a fundamental change in human interaction. While ritual acts like veiling or toning down the voice and lowering the gaze aim at the regulation of seeing and hearing, CMEs as used by the Salafiyya necessitate most notably the regulation of text-based interaction. One conclusion could be that women and men are free to interact as they want as long as seeing and hearing is not involved. However, Amina described her uneasiness with such an approach: "You feel when it is not right any more. You know that you have to stop and then you do it. Shaitan is always lurking

¹⁷⁷ E-mail interview from April 2010.

around the corner and waiting for a chance to sow fitna.”¹⁷⁸

Failed ritual transfers

In some cases, hardly any attempt is made to reproduce a ritual in a new environment or the reproduction is not understood as a substitution for the “real” ritual. Similar to the transfer processes described before, failed or blocked transfers take place in an intuitive and improvised manner and are rarely the result of a conscious decision. Usually, the possibility to enact a ritual in a chat room or forum does not even occur to believers.

A prominent case in point is the obligatory prayer ritual (*salat*), which must be performed five times a day and involves several patterned and repeated sequences (*raka'at*) of body movements among which most importantly the prostration (*sajda*). Muslims following the Salafiyya take utmost care to pray just like the Prophet did by carefully following the same movements he is thought to have performed down to the smallest detail, including the position and movements of the fingers. While there are numerous CMEs where Christians pray, my interlocutors do not see a point in performing a prayer in a chat room or on a forum since the central element, the body movements, cannot be performed in these environments. Furthermore, they stress that the best way to perform the prayer is in company with other Muslims. Communal prayer is a highlight during gatherings of the Salafiyya offline. The ritual as performed by the Salafiyya demands that the believers organize in rows (women and men apart) touching each other with the outer sides of their feet. In accounts of such communal prayer, Salafi Muslims describe the feeling of companionship and of re-assurance which they find in their faith. When the period within which a prayer has to be performed draws towards its end, participants in forums and more so in chat rooms start telling each other that they will have to briefly leave the keyboard in order to perform the prayer ritual in their homes. For a few moments, activities cede while the chat room connects the different personal prayer spaces of the participants at home. Being confused by my questions about why they do not pray communally in a chat room, most answers hint at the impossibility to enact and feel the embodied movements of the ritual in CMEs.

The case of the prayer ritual provides an instance in which a transfer of a ritual to a computer-mediated environment is not even attempted. In other instances, the transfer takes place but the ritual ceases to be a ritual. For instance, many researchers point to the *hajj*, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, as an example of a Muslim ritual that has recently been transferred to CMEs like Second Life (for instance Radde-Antweiler 2008a, 191). However, reading the press

¹⁷⁸ Excerpt from my notes taken during a Muslim Youth Camp, 17-22 July 2010 near Tilburg, the Netherlands.

releases of IslamOnline.net, the Islamic portal that maintains the virtual *hajj* in Second Life, and asking my Muslim interlocutors how they understand the practice of virtual *hajj*, the picture that emerges is different. Interlocutors stress the usefulness of the virtual *hajj* for the preparation of the “real” *hajj* by learning the different ritual components and stages involved. The creators of IslamOnline.net clarify in a fatwa that the virtual *hajj* does not substitute the *hajj* to Mecca and is only an educative and informational tool (Kutty 2009). The virtual *hajj* does indeed provide the same sequencing of movements and the phatic language that is part of the *hajj*. However, it does not instill the sense of being “there”, that is, in Mecca, as part of the community of believers moving together according to a specific script revealed by God. As Bunt puts it in his discussion of the virtual *hajj*, “[w]hether a virtual pilgrim might receive any form of spiritual substance from their online journey is clearly in the eye of the beholder” (Bunt 2009, 94).

Enacting knowledge: Ritual deliberation, repetition and modularity

In the preceding sections I have dealt with various ritual practices and their transfer into computer-mediated environments with mixed result. In this chapter, we look in the inverse at how some practices become increasingly ritualised once they have been transferred to computer-mediated environments such as chat rooms and discussion forums. Transfers to new environments or changes in environments potentially entail changes in practices. Increasing ritualisation occurs when a specific religious practice is increasingly patterned, repeatedly performed, inserted with formulaic expressions and turned into a means of worship or devotion. Furthermore, the community of believers needs to be involved in a way that the practice becomes a central aspect of their religious life. Such a development seems to have taken place in recent years in computer-mediated environments of the Salafiyya with a practice which I have dealt with in detail in the chapter on hermeneutic-interpretive practices: Islamic argumentation. In the following I will first of all review Islamic argumentation as a narrative-performative practice through which knowledge is enacted in compliance with the model of the early community. Secondly, I will discuss the influence of digital technology on the ritualisation of practices, mainly the endless possibility of repetition and modularity.

Most commonly, Islamic argumentation starts with a question which invites the participants of a chat room and a forum to engage in the construction of *dalil*. Asking a question is not merely a way to get information and to find the right answer. Rather, believers enact scholarly curiosity and submissive devotion to the Divine message by asking questions. It is thus a performance through which a believer’s dedication to the cause is expressed. On one occasion, I

apologised in a chat room for asking many questions because I had the impression that I was unduly keeping participants in the chat room busy with my questions while they were actually logged in to discuss the conditions and meaning of *tawhid* according to the schedule of the chat room. The administrator of this chat room, JustAllah, answered: “Posing questions it the most important aspect of Islam. Without knowledge there is no Islam.”¹⁷⁹ To gain Islamic knowledge which begins with asking questions is inextricably linked to practising Islam and growing in your faith, as Umm Fatima unequivocally states:¹⁸⁰

Yes, this is knowledge in my eyes. Therefore, so to say . . . Yes, very practice oriented. So you learn it and then you take it with you and then you go further. Not that you . . . so to speak, you have Islamic knowledge and then it stays like this for always and you are just a Muslim . . . No! Of course, you are a Muslim but on a specific . . . higher level. I would like to grow. This is what I want to say. I am constantly busy to gain knowledge and every day more and more and more. And this I would like to practise more. The more I know, the more I will apply it in my daily life. This is what knowledge is for me.

Both statements indicate that asking questions and gaining knowledge are actually obligatory practices for a true Muslim if he or she wants to practice Islam truthfully. Islamic knowledge is not the prerogative of the religious scholars but a *sine qua non* for all Muslims. Religious scholars only stand out by excelling in the quest for knowledge in comparison to lay believers. This means that those Muslims who do not pose questions in order to increase their knowledge and purify their beliefs and practices are not on the true path of Islam. Asking questions is in this understanding a confirmation of the believer to be devoted to the true path and to follow the venerated ancestors starting with the Prophet, his companions, their followers and the scholars.

Interestingly, specific questions especially with reference to prayer, gender relations, Islamic norms of clothing, interactions with non-Muslims as well as erring Muslims and *tawhid* are repeatedly asked and answered in computer-mediated environments to the extent that a simple search operation would actually quickly guide the questioner to the right answer. However, posing a question has intrinsic value in itself independent of the provision of information because it establishes the questioner’s identity of a knowledge seeking pious Muslim sincerely engaged with his or her faith. The function of the answer is then not so much informative but rather affirmative because the questioner may know the correct answer in principle but is in need of collective affirmation and reassurance through which the link to the collective of righteous believers is reinforced. Furthermore, as I will analyse later, questions are asked in order to test and specify the position of other forum and chat room participants

¹⁷⁹ Quran and Sunna are our way, chat room, 11 October 2010.

¹⁸⁰ Interview taken on 5 June 2009 in The Hague.

regarding specific contested questions which split the Salafiyya into factions.

Once a question is thrown into the open, ritual deliberation with the aim to find or produce a correct *dalil* sets in as described in Chapter 3 (see p. 131ff.). The search for a correct *dalil* in order to establish an answer according to divine will is an act which will never end in a final conclusion because the Salafiyya reject final human authority in general with the exception of the Prophet who cannot be asked any more to shed light on his statements and actions. Even the revered companions of the Prophet are fallible as are the scholars and any other human being. This rejection of final human authority opens a highly flexible discursive space in which answers are only temporary closures. When a question is repeatedly asked it does therefore not suffice to answer with “so and so says this or that”. The *dalil*, or the link to the divine revelation, has to be established time and again to the best of the knowledge of those participating in Islamic argumentation. Howard argues that it is due to the discursive flexibility based on the lack of final human authority, that deliberation becomes ritualised:

Ritual deliberation enjoys precisely this elevated position of ‘privileged status’ because it has no hope of actually ending. It does not seek conclusion, but rather repetitious action. Elevating an everyday activity through repetition is, in fact, a hallmark of ritual. (Howard 2011, 59)

Islamic argumentation resembles thus Sisyphean labour without termination and is doomed to endless repetition since *dalil* needs to be re-constructed time and again. As I argue in Chapter 3, interpretive traditions, that is religious notions of right and wrong, norms of behaviour and beliefs, are often transmitted independently and apart from proof-text. Proof-text and interpretive traditions are therefore modules that are more or less strongly attached to each other but remain, in principle, autonomous. The relationship between them is furthermore often transitive, that is, established across one or more inferences which adds to the discursive flexibility of Islamic argumentation. However, there are exceptions to this flexibility when a final authoritative voice establishes the unequivocal meaning of a proof-text. This final authoritative voice can only be God because He is infallible. His voice manifests itself most clearly when the literal reading of a proof-text by Muslims following the Salafiyya only allows for one interpretation. The obligation to wear the *hijab* covering head, neck and bosom is an illustrative instance of such a fixed relationship between belief-tradition and proof-text within the Salafiyya because Q 24:31 does not allow for any other interpretation in their view.

This discursive flexibility turns Islamic argumentation into a narrative-performative practice performed as a collaborative effort with the aim to safeguard a religiously legitimate behaviour and to reproduce religious values in the community. Though the goal of the practice

itself, the establishment of *dalil*, is in principle not-determined, the outcome of ritual deliberation among Muslims following the Salafiyya in chat rooms and discussion forums are seldom revolutionary in the sense that they sweep away established interpretive traditions. Generations before have trodden the same interpretive paths, produced and examined *dalil* and discussed their validity. Changes occur in a rather unobtrusive and inconspicuous manner, e.g., adding new proof-texts to existing interpretive traditions or following the *dalil* of a minority position. More importantly, to deliberate with co-religionists about ethical and doctrinal questions “is one of the ways one both hones and enacts ethical knowledge” (Hirschkind 2006, 110).

Digitisation of large volumes of religious texts, among them the most important voluminous hadith collections, have granted access to the religious sources to the lay believer. Furthermore, due to search engines and functions everybody possessing a sense for what he or she is looking for can employ these sources. Until recently, this has been the prerogative of a small scholarly and, since the advent of (analogue) mass media, intellectual elite. Digitisation and search functions have increased the spread of Islamic argumentation and contributed to turning Islamic argumentation into a collective and communal practice as Abu Jamal underlines in his answer to my question as to whether the advent of digital technology has changed anything for him and his Muslim friends:

Yes, most certainly. Because, so to speak, you arrive quicker at the truth. Because otherwise you meet a person once every two, three weeks. And now you can just talk daily or once every two, three days with a person about the din [C.B.: religion] and thereby you both grow quicker in terms of knowledge in comparison to meeting offline. And also those whom you do not see often and also think differently about Islam, I can clarify issues much easier for them than face-to-face because I immediately have evidence at hand. Therefore, copy-paste, copy-paste, copy-paste and it is also much clearer for them. Otherwise I would have to invite them, take the books and search, search, search, search, search, search and so on. Much more complicated.

It is the principle of modularity that has given rise to the ritualisation of Islamic argumentation in the way that I have just described. The principle of modularity states that new media are composed of modules or self-sufficient and independent parts which can be assembled into larger media objects which in turn can be assembled into another larger object and so on. The media theoretician Lev Manovich has established modularity as one of the five principles of new media and defines it by comparing it to fractal structures:

This principle can be called ‘fractal structure of new media.’ Just as a fractal has the same structure on different scales, a new media object has the same modular structure throughout. Media elements, be it images, sounds, shapes, or behaviors, are represented as collections of discrete samples (pixels, polygons, voxels, characters, scripts). These elements are assembled into larger-scale objects but they continue to maintain their separate identity. The objects themselves can be combined into even larger objects—again, without losing their independence. (Manovich 2001, 51)

The text-objects I have described in Chapter 1 (see p. 53ff.) are exemplary of modules in that they circulate the web self-sufficiently and uncoupled from their original context and can be assembled in various configurations. The modular set up of computer-mediated environments affords the endless repetition of Islamic argumentation as a practice in which proof-texts circulating the web as modules or text-objects can be linked to interpretive traditions which also circulate. By the same token, this link can be severed without damaging the integrity of neither proof-text nor belief-tradition. The modularity of new media goes thus hand in hand with the discursive flexibility of Islamic argumentation and the transitive relationship between many proof-texts and interpretive traditions within the Salafiyya.

Finally, the use of search engines tends to facilitate repetitive communication and the emergence of patterns because they facilitate rather than spread of existing texts instead of the creation of new material. Informants confirmed that they, for the most part, did not produce new, that is, original, texts or material but rather used existing material which they copy-pasted as text modules and assembled into a new object. In most cases, the material is found with the help of search functions which produce similar results, when similar keywords are used for the search. Furthermore, when attempting to produce *dalil*, some text modules attain an elevated status due to their persuasiveness in providing the evidence searched for. They are incorporated more often into Islamic argumentation and linked to a specific interpretive tradition. This goes so far that those who engage in or follow Islamic argumentation in chat rooms and discussion forums more intensely immediately recognise these text elements and know how Islamic argumentation in the case in question will proceed. This sense of recognition pivots on the emergence of a pattern in the choice and assemblage of proof-texts and interpretive traditions which, finally, can turn Islamic argumentation into patterned and repetitive communication to the extent that Islamic argumentation can turn into phatic communication, a hallmark of ritual practices. Phatic communication mainly serves to establish and maintain specific relationships (e.g., the adherence of the person engaging in Islamic argumentation to a specific interpretation and corresponding scholars) and not necessarily to share information (i.e., the meaning of the interpretation itself for contemporary life).

I am not arguing that all instances of Islamic argumentation as practised in chat rooms and discussion forums are paramount to rituals. Instead I want to point to the increasing ritualisation of Islamic argumentation afforded by the communicative properties of chat rooms and discussion forums. They facilitate the collective performance of Islamic argumentation through which the collectivity expresses its norms and beliefs, its endless repetition and the

emergence of specific patterns. In particular with reference to questions which offer discursive flexibility—that is, are not determined by an unequivocal literal reading of God’s message—Islamic argumentation has turned into an important ritualised practise through which identities are performed and norms communicated.

Performing difference: *Hisba* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* in practise

I have introduced the notion of *hisba* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* in Chapter 2 as part of the interpretive protocol shaping the devotional spaces of chat rooms and discussion forums. *Hisba* is the duty to command or enjoin good and forbid wrong (*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*) imposed in the Qur'an by God on Muslims. How this should look like in practice largely depends on the specific interpretation of this duty. This duty refers broadly to all that God and His Prophet have commanded, that is, everything that is commanded in the Qur'an and the Sunna. The standard view is that it is a *fard 'ala al-kifaya*, a collective obligation which is fulfilled if undertaken by a sufficient number of Muslims. The obligation then ceases to exist for other Muslims. For instance, if several Muslims see another Muslim buying beer and one of the many witnesses goes to him and prevents him from consuming it, he has fulfilled the duty for everybody. The remaining onlookers do not have to intervene and forbid wrong as well. The questions that arise when putting *hisba* into practice have given room for manifold and at times disagreeing views among scholars especially in reference as to who should forbid wrong and command good and what should be forbidden (for a concise discussion see Cook 2003, 11–25). It suffice here to say that most of my informants, who correct wrong practices and belief and point out the correct ways of practising Islam in accordance to their own level of knowledge, understood it as an obligation whenever wrong manifested itself in public including discussion forums and chat rooms.¹⁸¹

Al-wala' wa-l-bara' (loyalty and disavowal) is first and foremost concerned with the correct behaviour of Muslim towards different groups of people, mainly Muslims and non-Muslims and their practices. This concept is concerned with to whom a Muslim should show loyalty and from whom a Muslim should dissociate. It has been continuously re-framed since Ibn Taymiyya brought it to the fore of Muslim theorising and practice. Just like in the conceptual trajectory of *hisba*, the concrete practice of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* remains ambiguous with reference to how it should be practised in the case of non-Muslims (e.g., Should one show hatred for them and how should this be done?) and with reference to Muslims who are guilty of sin and unbelief (see Chapter 2, p. 102ff.). The common denominator among my informants was that *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* is essential to their religion and understanding of *tawhid*. Not to dissociate from those who violate God's will and His law is considered to be at least a flaw in the worship of the person which demands complete submission to God, and in extension His will, alone (*tawhid al-uluhiyya* or

¹⁸¹ Hidden wrongs, that is wrongs whose source are not publicly detectable in contrast to publicly manifest wrongs do not have to be acted against or investigated. "If you hear the sound of music," Cook explains the argument, "but do not know where it is coming from, it is not your duty to proceed (Cook 2003, 58)."

tawhid al-‘ibada). In short, *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* means in what has come to be the Salafi understanding of it to be loyal to God, Islam and Muslims and to disavow or dissociate from everything belonging to other religions and non-Muslim, most importantly among them being polytheism (*shirk*), unbelief (*kufr*) and religious innovation (*bid‘a*). It is however contested as to which kind of sins and unbelief can turn into a reason to declare a Muslim an unbeliever (*takfir*) which would entail the need for disavowal. The following sections will deal with practices that are part of *hisba* and *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* in chat rooms and discussion forums.

Giving nasiha

The obligation of *hisba* is usually practised online by giving *nasiha*. A *nasiha* is a sincere advice given to a fellow Muslim to correct wrong behaviour or belief. The corresponding verb (*nasaha*) appears four times in the Qur’an with reference to the early prophetic missions of Shu‘ayb (Q 7:39), Noah (Q 11:34, 7:62) and Salih (7:79). According to the Qur’anic stories, each of them was sent to a specific community in order to command them to follow God and to warn them of the punishments awaiting them. After years of preaching God asked them to abandon their communities because they didn’t pay any attention to the sincere counselling and warnings and instead threatened the prophets. The communities were subsequently punished and destroyed, as for instance in the Great Flood which destroyed the people of Noah. Vers Q 7:79 on the ministry of the prophet Salih to the tribe of Thamud is representative for the futile work and vain efforts of those prophets: “So he turned his back on them, and said, ‘O my people, I have delivered to you the Message of my Lord, and advised you sincerely (*wa-nasahtu lakum*); but you do not love sincere advisers.”

Furthermore, the tradition of giving *nasiha* is rooted in a hadith accredited to the Prophet¹⁸²:

On the authority of Tamim al-Dari, may God be pleased with him, who reported that God’s messenger, *salla llah ‘alayhi wa-sallam*, said three times: ‘Religion is *nasiha* (sincerity, good counselling).’ We [C.B.: the companions of the Prophet] said: ‘To whom, oh messenger of God?’ ‘To God, glorified and sublime be He, His book and His messenger, to the leaders of the Muslims and their common people.’

In most Salafi writings and comments on *nasiha*, this hadith is in general interpreted in the following way: First of all, religion is *nasiha* in the sense of *ikhlas* (sincerity, see Chapter 2, p. 89ff.) towards God, His messenger and His book. Salafi Muslims understand this to mean that a Muslim has to submit and commit him- or herself sincerely to God. Secondly, as a commentary on

¹⁸² This hadith is found in al-Nawawi’s collection of forty hadith (*Kitab al-Arba‘in*), hadith 7.

this hadith on the popular German Salafi website Salaf.de explicates, Muslims have to honour the Qur'an as God's word and believe that it "is all-embracing and perfect and applicable as a system at every time in all places (Sultan 2004, 4)." Thirdly, with reference to the messenger of God, *nasiha* towards him is paramount to respecting and following him by practising his Sunna, copying his character, gaining knowledge about his Sunna and calling people to adhere to it. As the same commentary explicates, *nasiha*

[. . .] means to affirm his prophecy, to follow his commands and prohibitions, to show loyalty towards his friends and enmity towards his adversaries, to pay respect to him and honour him, to love him, his family and to hold his Sunna in high regard. That his Sunna is revived after his death with appropriate examinations¹⁸³, that you gain ample knowledge beyond the Sunna, that you protect the Sunna in an appropriate way, that you spread it, invite to it and that you adorn yourself with the akhlaq (character, behaviour) of the messenger of Allah, Allah's peace and blessing upon him. (Sultan 2004, 4-5)

Fourthly, *nasiha* towards the leaders of the community and to the common people includes to give sincere advice. This is done by supporting them and reminding as well as reprimanding them when they stray away from the true path and forget God. Similar to doing *da'wa*, the manner in which *nasiha* is to be given is the subject of a considerable bulk of Islamic literature. As in the case of *adab al-da'wa*, the balance between being patient, friendly and calm and, simultaneously, steadfast and rigorous when it comes to uphold the divine will in giving *nasiha* is essential and the exact execution of this balance is subject of endless discussions among different factions of the Salafiyya.¹⁸⁴

Umm Fatima portrayed the way she gives *nasiha* as firm but patient, an attitude to which informants aspire when giving *nasiha*:¹⁸⁵

[. . .] I am of the opinion that if you say it like this, this is how I used to be, that people take a dislike of you. That they think like 'oh, she is much further than me. I am not so far in terms of practising iman [C:B.: faith]. So I am incapable, I better do not talk to her any more.' I have learned that if you remain open for everything [. . .]. That you can just talk normally with a person and that you then can, let's say, talk about certain things. That you then must take action and say something like 'hey, but the scholars say this and this and this.' And that you inspire somebody to also live like this in contrast to if you say 'this is haram, this is not permitted, this is forbidden'.
[. . .] I do it in a way that the person in question can discuss with me and can explain

¹⁸³ The author here refers to the need to identify forged and manipulated hadiths in order to be sure to follow only the authentic reports on the life of the Prophet.

¹⁸⁴ It should be noted here that this interpretation of the hadith is rather striking because the same word, *nasiha*, takes on different meanings in the course of a short text. It is rather probable that *nasiha* here carries the general meaning of sincerity and that Salafi Muslims attach a varying range of interpretations to it depending on what sincerity can mean in a specific situation (e.g., when dealing with God, the Qur'an, the Prophet, the leaders of the community and the common people).

the different meanings which the word *nasiha* takes on in this hadith in relation to each category (God, the Qur'an, the Prophet and the leaders of the community as well as the common people) are rather peculiar considering that the term takes on different meanings in one and the same text. The differences stem from the

¹⁸⁵ Interview taken on 5 June 2009 in The Hague.

himself. I am not like ‘no, this is haram, stop it.’ I rather say: ‘well, this is haram what you do because of this, this and this. These are the reasons, I have checked them and the scholars say this about it.’ And if you do it in this way, they usually say ‘oh, okay. Thank you. Now I know. I will not do it in the future any more.’ In contrast to when I say like ‘this is haram.’ No, I am not like this. You have to be patient with people who are not on the same level as you [. . .]

When I asked her how she reacts if a Muslim goes on with practising Islam in a wrong way she admitted that it made her feel aversion towards this person because it is incomprehensible to her:

Because I just cannot imagine that somebody would do something of which he knows that it is haram. You have evidence and if you still do it . . . this is just not possible. But that you actually can do it, I find this . . . [. . .] I do not understand this. But I let it go then. I am not somebody who asks: ‘But why? I have told you eighty times that it is haram.’ [. . .]. In this case I let you be because you are grown-up.

Two elements of Umm Fatima’s description were quite common among my informants. Firstly, those who give *nasiha* strive to make it as acceptable as possible by delivering it with an attitude that makes the addressee feel as comfortable as possible without losing face. Secondly, the receivers of *nasiha* are expected to be grateful for the advice because they have been saved from a, perhaps fatal, error or from unbelief. The successful performance of giving *nasiha* needs an active counterpart who is willing to accept the advice and to internalise it. The failure of the *nasiha*-giver to elicit an appreciative reaction in place of stubborn refusal provokes a feeling of aversion as Umm Fatima describes and the desire to dissociate from this person, which is reminiscent of the obligation to dissociate from wrong-doers and their practices (*bara*’).

The following example taken from a forum illustrates how *nasiha* is given on a forum by corroborating the advice with *dalil*. The topic-opener, ab1986, asks for advice for a fellow Muslim who is caught up between his family on the one hand and the obligations and prohibitions prescribed by God on the other hand, which is a standard situation for many Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands.¹⁸⁶

Al-salam ‘alaykum,

one of my brothers has a problem with his father. He has just turned 18 and has been practising Islam for around a year. His father has a business which he runs under the name of this brother because he himself cannot do it due to some problems. This business has yielded quiet some profit this year and the father now wants to buy a new car. For this, he wants to take out a loan and the brother is supposed to do it. Since he knows that it is wrong from an Islamic point of view he does not want to do it and has told so his father. But his father keeps insisting. And now the brother asks what he is supposed to do.

He has asked me but I would like to get also advice from you. Should he say yes or no? Please take into consideration that he lives with his parents and that those do not have any relationship with Islam. Bear in mind that one should prevent to denigrate Islam in the eyes of the family. The family might develop hatred towards Islam because they are

¹⁸⁶ Al-Sunna, forum, 3 November 2010: I need some advice.

ignorant and will perhaps refuse to engage with Islam at all.

Offhanded I would have said yes, because it occurred to me that it might have far-reaching consequences. The family might fall apart or the brother might be kicked out or so. This is why I hesitated and asked the brother for time to think it over.

This is why I ask you to think about it and give advice.

Baraka Allah fikum

The main problem here is that taking a loan from a bank involves paying interest (*riba*) which is forbidden in Islam and considered a major sin. God forbids in the Qur'an in several verses *riba* and makes clear that those who do not live up to this prohibition are doomed to hell and that cruel punishments will expect them.¹⁸⁷ There are also numerous hadiths accredited to the Prophet in which he prohibits *riba*, which has the connotation of usury.¹⁸⁸ The punishments concern both, those who take *riba* and those who pay. It is particularly difficult to live up to this prohibition in non-Muslim society where paying interest or become part of a deal which involves interest is an integral part of the economy and often difficult to avoid as for instance, in the case of a simple savings account. The dilemma as framed by the thread opener consists of obeying to your parents and instilling in them an inclination towards Islam so that they might convert in the future and, on the other hand, the clear and uncompromising prohibition of *riba*. Umm Jawad answers in a manner that does not tolerate any objection:

'Alaykum al-salam wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu,

[citing ab1986] The family might develop hatred towards Islam because they are ignorant and perhaps refuse to engage with Islam at all.[/]

These kinds of words should not come from the mouth of a muwahhid¹⁸⁹. Or do you think that the *hidaya* [C.B.: guidance] of his parents are in his hands? Allah guides those whom He subhanahu wa-ta'ala wants to guide. And I can only say that this is a test of Allah for him. (Q 31:15) "But if they strive to make thee associate with Me that whereof thou hast no knowledge, then do not obey them."

He must not obey if they ask him to do haram.

And (Q 51:56) "I have not created jinn and mankind except to serve Me." Al-hamd li-llah

[citing ab1986] Offhanded I would have said yes, because it occurred to me that it might have far-reaching consequences. The family might fall apart or the brother might be kicked out or so. This is way I hesitated and ask the brother for time to think it over.[/]

Akhi [C.B.: my brother], if Allah declares something haram, khalas [C.B.: that's it, enough]. (Q 24:51) "We hear, and we obey." We do not need to say that this or that will happen. A sister whom I have gotten to know myself was beaten because she recited the Qur'an and then she was kicked out. She was 17 back then. Another young sister was kicked out and beaten because she wore her hijab, not even niqab [C.B.: face veil], just hijab . . . Allah al-musta'an [C.B.: May Allah help us]

[. . .]

¹⁸⁷ See verses Q 4:161, Q 2:275-280, Q 3:130, Q 4:161, Q 30:39.

¹⁸⁸ It is most likely that the term *riba* as it is used in the Qur'an means usury which is supported by transmissions ascribed among others to Ibn 'Abbas. However, the opinion that every form of interest is prohibited has become dominant within Islamic scholarship. I thank my supervisor Harald Motzki for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁸⁹ Somebody who adheres to the doctrine of *tawhid*, a monotheist.

Umm Jawad does not beat about the bush. Akin to a strict nanny who has caught a child lying, she reprimands ab1986 of bending the issue and stating the question in order to extract a *nasiha* which might serve as a justification for the brother to do the favour for his father and to avoid possible negative consequences for himself if he would refuse. Since God has unequivocally forbidden *riba* there is no room for discussion and manoeuvring. She cites two verses which underline that mankind was created to submit, serve and obey God. Other discussants join Umm Jawad and advise that the brother must refuse to sign the loan. Otherwise he would commit a major sin, possibly ending in hell for it. However, ab1986 does not give up that easily and evokes the importance of maintaining a good relationship with one's parents in Islam and that, if the brother who is the only Muslim in this family is kicked out, they might be lost for Islam forever. He, ab1986, thanks all those who have already given advice but would like to collect a few more opinions. After two more postings in this style, Umm Jawad loses patience:

Ma sha' Allah, if, after the words of Allah, you still want to "collect opinions", then I step out of this discussion. I have said what must have been said.

This is the concluding posting of this thread. It remains unclear if the practise of giving *nasiha* has borne any fruits in this case. Umm Jawad and others resisted the temptation to "bend" God's will to something which is more to the liking and easier to put into practices though this would make life much easier. At the same time, they have remained opened to the person who asked for advice by calling him "*akhi*" (my brother), greeting him appropriately and engaging with his question. Yet the intractable insistence of ab1986 to go on asking for advice though the only possible advice had already been given, leaves the thread inconclusive with irritated reactions in the last postings similar to Umm Jawad's.

Though it might be more common to give *nasiha* on forums and chat rooms upon request many engage with this practise from their own motivation. 'Isa describes how he sometimes subtly tries to trigger a *nasiha*:

Sometimes questions are asked so that others get an answers. If you see that a wrong belief or idea spreads on the forum or on the Internet in general, then one can ask a question about it and somebody perhaps will answer with evidence or existing fatwas. This type of *nasiha* is the most empathetic. You do not accuse a Muslim directly of a mistake but you ask a question about it and you hope that somebody looks sincerely for an answer.

Giving *nasiha* here takes the detour of Islamic argumentation in which somebody asks a question and triggers collective deliberation about it with the aim of constructing *dalil*. The actual target of the *nasiha* remains unclear though attentive participants in forums and chat rooms will possibly have an idea about the intention behind the question and as to who is targeted. 'Isa finds

this to be a more pleasant way of giving *nasiha* because this helps fellow Muslims to save their face and makes the advice more acceptable.

As has become evident in the above example, to give a *nasiha* does not always imply that sincere counselling is effective in commanding good and forbidding wrong. While the reactions of the addressees in chat rooms and discussion forums indicate whether they are receptive of a *nasiha* and are willing to change their behaviour or adapt their beliefs accordingly, it usually remains open whether they actually do so. Informants affirmed that voiced intentions and promises do not necessarily testify to the efficacy of a *nasiha*. While Umm Fatima admitted in the above quote that she felt affected if people did not pick up her advice, Umm ‘Ubaydillah looks at it from a more detached position:¹⁹⁰

It is better to recommend your sisters an instructive lecture or to advise them with wisdom and evidence. As soon as you have advised somebody you have fulfilled your obligation and it is up to the receiver what to do with your advice.

Her answer points to the delicacy inherent to the practice of giving *nasiha*. After all, to give advice means to, often publicly, criticise the religious practises and beliefs of a person and to question his or her authority in religious matters. This is more so the case when somebody who is considered to have more knowledge than the average Muslim following the Salafiyya is the target of a *nasiha*. The following extract from my notes taken during a chat room session shows how an authoritative voice tries to evade *nasiha* and, in extension, critique.¹⁹¹

MahmudOriginal, who was logged in in the same chat room as I was, contacted me using private messaging and asked whether I was a Muslim, what I would like to know about Islam and whether I would like to convert. He also said that he did not understand the speaker and administrator of the chat room, JustAllah. He indirectly criticised his German language skills by suggesting that I could ask him in case I was not able to understand the lecturer. He could answer in better German. He also suggested that he could call me to explain the *shahada* the meaning of which we were discussing in the chat room with JustAllah who answered questions about it. He posted a link to a film on his YouTube channel about the *shahada*. A few minutes after our conversation MahmudOriginal asked in the open chat window whether he could have the microphone in order to correct something and give a *nasiha*. JustAllah reacted quite distrustful asking him what he would like to correct. While MahmudOriginal insisted on doing this via the microphone, JustAllah in turn insisted that he should do it in the open chat window. He said that he had made bad experiences with giving the microphone to people he does not know and that he did not know the ‘*aqida* of MahmudOriginal. After a while MahmudOriginal, who kept his hand “raised”¹⁹², jokingly complained that his hand was falling off. However,

¹⁹⁰ Interview taken on 24 May 2009 in the Hague, the Netherlands. Umm ‘Ubaydillah agreed to be interviewed offline but rejected to be recorded. Since her voice belongs to her ‘*awra*, so her argumentation, she did not want it to be recorded and stored somewhere beyond her control with a possibility that men could listen to it. I wrote a report of our conversation by paraphrasing her. She rewrote parts of the report in order to better represent her thoughts.

¹⁹¹ Excerpt from my notes taken on 11 October 2010 in the chat room “On the path of Qur’an and Sunna”.

¹⁹² A hand is raised in a chat room by clicking on the icon of a raised hand which causes a raised hand to appear next to the name of the user. Raising a hand means to ask for the microphone in order to speak.

JustAllah and everybody in the chat room ignored him. He left the room after a short while.

While JustAllah had the power over the microphone, MahmudOriginal was able to contact participants like me via private messaging and sow doubts about the authority and knowledge of JustAllah. The private messaging function is a default function of the chat client and cannot be manipulated by the administrator of a chat room hosted by that chat client. The announcement of giving a *nasiha* in order to correct the speaker was clearly understood as a challenge by both the speaker himself and the participants. However, it would have been a sign of insincerity and a lack of devotion to Islam to bluntly reject a *nasiha* which might help to improve one's faith. JustAllah used the fact that he did not know the '*aqida* (creed, doctrine) of MahmudOriginal and did not want to provide the space for the propagation of unbelief as a pretext to decline the microphone. He actually handed over the microphone to other people who asked for it. He offered him to give *nasiha* in the open chat window by typing it. Knowing that this would disadvantage him—type-chatting proceeds in very short and quickly written sentences—MahmudOriginal denied. Due to the unequal distribution of communicative means in chat rooms MahmudOriginal failed to voice his *nasiha* and to command good and forbid wrong.

This last example shows that *nasiha* is regularly used to expose or even unmask a person as a Muslim with defective beliefs or corrupted practices. This is where *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* becomes important because this principle demands from Muslims following the Salafiyya to dissociate from those who are known or have been identified as unbelievers.

Dissociating from unbelievers

The principle of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* includes disavowal as well loyalty. The latter, that is loyalty to Islam, God and fellow Muslims, is rather indirectly implied in the usual practices and interactions in chat rooms and online forums. The standard goal to emulate the Prophet and to internalise *adab al-da'wa* in the behaviour towards others is in fact a form of showing loyalty to God, Islam and Muslims. In contrast, *bara'* or disavowal necessitates a deviation from the behavioural norm and the explicit identification of the person to be disavowed and, in consequence an act of disavowal or dissociation. The most common form in which this takes place in chat rooms and discussion forums of the Salafiyya is *takfir* (declaring a Muslim an unbeliever) followed by warnings, ridicule and abuse towards the present or absent convicts. *Takfir* is however a very contested issue and it is fiercely discussed in chat rooms and online forums as to who is allowed to do *takfir* and as to what constitutes a case of unbelief which places a Muslim outside of Islam (see Introduction, p. 13f.). A discussion about *takfir* can ironically sometimes lead to the practice

of *takfir* towards those who disagree in this question. A lighter version of *takfir* for those who do not want to get their fingers burned is to expose the sinfulness (*fisq*) or unbelief (*kufr*) present in the practice or belief of a person without drawing any conclusion with reference to the status of the faith (*iman*) of the person in question. Exposing sin and unbelief stops therefore shortly of *takfir* because *takfir* itself is a hot button issue.

Before turning to the issue of *takfir*, one practice through which Salafi Muslims explicitly show loyalty to fellow Muslims in forums and chat rooms is worth mentioning. “Giving *salam*” is about the etiquette of properly greeting a fellow Muslim with fixed greeting phrases reserved for Muslims. Non-Muslims are usually greeted in accordance with the local vernacular standards (e.g., hallo, good morning, good evening). The proper protocol of greeting among Muslims which was practised in all forums and chat rooms I included in my research follows a specific exchange of phrases. If the initial greeter starts with “*al-salam ‘alaykum*” (peace be upon you). Those who react in a forum thread or are present in a chat room are required to answer with at least “*wa-‘alaykum al-salam*” (peace be upon you as well) or, adding one further blessing to the phrase, with “*wa-‘alaykum al-salam wa-rahmat Allah*” (peace and the God’s mercy be upon you) and, adding two further blessings, with “ *wa-‘alaykum al-salam wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu*” (peace and God’s mercy and blessing be upon you). If the initial greeter starts with “*al-salam ‘alaykum wa-rahmat Allah*”, the respondents have to reply with a greeting of the same or an higher order, that is, either “*wa-‘alaykum as-salam wa-rahmat Allah*” or “*wa-‘alaykum al-salam wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu*”. It is not permissible to reply to an Islamic greeting of a fellow Muslim with a greeting of a lower order. The third option is that the initial greeter starts with “*al-salam ‘alaykum wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu*” the respondents need to return the greeting with the same phrase.¹⁹³ The obligation to return the greeting with a phrase of the same or higher order stems from the Qur’an (Q 4:86): “And when you are greeted with a greeting greet with a fairer than it, or return it; surely God keeps a watchful count over everything.” According to hadiths accredited to the Prophet, the reward for good deeds which count on Judgement Day (*hasanat*) increase proportionally with the degree of the greeting. This relatively fixed protocol of Islamic greeting is also a tool to perform ones “Muslim-ness” because the correct use of the greetings indicate that a person is a Muslim. Whenever I was greeted according to this protocol in a chat room or discussion forum, I used the local vernacular forms in reply. In most instances this immediately triggered questions about my religious identity.

¹⁹³ Participants in chat room conversations tend to use abbreviations for the long greeting formulae because the exchange of short typed lines at a quick pace.

Giving *salam* is a rather mild way to perform and express difference in chat rooms and discussion forums because it does not entail any harsh consequences. It is rather a tool for identifying one's own group, the Muslims, and the others, that is non-Muslims and Muslims not familiar with the protocol. Doing *takfir* is in comparison a highly emotional, delicate and risky practice due to the contested issue of what constitutes the kind of unbelief which turns a Muslim into an unbeliever. In the following I will briefly trace the main fault lines concerning *takfir* among Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands.

One *takfir* fault line that runs across the Salafi community is the discussion as to when a sin turns into a form of unbelief that expels a Muslim from Islam. A sin must be *kufir akbar* (major unbelief) in order to justify *takfir*. The discussion about whether ruling by man-made laws in the case of Muslim rulers is a form of major unbelief illustrates what is at stake. It suffices here to recap the main arguments which I have delineated in the Introduction of this book. One group maintains that ruling by man-made laws is paramount to unbelief and that the laws and the rulers are idols (*tawaghit*). This interpretation justifies *takfir* towards the rulers and those supporting them because following, implementing and legislating these laws amounts to worship of idols which again is *shirk* (polytheism) incommensurate with *tawhid* (monotheism), the very basis of Islam (Wagemakers 2012, 166–174). *Shirk* counts as major unbelief (*kufir akbar*)¹⁹⁴ which expels a Muslim from Islam. The opposing view among Salafi Muslims rejects the automatic link between *kufir akbar* and ruling with man-made laws because it can only be *kufir akbar* if one can prove that (1) the man-made laws were legislated with the conviction of the legislator that this is the right thing to do while knowing that Islam forbids it (*i'tiqad*), (2) that the legislator turned man-made laws from *haram* to *halal* while knowing that they are *haram* (*istihlal*) or (3) that the legislator negates the truth of Islam altogether (*jahd*). In their eyes, legislating by man-made laws is a sin and *kufir asghar* (minor unbelief) until one of the above elements, *i'tiqad*, *istihlal* and *jahd*, can be proven. Most Salafis contend that a form of minor unbelief or a sin can only turn into major unbelief and thus a justification for *takfir* if it is committed with conviction or rendered *halal* while knowing that Islam says the contrary or if the perpetrator rejects the truth of Islam altogether.¹⁹⁵ The point of contention is that in the case of those who do *takfir* on Muslim rulers imposing man-made laws the sin (*shirk*) falls directly in the category of *kufir akbar* and there is

¹⁹⁴ *Kufir akbar* comprises sins on the level of the religious fundamentals, first and foremost *tawhid*. In contrast to *kufir akbar* which turns a Muslim into an unbeliever, *kufir asghar* (minor unbelief) are sins at the level of disobedience against a divine ruling which does not expel a person from Islam like drinking alcohol.

¹⁹⁵ The terminology used might vary but the idea is that *kufir* which expels a Muslim from Islam must be intentionally committed with the belief that it is right while knowing that God forbids it (see for instance al-Masri n.d.; Salafipublications 2000). Wagemakers provides a more detailed account of the discussion on ruling with man-made laws (Wagemakers 2009, 95–101).

thus no need to go the detour of proving *i'tiqad*, *istihlal* or *jahd*. Another instance in which the disagreement on the need to prove *i'tiqad*, *istihlal* and *jahd* comes to the fore is the sin of not praying.

A second prominent contested issue is voting in democratic systems ruled by man-made laws. In line with the above argument that legislating and ruling by man-made laws amounts to *shirk*, some Salafi Muslims in the Netherlands and Germany believe that voting is the same as confirming the authority of man-made laws, which would be *shirk* and a justification for *takfir*. Others, based on scholars like Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid, argue that

the interests of Islam require Muslims to vote so as to ward off the greater evil and to reduce harmful effects, such as where two candidates may be non-Muslims but one of them is less hostile towards Muslims than the other, and Muslims' votes will have an impact on the outcome of the election. (al-Munajjid n.d.)

In this view, the advantages (preventing harm from Islam and the Muslim community) and disadvantages (voting in a system of man-made law) must be weighed against each other. This principle of *maslaha* (interest, advantage, benefit) allows scholars to take the Muslim public interest and welfare into account when making a decision as to whether something is *haram* or *halal*. A third and perhaps biggest group in this discussion believes that voting is not permissible and a sin but not a form of unbelief that turns a Muslim into an unbeliever.

The discussion above illustrates some of the considerations that play an important role when engaging in *takfir*. In the eyes of some, doing *takfir* is part of *tawhid*. This means that if a Muslim refuses to do *takfir* on a *kafir*, he himself will become a *kafir*. The scholar Diya al-Din al-Qudsi states in one of his books translated into German:¹⁹⁶

If you consider somebody a Muslim whom Allah and His messenger have identified as *kafir*, or if you doubt his *kufr* in spite of evidence from Qur'an and Sunna or if you do not do *takfir* on him, you defy thereby the judgement of Allah and His messenger. (al-Qudsi 2012, 113)

This reasoning leads to the highly contested practice of "chain *takfir*" in which the chain of "doing *takfir* on somebody who refuses to do *takfir* on somebody who refuses to do *takfir* and so

¹⁹⁶ His book *Der Wahre Tauhid* (original in Arabic: *Hadha Huwa al-Tawhid*) was recommended to me by three Salafi Muslims so that I could learn more about the reason as to why doing *takfir* belongs to the fundamentals of their religion (*usul al-din*). They believed that not doing *takfir* on an apparent unbeliever constituted in itself *kufr*. Al-Qudsi's lectures circulate widely on the web. Muhammad Bouyeri, the murderer of the Dutch intellectual Theo van Gogh translated some of his writings, among which his book *The True Muslim* (available on his website Haqyayinlari.com), into Dutch (Peters 2005, 21). Not a lot is known about him except for that he currently is the administrator of the forum Davetulhaqq.com. The only biographical information I could gather comes from an Arabic forum posting, in which information about al-Qudsi stemming from one of his students was posted (al-'Ali 2012). According to the posting, he was born in the Palestinian Territories and should be in his 60s (the information was given in 2008). He has attained a doctoral degree in 'aqida (doctrine, fundamentals of the faith) and paediatrics.

on” is expanded almost endlessly with the result that the majority of the Muslim community is potentially *kafir*. Adherents of this notion of *takfir* are derogatively called *ghulat al-takfir* (exaggerators or extremists in *takfir*) or *khawarij* (Kharijites, literally: those who went out).

The Kharijites were originally a group of people who defected from ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), a cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, when he proposed during the battle of Siffin in July 657 to his adversary Mu‘awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (d. 680) to settle their differences by letting two referees pronounce a judgement based on the Qur’an. ‘Ali and Mu‘awiya were involved on opposing sides in the first Muslim civil war over the succession of the third caliph ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan (d. 656) who had been murdered. While the majority of ‘Ali’s army accepted his proposal for different reasons, one group fiercely protested and withdrew from his army. From their point of view, God had appointed ‘Ali to lead the community. He should therefore make sure to execute the will of God and not compromise. Their protest slogan thus was “judgement belongs to God alone” (*la hukm illa li-llah*). When the verdict of the referees was issued another large number “went out” (*kharaja*) secretly from ‘Ali’s camp in Kufa to those who had withdrawn earlier because their hopes were not fulfilled by the verdict. In the following decades they organised local uprisings and committed political murder but their movement never succeeded in gaining any bigger and lasting impetus due to internal disputes and splits as well as to outside intervention and suppression (for a more detailed overview see Levi Della Vida 1978). Their opposition was quelled by the end of the seventh century. In spite of their disappearance as a notable political force, the Kharijites continue to live in the narrative repertoire of Sunni scholars and believers due to mainly two teachings. First of all, believers are obliged to proclaim illegitimate and depose the leader (*imam*) who has deviated from the true path as ‘Ali did when he accepted human arbitration. In extension, they also believe that the best Muslim should become caliph and reject the bias favouring the family of the Prophet and specific tribal affiliations. Secondly, Kharijites believe that Muslims who commit from their point of view a mortal sin were unbelievers regardless of whether they declared to believe in God or not. Based on this practice of *takfir*, more extreme Kharijite groups practised *isti‘rad* which meant that people were interrogated about their beliefs and, if found to be apostates (*murtaddun*), put to death.

This moral strictness, rigour and intransigence has helped to develop the notorious reputation of the Kharijites. One does not need a lot of fantasy to understand why those who rather readily practise *takfir*, including chain *takfir*, are abused as *khawarij*. They, in turn, call their opponents “*murji‘a*” (upholders of the doctrine of *irja*). This early politico-religious movement came into existence in the course of the conflict between the caliph ‘Uthman, his successor ‘Ali

and the challenger of 'Ali, Mu'awiya. The doctrine of *irja'* stipulates that faith (*iman*) comprises belief and its public confession but does not include acts. Somebody who commits sins or behaves wrongly is a sinner or aberrant believer but still a Muslim and not an apostate. This put them in sharp opposition to the Kharijites according to whom faith includes both beliefs and acts. While the Kharijites declared 'Ali, 'Uthman and Mu'awiya to be wrong and apostates, the *murji'a* deferred this judgement to God¹⁹⁷ and asked Muslims not to dissociate from nor declare solidarity to either one of them (for a more detailed overview see Madelung 1993). The notion of *irja'* later entered the Ash'arite doctrine (see Introduction, p. 11f.) and thereby Sunni orthodoxy when Ash'arite scholars defined faith basically as belief in God and assigned acts to a secondary rank, a principle which is rejected by the Salafiyya. Those who are themselves abused as Kharijites answer by calling those *murji'a* who refuse, for instance, to dissociate from the Saudi rulers due to their apparent unbelief embodied in Saudi cooperation with the USA and other acts.

Knowledge about these events from the early history of Islam are wide-spread among Muslims following the Salafiyya and their re-narrations are tinted by the bias and preferences of the narrator and the audience. Chat rooms and discussion forums are an arena in which Salafi and non-Salafi Muslim opponents are "morphed" into either Kharijites and *murji'a*. Questions like "Who are the khawarij of today?" or advice on how to identify contemporary *murji'a* abound. This "discursive morphing" (Howard 2011, 66) takes place because Salafi Muslims believe that this early division into sects is still relevant today and a major explanatory factor for contemporary events and developments.¹⁹⁸

The following example from a forum discloses the delicacy and the contentiousness inherent to the practise of *takfir* among Salafi Muslims. The thread begins with a copy-pasted news item about the death of the Egyptian Islam scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Abu Zayd worked at The Institute for Arabic Language and Literature of the University of Cairo in the 1980s when he was accused of apostasy. The accusation was levelled against him by religious scholars who took offence at his analyses of the Qur'an in which he employed historical-critical methods. This finally led to the judgement of forced divorce from his wife in 1995. He was threatened and decided to go into exile in the Netherlands where he continued working as a professor and died in 2010. The first reaction on the news of his death comes from Abu Hafsa, who is himself a Salafi

¹⁹⁷ The Arabic verb *arja'a* (in Qur'anic usage *arja*, see Q 9:106) means to defer judgement and is believed to be at the origin of the terms *murji'a* and *irja'*.

¹⁹⁸ Morphing is a technique employed in motion pictures and animation through which one image is seamlessly faded into another image. Discursive morphing does the same however with reference to narratives. In the course of discursive morphing, the original narrative and the contemporary lives of, in our case, Muslims become an extension of each other.

preacher enjoying popularity among many young Dutch-speaking Muslims:¹⁹⁹

Al-hamd li-llah, another preacher of heresy less in the world.

His dry and somehow merciless remark triggered a series of interjections like the following one from Marwan:

Subhan Allah, I cannot believe that you say this!
The Sunna teaches that we should make du'a' for those that have deviated in place of cursing them with something like this. Now Satan can once again rejoice.
khayr [C.B.: good, well], in sha'a llah

He is outraged by the laconic way Abu Hafsa comments on the death of a human being and Muslim. Abu Hafsa answers immediately citing a host of evidence from Qur'an and hadiths in order to prove that his comment is Islamically correct:

To make a du'a' for a dead kafir? This is not permissible according to the Qur'an, the Sunna and the ijma' [C.B.: consensus] of the 'ulama'.
It is haram to do the prayer for the unbelievers and the munafiqin [C.B.: hypocrites] or to beg Allah for mercy and forgiveness for him due to the words of Allah, the Blessed and the Sublime:

And pray thou never over any one of them when he is dead, nor stand over his grave; they disbelieved in God and His Messenger, and died while they were ungodly. [C.B.: Q 9:84]

and due to a hadith which was transmitted from 'Ali (radiya Allah 'anhu): I heard once a man begging for forgiveness for his two parents while these were mushrikin (polytheists). I replied: "Are you begging for forgiveness for your parents while they were mushrikin?!" He replied: "Did not the prophet Ibrahim beg for forgiveness for his father, him being a mushrik?" He ('Ali) said: "I told the Prophet (salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam) about this and this verse was revealed:

"It is not for the Prophet and the believers to ask pardon for the idolaters, even though they be near kinsmen, after that it has become clear to them that they will be the inhabitants of Hell. Abraham asked not pardon for his father except because of a promise he had made to him; and when it became clear to him that he was an enemy of God, he declared himself quit of him; Abraham was compassionate, clement." [C.B.: Q 9:113-114]

Al-Nawawi (may Allah the Sublime have mercy upon him) said in al-Majmu' (part 5, page 144 and 258): Praying over a kafir and begging for forgiveness for him are haram as is written in the Qur'an and the ijma'.

Following his evidence, praying for a dead unbeliever and asking for forgiveness for him are not permissible. Thereby he proves that his uncompromising stance and rigour is the only possible way to react to these news. However, other participants are not convinced:

[jawaneke]

Salam,

even if you totally disagree with somebody, even if he may be your enemy, after all, every human being is a creation of Allah swt.

¹⁹⁹ Islambegrijpen, forum, 6 July 2010: Qur'an scholar who fled to the Netherlands died. Although I have in general not anonymised the names of popular and well-known preachers, I have chosen to do so in this case since his real name added to some key words from the discussion will lead to the forums thread and threaten the anonymity of the other discussants.

This is why I ask myself whether it is actually prudent to rejoice about somebody's death.

[talib hullandi]

Al-salam 'alaykum,

excuse me, with all due respect, but was this guy a mushrik???

"Then admonish them! Thou art only an admonisher. Thou art not charged to oversee them." (Q 88:21-22)

"Judgement belongs not to any but God." (Q 12:67)

"and He associates in His government no one" (Q 18:26)

[...]

Allah (swt) is the most merciful . . .

ma'a salama [C.B.: with peace]

Jawaneke uses a very general argument that all human beings are the creations of God and that it is not done to rejoice about the death of somebody. She takes offence at Abu Hafsa's "*al-hamd li-llah*" (praise to God) which is an expression of joy and happiness. Talib hullandi asks for more details on the misdeeds of the deceased Abu Zayd and lists quotations from the Qur'an cementing the sole authority of God to cast judgements. The role of Muslims is reduced to admonishers. Abu Hafsa reacts in a longer posting to talib hullandi:

Wa-'alaykum al-salam wa-rahmat Allah dear brother,

this man has been declared kafir by many 'ulama' in Egypt after they had studied the content of his writings; and this is also the reason why he fled to the Netherlands. And also in the Netherlands he continued to publish his weird ideology which I was also forced to study at university during which I read comments which made my Muslim hair stand on end.

Do not misunderstand me, I am very careful with doing takfir on individuals and I only do this in cases when the evidence for this is more than clear, without doubts and guessing.

Concerning the verses which you cite, they are entirely out of place here. The first verse is about admonishing people and the fact that we cannot force them to believe . . . But what has this to do with a man who has been admonished and has died? How can we admonish somebody who is already dead? (and has been advised before his death many times?)

Concerning "Judgement belongs not to any but God", this does not mean that we are not allowed to judge anybody any more. In the fiqh [C.B.: jurisprudence] of Islam there are not for nothing many rules about Muslims and apostates . . . The apostate does not inherit from a Muslim, neither a Muslim from an apostate. The apostate is not allowed to marry a Muslim woman and he is not to be buried with the Muslims. The funeral prayers are not to be prayed over him. The apostate is not allowed to be taken as a leader of Muslims and he cannot be a wali (legal guardian) for a Muslim woman, etc. If we were not allowed to call a person apostate, why would there be these rules in Islamic fiqh?

Doing takfir on Muslims based on guesses and hear-and-say is what causes destruction on earth, but NOT doing takfir towards people after their kufr has become more than apparent also causes destruction on earth. Because in this way the apostate would be able to marry a Muslim woman and could be a leader of Muslims.

Of course, only Allah knows whether a specific person has repented before his death and whether they for 100 per cent sure belong to the people of janna [C.B.: Paradise] or jahannam [C.B.: Hell]. But we judge only according to outer appearance and what we can perceive. And this does not show a lot of good stuff for this man. And I am not saying this with joy because nobody wishes kufr and jahannam to another person.

In this post he nuances his first statement without ceding any ground. For him it is a simply necessity to do *takfir* if the evidence is clear because God has made specific rules for apostates. He emphasises that he is not happy that this person has died a *kafir* and will probably end in hell. Other participants are not convinced and continue to object to his harshness. The thread is finally abandoned inconclusively because all discussants hold on to their point of view.

This thread exemplifies a rather mild way of doing *takfir* in spite of the rigour of Abu Hafsa's first reaction and is uncompromising stance. The following example is of a different order in terms of harshness and abuse. I cite from reactions that occurred later in a thread in which the issue of chain *takfir* was discussed.

[al-haqq:]

And why does somebody like Nasr al-Din al-Albani²⁰⁰ become a kafir in your eyes?

[haqq-wa-sayf:]

Bi-sm Allah al-rahman al-rahim

al-salam 'alaykum,

because he says that the tawaghit²⁰¹ are his brothers . . . thus they actually are his brothers.

lahu dinuhu wa-lana dinana al-islam²⁰²

[al-haqq:]

Bi-sm Allah al-rahman al-rahim

al-salam 'alaykum wa-rahmat Allah

this means that if Abu Hanifa, rahimahu Allah, had called somebody his brother though this person did not pray, Imam Ahmad would have been forced to do takfir on him?²⁰³

Sister, your statement contradicts the statement of Abu Hamza above.

[Abu Mariyam:]

[citing haqq-wa-sayf] because he says that the tawaghit are his brothers . . . thus they actually are his brothers.[/]

May Allah subhanahu wa-ta'ala guide you. What kind of principle is this supposed to be?

[al-Salafiyya:]

Why are this kharijiyya witch and her cronies allowed to spread their poison here over the 'ulama'? What kind of forum is this???????

Listen, you hellhound bitch, Sheikh al-Albani (rahimahu Allah) has never regarded those which you and your Afghan nobody shaytan, whose brother has become now ayatoller²⁰⁴,

²⁰⁰ Influential hadith scholar (d. 1999) who refused to do *takfir* on the rulers of Saudi-Arabia.

²⁰¹ Idols, term used to refer to mainly the Saudi but also other Muslim rulers who do not legislate and rule with the shari'a.

²⁰² They have their religion and we have our religion, Islam.

²⁰³ Abu Hanifa (d. 767), a Muslim scholar and namesake of the Hanafi *madhhab* (jurisprudential school), was of the opinion that a Muslim who does not pray is still a Muslim while Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), religious scholar and the namesake of the Hanbali *madhhab* was of the opinion that this person is an unbeliever.

²⁰⁴ The poster refers to Abu Hamza al-Afghani, a Salafi ideologue who has written several books in German on topics such as *tawhid*, *takfir* and jihad. He supports chain *takfir* if certain conditions are met and has become notorious among Salafi Muslims in Germany with his book *Eine ruhige Kritik an die kämpfenden Gruppen* (a calm critique addressed to the fighting groups) published in 2010 in which he accuses people like Usama ibn Ladin and the likes

fight, has never regarded them as tawaghit so that you can bring the statement that he considered tawaghit as Muslims.

What a stupid brat! Qabbahaki Allah [C.B.: May Allah make you ugly]

May our hands grasp the throat of your kind so that fitan [C.B.: plural of fitna] stops.

Amin

[al-haqq:]

Let's discuss for once in a civilised way, in sha'Allah . . . without clashes and insults and so on.

[Abu Irfan:]

[citing al-Salafiyya] May our hands grasp the throat of your kind so that fitan stops.[/]

Your Kalashnikov idol has completely removed your sanity. Your sword sufi do not grasp anything except for your Chuck Norris doll when you dress her before you send her on jihad on the hills of your bed cover. Your brain has exploded before you have. You will not understand anything because you are completely maniac [C.B.: *durchgeknallt* in the original], you small clever boy.

[al-Salafiyya:]

Yeah, you Rambo, you have really impressed me with that. What should I say to such an ablah [C.B.: idiot] like you??? You jahil al-murakkab²⁰⁵ compares the qadhiya [C.B.: issue] of the nasara [C.B.: Christians], who are by asl [C.B.: by principle] kuffar and whose kufr is explicitly mentioned in the nass [C.B.: the text, i.e., the Qur'an], to the hukkam [C.B.: rulers], who are by asl muslimun and who are regarded by many 'ulama' as Muslim due to the ta'wil [C.B.: interpretation] of kufr duna kufr²⁰⁶.

See you no-good, even a Abulhussain²⁰⁷ would be able to refute you with indefinitely adilla [C.B.: plural of *dalil*, evidence] on the topic of kufr duna kufr. How can you then in such a matter of ta'wil do takfir [C.B.: *takfirieren* in the original] on al-Albani (rahimahu Allah)? His likes who have precisely followed these adilla which confuse even du'at [C.B.: preachers], let alone the 'awamm [C.B.: lay believers].

Okay, so go, and do takfir towards yourself you muflis [C.B.: bankrupt] or become Ayatoller like the brother of your Hindu Kush shaytan.

[citing Abu Irfan] your Chuck Norris doll when you dress her before you sent her on jihad on the hills of your bed cover.[/]

What a mentally retarded person . . . be aware not to mutate into an Ayatoller tomorrow. The signs are visible.

This exchange is one of the many examples in which episodes of Islamic history and local, international as well as scholarly debates are used along curses, comical metaphors and self-made labels in order to deride opponents. Even for those following all debates it is at times difficult to understand the argumentation and hints which are at times only decipherable by insiders. What

of not having understood *tawhid* and jihad properly. His older brother is supposed to have converted to Shi'a Islam, an information which I could not verify. The word "Ayatoller" is an intentional malapropism of the word ayatollah (a high-ranking title for clerics of the Twelver Shi'a) to which the German suffix -er is added. The meaning is roughly "even crazier than an ayatollah".

²⁰⁵ A *jahil murakkab* (compound ignorant) is somebody who claims to know almost everything but has in fact no knowledge of Islam. A *jahil murakkab* is considered to be worse than a *jahil basit* (simple ignorant) who says that he does not know.

²⁰⁶ Literally *kufri* less than *kufr*. Unbelief that does not nullify one's belief in God (*iman*), see Introduction (p. 14).

²⁰⁷ Abulhussain is a well-known and popular Salafi preacher in Germany who is ridiculed by those Salafi Muslims with Jihadi inclinations as too compromising. The poster here wants to underline that even such a "wannabe Salafi preacher" like Abulhussain would be able to refute the person in question.

stands out is not only the uncompromising stance of the protagonists but the ferocity and enmity that gradually increases to a boiling point. Given the hostility among the discussants it does not come as a surprise that differences could not be surmounted and that the thread was hence left unresolved.

These outbursts are at times baffling because enmity and anger are voiced all of the sudden in a way that can lead uninitiated observers to believe that those who take part in these clashes are at war and doomed to eternal hostility towards each other. What might be at play here is the cultivation and performance of what Schielke terms “righteous indignation” (Schielke 2010, 7) in his discussion of “secular-liberal” and “Muslim” reactions to the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllandsposten* in 2005. Righteous indignation is a reaction on the diffuse feeling of moral injury experienced by those who “grow angry” the more they talk about and act on their feeling. Schielke explains with reference to the cartoon affairs that

[. . .], the issue was roiled again and again for many weeks, offering the people involved a strong sense of righteous indignation, emotional bonding and knowing one’s place. Thus while the discourses and the arguments expressed as well as the specific moments of moral injury experienced on both sides of the controversy may have been different, the emotional quality of the event was often strikingly similar on both sides; and this can be explained by neither Islamic tradition nor secular power. [. . .]. In my view, the Danish caricature affair was an event of meaningful anger on both sides: an occasion to feel and express righteous anger about being hurt and threatened in a way that both *requires* and *allows* a clear response. (Schielke 2010, 7–8)

The escalations of *takfir* in chat rooms and discussion forums like the one cited provide occasions for the release and cultivation of instant righteous indignation which in the course of the interaction turns into meaningful anger. This anger or indignation transforms from “a diffused and often implicit moral ‘gut feeling’ to simple slogans and personified distinctions of good and evil, us and them” (Schielke 2010, 8) which are reproduced from the rich stock of narratives of the early Muslim community. The cultivation of righteous indignation produces clear lines of division between the “extremist *takfiris* who sow *fitna*” and the “hypocrite and coward *murji’a* who refuse to say the truth to those in power”. Schielke uses the interpretive broader framework of populism in order to explain the outbursts in the Muslim as well as secular-liberal camps in the course of the cartoon affair because populism possesses the quality of making moral unease and gut-feelings concrete, explicit and manageable. The latter implies that moral anger and anxieties can be cultivated, aggravated and enlarged. Doing *takfir* in this interpretation turns into populist agitation in which the limits of what is bearable and acceptable is performed, negotiated and properly framed in concepts that speak meaningfully to the imagination of

Muslims. Cursing, insulting and offending becomes part of *takfir* understood as righteous indignation driven to its maximum. At this stage, discussion is fruitless, the separation between Evil and Good is manifest and turned in to points of references in which the participants anchor their identity. Not every instance of *takfir* ends in fierce abuse like in the example provided above. However, once the conversation has come to the verge of name-calling it quickly spirals up to this extreme if it is not curbed by other participants or moderators.

Chat rooms and discussion forums offer plenty occasions for the cultivation of righteous indignation and populist agitation. They are spaces easily accessible upon a mouse click, if no restrictions are imposed by the administrators, dedicated to a specific form of devotion and worship. Opponents from within the Salafiyya or non-Salafi opponents can in most cases just as easily enter these spaces and make their presence felt there which causes friction from which clashes like the one presented above can spark off. Though everybody can easily leave these spaces if he or she feels uncomfortable, many stay and attend or engage in these clashes. It is difficult to uncover the motivation of those who participate in these “online battles”. The answers of many informants and the evolution of these clashes point towards their cathartic effect on participants. While the differences are in most cases not resolved, those who engage in *takfir* and similar rigorous and harsh practices are able to vent their anger and to, simultaneously, rectify their own beliefs and devotional practices through the enactment of boundaries and limits. The cultivation of righteous indignation can thus incite a catharsis and help to deliver believers from ambiguity, doubt and uncertainty.

The intensity with which *takfir* takes place and is debated often triggers resigned reactions in which Salafi Muslim capitulate facing a confusing and fierce debate in which a Muslim can quickly become an apostate. This “*takfir* fatigue” indicates that the division into good and evil or we and them does not always produce the clarity and deliverance longed for. After a long chat session of lecturing and answering question Abulhussain started to talk himself into resignation observing that *fitna* was pulling Muslims in Germany apart and that his *da'wa* activities were contravened from within the Muslim community:²⁰⁸

I mean, we want to worship Allah subhanahu wa-ta'ala here. We want to learn our religion. We want to have classes here. And, please, I do not want to talk about others now or about other topics and so on. [. . .] There are particular words or topics, you really do not want to hear about them any more. You do not want to hear the word any more, because too much has been said about it. [. . .] But I will tell you something, I will reveal something to you. If you want to destroy a city, you just have to send two Muslims who carry *fitna* in their hearts and they will destroy it within a few months. la hawla wa-

²⁰⁸ Islam lessons, chat room, 27 March 2009.

la quwwa illa bi-llah²⁰⁹. You may work for ten years but then there come two, three people who are sick in their hearts and they destroy your entire work. [. . .] And this situation we are faced with today, us Muslims, that the enemies of Islam have humiliated us, that our leaders have humiliated us, that we live so poorly, this has not come about without any reason. We have done this ourselves with our own hands. [. . .] If you watch Muslims, how they live and what they do and so on . . . I really do not know why people accept Islam. We always say ‘people, please differentiate between Islam and Muslims. Islam is the Truth, Islam is beautiful.’ But us? And when I say us, I mean not me or you, I mean in general. There are black sheep among us. Among us there are people who want to destroy everything which you want to construct. And this has unfortunately always been the case. You want to build a house. Let’s say you want to build a house, yes? You build the first floor, the second floor and then somebody comes and asks ‘Well why this way? This is wrong. We dismantle it.’ Then you want to build again. You build one floor and again a third person comes and say ‘No, this is wrong’ and dismantles everything. And finally we do not build at all.

Encouraging words typed by participants into the main chat window could not uplift the spirit of Abulhussain who talked in total for about 14 minutes on the self-defeating practises of Muslims after he had received a question on *takfir*. His otherwise lively manner of narrating and talking was for once diminished and made place for an exhausted and defeated man who repeatedly predicted the downfall of the Muslim community in Germany.

The practice of doing *takfir* has many sides from simply making sure that unbelievers are identified and the endeavour to keep religious innovation at bay to the cultivation of righteous indignation vented in populist agitation. Yet, all these multiple motivations and expressions of *takfir* have in common that they perform and enact the limits of inclusion as understood by Salafi Muslims. During this performance Salafi Muslims dissociate from unbelievers and unbelief and do thereby not only protect the boundaries of legitimate Islamic practice and belief but also purify their own faith. To know that something is wrong or that somebody is an unbeliever and not exposing it, means silent toleration. However, the contested issues within the Salafiyya as to what is considered to be *kufir* that expels a Muslim from Islam and as to how *kufir* can be identified, remain unresolved and cause fissures splitting the Salafi community into groups.

²⁰⁹ There is no might nor power except in Allah.

Vernacular da'wa: Circulating and consuming Islamic material

In this section I deal with everyday devotional practices in computer-mediated environments which are not instantly transformative by, for instance, transforming space, time or social states like in the case of the conversion ritual, and do not necessarily invoke the immediate presence of God. They are in contrast to rituals less pathic and structured, that is, not bound to the minute and exact declamation of specific phrases or repetition of particular movements. Rather, these devotional practices are part of everyday worship of God and often interwoven with mundane acts and elements. With reference to Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands, devotional practices are above all geared towards propagating and diffusing “true” Islamic knowledge, curtailing religious innovations (*bida'*), sin as well as unbelief (*kufr*) and cultivating the right attitude towards God, yourself and other human beings.

The most ubiquitous everyday practices of devotion in forums and chat rooms are the circulation and consumption of material containing religious knowledge. I call this material “Islamic” material for two reasons. First of all, those who circulate it do so with reference to and motivated by their faith and thereby frame the material as Islamic. Secondly, they transmit and carry ideas, norms, orientations and beliefs which Salafi believers identify as Islamic. In the following I discuss the circulation of Islamic material as a practice of vernacular *da'wa* before I move to the analysis of the consumption of this material as a practice through which the right beliefs and dispositions are cultivated.

The routine of vernacular da'wa: Circulating Islamic material online

The first set of devotional practices in computer-mediated environments that concerns us here belongs to what I conceptualise as “vernacular *da'wa*”. To begin with, vernacular *da'wa* as performed by Muslims following the Salafiyya comprises various acts which aim to promote the model of the Prophet and his companions to Muslims as well as non-Muslims, which affirm the core norms of the community and which are in themselves a performance of the model by using home-grown, local or common-place means of communication. This rather compendious definition necessitates further clarification beginning with the term *da'wa*.

Da'wa is a widely used and, concomitantly, rather vague expression with a long tradition. Most Muslims and non-Muslims who know the term translate it as invitation or call to Islam and refer to missionary practices. These are practices that aim to bring non-Muslims and erring Muslims (back) into the realm of Islam. As I have already mentioned in Chapter 2 (see p. 88ff.)

with reference to *adab al-da'wa*, a lot of literature of scholarly as well as non-scholarly origin circulates on the web as well as offline explicating the different rules, conditions and norms to which Muslims have to adhere when engaging in *da'wa*.

In the beginning of Islam, *da'wa* was associated with the work of the prophets and messengers of God who revealed the divine message and tried to lead people to God. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad when different groups started to vie for political and religious leadership *da'wa* gained the connotation of propaganda. Ibn Khaldun (d. 808) writes in reference to this era that *da'wa* is a means to establish a new empire or to legitimise a new ruler on the basis of monotheism (see chapter 3 in Ibn Khaldun 1978). Islamic missionary work among non-Muslims on the periphery of the Muslim world, mainly by Sufi Muslims in Africa and South-East Asia, was later also subsumed under the term. The last two centuries have witnessed a new form of *da'wa* which has turned into an obligation especially for Muslims engaged in one of the Islamic reform movements. Active Muslims on the right path are expected to call their erring co-religionists back to the true path and to spread their religious knowledge. In his book *Du'at . . . La Qudat (Preachers . . . Not Judges)* (al-Huḍaybī 1977), the former leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Hudaybi (d. 1973), advocates the purification of individual conduct and a true Islamic upbringing of Muslims by preachers (*du'at*) before an Islamic state can possibly be established.²¹⁰

As this admittedly very brief historical account shows, *da'wa* is more than trying to convert somebody to Islam and its meaning varies considerably in terms of scope, aims as well as associated acts and behaviour. In its most inclusive understanding, *da'wa* simply means Islam when used as part of the term *al-da'wa al-islamiyya*. In spite of these differences, practices related to *da'wa* share four key characteristics, independent of whether *da'wa* is used for political reasons as Ibn Khaldun had in mind or strictly refers to conversion attempts.²¹¹ First of all, *da'wa* includes a testimony to Islam as the only true faith. It, secondly, is a ritualised practice in that it includes specific types of behaviour and particular phrases. Thirdly, *da'wa* practices address a third person or a general public and, finally, aim at spreading correct information about Islam and the model of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih*, that is, correct from the point of view of the practitioner of *da'wa*.

In extension of the historical account above, the observations and conversations during my fieldwork reveal a dimension of *da'wa* which is often neglected. *Da'wa* is also a performative

²¹⁰ For more details on the term *da'wa* and its history as a practice see chapter four of Harm's dissertation about cyber *da'wa* (Harms 2007, 37–92)

²¹¹ For the following I am greatly indebted to my colleague Martijn de Koning who helped to sort my thoughts and added his own thinking to my ideas by discussing insights drawn from his own fieldwork.

practice through which Muslims following the Salafiyya enact the model of the Prophet and reinforce the shared notions of good and evil as well as the collective norms deduced from this model. When I discussed the meaning and implications of *da'wa* with Christian and Abu 'A'isha, both underlined that they feel comfortable to engage in missionary work although many non-Muslims and even some Muslims frown upon proselytising practices. Christian elucidated what *da'wa* meant to him personally:²¹²

- Christian: [. . .] For me personally, it is, if anything, an honour to do the work the prophets have done. Because they are the best of all people. They have gone through the greatest ordeals. And they have called upon the people to believe in one God. And if you get the possibility to follow in the footsteps of these people, that gives you . . . If you read the stories of the prophets, well you listen to them once in a while or you read them time and time again, then, well these are things which really motivate me.
- C.B.: Also in your faith?
- Christian: Yes of course. This gives me a lot. There are of course also other things, everybody has different things. But this is how it is for me, where I say, there is nothing greater than to follow the best of all human beings, the Prophet Muhammad.

Christian places himself in the line of the messengers of God who have called people to Islam. Among these, the Prophet Muhammad and in extension his way of doing *da'wa* stands out. *Da'wa* does thus not only aim at bringing a person to Islam but places the believer in the line of the best human beings and is an enactment of the perfect model of a Muslim life. Likewise, Munir argues that *da'wa* is rooted in the believer's behaviour reaching down to very mundane aspects of everyday life. Upon my question as to what *da'wa* meant for him, he answered:²¹³

- Munir: Practically? I try to represent Islam to the best of my abilities. Well, that I act as a Muslim. And when there is an occasion and I try to do *da'wa*, when I am talking to somebody, it is how I behave towards him in certain aspects.
- C.B.: *Da'wa* is therefore not only speaking but also behaving?
- Munir: Behaviour. There are silent *du'at*, people who do *da'wa* with their behaviour. For instance, when I treat a neighbour very well. That I help him if he needs something. Or a parcel arrives for him and I take it and give it to him without opening it.
- C.B.: Okay. That really does reach very deep into everyday life [. . .] and actually into the relationship with others.
- Munir: Right. It is definitely about your relationship with others.

Munir places the emphasis on acting and behaviour in an everyday setting. His notion of *da'wa* is all-encompassing and includes almost negligible details like accepting a parcel for an absent neighbour. All acts deemed to be "good" are therefore done for the sake of God and out of the deep motivation to follow His will. This last quote brings us back to the often elusive character of *da'wa*: almost everything from overt attempts to convert a person to Islam and

²¹² Interview with Christian and Abu 'A'isha taken on 3 February 2011 in Mönchengladbach, Germany.

²¹³ Interview taken on 1 April 2010 in Darmstadt, Germany.

behaving as a Muslim according to Gods will to borrowing salt to your neighbour can be interpreted as *da'wa*.

This tendency to conceive also taken-for-granted behaviour as *da'wa* can partly be explained by its importance for Muslims living in non-Muslim majority countries outside *dar al-Islam* (the abode of Islam). In such a situation, *da'wa* first of all serves as a testimony to one's faith and thereby affirms the belonging to the community of believers and adherence to its beliefs and norms in contrast to the community of unbelievers. Secondly, *da'wa* is considered by some Salafi scholars such as Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid (b. 1960) as the main reason why Muslims may reside in the lands of unbelief and are not obliged to do *hijra*, that is, to migrate to an Islamic country. This may give many Salafi Muslims born or raised in Germany and the Netherlands an additional push to engage in *da'wa* activities.

I use the term vernacular in order to qualify *da'wa* practices in computer-mediated environments because these practices operate in everyday social interaction, are rooted in the medium itself and are expressed, so to speak, in its particular vernacular language. The term itself carries the connotation of home-grown and native which in our case of *da'wa* practices means that Salafi Muslims employ the native communicative properties of CMEs and their experiences as computer-users intuitively, that is, outside of a formalised or institutionalised structure. In most cases, the term vernacular is employed to the native or indigenous language of a certain area. Researchers and scientists have for instance repeatedly pointed out that specific media and communication technologies such as the printing press have facilitated the use and spread of vernacular, that is locally spoken, languages to the demise of languages largely used for scientific or religious discourse as Latin or the formal Arabic associated with the religious sciences and not mastered by every literate person (see J. W. Anderson 2003, 889; Stolow 2006, 76–78; Ulrich 2009, 1–4). In cultural theory, the term is used to point to native or home-grown and common-place forms of, for instance, architecture, culture or religion in contrast to the more institutionalised and formalised standards (“high” culture) which are usually restricted to elites. In his analysis of the literature on the vernacular, Howard identifies two notions . First of all, the “subaltern vernacular” (Howard 2008, 493; see also Ono and Sloop 1995) is a discourse which empowers subaltern groups and counteracts hegemonic formations such as official religions and national-state culture. Secondly, the “common vernacular [. . .] is the common and informal action of many individuals over time” (Howard 2008, 494). This notion of the vernacular is akin to “common sense” or to what is repeatedly communicated and enacted in a community over time. It is to this latter understanding of the vernacular that I refer to with the term vernacular *da'wa*.

Practices of vernacular *da'wa* are not inherently religious practices. They are rather specific ways to use and engage with digital technologies which have emerged as relatively stable practices in the course of the appropriation of digital technologies. Surfing the net, lurking or spamming are all instances of such practices, which can also be employed in a religious context.

The material that is circulated and framed as Islamic ranges from poems, stories, lectures, scholarly texts to *anashid* and single hadiths or Qur'anic verses. The main condition for the circulation is that it is digitalised and comprehensible for those addressed. Forums are a great venue for the circulation of "Islamic" material. The material is posted either with the help of copy-past or hyperlinks without any obvious request from other forum participants. The following brief example from a discussion forum illustrates how Islamic material is circulated:²¹⁴

[Abu Khalid]

Question:

Is there a difference between 'aqida and manhaj?

Answer:

The manhaj is more general [and broader] than the 'aqida; the manhaj is in the 'aqida (beliefs) and in the suluk (mannerism) and in the akhlaq (morals) and in the mu'amalat (mutual relations and business transactions) in the life of every Muslim and in every field in which the Muslim traverses is called the manhaj. As for 'aqida, then what is intended by it, is the foundation of iman (what the Muslim believes) and the meaning of the shahadatayn²¹⁵ [the two testimonies] and that which it comprises and this is what is meant by 'aqida.

Arabic source: Al-Ajwiba al-Mufida

[al-nasr]

Al-salam 'alaykum,

This is very useful. This is not always clear for everybody. Thank you for sharing.

[Umm Suhayb:]

Baraka Allah fika. [C.B.: May God bless you]

[Tawfiq:]

Bismillah [C.B.: In the name of God]

Both terms *'aqida* and *manhaj* regularly sow confusion among followers of the Salafiyya. In order to help elucidating the difference, Abu Khalid posts a translated excerpt from a fatwa of Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan (b. 1933). Although the excerpt itself is slightly cryptic, the participants reacting on his post appreciate his attentiveness to help to fill one knowledge gap within the Muslim community. It is a quite common practice to post phrases like up, *itla'* (up) or other short phrases in order to "up" a posting, that is, to make it appear on the top of discussion threads of a forum which are sorted chronologically with the thread including the most recent contribution on top. *Ad'iya* and *dhikr* phrases as "*bi-sm Allah*" in the example above are used as

²¹⁴ Al-Manar, forum, 21 December 2008: The difference between 'aqida and manhaj.

²¹⁵ The two testimonies comprised in the *shahada* spoken for instance during conversions are: (1) There is only one God (*la ilaha illa Allah*) and (2) Muhammad is His messenger (*Muhammad rasul Allah*).

well to up a posting and to call the attention of the believers who enter the forum. To “up” such a posting in which material is circulated is a sign of agreement of other participants of the forum or an attempt of the topic opener to bring his or her concern to the attention of others. This reaction is in some ways equivalent to the mutterings and gestures of listeners of sermons in mosques or elsewhere through which they approve that what is said and articulate their emotional attachment to the norms and values expressed in a sermon.

While some posters make an effort to circulate digestible texts or excerpts of more voluminous texts, others post texts that need to be copy-pasted in several postings due to their length. The language is often akin to the style of scholarly writing and reading them quickly exhausts most lay believer after heaving read the first lines. Forum participants nevertheless support these postings by writing invoking God, thanking the topic opener or “upping the thread”. This illustrates that these reactions are not meant to express that people have read, watched or listened to the material. They are rather part of the performance of circulating Islamic material in computer-mediated environments through which the norms and the collectivity are reaffirmed.

The circulation of Islamic material comes in a different guise in chat rooms because they do not afford copy-pasting texts longer than a few lines in the open chat window. The extent to which the circulation of material is possible depends furthermore on the chat room genre (online *durus*, study group, *Stammtisch*, debating club; see Chapter 3, p. 142ff.). Owners of chat rooms providing online *durus* tend to not tolerate the placing of external links in the open chat window. There is therefore hardly any space of this kind of devotional practice within the boundaries of the lessons. However, the person providing the lesson uses the material for his instruction as part of the lesson itself. He does not place or read out a text-object as a self-explanatory statement as was done in the example above. If he cites a text-object such as a verse or a scholarly interpretation he embeds it into the broader context of his lesson.

The other chat room genres—study group, *Stammtisch* and debating club—provide more space for the circulation of material which usually takes on an aural form. Chat rooms falling within these genres are less hierarchically structured and provide participants the opportunity to use the microphone. Without any obvious reasons as for the choice of the material, participants use this opportunity to share a recording of a lecture, a sermon or a *nashid* which they think is especially relevant and heart moving and the recitation of a Qur’anic verse in order to remind the community of what is written in it. Sometimes a participant takes the microphone and reads out a hadith or a poem which deals with an aspect of faith that occupies or impresses him or her.

More recently, YouTube channels and blogs have turned into a popular venue for the circulation of Islamic material in recent years in addition to forums, mailing lists and, to a lesser extent, chat rooms. Blog and channel owners do in general not expect any reaction or comment and are not primarily interested in discussions. Kamil who ran a YouTube channel for some time underlined that his main intention was “to provide access to authentic knowledge in German.”²¹⁶ ‘Isa, who owns a blog argued similarly emphasizing the need of literature in German language when I asked him why he had chosen to open a blog and what he wanted to achieve with it:²¹⁷

Providing Islamic literature in German. Something instructional for brothers and sisters who speak neither Arabic nor Turkish. Classic Islamic literature in German is still scarce. It makes sense to publish fragments of already published literature and to translate fragments from still unpublished literature. Through this you raise the attention for published literature and you stimulate to tackle texts that have not been translated yet.

Both had a specific idea about the material they wanted to circulate with the help of their blog and YouTube channel. Central to their choice was to provide something “useful” for the benefit of the community and the broader public. When I asked Kamil why he had sub-titled a video of Amir Junaid Muhadith, a former rapper who converted to Islam, he replied the following:²¹⁸

Yes, this brother has converted to Islam and is on the manhaj of the Salafiyya. And I thought that it might be useful to translate this video so that people can comprehend why he converted and what Islam really is.

Material is thus useful if it can make people understand the true nature of Islam and if it illustrates the motivation of Muslims following the true path.

However, the in general positive attitude of the recipients of Islamic material can quickly wear down if it is perceived as spamming. This impression occurs if a person forwards material indiscriminately and massively often lacking even a salutatory address. According to Fatima, this is a pointless action which makes her rather weary. When I asked her whether she circulates Islamic material she affirmed and described the limits within which she thinks it makes sense:

Fatima: Yes, I sometimes do this. Not often, but sometimes. I am not somebody who forwards tons of stuff because I think that, yes, forwarding articles, I think if people want articles they look them up themselves. And . . . then I think like well, why should I always forward articles. In fact, what you do is to forward an entire web page to people in bits and pieces [laughing]. I find this a bit pointless. But it is more, for instance . . . yes, I once had an article which I forwarded. It was about suicide attacks and what scholars say about them. There is a huge lack of knowledge concerning this and I thought like—there are also many non-Salafi Muslims in my address list—therefore, I thought let me forward this. And I

²¹⁶ Online interview (via MSN) from 24 January 2010.

²¹⁷ E-mail interview from April 2010.

²¹⁸ Online interview (via MSN) from 24 January 2010.

added references to the sources and everything. I thought yes, I will forward this, this makes sense. But, you know, keep forwarding all sorts of articles, no.

C.B.: Is this spam for you?

Fatima: Yes because people also receive forwarded messages of others and if you in turn forward a lot, then it will not stand out any more. You better forward something sometimes and it should be useful.

C.B.: Do you receive a lot of forwarded messages.

Fatima: Yes.

C.B.: Do you find this annoying?

Fatima: Yes, at a certain point yes. Because that people . . . they receive something and then they think oh, I just forward it, you know. And I often think that it is really not worth to be forwarded. And then you think, don't read it because it is a person who just forwards stuff. If you read all the forwarded messages you might lose a lot of time each day.

She is not averse to forwarding material, but it must have a certain value and be useful. She like many others do not consume and react on forwarded material any more if it comes from people who circulate material at random.

In many cases, before the material is circulated, somebody needs to do the work of translating. Many participants in my research actively translate texts from mostly English or Arabic sources into German and Dutch and circulate the material. Beside usefulness, another common criterion and motivation is to provide “authentic” material, that is, knowledge coming from the scholars who write in classical Arabic. It is in most cases again the Internet that provides access to the works of these scholars. An exception are students of knowledge from Germany and the Netherlands who study in Arabic countries and see it as an obligation to translate some of the texts they study or fatwas from their teacher-scholars into their own languages and to make them accessible in their home countries. For those who use the Internet to find texts in order to translate them, the process contains an element of uncontrollable momentum because the results are partly left at the mercy of search engines. ‘Isa described the way he finds new material for his blog in the following way:²¹⁹

I look in particular for translations of classical Islamic literature. Primarily of course in German and, secondarily, also in English. A lot has been translated into English so far. I try to translate text fragments with the help of Imam Google and sheikh Yahoo and to provide an incentive for those who are able to translate. I search with the help of search engines using the names of the great scholars. For instance, I type Qayyim, Taymiyya, Kathir and so on and rummage through the results for translations. When I find something useful, it is registered and interesting fragments are translated or (if they are in German) published on my blog.

‘Isa and many with him look for works of specific scholars they deem authentic and reliable. While some, among which ‘Isa, try not to pull the texts out of their textual context, others are less careful in this regard and neglect the context. Furthermore, the status of these texts and the quality of the first translation, mostly into English, is seldom examined.

²¹⁹ E-mail interview from April 2010.

Importance is another criterion often brought forth when I asked Muslims following the Salafiyya how they decided what they circulate. Something is important if it can bring clarity into confusing issues and if it is related to important aspects of the religion. Simone, for instance, copy-pastes information into the forum on which she is active whenever she comes across something she thinks is important to know. When I asked her for a concrete example she gave the following:²²⁰

Simone: Yes, that was something with raising . . . something with the prayer. About raising the hands. There is a lot of confusion out there about it. And when I found that I put it on the forum.

C.B.: So, you share knowledge with others?

Simone: Yes

C.B.: Why do you do this?

Simone: Well . . . I know that there are topics that might be an issue for others as well. In these cases I put it on the forum. And yes, they have to know for themselves of course what they want to do with it.

As we have already seen earlier, the right performance of the five daily prayers in every detail is of fundamental importance. In particular, beginners on the path of the Salafiyya often fail to enact the bodily movements accurately. In this way, Simone, a convert herself, thought that the text on raising the hands during prayer might be of importance to a broader public.

In contrast to the practice of *hisba* and giving *nasiha*, circulating Islamic material is not a practice in which the practitioner watches closely over the right behaviour and practices of others and tries to make sure that wrong practices are eradicated by addressing them or the wrongdoers. Rather, the essential element of this act of vernacular *da'wa* is the circulation itself. The addressees are not specific persons but a general public and, as Simone puts it, it is left to them what they personally do with it or not. She appreciates expressions of acknowledgement and affirmation posted on forums or typed into chat room windows. In fact, many “circulators” of Islamic knowledge in discussion forums start upping their postings after a period without any reaction. What she rather hints at is that whether a person having read her post actually takes it to heart and adapts her or his practices and behaviour does not concern her any more.

While the practice of circulating Islamic material is widespread among Muslims following the Salafiyya, they disagree about the nature of the material that a lay believer may circulate. Some take a very strict stance and only circulate material from scholars they consider to be trustworthy. Editing the material, be it by adding an introductory sentence, writing a summary or creating a video from different material, opens in their view the gates for religious innovation and mistakes and is absolutely intolerable. Umm Zayd expresses this fear when we talked about

²²⁰ Interview taken on 27 January 2010 in Breda, the Netherlands.

sharing knowledge with others and forwarding material.²²¹

- Umm Zayd: [. . .] because I think that it is simply very important that you can translate it in a good way. Even if you speak Arabic. But if this was not an option I would perhaps . . . See, if I had a fatwa of a scholar as you said and if I was able to translate it literally . . . Perhaps I would do it. But I find it a bit . . .
- C.B.: But you would not write your own text?
- Umm Zayd: No, not that. I am a beginner, an amateur. I would not dare because . . . perhaps that I [C.B.: later] find something that says something totally different. Or that I have said something wrong. And then it is on the web and all the people have taken from it, you know. And that it spreads further. No.

Her main concern is the uncontrollable dissemination of material once it is online. If it contains a mistake she would not be able to retract it and warn those who have already consumed it. Others are less cautious and, as in the case of *da'wa* and preacher networks, produce their own videos. It is not a surprise that those believers who are reluctant to construct *dalil* themselves and who restrain themselves to at the most verify *dalil* they come across (see Chapter 3, p. 160ff.) reject to circulate material other than the work produced by the venerated scholars since the cautiousness in both cases is motivated by the fear to introduce and spread wrong belief and practices. Within the narrow confines of the fear to spread wrong and the will to share knowledge, some like Umm 'Ubaydillah take the stance that translating texts, putting audio recordings into writing or adding subtitles in Dutch and German to a video are beneficial.²²²

I myself have never edited material with Islamic content yet. Whether I would do it depends on the content and how it should be edited. If somebody, for instance, takes a recitation from the Qur'an or a lecture and makes a video from it with sub-titles, this can be very useful. In any case, it is no option to edit the content.

While she thinks in general that creating new material by producing video's with subtitles of lectures or Qur'anic recitations is beneficial, editing the content itself would go a step to far.

At the beginning of this section, I have listed four key elements which *da'wa* practices have in common in spite of the great variety within this category of practices: (1) testimony to Islam as the Truth, (2) ritualised elements like specific acts and phrases, (3) addressing a third person or a general public and (4) spreading correct information about Islam. Circulating Islamic material, I argue, falls within this group of practices because the circulation of Islamic material is a testimony to Islam as the only truth, addresses a general public or an indiscriminate group of persons (e.g., contacts in a digital address book, everybody on a mailing list, blog readers, chat room visitors) and aims at spreading correct and useful authentic information about Islam.

²²¹ Interview taken on 16 September 2009 in Amsterdam.

²²² Interview taken on 24 May 2009 in the Hague, the Netherlands.

Circulating Islamic material includes certain recurring acts and elements like copy-pasting or linking, forwarding, “upping” or reacting with *ad’iya* and other exclamations and the common motivation to spread knowledge perceived to be authentic and beneficial. The material that is circulated appears as text-objects containing the important information to be shared with others. As I write in Chapter 1 (see p. 53f.), texts-objects are bounded objects that are acted upon and with are subjected to hermeneutic operations or become part of a performance. Their origin or creator are only in so far important as their names might bestow authority on text-objects. Text-objects can be of any provenance and appear in aural and visual forms. In chat rooms, text-objects are either posted as hyperlinks in the open chat window if participants are allowed to do so or they are read out or played as a recording as in the case of hadiths, recorded lectures or Islamic stories.

Circulating Islamic material as it appears among the computer-mediated environments of the Salafiyya is a vernacular practice because it is not institutionalised and sanctioned by an established religious authority. It is first and foremost the result of the interaction of Muslims following the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands with digital technologies and as such a “local” or “home-grown” practice. Practices of vernacular *da’wa* are not restricted to computer-mediated environments. They occur whenever Muslims use venues and resources that originate in the local community and are part of home-grown practices. The practice of some Salafi groups in Germany to regularly set up Islamic information stalls in the market places of German towns can serve as another example of vernacular *da’wa* outside of the confines of computer-mediated environments.

Cultivating the right dispositions and beliefs: Consuming Islamic material

In the above section, I have briefly alluded to the role of the recipients of Islamic material circulated in computer-mediated environments of the Salafiyya as active actors in contrast to the notion of the passive consumer. The short discussions of Qur’anic recitations as a disciplining practice to silence chat room participants and of online *durus* in chat rooms in Chapter 2 touch as well on the practices to which I will turn in more detail here. This section will take a closer look at these and others performances as devotional practices cultivating “a properly disposed heart” (Hirschkind 2006, 135), that is the right disposition and attitudes in which Islamic values and norms can flourish and blossom.

Since this material is consumed in moments of private audition, viewing and reading behind the computer screen, it is difficult to localise these performances in computer-mediated

environments. The encounter with and consumption of Islamic material online elicits performative moments in the everyday lives of the believers. These are “act[s] that occur[] in the private experience of computer users” (Howard 2005, 178) which span online and offline environments. What is, however, possible is to collect the traces left from the performances in chat rooms and forums, to generate additional information from interviewing those who engage in these performances and to observe these performances in offline environments (e.g., mosques). I begin by discussing the consumption of *anashid* and recitations from the Qur’an as well as its affects on the senses and body before I turn to lectures, stories and poems.

Anashid and Qur’anic recitations appear either as embedded audio or video files in discussion forums or are played in chat rooms via the microphone function. While participants of a chat room listen collectively to the Qur’an and *anashid* because they are simultaneously logged in and react in real-time in the open chat window, discussion forum participants are in principle “alone” when clicking on the file in order to open and to play it. Listening takes thus place in solitude behind the computer screen. Only the comments left in the thread after the posting containing the audio or video file can generate a feeling reminiscent of collective listening because they give expression to what brothers and sisters in Islam have felt or thought when listening.

Listening to the recitation of a verse from the Qur’an is of a different devotional order than listening to *anashid*. Qur’anic recitations are the representation of the Divine voice and the genuine words of God while *anashid* are human expressions of devotion and faith. Recitations require a specific attentive disposition expressed in the norms, for instance that the listeners should not speak and that they should open their hearts to the words of God. *Anashid* do not require the same attention and can also be listened to as background music or with the aim to entertain. They are popular among women who follow the Salafiyya and are stay-at-home moms like Umm Zayd whom I asked on which occasion she listens to *anashid*:²²³

- Umm Zayd: Sometimes when I clean the house.
C.B.: As background music?
Umm Zayd: Yes. And sometimes just when I am in the mood to listen. Once in a while I also play them for ‘Abdallah [C.B.: her son]. He likes them. If he is bored or so or he wants to do something with the computer what he is allowed to do. Then I put him on my lap and play a nashid. He then gets the feeling that he has done something.

Anashid often accompany everyday chores and are in particular thought to be good for children who are thereby protected from the evil influence of worldly music and can enjoy

²²³ Interview taken on 16 September 2009 in Amsterdam.

Islamic entertainment through which they might learn something. In contrast, Qur’anic recitations disrupt daily routine and the believer must pay as much attention to it as possible. Based on the verse Q 7:204 (“And when the Koran is recited, give you ear to it and be silent; haply so you will find mercy”), informants confirmed that they would not listen to the Qur’an when there was no opportunity for attentive silence. This does not mean that the Qur’an can not be listened to during daily activities like riding the car or cooking. In contrast, it is beneficial as long as the believer is able to listen with appropriate attention (Islam Q&A n.d.). When I was driven home after half a day of intense conversation by a couple following the Salafiyya, the husband asked me whether I would mind if he put on recitations from the Qur’an. When he did so, we all fell silent from an animated conversation within a second. Occasionally, the husband, who was driving, moved his lips silently forming the words of the verse being recited in that moment with his lips. His wife was nursing her son under her black *abaya*, a long robe-like dress worn by many Salafi women. She was sitting with me on the back-seat with her face direct towards the front, her eyes gazing into nowhere. Although both were busy with everyday acts, nursing and driving, they were drawn away into the recitation without neglecting their tasks.²²⁴

While the status of Qur’anic recitations is uncontested—it is the recitation of God’s words as commanded by God—*anashid* are in constant need for justification due to the general rejection of music within the Salafiyya. The rejection of music is based on verse Q 31:6: “Some men there are who buy idle talk to lead astray from the way of God without knowledge, and to take it in mockery; those—there awaits them a humbling chastisement.” From a number of reports accredited to the Prophet and his companions the main interpretive tradition within Salafi circles is that the expression for idle talk, “*lahwa al-hadith*”, refers to music. In a posting entitled “Music, the voice of the devil”, MuslimWoman writes:²²⁵

[. . .] The venerated scholar Ibn Qayyim said: “Music is perfidious, she wanders in the hearts of humans, she emasculates and whispers in the human mind.

She thrusts herself from all sides into the ear, she sneaks into our imagination where she swirls and arouses desires, the lusts of frivolity, shamelessness and dullness.

His iman (faith) will complain about him to Allah and Shaytan will be excited about him and then the memorisation of the Qur’an will be made difficult for him.” [. . .]

Music is thus a resource of the devil which he employs to lure believers away from correct behaviour, from the Qur’an and from God by occupying and whispering into their minds. This framing of music circulating among the Salafiyya is based on the book *Ighathat al-Lahfan min Masayid al-Shaytan* (Assistance for the grieving from the traps of the devil) authored by

²²⁴ Based on my notes taken on 7 October 2010.

²²⁵ Qur’an wa-Hadith, forum, 22 May 2007: Music, the voice of the Devil.

Muhammad ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) and accounts for the ambivalent feelings of many Salafi Muslims concerning anything that might resemble music. Two years after the initial posting, Rose agrees with MuslimWoman and alludes to her own experience:

Al-Salam ‘alaykum wa rahmat Allah wa barakatuhu!

jazaka llah khayran and baraka llah fiki for this. Concerning perfidious: I have made ample experience with the perniciousness contained in music, subhan Allah! Let’s put it like this: I really see the huge difference between fans of a musician and the follower of the umma! And I am al-hamd li-llah glad that I have found my new friends (practising sisters in Islam)!

Wa-salam, your sister in Islam

Rose emphatically stresses the image of music containing the evil whisperings of the devil who does everything to mislead believers in order to frame her experience with friends of her old life with whom she shared the past time of listening to music before her conversion to Islam. She does not delve deeper but leaves it to the imagination of the reader to understand why her new female friends in Islam are miles away from the perniciousness of music.

Muslims following the Salafiyya therefore either do not listen to *anashid*—or any other kind of music—because there is no benefit in it in their eyes while others, who were the majority among my informants, try to make sure that the *anashid* they listen to comply as far as possible to the exigencies set out by the scholars as Umm ‘Ubaydillah does:²²⁶

I listen sometimes to beautiful anashid on the condition that they are entirely without instruments and do not include a sung form of worship. Worship that is sung is characteristic of Sufis and there are no transmissions that the companions of the Prophet (may Allah be pleased with them) did it or approved of it. All good forms of worship are clearly described in Qur’an and Sunna and everything that is not included is bid’a. [. . .]

There are different opinions about listening to anashid. Some scholars call it permissible under certain conditions and other scholars say that it is forbidden. They forbid it because also anashid with instruments often have a rhythm which stays in your head. Furthermore, some scholars say that men are not allowed to sing. Women are, however, allowed to sing on weddings for instance. But it is not permissible to record it.

Her position is representative for most Salafi Muslims to whom I talked about their listening habits. They claim that permissible *anashid* is not music because they lack the seducing rhythms characteristic of Western music from pop to classic and they contain messages or moral advice which are important for the ethical constitution of a believer. The demurs of the scholars notwithstanding, listening to *anashid* posted on forums or played in chat rooms is a common practice which triggers a series of typed reactions from *dhikr* phrases, *ad’iya* of various length over affirmative exclamations (“That is so true!”) to copying entire verses from the Qur’an. Some react by posting additional *anashid* which they think express a similar notion or by which they

²²⁶ Interview taken on 24 May 2009 in the Hague, the Netherlands.

are moved. Some describe their affective and sometimes visceral response to a *nashid* with expressions like “heart warming”, “I get goose-pimples from it”, “This makes me cry” or, simply, “beautiful”.

Whenever possible I asked informants to watch videos with *anashid* together and to discuss them. The general reaction was, that they give a peace of mind and calm which refreshed the mind and re-arranges priorities. In the hassle and stress of everyday life it is easy to lose God and what is due to Him, that is worship, out of sight. *Anashid* help to re-establish the focus on God and on serving Him. Some said that they would not listen to *anashid* because, from their point of view, most *anashid* have come to resemble pop music and are produced by deceptive people who are more interested in the marketisation of their music than in being a servant of God. However, they acknowledge that *anashid*, if conforming to Islamic norms, can be beneficial by making listeners think about their relationship with God. Many also affirmed that they used to listen to *anashid* when they started to practise their religion correctly because it helped them to stick to the path in difficult times and resist the multiple temptations from the unbelieving surrounding. But the further their faith developed and the more Islamic knowledge was gained, they started to see the contested aspects of *anashid*. At one point in time, they simply stopped listening to *anashid* and listened to Qur’anic recitations which is considered to be more beneficial and essential for believers. They frame *anashid* as a tool to bridge the transitory period from the old to the new life. The actual goal is, however, to listen solely to Qur’anic recitations, to get benefit out of it and to enjoy these auditions because it is God’s word. On the other end of possible affective reactions to *anashid*, informants admitted that beautiful *anashid* made them cry and aware of the overwhelming power of God.

Umm Fatima expressed most articulately what many informants thought about the affects which listening to *anashid* bore on them and believers in general. In the beginning, Umm Fatima said that she herself did not listen to *anashid* at all. She would only listen to *anashid* for children with her baby daughter. However, she used to do so in the past and it gave her calm and peace:²²⁷

Yes, it has a calming effect. You get the feeling that you step into a particular world at this moment. You are not busy with daily stuff any more. You step out of it for just a moment.

She describes it as a temporary break, similar to a still life in which everything ceases to move for the second until one steps back in. We listened to four versions of the same *nashid* based on the narrative of the *ghuraba’* (the strangers) which I have already referred to in my general

²²⁷ Interview taken on 5 June 2009 in The Hague.

discussion of narratives as a analytic category in this chapter.²²⁸ Having listened to the first version produced by the popular Qur'an reciter Ahmad al-Ajmi (b. 1968)²²⁹, she emphatically exclaimed that it was beautiful and that she already knew it. At the end she explained why she preferred al-Ajmi's version in comparison to the others we had listened to:

- Umm Fatima: Well, in comparison, if I think about the text and so on, then I prefer the first. How al-Ajmi sings so powerful alone. Just powerful. You see the pain in his eyes, and yet the power.
- C.B.: What kind of message is this for you?
- Umm Fatima: Yes, I know the text, and also the hadiths. They for sure have a message. It is not only a message but also a guideline and also recalling what you are. Recalling of . . . for instance, if I walk outside and people look at me in an odd way. Sometimes, this hurts and I am like yes, but I am meant to be ghuraba'. It is part of me that I am a stranger. That I am a traveller in this world. I should not find it weird that they look at me in an odd way. This helps a lot. And in these moments I have to think of this song and these hadiths.
- C.B.: So this gives you power in certain situations?
- Umm Fatima: Yes, sure. Also power. Also just waking you up, hey, you are a stranger here.
- C.B.: Is it a negative term, stranger? It is actually negative . . .
- Umm Fatima: No, it is very positive. You can look at it very positively that you are a stranger. Because in this case, that you are a stranger only yields benefits . . . to be a stranger is actually something good. This is what Islam teaches us. Because you can not . . . and it is also more like accepting that the people around you are different. This is easier to accept and to tolerate because . . . you are meant to be different from them.
- C.B.: Therefore, this makes you more tolerant? That you say, okay, it is not weird that I am different and that they are different from me?
- Umm Fatima: Yes. Wherever I am, even if I do not feel at home, I can live with it because I have the feeling of being a stranger anyway. Islam came as something strange and will leave as something strange. It is always stranger. In Morocco, I am a stranger. In the Netherlands, I am a stranger. In Egypt, I am a stranger. In Belgium, I am a stranger . . . So, I am always already a stranger. It is real . . . it is also true, we are the ghuraba'. We are the strangers. We are also always . . . We are always observed, people always talk about us. Therefore, I find it a very strong . . .
- C.B.: This relates perfectly to your experience . . .
- Umm Fatima: Yes, absolutely. And this also means . . . the truth that the Prophet has spoken with this hadith. It is simply true. Everything falls in its place. That is what it is for me. And yes, this nashid al-ghuraba', it always is like, oh yeah, oh yeah.
- C.B.: And the first version, you thought the message was more powerful?
- Umm Fatima: Just the way he does it, very calm but still with pain . . . you know what I mean? It is sometimes very painful that you are a stranger.
- C.B.: Yes, sure.
- Umm Fatima: It can sometimes hurt and sometimes you just have to cry. Sometimes I have something like . . . Sometimes it is very bad that you do not feel at home anywhere. That you are not welcome anywhere . . . due to the way you practice Islam. This sometimes really hurts. But if you then

²²⁸ For the texts of the related hadiths see footnote 160.

²²⁹ This video is a simple excerpt from a television appearance. He sits and sings apparently spontaneously the *nashid* conducting himself with a ball pen in his hand. This excerpt has been uploaded to YouTube and other video-sharing websites numerous times.

think, what kind of reward will come . . . this is why you do it. This gives comfort. But the fact that you are a stranger, this can sometimes be painful . . . especially . . . this is scientifically proven . . . the first primary need of a person is that you want to belong somewhere. Animals also have this. This is it. And if you do not have this . . . then you have lost something primordial. This is why it is important to have people around you with whom you can talk because they are on the same level as you.
[. . .]

It is the unity of style and message that affects Umm Fatima, who is otherwise quite sceptical in relation to *anashid*, so deeply and enduringly. She can easily relate the narrative to her own life of being a Muslim woman wearing a face veil in the public of a Dutch city. The narrative highlights the feeling of being a stranger, associates it to being a Muslim on the true path and, finally, turns the potentially negative feeling of being alone in an environment dominated by other norms, which are often in conflict with the Salafi interpretation of Islam, into positive energy. This energy stems from the realisation that it has to be this way, that the feeling of strangeness is a sign that one is on the true path. To feel strange is therefore a goal in itself because, after all, only strangers are Muslims. If a Muslim does not feel like a stranger, his or her faith, religious beliefs and practices are not sound. The sober style of the presentation without any allure originating spontaneously from the flow of the moment brings the message of the strangers to the fore in a way that polished productions realised with expensive equipment in a studio would not be able to do. The imperfectness of the recording actually emanates authenticity and truthfulness. Due to the soberness of the presentation, all emotion is located in the eyes of al-Ajmi which signal pain and sadness about the fact that Muslims feel pain because they are strangers. His calm and composed demeanour though radiates self-assurance, knowledge and power which impress Umm Fatima and give her the power to continue on her path.

Numerous other instances of shared audition and viewing involving different *anashid* confirmed the importance of a sober and yet powerful and authentic style without any bells and whistles. Umm Fatima referred to the hadiths about the *ghuraba'* as poetry in order to emphasise the high quality of the text as compared to other *anashid*. She and others advised me to listen to the “Nuniyyat al-Qahtani”²³⁰, a poem of roughly 6000 words and almost 700 lines in the style of a *qasida*²³¹, accredited to a rather unknown scholar, Abu Muhammad ibn ‘Abdallah al-Andalusi al-

²³⁰ The term *nuniyya* refers to the letter *nun* (n) of the Arabic alphabet. A *nuniyya* is a poem which rhymes in this letter. These poems are often used for pedagogical reasons because they facilitate the memorisation of important content. The “Nuniyyat al-Qahtani” can easily be found on the Internet as plain text or in recited form.

²³¹ The poetic style of *qasa'id* (sg. *qasida*) originates in pre-Islamic Arabia. They are rather long poems in which every line rhymes and follows a uniform metre (Krenkow 1978).

Qahtani, who is said to have lived in the fourth and fifth Islamic century in al-Andalus.²³² Information about his life or his work has not survived time with the exception of the *nuniyya*. Its popularity among Muslims, especially scholars, inspired by the Salafiyya stems from its content. It covers important aspects of Islam as the Qur'an, 'aqida (doctrinal creed), hadiths, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), history, *sira* (biography of the Prophet), questions of *akhlaq* (behaviour towards others) and so on, whereby he takes a clear Salafi stance by refuting those groups who are considered to be heretical from a Salafi point of view such as the Mu'tazila and the Ash'ariyya. Many Salafi scholars use it to teach their students the fundamentals of their faith. Interestingly, also those whose Arabic was not sufficient to learn or understand the poem, which concerns the majority of my informants, testified to its beauty and benefits for believers as a mnemonic aid.

Reading Islamic poems and stories in forums and chat rooms elicit affective reactions similar to those of *anashid* described above. Just like *anashid*, they “make you think for a while”²³³ and are powerful in that they affirm knowledge and belief. Among my informants only Layla wrote poems and shared them on a discussion forum though many poems of unknown origin circulate in the Salafi web sphere. Those who had read her poems attested that they were inspiring moments of tranquillity and silent devotion shot into the routine of daily actions. The following example of a short poem entitled “Allah stands with the patient” is illustrative of this rather instructive and educational poetic style preferably consumed on discussion forums and in chat rooms.²³⁴

Allah stands with the patient
maybe you feel very well today
so you neglect your du'a'
suddenly everything changes in one blow
arduously you bear every single new day
Know that everything is different
because Allah does never forget
Keep in your heart: “I am not alone
Allah will always be with the patient!”

With this poem she intends to give hope to those who have neglected the worship of Allah and have thus ended up having a difficult time. She wants to tell them that God does never forget them and that this makes all the difference since they will never be alone. Trusting in God they should patiently endure troubled times and hold on to their faith. Forum participants often reacted to her poems with the customary exclamations and comments like “this lightened up my

²³² Al-Andalus is the term of the medieval Muslim state on areas that are today part of Spain, Portugal and France.

²³³ Simone during our conversation on 27 January 2010 in Breda, the Netherlands.

²³⁴ Qur'an wa-Hadith, forum, 21 November 2009: Layla's poems. The original German poem features simple rhyming couplets which I have not rendered in the translation.

day” or “how enchanting”.

Poems often contain concrete moral advice relating to the believers’ daily experiences and feelings. Stories have a similar structure aiming as well as at educating, instructing and reassuring believers in the up and downs of everyday life. Invented or imagined stories are not regarded as authentic, that is, narrated from real life or stories that are rooted in the lives of the Prophet, his companions and their pious followers, and are therefore not Islamic. Islamic stories are intrinsically related to real life since lying, which interlocutors thought to be the same as inventing, is incompatible with Islam. In the case of religious statements, the issue of authenticity hinges on *dalil* which links the statement and the issue in question to the religious sources. In the case of poems and stories, re-narrating an episode from the early Muslim community, pious Muslims and venerated scholars are all considered to be authentic. However, many circulated stories cannot be verified and promote norms and values which are not restricted to Islam but of universal value. In spite of the authenticity problem, most thought that these stories were helpful. Umm Zayd explained during a conversation what makes a story authentic, how a specific story inspires her and guides her actions:²³⁵

Sometimes . . . it depends. Sometimes yes, sometimes not. Sometimes I think about them well, what is this actually all about. I do not see an origin in this story, that it has a real Islamic origin. Everybody can have written it. And, you know, in these cases I am not really interested. But sometimes, if it really is a beautiful story, a strong story, then I do not mind who has written it and from where it comes. It’s all about the morals. You again learn from it. Just recently, a story was told about the daughter of the Prophet. She was married to ‘Ali and they hadn’t had any food for three days. They did not have anything in their house. When ‘Ali came home he asked her: Why are you so pale? She told him that they had not found any food in their home for three days. He asked: Why did you not say anything? She said: My father, the messenger of Allah (salla llah ‘alayhi wa-sallam), has taught me never to bother my husband with food and the like. Something like this. That it is a condition of *sabr* [C.B.: patience], this is very important. That is comes automatically so that it was better not to ask for it. I do not know why because these days many women claim their right that the men have to maintain them in terms of food and such. And they are not satisfied until the money is gone. And if a man gives in once in this struggle . . . yeah, that many women take advantage of it. This is what it was about. And I went and thought like well, we have to save money because we want to move as fast as possible to an Islamic country if possible. And then sit . . . I really start to think like are not all the things I ask from my husband or which I buy myself . . . is this not . . . is this not luxury? Are those really things I should ask for? Do you get it? Just this kind of things, stuff relating to your behaviour. How the women of the Prophet did it and so on. Whether this is true or not, they are simply beautiful stories.

According to her, specific morals promoted by a story make it strong and beautiful and part of the Islamic stock of narrative material. As Hirschkind notes in his analysis of the rhetorics of Egyptian preachers, the Islamic narrative and homiletic tradition encompasses a rich textual corpus of imagery, spoken maxims, stories, fragments and more “that constitute a living body of

²³⁵ Interview taken on 16 September 2009 in Amsterdam.

communally experienced wisdom” (Hirschkind 2006, 162). In spite of the rigour with which Salafi Muslims address the issue of authenticity in hermeneutic-interpretive practices, stories and poems do apparently not fall in the same category. They are authentic or Islamic if their message conforms to Islamic ethics irrespective of authorship as Umm Zayd states. Umm Zayd’s statement provides furthermore a good example of how a narrative from the time of the Prophet is re-narrated today, how a woman inspired by the Salafiyya can identify with it and relate her life to it and how the story (re-)orients her behaviour and actions. Islamic poems and stories are thus more than simply mnemonic aids helping to learn, rehearse and remember important aspects of the faith. They are in addition, part of the “living body” of a textual repertoire which infuse themselves into the lives of those who consume them, shaping their behaviour and giving meaning to practices, events and acts.

Recorded lectures available as audio files in discussion forums and played via the microphone function in chat rooms also resort to the rich textual repertoire of Islam and combine the aural qualities of *anashid* with the narrative elements of poems and stories. They elicit comments in threads or open chat windows similar to those posted in response to *anashid*, stories and poems. Listening alone to a lecture that was posted or linked to in a forum differs from the collective audition of a lecture in a chat room where participants are able to exchange thoughts, impressions and emotions immediately by type-chatting via the main chat window and can thereby feel secure in the company of like-minded people. Asking people why they would listen at the computer to recorded lectures, the most common answer was, again akin to the answers I received when asking about stories, poems and *anashid*, to get a benefit out of it. To get a benefit out of a lecture or to profit from it was often associated with the lecturer’s ability to give practical advice and to convey abstract notions in powerful and perceptible images that relate to the lives of the believers.²³⁶ Again, Umm Fatima most aptly describes the notion of profit and benefit of lectures when I asked her whether listening to lectures had any practical effect on her.²³⁷

Yes, absolutely. I also find stories about certain sahaba [C.B.: companions of the Prophet] very beautiful. These are also things from which I can profit, how they did things like . . . I usually call this an iman boost . . . iman boost because . . . you know . . . you get an energy boost from it like look how difficult it was for them, look how they did it, you know. We do not live in times as difficult as theirs although I am sometimes finding that we actually have a rough time here. Then I think, no, they were living in much harder times. This gives a lot of power, so to say, to go on with everything.

²³⁶ German informants usually used the word *nützlich* which can also be translated as useful. Dutch informants often employed the term *profitvol* which is not listed in standard Dutch dictionary and mostly used on Dutch Muslim websites. In addition they used the word *nuttig* (useful), though to a lesser extent.

²³⁷ Interview taken on 5 June 2009 in The Hague.

[...]

And these are again things that you take with you into your daily life, when you go outside or when you are busy praying and so on. Just the daily pursuits. There is often a lot of advice in there that you can take and which makes practising your religion easier. I mean, I know oh, they also did this and they also found it difficult. And this makes is a bit . . . sometimes, if you take everything from books it is hard. It is quite hard to practice your religion in this way. And if you read how the sahaba or the people around the Prophet did it then you can give an interpretation to it and then it becomes easier for you because you know that your are not the only one who does it this way.

As a regular listener of lectures circulated online she prefers those preachers who use the stories of the early Muslim community in order to illustrate certain issues and important fundamentals of Islam. The term she uses in order to describe her affective reaction to lectures, *iman boost*, relates to a bodily sensation that is felt with a sudden increase of velocity, a pressure surge. Other informants used a similar imagery (e.g., explosion, being lifted up). This explosion of energy provides the power to face rough and difficult circumstances and to remain steadfast. Books dealing with doctrinal questions, issues of right and wrong behaviour and worship, which Muslims following the Salafiyya consume, lack this sensational affect and the immediate impact on daily life.

While *anashid*, stories and poems affect the listener and reader emotionally, it was only in relation to lectures that participants said that it spoke to, addressed or opened their hearts. Among them was ‘Isa who tried to explain the significance of the heart (*qalb*) in this context to me:²³⁸

C.B.: What does it exactly mean “addressing the heart”? Does it have to do with feelings or emotions?

‘Isa: No, the heart as an Islamic term describes the place (the organ) that houses faith (*iman*) and awe of God (*taqwa*). The heart of a Muslim is besmirched by the sinful acts and disobedience (towards Allah). The heart is also the communicative medium of the Muslim with which he contacts Allah. It is difficult to describe the term heart (*qalb*) and I do not want to write something wrong.

In his short description, the heart is the place which harbours faith and *taqwa* and is the communicative link of the individual to God. Sins and disobedience towards God make the heart blind to the point that the individual cannot see God any more and loses this link to his or her Creator because when sins settle in a heart, there is no space for God. ‘Isa sent me a link to a forum posting in which he himself cites a respective chapter about the heart from the book *Charakterreinigung: Tazkiya - Wie man ein guter Mensch wird* (purification of character: tazkiya – how to become a good person) published by the German Information Service on Islam (DIDI – Deutscher Informationsdienst über den Islam) (Mourad, Mourad, and Mittendorfer 2009). This book is based on Ibn Qudama al-Maqdisi’s book *Mukhtasar Minhaj al-Qasidin* (Abridgement of the

²³⁸ E-mail interview from April 2010.

Road of the Pursuers, see footnote 74). The posting starts with the three verses from the Qur'an which circumscribe the role of the heart:

Q 22:46: What, have they not journeyed in the land so that they have hearts to understand with or ears to hear with? It is not the eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts within the breasts.

Q 2:6-7: (6) As for the unbelievers, alike it is to them whether thou hast warned them or hast not warned them, they do not believe. (7) God has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a covering, and there awaits them a mighty chastisement.

Q 2:10: In their hearts is a sickness, and God has increased their sickness, and there awaits them a painful chastisement for that they have cried lies.

Subsequently, these verses are explained with a quotation from the Qur'an commentary *Al-Asas fi l-Tafsir* (The basic principle of interpretation) of Sa'id Hawwa (d. 1989), a key ideologue of the Islamic revival movement in Syria. According to Hawwa, there is a material tangible heart serving as a pump for the circulation of blood. The heart is however also

the place of a different heart, that is of feelings like love, hatred, malice, generosity, fear and inner peace. These feelings are just as well tangible for everybody since every person feels part of these feelings. This second heart is the place where one tastes the iman and it is also the place where kufr [C.B.: unbelief] and hypocrisy takes place. (Mourad, Mourad, and Mittendorfer 2009, 17)

Those who believe, feel many virtues which unbelievers are not even able to feel anymore because their second heart is partly dead. This second heart can "get sick, healthy, blind and deaf" (Mourad, Mourad, and Mittendorfer 2009, 17). Because they refuse to submit to and worship God and live in sin, God has "sealed" their hearts, that is, He does not give them guidance and they will not be able to see the truth of Islam. Vice versa, a person is able to purify his heart from corruption and filth by purifying his character, abstaining from sin and doing the utmost in order to understand the divine truth. The purer the heart the more God will guide the believers and their invocations will be heard. The term used by many people I worked with for the process of purifying the heart and making it receptive for God's words was "opening the chest", an expression stemming from the Qur'an (Q 6:125):

Whomsoever God desires to guide, He expands his chest to Islam (*yashrah sadrahu li-l-islam*); whomsoever He desires to lead astray, He makes his chest narrow, tight, as if he were climbing to heaven. So God lays abomination upon those who believe not.

In sura 94 God asks the Prophet whether He has not expanded his chest (*a-lam nashrah laka sadraka?*) and relieved him from all burden which pressed on his soul (Q 94:1-3). Every difficulty is linked with relief (Q 94: 5-6). A true believer must work hard at every stage and turn all his attention towards God (Q 94:7-8). Opening the breast, which is considered to be synonymous to opening the heart, is tantamount to a state of moral purity and relaxation that follows after

devotional practices in the course of which the believer has turned his or her entire mind towards God.

A good lecturer addresses the heart by drawing the listener closer to God, instilling awe and making him repent. This is accompanied by the expansion of the chest making room for God, for worshipping him and for the virtues characteristic of a true believer.²³⁹ An all-time favourite among my informants in the Netherlands provides a good illustration of a lecturer who motivates his brothers and sisters to repent and to open their hearts in order to let God guide them and focuses their hearts on the worship of God. The lecture of the preacher Aboe Ismail entitled “Addressed to My Sisters” was first published and made available on the website al-Yaqeen.com maintained by the as-Sunna Mosque in The Hague in May 2007 (Aboe Ismail 2007). Since then it has kept re-appearing in discussion forums and chat rooms of the Salafiyya and continues to receive enthusiastic praise as a lecture that makes listeners “shiver”. Many women with whom I spoke advised me to listen to this lecture when I asked them which lectures were their favourite ones. Several video reproductions of the lecture in combination with *anashid* or graphic material can be found on YouTube. The aim of Aboe Ismail is to motivate his “sisters” to embrace the Islamic norm of clothing including *hijab* which is understood as an obligation for Muslim women. He starts without beating about the bush:

I apologise to my brothers because I will concentrate in the following minutes on my sisters. I address my words today to the Muslim woman. The reason for me to do this is that I am afraid that my Muslim sister will miss eternal happiness though I know that her heart is filled with kindness. To my sister I want to say that she has to wake up from her carelessness and that she has to take those people who have already passed away as examples. Therefore dress yourself in a modest garment, namely that of piety, of taqwa.

He starts with a calm, rhythmic declamatory style which he maintains throughout the entire lecture. He only punctually shifts to pitched exclamations which are still relatively calm in comparison to other preachers who employ a more dynamic theatrical and intense oratory style. After this opening, he continues to awake fear among his listeners by reminding them of the inevitable: death, the torments of the grave and the need to justify yourself in front of God.

Dear sister, look at life around you and see what worldly life has done with her admirers. Has she enabled these admirers to take a part of her great pomp and circumstance with them into their graves or has she sent them away with empty hands? By Allah, nothing can drive away your loneliness in the grave except for your good deeds. Therefore, take your time in order to stand still and ask yourself the following question: ‘If I die tomorrow, will my grave be a sea of fire or actually a garden of Paradise?’

The question as to whether one will be in a sea of fire or a garden of Paradise if one dies all

²³⁹ In his study of cassette sermons in Cairo, Hirschkind analysis in depth the techniques employed by lecturers to open the hearts of their listeners and the experience of the listeners who feel the opening of their hearts (Hirschkind 2006, 67–104, 143–204).

of the sudden is a common staple among preachers. The question is also used in order to urge people to convert and not to delay their decision. It infuses a sense of urgency and utmost importance into the question of wearing *hijab* which is turned into an issue over which one's fate in the hereafter will be decided. He then continues to depict the position and value of a woman in Islam and their meaning for the entire umma.

Dear sister, life is much too cheap and therefore not worth it to sacrifice yourself for it. Choose for eternal happiness, choose for the hereafter and chose for the pleasure of Allah. They say that you represent one half of the society. [. . .] But we the Muslims think that this is not a truthful rendering of you real value! You stand according to us for the entire society. The society cannot continue to exist without you. [. . .] By abiding by the Islamic norms of dressing others will not be able to treat you as a piece of meat. Thereby, there will for everybody be no other option than to judge you according to your skills, brightness and qualities. And not according to your looks. You are the most honourable. You are like a flower in the desert, a rainbow in the night, when you differ from the rest by abiding by the rule of Allah. I can say in the name of all Muslims that, with your chastity, virtuousness and Islamic appearance, you are the colour in our dark days.

Rhetorically, his voice falls into a crescendo culminating into the phrase “You are like a flower in the desert” which is the title most listeners have given to this lecture. He turns the difference in outer appearance for which women abiding by the Islamic norms of dressing as interpreted by the Salafiyya are often stigmatised in Germany and the Netherlands into an honour and into a testimony to the truthfulness of their worship and submission to God. Having illustrated the privileged status of women in Islam he awakens the listeners' desire to abide by God's will and to serve Him. He then places the God-fearing Muslim woman proudly wearing her *hijab* in a genealogical line with the wives of the Prophet, the mothers of the believers (*ummahat al-mu'minin*), and turns her into a symbol of freedom from the suppression by fellow human beings

You have embarked with your persistence, strong will and uncompromising conviction on the same path as the women of the Prophet, *salla llah 'alayhi wa-sallam*, and the other pious women of his time. You have set yourself free and untied yourself from what others think and find. The only thing that still counts for you is the pleasure of your Lord. The only thing you worry about is what He, the Almighty thinks of me. Have I fulfilled His expectations?

He pursues the freedom trope further by framing the *hijab* itself as an expression of freedom in contrast to the overall notion dominating public discourse in Germany and the Netherlands in which the Islamic veil is usually interpreted as a symbol of female incapacitation and suppression undoing centuries of struggle for emancipation in the West.

Your *hijab*, dear sister, is not the symbol of suppression but, on the contrary, of freedom, of freedom! And I say it again: of freedom! By wearing the *hijab* you have decided not to be bowed down by the ideas and propositions which are forced, imposed upon us by mortals like you and me. By wearing the *hijab* you have decided to determine your own course of life and to live according to the rules of Allah. You have decided not to continue to be a servant of people but only to serve Allah, the Lord of all human beings. By wearing

the hijab you decide to remain permanently in a state of devotion. Every second that a Muslim woman lives wearing her hijab is one of devotion.

The permanent state of devotion, a state in which the heart is open towards God and not defiled by sins and unbelief, is the highest aspiration of a believer. Attaining this aspiration by donning the veil and submitting to God which simultaneously frees oneself from the yoke of worldly pressure, opinions and stress, becomes a reachable goal. Aboe Ismail does not conceal that this will elicit hatred and incomprehension from fellow human beings. But this will only increase the reward for those who hold on to the divine prescriptions in averse times:

And dear sister, when people in your surrounding hate you because of your chastity, because of you holding on to the rules of Allah, because of you wearing the hijab, know then that the Lord of these people will spread out His blessings over you. And know also, that the irritation and the hate which those people feel in their hearts because of your virtuousness is a reason for you to rise in rank in Paradise.

In the final sequence of his lecture he emphasises the importance of wearing the hijab for the entire Muslim community and appeals to his sisters to not let the umma down. He thereby puts a lot of weight on the shoulders of those wearing and not wearing the veil. However, this is framed as an honour and as a privilege because those who don the veil stem from the wives of the Prophets, the ultimate role models for Muslim women.

You are the hope unto which the umma clasps. You are the flame that can make our hearts burn. You are the light that can chase away darkness. You are the rain that can break drought. You are the daughter of Khadija, 'A'isha, Hafsa, Khawla (radiya lillah 'anhunna) who have written history. You are our everything and I say it frankly! Yes, you sister, you are our everything. Therefore do not let us down! [. . .] Therefore, dear sister, do not let them drive you crazy! Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala has honoured you! Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala has given you a high rank and Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala will guard your chastity! And this is why He has prescribed these rules, why He has prescribed you the hijab and if you adhere to them, know that you will receive the affection of Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala and that you will qualify for Paradise!

Apart from the honour of being a descendant of the wives of the Prophet, wearing the veil qualifies the bearer for Paradise and reassures her to escape the torments of the grave and all horrible punishments for a life in sin.

Aboe Ismael's lecture reveals some essential techniques of exhortatory preaching with the help of which listeners are enabled to feel *taqwa*, to submit to God and to embrace His will with enthusiasm. Most importantly, he switches between elements of *tarhib* (warning, awaking fear) by invoking images of the punishments awaiting sinners and unbelievers and elements of *targhib* (enjoining, awaking desire for something) in which the prescribed way of life as set out in the religious sources with all its rules and regulations is framed as the only path to happiness, to paradise and to a life devoted to the worship of God alone. By describing the abominations of the world in general and ways of living that fall outside of Islam in particular, he awakens the desire

of the listeners to free themselves from the filth of worldly aspirations and turn towards the sole purpose of life: worshipping and serving God. Both *targhib* and *tarhib* belong to the classic repertoire of Muslim preachers. Some hadith collectors beginning with the ninth century have dedicated entire hadith collections to the topic of *tarhib* and *targhib*.²⁴⁰

Informants differed in their preferences regarding lectures. Some preferred zapping through several lectures sitting behind their computer screen while others meticulously re-listened lectures and took notes. Others said that their need for practical advice decreased with the increase of their knowledge. For some, the socialising aspect of lectures was central and they therefore preferred to listen in the company of fellow sisters or brothers to lectures. In spite of these distinctions among the people I talked to, they all professed that good lectures warm or move their heart, draw them closer to God, improve their faith and stimulate worshipping or submitting to God.

Listening to lectures and *anashid* or reading poems and stories are thus devotional practices and performances rather than passive acts of consumption. When listening and reading, the believers attempt to open their hearts and minds to the divine message and let it re-orient their behaviour and focus towards the sole reason for being in this world, the worship of God. Their hearts and minds are temporarily drawn away from the daily activities, with which they might even be busy at the time of listening or reading, and are reset to their true purpose or, in order to stay in the language of computer programming, to default. The default position of a believer is his or her *fitra* (see Chapter 3, p. 121ff.), the natural inclination or disposition to worship nobody else but God and to entirely submit to Him. This default configuration is incessantly over-written by contaminating worldly and non-Islamic influences. The consumption of Islamic material is therefore a moment of reconstitution of the proper dispositions and of re-orienting behaviour, speaking and thinking.

²⁴⁰ One example is Humayd ibn Zanjawayh's *Kitab al-Targhib wa-l-Tarhib* (see J. A. C. Brown 2009, 35).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed and analysed a series of ubiquitous narrative-performative practices belonging to the categories of religious rituals, the performance of difference and everyday online devotion. Irrespective of their difference, all of these practices have their roots in the narratives about the life of the Prophet, about the early Muslim community, and about the lives of pious Muslims. These roots are not the only narrative elements of these practices. Islamic material in the form of anashid, stories and poems tell myths and stories about lives dedicated to the worship of the one and only God which readers and listeners can easily relate to their own lives or the lives of family and friends. Different rhetorical styles and techniques like discursive morphing authenticate the stories told and the practises in which they are re-lived.

In this universe of lived and practised religion, Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya attempt to hone and develop their subjectivity in order to get as close as possible to the ideal model embodied in the lives of the Prophets and the *salaf al-salih*. This endeavour is given shape by the communicative technologies in which chat rooms and discussion forums are anchored. Affordances of chat rooms and discussion forums accentuate and shape narrative-performative practices (converting to Islam or listening to recorded lectures) or give rise to new practices (circulating Islamic material as a form of vernacular da'wa, "doing" Islamic argumentation). These changes are not revolutionary and seldom taken note of by the actors themselves.

Furthermore, narrative-performative practices have a therapeutic quality in that they affirm beliefs, cultivate the right dispositions and re-orient the behaviour of the believers towards the ideal model. They heal doubts and instil an all-encompassing ability to understand and interpret the world so that every piece falls in its place. The community of the believers is repeatedly united in practising their religion in chat rooms and discussion forums in the course of which collective norms are re-enacted and authenticated. It is, however, healing without sealing since the boundaries of the ideal model are contested and tend to unravel as the practices of *takfir* and giving *nasiha* illustrate.

Chapter 5

Producing authority: Authenticity and vernacular volition

When talking about the need to gain knowledge, informants referred to the need to acquire knowledge from reliable or trustworthy sources, be they websites or persons. When I further asked them as to what a source actually made reliable, the notion of authenticity²⁴¹ kept appearing in their answers. Authority and authenticity are closely intertwined within Salafi discourse or, to put it stronger, the Salafi understanding of authority is predicated upon specific notions of authenticity. Authoritative persons or sources have to be authentic and those who want to gain knowledge and grow in their faith aim to acquire authenticity. This chapter will investigate the notion of authenticity as employed by informants and analyse how authenticity is achieved in order to produce authority.

Given that Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya strive to emulate the model of the Prophet and his companions as accurately as possible in every sphere of life, their success hinges on the authenticity of the information they have about the lives of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih*. This form of textual authenticity is yielded by successful truth-claims based on the textual sources. Textual authenticity is only one side of the coin though. In order to render their information about the model of the Prophet more persuasive beyond the strict textual proof, Muslims following the Salafiyya situate themselves in chains of knowledge transmission which should ideally reach back to the final authority, the Prophet himself. The enactment of a chain of transmission becomes part of what I call performative authenticity and which describes how Muslims following the Salafiyya successfully realise an authentic performance of a pious, God-fearing Muslim. God's will as expressed in the texts and as realised in the lives of the Prophet and the early Muslim community needs to be put into practice and performed in everyday life. The sincerity of a believer in realising this model and his or her commitment to it are important criteria with which fellow believers measure the authenticity and hence authority of a Muslim.

Textual and performative authenticity are reproduced in chat rooms and discussion forums by incorporating "native" elements of digital communication technologies that underpin these spaces. Howard's notion of aggregate volition, to which I have alluded in Chapter 2 (see p. 79f.), points to the repeated choices of Internet users bestowing authority on norms and ideas expressed online. I will turn to this vernacular dimension of Salafi authority in CMEs in the last

²⁴¹ In this context, German informants used the attributes *authentisch* (authentic) and *zuverlässig* (reliable). Dutch informants used the attribute *betrouwbaar* (reliable) for the most part but also *authentiek* (authentic). Both groups in addition also used the Arabic term *sahih* (authentic, sound).

section of this chapter. The first section will deal with textual authenticity, the importance of chains of knowledge transmission and performative authenticity. This chapter recaptures many ideas and arguments which we have already encountered in the preceding chapters. However, this time I will highlight and analyse those aspects which tell us something about how Muslims following the Salafiyya understand and construct authority.

Textual and performative authenticity

Whether a believer tries to authorise a specific action or a specific interpretive tradition, he or she must be able to provide convincing *dalil* if the action or interpretive tradition in question is contested by other believers. Secondly, he or she must place herself convincingly in a chain of knowledge transmission which should ideally reach back to the Prophet and his companions. And thirdly, a believer should strive to realise the ideal model illustrated in the lives of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih* in their own lives and to cultivate the corresponding ethical standards. As we will see in the course of this chapter, sincerity, which demands from a believer to be honest and true when practising his or her religion and to do so with the right intention (*niya*) of submitting to God's will, is a core value with which performative authenticity is measured.

Textual authenticity

As explained in Chapter 3 (see p. 165), a *dalil* establishes a twofold link between contemporary life situations of believers and the proof-texts reaching from concrete present-day issues or questions to events, statements and behaviour that have been reported from the past and back by extracting correct guidelines and the right beliefs from these texts. The ongoing production of *dalil* re-produces networks of interpretive traditions in which proof-texts and interpretations are central nodes linked to each other by hermeneutic-interpretive practices which produce *dalil*. Differences in interpretive traditions are first of all due to the use of different proof-texts and, in addition, to diverging understandings of the texts which yield different interpretations.

The discussion about *takfir* and ruling with man-made laws illustrates this point. I will recap in the following the basic points from the Introduction (see p. 13ff.) and Chapter 4 (see p. 206ff.). Two main interpretive traditions circulate among Muslims following the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands: (1) ruling with man-made law expels a Muslim ruler from Islam and (2) ruling with man-made law is unbelief but not necessary apostasy. Both interpretive traditions use the verse Q 5:44: “[. . .] Whoso judges not according to what God has sent down - they are the unbelievers.” The proponents of interpretive tradition (2), however, use additional proof-texts in the form of four hadiths accredited to one of the most venerated companions of the Prophet, ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Abbas and his students Tawus ibn Kaysan and ‘Ata’ ibn Abi Rabah in which they comment the following on this verse:

Whoever rejects what Allah has revealed, will have committed kufr, and whoever accepts what Allah has revealed, but did not rule by it, is a zalim [C.B.: oppressor, somebody who is unjust] and a fasiq [C.B.: evildoer] and a sinner.

He [C.B.: Ibn ‘Abbas] said, ‘It is an act of Kufr.’ Ibn Tawus added, ‘It is not like those who disbelieve in Allah, His angels, His Books and His Messengers.’

There is kufr and kufr less than kufr [C.B.: kufr duna kufr], zulm [C.B.: injustice, oppression] and zulm less than zulm, fisq [C.B.: sinfulness] and fisq less than fisq.

This is not the kufr that annuls one’s religion.

Furthermore, those who believe that ruling with man-made law is not a direct indication of apostasy, concur that the conditions of *jahd* (denial of the truth of Islam), *i’tiqad* (believing that it is right although God commands different) or *istihlal* (making lawful what God has forbidden) have to be met in order to expel a ruler from Islam. Their opponents dismiss the hadiths cited above as weak and deny the applicability of the three conditions in this case because according to them it is apparent that those rulers who systematically apply man-made law are convinced that they do the right thing though they know that God commands different. The illustration below, a simplified graphic representation of the network of interpretive traditions and proof-texts in this debate, shows relevant nodes (interpretive traditions in rounded rectangles and proof-texts in ellipses) and the main links between them. This illustration is indeed a simplified version because other proof-texts and intervening interpretive traditions have been omitted in order to focus on the main lines of argument. Yet this representation indicates how one proof-text (Q 5:44) yields different interpretations²⁴² which are further bolstered by intervening interpretive traditions which in turn have their own proof-texts not represented here in the illustration. One interpretive tradition in this debate on ruling with man-made law (Ruling with man-made law expels a Muslim from Islam) is further extended with two intervening interpretive traditions to the conclusion that not doing *takfir* on a Muslim ruler who does not rule with man-made law expels a Muslim from Islam. This is the argumentative line of those who engage in chain *takfir*.

²⁴² One point of contention regarding the interpretation of verse Q 5:44 is that proponents of interpretive tradition 2 (Ruling with man-made law is unbelief but not necessarily apostasy) claim that this verse is about the unwillingness of the Jews to adhere to the message which God sent to them via His messengers. It is therefore not applicable to Muslim rulers who do not reject the message of God. Proponents of interpretive tradition 1 (Ruling with man-made law expels a Muslim ruler from Islam) argue that the unbelief of the Jews is apparently regarded as apostasy or *kufr akbar* in this verse without recourse to *jahd*, *i’tiqad* or *istihlal*. There is therefore no necessity to insist on these proofs in the case of Muslim rulers whose *kufr akbar* is apparent by their ruling systematically with man-made laws (Wagemakers 2009, 99–101).

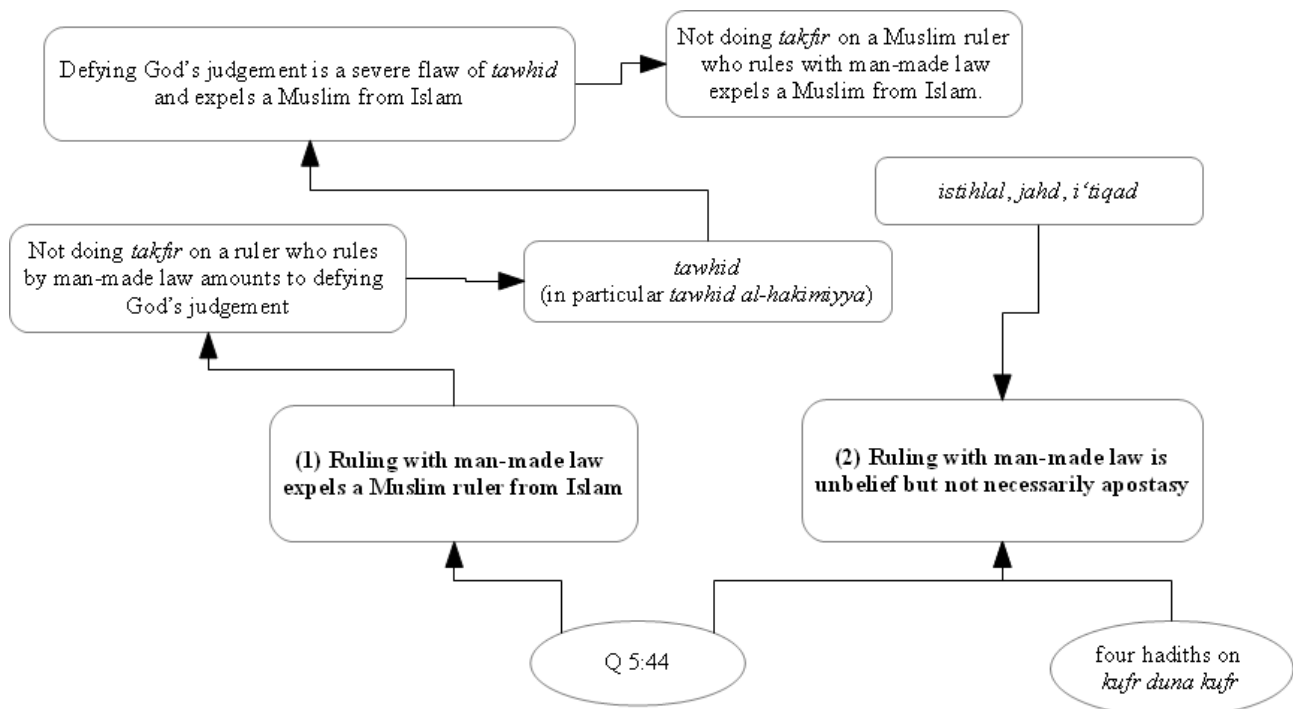


Illustration: Ruling with man-made law

Both positions in this debate possess textual authenticity due to the links they can establish with proof-texts or with other interpretive traditions which are also textually authenticated by other proof-texts not represented in the illustration above. The central question then is as to which *dalil* and therewith which interpretive tradition is able to “become more authentic” and therefore persuasive in comparison to opposing views. I argue that the enactment of a chain of knowledge transmission and performative authenticity help to increase the authority of an interpretive tradition and those championing it by authenticating it beyond the strict textual proof.

Enacting chains of knowledge

A crucial part of authenticating the interpretations to which a believer adheres is the ability to join and locate oneself in a chain of knowledge transmission which should ideally reach back to the Prophet. By doing so, Salafi Muslims clarify their affiliation to a chain of scholars who have successively transmitted knowledge from one to the other in the course of the centuries after the death of the Prophet. When I asked informants about how they made choices when being confronted with opposed or conflictive interpretive traditions, most claimed that they would rely on the grand scholars and preferred taking knowledge from them because they themselves had gained their knowledge from a scholar who can trace back his knowledge in a chain of teacher-

student affiliations to the *salaf al-salih*. Who actually belongs to the grand scholars (*al-‘ulama’ al-kibar*) is contested. Some refer to members of the Saudi scholarly establishment as, for instance, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Baz (d. 1999), Muhammad ibn Salih ibn al-‘Uthaymin (d. 2001) or Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan (b. 1933). Others reject them because they have compromised themselves by cooperating with the Saudi royal family. They rather follow scholars and intellectuals such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (b. 1959), Safar al-Hawali (b. 1950), Abu Basir al-Tartusi, ‘A’id al-Qarni (b. 1960) and Muhammad Surur Zayn al-‘Abidin (b. 1938).

The affiliation with one or more scholars and their chain of transmission is also a criterion used to test the reliability of a website. Simone, and many others with her, check the scholars which are mentioned and featured on a website first in order to decide about the reliability and authenticity of the information provided there: “There are different scholars in Islam. And if you see the names of the scholars you follow, so to say, you really know that they are reliable.”²⁴³ When I discussed the issue of reliability with her, Umm Fatima gave me a list with names of scholars who have learned from each other. The list, which circulates among Salafi Muslims in the Netherlands and is of unclear origin, started with the companions of the Prophet and ended after seven pages with present-day scholars of the Saudi establishment. They were all connected with each other via a series of teacher student relationships. Umm Fatima uses this list, which is of unknown origin and does not state an author, in order to make a decision on the reliability of a website and of a scholar or student she had not heard about before:

- Umm Fatima: [. . .] See, even if it is a new name, I can accept him if he is a student let’s say from sheikh al-Albani or sheikh Ibn Baz or so. If he is a student from the grand scholars, in this case I say: oh yes, he is reliable. See, with a website, I pay attention . . . if it is a new website . . . See, we have a fixed set of website which are known under Selefies²⁴⁴. Selefies in Canada, in the U.S., in America, in England, in the Netherlands know them. These are all known websites. And they refer to each other with links. If you find links on one of those sites, you know that these are links from brothers who know each other. If, for instance, you have a new website and you are not sure . . . Well, in this case I always look at the scholars or I ask somebody I know: ‘Do you know this website and do you know whether it is reliable or not?’ This is how I do it. But basically we keep to our standard websites [. . .].
- C.B.: You do not visit any new websites?
- Umm Fatima: No, not at all.

Like Simone, Umm Fatima pays attention to the scholars featured on a website. Furthermore, she follows the links provided by websites from which she is convinced that they

²⁴³ Interview taken on 27 January 2010 in Breda, the Netherlands.

²⁴⁴ The term “Selefie” is used by more quietist Salafi Muslims in the Netherlands who strictly follow the religious scholars of the Saudi establishment, most prominently among them Rabi’ ibn Hadi ‘Umayr al-Madkhali (b. 1931). This has earned them the label “*madakhila*” or “*madkhalis*” among their opponents outside and within the Selefi network.

are reliable because reliable websites, as she says, link to each other. The same idea of contagious authority—that is the authority of a person, website or text is bestowed on other persons, websites and text through proximity and links—was also nourished by those informants who acknowledged that they took the authority of unknown preachers, scholars and students of knowledge for granted if they appeared together with known authorities in a lecture or seminar. They believed that scholars or other known authorities would not take part in an event if people with corrupted beliefs and practices were to spread their ideas there as well. However, links leading to the venerated religious scholars without detour are usually much more esteemed and are interpreted as a higher degree of authority than the indirect links produced by contagious authority.

While some refuse to take knowledge from people of a specific chain of knowledge transmission because they think that they have severe flaws in their beliefs, others accept “sound” statements from scholars and students of knowledge who may have issued faulty statements in the past concerning other questions. They argue that the name of a scholar attached to a specific interpretation is not an evidence for its reliability. Instead, they claim to examine the soundness of the argumentation and look at the biography of a person in order to distil hints from it which point toward the origin of his knowledge.

The following example from a German forum illustrates how chains of transmission are constructed as well as how authority is discussed and scrutinised. The topic opener asks whether anybody can provide information about Muhammad Abu Fatima who runs an Islamic school online. Sunni, who is the first to react and who studies at the school of Abu Fatima, places the curriculum vitae of his teacher with some introductory words:²⁴⁵

Al-salam ‘alaykum

This is what I have found and in sha’allah it will help. I am myself registered at his madrasa [C.B.: school] and have until today not found anything suspicious. But I have to say that I do not possess a lot of knowledge to really pigeonhole people.

May Allah, swt, forgive our sins.

Studies of the teacher Muhammad Abu Fatima:

- Islamic Institute in the Netherlands of sheikh Ahmad Salam who was a student of sheikh al-Albani.
- Preparatory courses for preachers, Eindhoven [C.B.: in the Netherlands], Saudi al-Waqf al-Islami, shuyukh [C.B.: Arabic plural of sheikh]; Ibrahim al-Duwaysh, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Shibani and others, fiqh, introduction to hadith science, introduction to Qur’an science.
- Arabic Institute Morocco: Arabic with sheikh ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Aliwi
- Arabic with sheikh al-Mukhtar Wu’addi
- The old Islamic school in Tankert (Morocco), usul al-fiqh [C.B.: the basic principles of

²⁴⁵ Al-Sunna, forum, 19 February 2010: Who is Abu Fatima?

jurisprudence] and fiqh, sheikh Mulud al-Sariri

- Arabic, usul al-fiqh and fiqh with the scholar Muhammad al-Samadi
- Old Islamic school of Northern Morocco, Arabic, hadith and fiqh

Scholars whom he has met and from whom he has taken knowledge:

- Sheikh Oueld 'Adoud, Sheikh Ahmad al-Murabi in Mauritania
- Sheikh Salim Rafi'i in Berlin

Scholars from whom he has taken knowledge via the Internet:

- Sheikh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Barrak
- Sheikh 'Abdallah al-Fawzan and others
- Islamic Academy of Saudi-Arabia

The question as to who is Abu Fatima is boiled down to the issue of where he has taken and maybe still takes his knowledge from. The curriculum vitae placed by Sunni features a list of people from whom Abu Fatima has taken knowledge in one form or the other. This list was copy-pasted from the web-site of his online school and thus represents the attempt of Abu Fatima to situate himself in a chain of transmission. This list is critically scrutinised by the participants, first and foremost al-Thabit:

Al-hamd li-llah,

to be honest, I really do not understand how this Muhammad Abu Fatima can put his 'studies' on the net. They are more than embarrassing. He may be able to fool people who have no knowledge and think that this brother has studied with so many shuyukh. But people who have some knowledge and read this will only shake their heads in disbelief.

[...]

I also attended the courses in Eindhoven and these were courses similar to the ones provided by Abulhussain where big topics are only briefly touched upon and from which you hardly profit. If he puts it like this people think that he has studied fiqh, hadith science and 'ulum al-Qur'an [C.B.: the science of Qur'an] though he has only listened to a few words about these sciences in lectures of 45 minutes each. [...]

He should provide certificates in which the 'ulama' allow him to teach. I doubt however that he is able to do so because if he puts four-day seminars and a visit to an institute on the top of his lists of studies, what should we think then of the other points on the list?

Sheikh Oueld 'Adoud rahimahu llah was a great scholar, no doubt about it. But what kind of knowledge has he taken from him? Leaving aside that the sheikh dedicated only five minutes to each student in order to teach them. What kind of great knowledge are you supposed to have gained by seeing a sheikh? [...]

It is more than a disgrace to write a biography like this as a so called talib al-'ilm [C.B.: student of knowledge]. And who is 'Abdallah al-Fawzan? And what kind of knowledge from the Internet has he taken from the Islamic Academy of Saudi-Arabia?

Me as a miskin [C.B.: poor, miserable, humble], I could make my biography a thousand times more attractive if I mentioned my Internet shuyukh, shuyukh whom I have met and the Islamic universities and institutions I have visited in a list of studies.

In the eyes of al-Thabit, the attempt of Abu Fatima to place himself in a chain of transmission by affiliating himself with certain scholars is futile. He exposes every single link of Abu Fatima to a scholar as weak either because the time spend in a seminar or visiting an institution is by far not enough to really digest the material of a subject or because the scholars in

question are not known to him. He needs more information in order to judge the link like certificates of a scholar that Abu Fatima as his student is allowed to teach and transmit what he has taught him. Al-Thabit alludes to the classical system of *ijaza* (permission, authorisation, license) with which a scholar allowed a student who had studied his books “at his feet” to transmit his knowledge. Studying with a teacher often implied *qira’a*, reading out the book of a teacher in the presence of that teacher. An *ijaza* often specified which book or subject exactly the student was allowed to transmit. This classical system of knowledge transmission came under high pressure with the advent of mass media because knowledge became massively transmissible without any further influence of the author or teacher. Al-Thabit further ridicules that he mentions from whom he has taken knowledge via the Internet. Others in the thread criticise that Abu Fatima has recommended lectures of Abulhussain und Abu Anas who are part of the preacher network “Einladung zum Paradies” (EZP, invitation to paradise) which is largely disapproved among the participants of this particular forum. Others like ‘Isa are less harsh:

Bi-sm Allah al-rahman al-rahim, al-salam ‘alaykum wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu
[. . .] I personally think that the blog of the brother Abu Fatima is quite beneficial. A member of the steering committee of my masjid [C.B.: mosque] knows this brother personally and has visited him only recently in Morocco. ‘Aqida and manhaj of this talib al-‘ilm should be alright.

That he refers to texts and durus from Abu Anas, Abulhussain and others of their group can be explained by his opinion that you take good and leave bad. [. . .]

I am for instance also of this opinion. Even nowadays I still listen to durus of Abu Hamza, Abu Anas, Abu Jibril and so on because one mistake (even if it was a mistake in the ‘aqida) does not annihilate the entire knowledge of a person.

To completely boycott Muslims just because they prefer a different ruling or because they have made a mistake, this leads quickly to the point that you will only have very few sources of knowledge and exhortation left to rely upon. But, after all, everybody has to follow his own decision.

I can try to get more information from this brother in my masjid. Or I advise those among you who have doubts about his ‘aqida to contact him personally.

Please do not warn prematurely.

‘Isa

‘Isa belongs to those Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya for whom the chain of transmission is important while simultaneously being of the opinion that a Muslim can take knowledge from a person who has made mistakes as long as the knowledge one takes from this person is beneficial and, of course, correct. He also cautions that if people continue to raise the bar there will be little sources left to take knowledge from. Furthermore, he advises that those who harbour doubts about Abu Fatima’s *‘aqida*, that is, creed, should contact him personally. He is supported in this by other participants who warn that it amounts to gossiping to talk about somebody’s faith without giving him or her the opportunity explain him- or herself.

AbuMufid, one of the last contributors to the thread, raises another issue at play when constructing and verifying chains of knowledge transmission:

[. . .] I can only add that we have asked the brother Abu Dujana about Abu Fatima. He did not know back then that Abu Fatima was giving durus. But when he heard it from us he was very happy and told us that if we have the possibility we should in any case learn from this brother. He knows him very well and they were together in the Netherlands. Abu Fatima was the strongest talib al-'ilm. Always number 1, rarely number 2. This brother does not live in Germany any more. Abu Dujana said that Abu Fatima is the strongest in terms of knowledge in the German-speaking region and if a German should be called sheikh it should be Abu Fatima. [. . .]

Abu Dujana belongs to the preachers and students of knowledge who are respected by most participants of this particular forum but is a contested personality on other forums. His praise of Abu Fatima's knowledge and scholarship authenticates Abu Fatima's lessons and encourages the followers of Abu Dujana to study with him. Many informants acknowledged that they ask friends who have more knowledge than them and preachers they consider trustworthy if they were unsure about the reliability of a specific scholar, preacher and student of knowledge. These rather informal credentials serve as an additional proof of the reliability of those who do not possess an *ijaza* of a scholar. These are by far most preachers and students of knowledge in Germany and the Netherlands. They testify to the sincerity of the person in question as a Muslim seeking knowledge and to his outstanding results in doing so. German and Dutch preachers and lecturers either fall into praise when asked about the level of knowledge of a fellow preacher or dissociate from him by warning followers not to take knowledge from this person. Hence, they form networks of praise and dispraise whereby the latter is voiced either carefully in order not to compromise oneself because every human being is fallible or fiercely in order to underline the urgency of not taking knowledge from a supposedly corrupted source. These informal networks connect by praise and association as well as warnings and dismissal entail a strong performative dimension since these affiliations (or dissociations) are not only stated but also enacted. This brings us to the issue of performative authenticity within the production of authority.

Performative authenticity

As the preceding discussion from the forum shows, people place themselves or others in a genealogy of knowledge by enumerating the sources of their knowledge, by attesting to their devotion to the project of gaining knowledge and by emphasising personal acquaintances or *via-via* relationships through which more intimate insight into the qualifications of a person's knowledge is insinuated.

Muslims following the Salafiyya do not tire to emphasise that all human beings—with the

exception of the Prophet—including the greatest scholars are fallible. What counts is their sincerity in their quest for knowledge which instils the urge in them to make sure to the best of their knowledge that what they know, live and transmit in terms of religion is correct. Sincerity is thus to be found in the proper intention (*niya*) of a Muslim when it comes to practising the religion. Being sincere is another source of persuasive power. For Kamil, sincerity is one of the criteria at the hand of which he identifies reliable scholars:²⁴⁶

This means that they have to speak with evidence and that they are known for their sincerity in their manhaj. A scholar needs to have the recommendation of a great scholar. And if somebody is criticised but too stubborn to correct his mistakes and continues on the path of falsehood, then we will not take knowledge from him any more.

The concession to have been on the wrong path either with one's belief or practice or to have made a mistake is understood as a sign of sincerity if coupled with remorse and rectification of the misstep. The willingness to rectify one's path and mistakes is equated to sincerity which makes the scholar, preacher or student of knowledge in question even more reliable and trustworthy because if he is not afraid to admit a mistake in one case he will do the same again in the future. This has given rise to a "rhetorics of personal disclosure" (Hirschkind 2006, 146) in which preachers adopt an attitude of humility regarding their knowledge. They acknowledge wrong statements in order to rectify them and clarify what the true interpretation is. Furthermore, they dissociate from the proponent of a wrong interpretation and affiliate humbly with those who have proven to be right.

The same attitude is at work on forums and chat rooms where participants who expose themselves by engaging in Islamic argumentation and running the potential risk of arriving at the wrong judgement, which then spreads across the forum, are asking others to examine their argumentation. This discourse of personal disclosure is closely related to the "street credibility" with which many preachers try to authorise their lectures. Their honesty about their past endows them with sincerity because they self-critically disclose something which a person would usually want to hide. These are men who have been associated with petty crime, gambling or other suspect activities and have turned their backs on their "old life" when they started to turn towards God. Following the notion of "I have been there, I have done it and I know what I am talking about", they possess authority bestowed on them by the contradiction between their present lives as pious Muslims and their shady, if not criminal, past. The discourse of personal disclosure puts them in a position to talk truthfully about their past, to admit their mistakes and to preach God's words with a credibility of their own. The further away they have been from God

²⁴⁶ Online interview (via MSN) from 24 January 2010.

and a pious Muslim life in the past, the more miraculous is their turn towards Islam and the more power and authenticity is inherent in their words. They usually skilfully include their non-Muslim past in the performance of their authority.

An additional important aspect of performative authenticity is the successful cultivation of a moral being who stays true to the virtues ascribed to the ideal life of a good Muslim and is sincere in his or her practices. While this might be commonsensical this is, however, easier said than done. The ethical virtues such as sincerity, fear of God (*taqwa*), politeness, veraciousness and patience (see p. 88ff.) are in many circumstances difficult to realise and, at times, contradict each other. For instance, by being sincere and veracious a believer can come to violate the values of politeness of patience. Furthermore, to cultivate the fear of God is an immense challenge for Muslims who live in environments filled with temptations and lure which corrupt the heart, especially of those weak in faith. The seduction to stray on the path of evil lurks on the way to school or work, when doing shopping, when watching television or surfing on the Internet. One strategy to decrease the danger to deviate from the Truth is to avoid possible temptations and cleanse the immediate surrounding as far as possible from it. For instance, those research participants whom I could visit at home had removed television sets from their homes for religious reasons. Another strategy is to seek the company of fellow Salafi Muslims and immerse oneself in lectures, Qur'anic recitations and other devotional practices which help to cultivate piety and *taqwa*.

The main point in this quest for moral integrity is that it is almost impossible to be reached. While striving for perfection, Salafi Muslims thus encounter their own sinfulness which, again, induces them to intensify at least temporarily their attempts to become morally complete beings in the Salafi understanding of the term. Indeed, Muslims following the Salafiyya are taught to be aware of temptations, their own failures and to consciously stay away from them. In the course of the endeavour to reach moral perfection they are thus face with their own imperfection. These “moral ambitions” (see Elisha 2008) of the Salafiyya are thus difficult to perform and comply with. To fall prey to the surrounding temptations can nourish intense doubt about a believer's sincerity and religious devotion and finally, as de Koning (2011, 184) aptly observes in his analysis of the moral ambitions of the Salafiyya in the Netherlands, “lead to the conclusion that the entire identity as a Muslim is empty, hollow and actually inappropriate and meaningless.” Furthermore, the contradictions built into Salafi ethics, as for instance illustrated in chapter 4 (see p. 96ff.) in the tension between gossiping and giving *nasiha*, as well as internal fragmentation make failure almost inevitable. In short, the ethical standards as set up by the ideal

model produce sinfulness and, in extreme cases, hollowness because a believer will always fall short of the moral standards which shape his or her subjectivity. At the same time, these ethical standards that produce sinfulness also promise rescue from a meaningless and sinful life (for a similar argument with reference to the Christian Urapmin in New Guinea see Robbins 2004).

To be able to successfully navigate through the ambiguities and moments of failure inherent in the moral ambitions is one element of the performative authenticity of the Salafiyya and produces authority. To cultivate such morality, to be honest about one's failures and to humbly continue to realise the moral ambitions are all part of the performative authenticity Salafi Muslims strive for. However, those who excel in it and master it can lay claim to moral authority because they have remained true to themselves or, to put it differently, to the internalised ethical standards which have become part of their subjectivity.

All these aspects of performative authenticity should not obscure though that the notions of authority and authenticity fostered by Salafi Muslims are often rather vague. Many interlocutors were not able to describe the criteria they use in order to judge the authority of a scholar, preacher or anybody who makes a religious claim. Umm Hafsa told me that she finds it really easy to distinguish between wrong and correct knowledge.²⁴⁷

- C.B.: With reference to the scholars whom you accept as reliable, why are they actually reliable in your eyes?
- Umm Hafsa: Because I know that they follow the right way and I have had information about it. I pay attention to what they have written. Some declare things allowed and others declare them haram. But you have yourself already some insight
- C.B.: Okay. So, with experience you know who is reliable and who is not?
- Umm Hafsa: Yes. I do not always know it but the great scholars are clearly reliable and with the others you have to verify that. I have somebody who helps me out in questions like this. Some scholars and preachers keep themselves busy with political issues and they introduce innovations to Islam.
- C.B.: Okay. What do you mean by 'verifying'? Do you look yourself at the dalil they provide?
- Umm Hafsa: To ask around, this is what I mean.

Umm Hafsa herself is quite sure about who is reliable and authentic and who is not. However, she is not able to explicate why. It is a sense of authenticity associated with specific names and acts. Specific religious scholars are reliable—these are in her case the scholars of the Saudi establishment—and those who “keep themselves busy with politics” and “introduce innovations to Islam” are not. These attributes are usually used to refer to Salafi activists who express political opinions, vote in local elections, take part in demonstrations against anti-Muslim sentiments or engage assertively in street *da'wa* by organising information tables or

²⁴⁷ Interview via MSN, 21 January 2010.

distributing material in public spaces. More quietist Salafi Muslims reject this engagement as political and an innovation because it is not part of the Sunna of the Prophet and therefore not authentic. Apart from the *a priori* rejection of scholars, preachers and students of knowledge who are politically active in the broadest sense of the word, Umm Hafsa, and many with her, ask people in their surrounding about the authority of a person and base their judgement on their statements.

When participating in forums and chat rooms one quickly comes to recognise and identify the “common suspects” who are able to authoritatively answer questions and provide religious statements which are accepted by others or, at least, a majority of participants. They are able to project their authority in forums and chat rooms not only based on the textual authenticity of their answers but, yet again, by performing authentically in a computer-mediated environment. This is usually done in chat rooms and forums by imitating a scholarly style associated with the great scholars and their religious writings and by appropriating a habitus which is thought to correspond to the habitus of the *salaf al-salih* and the great figures of Muslim history from the point of view of the Salafiyya.

Another look at a forum thread which I have already discussed with reference to Islamic argumentation in Chapter 3 (see p. 133ff.) will help to visualise how Salafi Muslims produce authority in chat rooms and discussion forums. In this forum thread with the title “Use of the pill and menstruation: An answer needed as soon as possible” Umm Ridwan, the thread opener, explains that she is taking the pill in order to not get her period during Ramadan. She wants to fast and pray the *tarawih* prayer during the month of Ramadan so that she can profit from this month in terms of *hasanat* which would be impossible without the pill due to ritual impurity caused by the menstruation. Her problem is that in spite of her taking the pill she is losing a brownish slime. She also feels typical symptoms of the period like stomach aches. Her question is whether this is interpreted as having a period and whether she therefore should not be fasting and praying. The first reaction from al-Maghribiyya states that it is a sin to artificially stop the period during fasting. She advises her to ask a scholar. Umm Ridwan answers that she knows that it is better to let nature do her work. But she would like to have an opinion from people who know more about this issue and can tell her if that what she has is considered to be part of the menstruation. Bilal answers that there are many rules concerning the menstruation. In the following he cites and summarizes a few rulings from a scholarly book concerning the times when a prayer may be stopped and when it must be performed during the menstruation of a women. However, his contribution does not really answer the question. Jamila voices her dismay

and consternation about al-Maghribiyya's reaction: She should talk with knowledge because to declare something *haram* has great consequences. She has heard a scholar on the Arab TV channel Iqra explaining that a woman may use the pill in order to be able to fast the whole month of Ramadan. In the same vein, Abu Muhammad cautions the earlier poster, al-Maghribiyya, not to call something a sin without further pondering because that would mean that it is *haram*. Only through the Qur'an, the authentic *ahadith* and the consensus of the grand religious scholars can an act be judged *haram*. He then explicates based on the fatwa collection of six grand scholars called *Fatawa al-Mar'at al-Muslima* that a woman is in principal allowed to take the pill during Ramadan and that a women is not allowed to pray if she is bleeding red blood. The brown slime Umm Ridwan mentions is not considered to be a menstruation. Jamila closes this discussion by saying that she had hoped that Abu Muhammad or somebody else would come to support her answer with evidence and thanks for his reaction.

Abu Muhammad who dominates many discussions in this forum in a similar way emerged as the poster with the most persuasive answer from among all the answers provided. As discussed in Chapter 3, he provided *dalil* and thereby produced textual authenticity. However, what is of interest here is the way in which he performs authenticity:

Bi-sm Allah al-rahman al-rahim [C.B.: typed in Arabic letters in the original]

Al-salam 'alaykum wa-rahmat Allah wa-barakatuhu

First of all, it is an even bigger sin to declare something haram while the grand scholars have been asked about this. As you say yourself, go and ask the scholars. And many women went to the faqih and 'allama Salih ibn al-'Uthaymin rahimahu llah who spoke often about these questions. Because if you say that it is a sin to stop menstruation this means that this has been declared haram either by Qur'an and Sunna or by the grand scholars without any ikhtilaf among them.

Tayyib, in the fatawa collection of the grand 'ulama' called fatawa al-mar'a, fatawa which deal with women situations, a question is asked as to whether it is permissible to use the pill and it has been answered. It is permissible to use the pill for a woman also during the month of Ramadan. But she must be sure that this will not yield disadvantageous physical problems.

And concerning the colour of the menstrual blood, it must be really reddish, like menstruation blood. The colours as for instance yellow or brown are not considered to be menstruation blood. This is based on a sahih hadith of the sahabiya Umm 'Atiyya radiya llah 'anha. Therefore, after you have done ghusl and you see yellow or brown, this is not considered to be menstruation blood as has been transmitted.

This is also mentioned in the fatawa al-mar'a of the sheikh al-'allama Ibn Baz rahimahu llah, the former mufti of Saudi-Arabia.

Idhan dear sister, I hope that you herewith in sha'a llah know what the hukm is about the use of the pill given that an answer has been given by the ahl al-'ilm and explicitly by the grand scholars of this century rahimahum Allah.

Allah a'lam

His dense answer exemplifies the skills that are needed for the production of authority in computer-mediated environments of the Salafiyya. He reproduces the answer given by Ibn

al-'Uthaymin in his own words clearly and to the point. His posting starts with the *basmala*²⁴⁸ written in Arabic script and the proper Islamic greeting according to the etiquette of greeting. He employs a sober scholarly style which stands out for its clearness, simplicity and sobriety. In general, he does not give guesses or react with something that does not answer the question. He usually enters a discussion at a later point and reacts on futile statements in preceding contributions by exhorting participants not to jump too quickly to conclusions and judge prematurely without having examined what people of knowledge say. In this vein, he admonishes al-Maghribiyya, who called in her contribution the act of delaying the period a sin, before he introduces his answer to the initial question with the Arabic word *tayyib* (well, good), a word often used in spoken Arabic to indicate that the speaker will now turn to the matter itself. His entire reaction is interspersed with Arabic terms for which he easily could have used a Dutch equivalent. Some words such as *sahih* (authentic) or *ikhtilaf* (difference of opinion) belong to the Arabic terminology of religious sciences and are known by most Salafi Muslims. Others, like *idhan* (thus, a conjunctive adverb) are usually only known by those who have at least good knowledge of standard Arabic which is a minority of those I have met in the course of my research. His use of Arabic thereby indicates that he is able to read the religious sources in the original and that he understands them. With his last phrase, "Allah a'lam" (God is All-Knowing), he puts his own authority in perspective because he underlines that God alone is all-knowing and thereby points to the fallibility of human beings including himself. This is part of the performance of humility and sincerity which is highly valued among Salafi Muslims.

Abu Muhammad's performance of authenticity is in most cases persuasive. He is one of those participants of the forum whose contributions are highly valued, who is in general trusted and who is often directly called upon to give his opinion. As far as I could find out, Abu Muhammad has studied at least for two years in Medina and spends a great deal of his free time with what he calls "gaining knowledge". On each forum I could identify several participants who commanded a similar authority among the participants. They are not only repeatedly asked to comment in discussion threads but their answers available in the archives of forums are cited or referenced in subsequent discussions in which they might be of relevance. Their contributions therefore turn into text-objects (see Chapter 1, p. 53f.) which circulate the Internet relatively independent of their author and the context of their origin, that is, the textual talk of a forum thread or the context of a chat room session in which they were originally produced. In some cases, the answers are even cited outside of the boundaries of the CMEs in which they originated.

²⁴⁸ The *basmala* is a noun and stands for the phrase "*bi-sm Allah al-rahman al-rahim*" (in the name of God the most gracious, most merciful). The *basmala* opens 113 of the 114 chapters of the Qur'an.

This last point about authoritative contributions turning into text-objects circulating in CMEs brings us to the role of repeated choices of users in the production of authority online.

Authority from below: Vernacular authority online

Being faced with bulks of information detached from their original author and context which all claim to be true and hence authoritative, the issue of authority becomes an intricate one in CMEs. Among the myriad pieces of information, textual and performative authenticity cannot guarantee widespread acceptance and authority among the broader community of believers. What then, one could ask, makes a specific authentic contribution of a sincere Muslim stand out among all the other authentic contributions of sincere believers?

In this context, Howard makes two observations with reference to authority among evangelical Christians online which are just as important for the production of authority in chat rooms and forums of the Salafiyya:

[t]here is no central authority to rein in the diversity of individually expressed interpretations other than the everyday users and creators of these media themselves in the form of their aggregate vernacular authority. [. . .] In this religious movement, however, individual expression does not result in rebellion or fracture. Instead, social control bubbles upward from the aggregate volition of a myriad individual choices to communicate. (Howard 2011, 156)

His first observation is that authority is based on the repeated choice of the users to post, link, cite or otherwise reference and consume the texts and expressions of faith of scholars, preachers and, in our case, engaged lay participants of forums and chat rooms. Through the “multiplicity of voices speaking in the noninstitutional discursive space of quotidian life” (Howard 2008, 493) vernacular authority (see discussion of the term “vernacular” in Chapter 4, p. 222f.) from below is produced. These choices are based on judgements made about the textual and performative authenticity outlined above. The accumulation of all these choices bestows authority on those who manage to remain on top of the list of aggregate volition. These are those persons whose texts are mostly cited and circulated.

Secondly, the aggregation of individual choices or expressions does not necessarily imply that authority in the Salafiyya becomes dramatically fragmented, that established interpretive traditions will vanish and that a form of grass-root deliberation is slowly finding its way into the Salafiyya since the choices of individual users have a say in the construction of authority. There has in general been a tendency to regard the Internet and social computer-mediated environments like online discussion forums and chat rooms in particular in terms of an ideal “Habermasian spaces” in which interaction and communication remain untouched by status and ritual representations of authority. According to this understanding, authority in these spaces is not taken for granted and communication succeeds due to its own merits in terms of well-formed

words and convincing arguments (for instance J. W. Anderson 2003, 892). However, when dealing with these spaces, two caveats should be kept in mind: First of all, neither chat rooms nor discussion forums of the Salafiyya are free from coercion, etiquettes and interpretive protocols as Chapter 2 illustrates. For instance, moderators and administrators can ban participants or regulate communication channels. This kind of coercive authority of “gate-keepers” is based on the communicative properties of these environments, e.g., the technical possibility to bar a participant from the microphone, as well as on the wide social acceptance of these acts of coercive authority. Secondly, the conceptualisation of computer-mediated environments as a public sphere providing an ideal speech situation is rather part of an ethics of discourse or of how things should be than of the empirical analysis of the construction of authority and power within certain communicative environments.

Akin to this liberal notion of the public sphere, much of what has been written over vernacular cultural forms (for a good overview see Ono and Sloop 1995) accentuates the liberating and emancipatory potential of the vernacular for marginalised groups. This implicit bias is, however, not always helpful when studying religious practices of groups like Muslims following the Salafiyya who do not necessarily identify themselves in opposition to the religious scholarly establishment.²⁴⁹ It is rather to the opposite since they try to place themselves in chains of knowledge transmission and see themselves in the tradition of those scholars whom they venerate as the upholders of the only truth. The power of the participants is not so much their ability to challenge this model of knowledge transmission or render it meaningless but to take part in the decision on whether a person and his or her statements, beliefs and practices are authentic. In doing so, they harbour a notion of authenticity which is very much oriented towards the concept of authenticity employed by religious scholars who investigate the quality of the chains of transmission and the reliability of transmitters. In this sense, those who participated in this study adhere to a rather conservative notion of authority which has a long legacy within Muslim thinking.

The Internet is often portrayed as the translocal or transnational space par excellence because, at least on the surface, it lacks geographic, ethnic, gender or age boundaries which stop people and knowledge from travelling. When we take a closer look at the discussions and practices analysed in this study, we see that established authority actually still matters in the form of the exegetical religious authority of the religious scholars and interpretive traditions.

²⁴⁹ This might be different when one would study for instance Salafi Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands as a marginalised subaltern group excluded from hegemonic formations.

Communication is structured by the need for and the contestation of textual authenticity. At the same time, this need translates into new forms of authority which could be summarized in the ideal type figure of the translator, as represented by Abu Muhammad in the example above. Knowledge does not travel unhampered without encountering any obstacles or barriers. The barriers can be languages, different life-worlds or, simply, changes in material form (i.e. from analogue to digital media). In order to overcome these barriers, a translator is needed who takes the knowledge as baggage, moulds and shapes it, until it fits through the barrier and becomes applicable and relevant in new locations. Changes do indeed occur in the process of translation, though mostly subtle and seldom obvious. They rather take the form of establishing new links between interpretive traditions and proof-texts or of doubting and rejecting these links as I have discussed with reference to the workings of transitivity in Chapter 3 (see p. 153ff.). Mandaville aptly summarises this process in his article “When Meaning Travels”. Inspired by ideas from Edward Said, he writes:

When a theory travels it splits, multiplies and reproduces such that what we eventually end up with is many theories. Within any set of ideas, there will be multiple and often competing discourses on the nature of the ‘true’ (or originary) idea. (Mandaville 2003, 122)

What happens to the production of authority within the Salafiyya is that the migration of Salafi thought and practice to discussion forums and chat rooms has provided “translators” like Abu Muhammad and others the opportunity to gain locally bounded authority within a network of competing Salafi interpretive traditions and proof-texts. Their main claim is to state the “true or originary idea”. The success of their claim is for the most part measured and indexed by the repeated choices of other participants to use, comment and circulate their contributions. Consequently, the success of a “translator” hinges on the aggregate volition of the online communities which amplifies the contributions of those translators beyond the original context.

Conclusion

The Salafi understanding of authority is closely intertwined with authenticity. This means first of all that successful claims to authority must be based on authentic *dalil* in order to acquire textual authenticity. Furthermore, chains of knowledge transmission and affiliation to networks of scholars built on reciprocal credentials and references is the most common criterion used when deciding on the reliability of a person. Though many Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya claim that textual authenticity and sound chains of knowledge transmission are the main source of authority, they attach great importance to the moral authority of a person produced by performative authenticity. Performative authenticity is a product of the skill with which a believer is able to cultivate and embody the moral ambitions of the Salafiyya, to circumvent the threat of becoming hollow and empty due to a lack of sincerity and to perform according to the ideal model in a humble, self-critical and honest manner.

Textual and performative authenticity are recognised and honoured in computer-mediated environments by the vernacular authority stemming from aggregate volition. Every single user's choice to copy, circulate, cite, comment or to recognise a contribution in any other way adds to the authority of that contribution and its creator. Those who most aptly "translate" knowledge in these new environments and render it meaningful for the lives of Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands are bestowed with authority by the multiple choices of their co-religionists to approvingly engage with their contributions. It is only then that these contributions emerge as authenticated religious knowledge from among the overload of religious information available online.

Conclusion

The significance of religious practices in computer-mediated environments

Before concluding this study, I want to highlight the limitations of this study in order to clarify its possible range of meaning. In this study, I have focussed on the religious practices of Muslims following the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands in discussion forums and chat rooms. I zoomed into their religious engagement accessible to outside observers in selected CMEs and left aside various practices which were not closely related to their faith, as for instance discussing football results or exchanging recipes, as well as practices which I had difficulties to document in form of data. The latter group comprises practices like lurking or the integration of digital media practices into everyday life which were largely left uncommented by interlocutors and difficult to trace in interviews and participant observation online. It is therefore important to remind readers of what this study is not, that is, an inclusive explanation of Salafi identities, lives and actions. I deliberately chose to restrict myself to one, albeit important, aspect of Salafi subjectivity, that is those observable practices which are related to Islam. This practically means that I did not delve into other important sources for the construction of subjectivities such as family relations, friendship, work and school related issues or non-religious sources of identity formation like sports, local as well as national identities and hobbies. Instead of trying to account for and explain the construction of Salafi subjectivities, practices and lives in a totalising fashion, this study sheds light on what happens to a religion and related practices when believers engage with their faith in a new technological environment.

Concomitantly, the order and the emphasis with which the practices have been presented and analysed in this study are an outcome of my reasoned reflection and filtering of reality in the course of data gathering, coding, analysis and writing. This is not to say that this study is futile because it is not “objective” or free from inference from the side of the researcher. Rather, the prioritisation of some practices from among a diverse range of identifiable practices are the result of concrete research practices grounded in the empirical analysis of data. Keeping these crucial caveats in mind, I will retrace in the following the questions which stood at the beginning of this study (see Introduction, p. 35f.) and summarise the answers which have arisen from the analysis of the research data presented in the precedent chapters. Following this, I will briefly highlight in the second and final part of this conclusion the possible contributions of a praxeological approach as employed in this research to the study of the Salafiyya in general and in the European context in particular.

Summary: Salafi religious practices in chat rooms and discussion forums

The point of the departure of this study was the question as to what happens when a religion moves into new environments such as computer-mediated environments (CMEs) and is practised there. Focussing on religious practices, a set of sub-questions occurred which guided the fieldwork activities. These questions revolved around space-making (How do Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya construct devotional spaces and guard them?), transferring and (re-) constructing religious knowledge and practices in CMEs (How are religious knowledge and practices transferred to and constructed in CMEs?), constructing and moulding Salafi subjectivities in CMEs (How are Salafi subjectivities as well as communal identities presented, recognised and shaped online?) and establishing religious authority (What types of authority are constructed in CMEs and how are they generated?).

Devotional space-making online

Whether online or offline, spaces devoted to worship and faith-related practices need to be set apart from profane spaces by discernible markers telling in- and outsiders about the purpose of the space. Furthermore, elements which are thought to corrupt and sully the purity of the devotional space are kept at bay with the help of behavioural norms and their enforcement. Muslims following the Salafiyya and practising their religion in discussion forums and chat rooms employ visual and aural markers in order to create a devotional online architecture designating their space as a specifically “Salafi-Muslim” space. While chat rooms afford a relatively limited set of visual design choices discussion forums are visually and discursively shaped by the use of names—mainly user names and (sub-)forum names—and graphic material such as avatars, the graphic layout of a forum and the images inserted in posts and signatures of users.

The graphic layout of a forum, its name and the names of its sub-forums is imposed by forum administrators following what they consider to be an appropriate choice for the space they want to create. The labels used often related to central concepts of the Salafiyya like *manhaj* and *‘aqida* or biographies and stories of the Prophet and his companions. These choices are complemented by the aggregation of numerous design choices individual users make when setting up their forum presence the first time and logging in after the initial set-up of avatar, signature and profile information. Salafi informants related their choice of avatars and other images to a specific mood, a situation or a stage in life they were in at the time and which shaped their faith. The accumulation of all these choices gives rise to the aggregate volition of the

numerous users who thereby impress their “Salafi” identities, stories and notions on the visual architecture of a forum.

Aural markers are more important in chat rooms for the identification of the space due to the limited visual means through which chat room users can designate the identity of their space and to the Salafi objection to visual representation for different reasons such as gender segregation and the widely accepted prohibition to visually display animated things. Discussion forums are filled with audio material such as embedded audio and video files. However, forum participants have need to actively click on the files in order to listen to them. They are not part of the architecture of the space which immediately reveals itself to the visitor upon entering a forum. In chat rooms, the working of aural markers is somewhat different. Upon entering a chat room, participants in Salafi chat rooms usually immediately hear the voice of the lecturer or a recording played via the microphone function. The only exceptions are when people are waiting or type-chatting instead of using the microphone. The lecturers, administrators or moderators of the chat rooms usually decide what reaches the ear of the participants by either claiming the microphone entirely for themselves or by making a selection as to who is allowed to take over the microphone. In more informal chat rooms (e.g., chat rooms of the genre “*Stammtisch*”) the control is less drastic and rather exercised by the entire community voicing their critique when disagreeing with what they hear. In these chat rooms, administrators and moderators are restricted to the role of facilitators providing the infrastructure for the community. However, in contrast to the aggregate volition at work in the visual architecture of discussion forums, Salafi soundscapes in chat rooms are mainly produced by the small group of administrators and moderators.

Aural markers like *anashid*, recitations from the Qur’an, exhortations and narrated stories mould the space in that they tell participants about the identity of the space and give them a clue about what is expected from them in terms of behaviour, interaction and religious expression. They create a specific pious soundscape which moulds the expectations of visitors and calls for the performance of specific virtues embodied in *adab al-da’wa*. Moderators employ aural markers as a means to discipline and steer the behaviour of participants by playing Qur’anic recitations in order to silence participants and minimise unmindful chit-chatting. On other occasions they play powerful and short exhortatory lectures of well-known preachers in order to calm and prepare the audience waiting for the start of a lecture and to fill breaks, for instance between a lecture and a question-and-answer session.

Unsurprisingly, devotional spaces of the Salafiyya online are managed spaces in which

rules thought to be necessary to facilitate devotional practices are enforced. The requirement to provide evidence from the religious sources (*dalil*) for statements related to religion is a basic demand in all chat rooms and forums of this study. This rule was not only guarded by the moderators. Rather, the entire community of a forum or a chat room often reprimanded participants who did not adhere to this rule. Furthermore, Salafi forums and chat rooms featured rules geared towards the avoidance of *fitna*, that is chaos, temptation and dissension. This engendered rules for the communication between sexes in the public areas of chat rooms and forums, for instance the rule to remain sober and factual as well as the prohibition of flirting. Private communication between the sexes was in forums either entirely prohibited and the respective functions were turned off or restricted to a certain group of participants. Alternatively, some forums left the decision to the participants themselves but made sure that warnings were issued and that the requirements for suitable conduct between sexes were clear to everybody. In chat rooms, moderators could only react with banning the incriminated person upon the initiative of participants claiming to have been indecently approached by a member of the opposite sex. *Fitna* was not only seen as a threat emanating from illicit interaction between men and women but also from persons and groups proselytising, advertising wrong beliefs and endangering the religious purity of the space. While non-Muslims and followers of the Shi'a or any other group considered to be heretic were usually quickly banned, Sunni Muslims who were ignorant of the way of the *salafi al-salih* were rather reprimanded and re-directed in the spirit of *da'wa*.

This brings us to the interpretive protocols which shape behaviour and interaction of participants and arise from the active cooperation of community members rather than from the top-down enforcement of rules. The main elements of the interpretive protocol characteristically at work within forums and chat rooms of the Salafiyya were *adab al-da'wa* through which the perfect model of a Muslim community is revived and exposed to others, *hisba* (commanding what is good and forbidding what is wrong) and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal) which includes norms and practices circumscribing the limits of inclusion to a community and its devotional spaces. The norms and virtues which are subsumed under *adab al-da'wa* such as gentleness, patience and mercy should ideally be the result of a believer's love for God and his or her entire submission under the will of God. The total submission to God produces *taqwa* (fear of God) which intensifies the sensibility of a believer as to what God has commanded and *khushu'* (humility) which reminds a believer of his or her place in relation to God and fellow human beings. These virtues are expressed, enacted and cultivated in computer-mediated environments

of the Salafiyya.

The rather inclusive interpretive protocol of *adab al-da'wa* which shapes the devotional space of the Salafiyya is contained in its reach by the two notions of *hisba* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*. They fundamentally ensure that the Truth does not get compromised by an exaggerated application of the virtues of *adab al-da'wa*. Being friendly and patient thus should not lead to the toleration of heretical beliefs, sins and practices. The ideal model is the unpolished and balanced integrity of the Prophet who in all those situations in which he was confronted with sins remained patient but steadfast. While *hisba* in forums and chat rooms focusses on the actions of people and tries to ensure that participants do not expose unbelief, be it unwittingly or not, *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* aims to create a space hostile to any alternative truth claim and practices which question or compromise the Truth as understood by the Salafiyya.

Space-making practices are dynamic and repetitive in two aspects. They first of all need to be repeated and continuously enacted in order to be effective. When aural and visual markers are not included in the practices any more, rules not enforced, *fitna* not fought or interpretive protocols not carefully maintained, the devotional online architecture crumbles and the space loses its meaning for devotional practices. Secondly, the exact limits of in- and exclusion, the virtues postulated by *adab al-da'wa* and rule enforcement are prone to ambiguity and challenges which opens up a dynamic field of practices. The dynamism of space-making practices becomes evident in the numerous discussions on as to how, for instance, gender segregation should be implemented or at what point exactly politeness and patience interferes with the obligation of dissociating from unbelief. In many cases administrators cut the discussion short and take the decision to ban or censor or refrain from it. However, in general it is the accumulation of repeated individual voices, actions and choices which in their totality account for the exact arrangement and definition of a space.

Transferring and (re-)constructing religious knowledge and practices in CMEs

Akin to the cultural transformations within Christianity and elsewhere brought about by the introduction and spread of the printing press, I started my research with the sense that “something” happens to religious practice when it is extended into computer-mediated environments and incorporates new media and communication technologies into its practices. In order to get a grip on this rather vague notion, I looked at how two core elements of religion, that is religious knowledge and religious practices, are transferred, constructed and performed in the discussion forums and chat rooms of the German and Dutch speaking Salafiyya.

Let me first of all briefly recap the notion of knowledge underlying the practices and beliefs of Salafi Muslims who were involved in this study and then proceed to the hermeneutic-interpretive practices through which knowledge is produced, transmitted and authorised. The informants in my study understood religious knowledge in terms of a life-long quest for the Truth, that is Islamic knowledge, which brings them back to where they have started from when they were born, which is their *fitra* or the innate human inclination to worship God. Gaining Islamic knowledge is not something a believer is free to do whenever it suits him or her. Rather, acquiring Islamic knowledge is viewed as an obligation of every believer in the endeavour to emulate the ideal model of the Prophet and the pious ancestors in all aspects of life as closely as possible. The limits of the obligation are only set by personal abilities and resources. Most interlocutors and sources echo ideas and notions stemming from the exact sciences and empiricism in that knowledge must be backed up by empirical evidence while metaphysical or philosophical “musing” divert attention from the Truth at best or introduce heretical innovations at worst. The primary sources, Qur’an and Sunna, are constructed as scientifically approved Truth, that is, containing knowledge that can be corroborated by and inferred from the observation of nature. Notwithstanding the transparent nature of Islamic knowledge, believers are often not able to grasp an aspect of Islamic knowledge such as *tawhid al-asma’ wa-l-sifat* because human science lag behind the divine knowledge revealed by God in the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet. Incomprehensible or contradictory aspects of knowledge have to be accepted without further “asking how” (*bi-la kayfa*) until human sciences have evolved to a stage in which they can understand and see the empirical evidence already provided in Qur’an and Sunna. These sources do not need any interpretation in the sense of figurative or metaphorical reading. They should be read “literally” and Islamic knowledge derived from them needs to be rooted in a literal reading in form of *dalil* (evidence). Neglecting these exigencies opens the door to heretical innovation and unbelief threatening to contaminate the faith of a community and its members.

Islamic knowledge is constructed and transmitted in chat rooms and discussion forums with the help of what informants call “Islamic argumentation”. The core element of Islamic argumentation is *dalil*, the twofold link from a contemporary situation which has brought forth a question to an analogue situation or case described in the Qur’an and the Sunna and back to contemporary life by transferring a rule, practice or guideline from the proof-texts to present-day life. Islamic argumentation is a hermeneutic-interpretive practice aiming to unearth the applicable authentic model from the sources and making it meaningful to Muslims living nowadays. My discussion of diverse examples from forums and chat rooms shows that Islamic

argumentation varies by reason of, among other things, the affordances at play in a specific computer-mediated environments. For instance, while Islamic argumentation proceeds quite focussed and in a rather formalised manner in discussion forums including references to the sources, the proceedings of Islamic argumentation in chat rooms are more informal, sometimes intermingled with multiple conversational threads and narrative in nature.

Though informants framed their own role in the deliberative processes of Islamic argumentation predominantly as passive and merely receptive—that is, literally reading the sources without any interpretive interference from their side—the analysis of the process of Islamic argumentation has shed light on the subtle and hidden ways in which interpretive traditions are reinvigorated, sustained and at times transformed through active engagement of the participants. When engaging with Qur'an and Sunna in the course of Islamic argumentation, these religious sources do not always yield immediate and clear answers. They sometimes remain silent or are not comprehensible and therefore need intermediaries who explain and clarify their meaning. However, as the ubiquity of difference of opinion (*ikhtilaf*) illustrates, religious scholars often arrive at different rulings all bolstered with *dalil*. Yet, these ambiguities and problems, which occur when believers try to infer meaning from the sources by reading them literally, open room for an active role of believers.

I have described two ideal types in order to catch the range of active roles of Salafi Muslims who search for meaning in the religious sources in forums and chat rooms. The first ideal type is the more cautious one: the critical consumer of Muslim knowledge production. Being a lay person, he fears the dangers inherent in human reasoning and, concomitantly, in a more active role in Islamic argumentation and the construction of *dalil* because this could potentially open the door to heretical practices, beliefs and religious innovation. He therefore abstains from the active production of *dalil* and claims to follow the people of knowledge, that is the acknowledged religious scholars. In the same vein, he rejects collective deliberation about a religious question in favour of critically examining statements of reliable scholars, weighing their evidential strength and making a decision to the best of their knowledge. In contrast, the second ideal type, the active producer of *dalil* engages in the construction of *dalil* by searching for proof-texts in Qur'an and Sunna and by deducting meaning from there. The exegetical works of scholars are rather auxiliary means which are consulted when the meaning of a verse is not clear or in order to verify and bolster one's own understanding of the matter. The ongoing digitisation of hadith collections, the Qur'an and the scholarly opus form the basis of the active role of lay believers in constructing *dalil* because they render the texts searchable without having to

memorise large volumes of hadiths.

Many Salafi Muslims active in constructing *dalil* work rather inductively starting from an existing interpretive tradition which they support and for which they search matching proof-texts. By establishing transitive relations, they link an interpretation to proof-texts even when they are not literally identical. This act of linking and un-linking proof-texts and interpretive traditions facilitates the revitalisation of interpretive traditions by authorising them with *dalil* and making them relevant for present-day life. While intending to unearth and preserve the heritage of the community of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih*, small changes and transformations to the meaning of the religious sources can occur in the course of repetitive construction of *dalil* and transmission of interpretive traditions.

Having so far focussed on the hermeneutic-interpretive dimension of religious practices, let me in the remainder of this and in the following section turn to their narrative-performative dimension. This dimension underlines how religious knowledge in its broadest sense is not only produced and transmitted in forums and chat rooms but also put into practice, that is, lived, performed and transmitted by “doing”. In addition to their performative quality, these practices are narrative in that they are grounded in multiple ways in the narratives of the early Muslim community under the leadership of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih*. These narratives circulate in computer-mediated environments in which Muslims actively participate and live their religion. They provide blue-prints for the interpretation of contemporary life-situations of Muslims, emphasize certain ethics and behavioural etiquettes and embody the demeanour of a pious Muslim dedicated to true knowledge.

Rituals figure among the more prominent narrative-performative practices because they are in general known to the entire community of believers, are considered to be an essential part of religion and follow a relatively fixed patterned script. The discussion of the transfer of rituals performed by Salafi Muslims—and Muslims in general for that matter—to chat rooms and discussion forums has pointed to the diverse outcome of such transfers and to the factors which decide over the failure or success thereof. Some rituals are transplanted in an almost self-evident manner as, for instance, the conversion ritual in chat rooms while others either fail to be transferred (e.g., the prayer ritual) or the result is ambivalent (e.g., gender segregation). Ritual transfer is successful when the essential components of a specific ritual are conveyed to new environments and re-aggregated there in a meaningful way while remaining legible and enactable for believers. On the other hand, ritual transfer fails or yields mixed results when essential elements cannot be translated to the new environments and no meaningful equivalents

are found. Changes which occur during the transfer process do not necessarily indicate failure. For instance, the element of witnessing during a conversion rituals in a chat room is relegated from the eye to the ear (hearing instead of seeing a person uttering the statement of faith). The main indicator for success is that the ritual in itself remains self-explanatory in the new environments and can therefore be performed and recognised by the community of believers without any further explanation as to how it should correctly be done.

In addition to the transfer of already existing rituals another option might occur when a religion is practised in a new environment: the increasing ritualisation of a religious practice. I have argued that this is the case with Islamic argumentation in discussion forums because of the affordances inherent to the underlying communication technologies. Due to the lack of final human authority in religious questions and the resulting discursive flexibility, Islamic argumentation and the construction of *dalil* as its main element do not seek final closure but are endlessly repeated. During these repetitions, the digitisation of religious texts and the modularity of new digital media work hand in hand with the often transitive nature of Salafi reasoning since they facilitate the linking and un-linking of proof-texts and interpretive traditions. Simultaneously, the use of search engines by informants yields increasingly patterned communication because they tend to use existing text modules (or text-objects) and re-assemble them together with other modules into a new object instead of producing original texts. Popular text-objects circulating in Salafi forums and chat rooms are usually recognised by believers and automatically linked to specific interpretive traditions in the course of Islamic argumentation.

In contrast to rituals, devotional practices do not follow a fixed script, are rather part of everyday worship and as such accompany the trivial proceedings of mundane life. One practice which I qualify as “vernacular *da’wa*” has emerged from the religious engagement of Salafi Muslims in chat rooms and discussion forums as well as other computer-mediated environments. Circulating Islamic material online is one of the most ubiquitous practices of Salafi Muslims in CMEs such as chat rooms and forums. They forward, embed and link to material which in their perception contains important Islamic knowledge. The material can consist of *anashid*, sermons, Islamic stories, fatwas or simple pictures. As a practice, circulating Islamic material comprises various recurring elements and acts such as “upping” a post, translating knowledge, reacting with supplications and the idea to circulate information that is beneficial to the Muslim community. Circulating Islamic material is the result of interaction among believers in computer-mediated environments without the interference of a religious institution or an authority. It uses the “native” communication tools of these environments (e.g., hyperlinking, copy-pasting,

modularity) and is therefore expressed in the vernacular language of the context in which they come into being.

Islamic argumentation, rituals and vernacular *da'wa* as analysed in this study reveal how knowledge and religious practices are transferred to and reconstructed in computer-mediated environments. The metaphor of a filter might help to visualise the different processes involved and to abstract from the discussion of concrete practices. Religious practices are filtered through the affordances of a specific CME whereby they fall apart into their main elements or modules. These elements can transform when passing through the filter. On the other side of the filter, they are re-assembled into practices of which some are not able to meaningfully reconstitute themselves since they are not recognised any more by the community of believers and fail to fulfil the function of communicating the main norms and beliefs of the community. In other cases, practices are re-constituted with more or less invasive changes to their elements yielding mixed results as to their effectiveness. And finally, specific practices which have not existed before the filtering come into being by aggregating elements of different practices into a new practice or by accentuating certain patterns and modules.

Performing Salafi subjectivities and communal identities online

One pertinent question when it comes to analysing the practices of people belonging to a specific religious tradition in a specific environment refers to the ways in which communal identities are fostered and maintained. Communal identities tie the individual to the group and include those subjectivities thought to be authentic and “true” with reference to the tradition. Some practices stand out in this context in that they more clearly than other practices define and communicate the limits of the acceptable within a community and affect the dispositions of its members. In this study, I argue that the practice of *hisba* (commanding what is good and forbidding what is wrong), *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal) and the consumption of Islamic material in forums and chat rooms are central to the formation of Salafi subjectivities and communal identities.

Giving *nasiha* (sincere advice) is a central and omnipresent practice through which Salafi Muslims command what is right and try to correct un-Islamic behaviour which they observe in the compartments of their fellow Muslims. This practice entails a specific etiquette which essentially boils down to being patient with the addressee of a *nasiha* but simultaneously remaining firm by not playing down a wrong practice or belief. The active dissociation (*bara'*) from unbelievers and those who hold on to heretic beliefs is usually performed by implicitly or explicitly declaring a person an unbeliever (*takfir*). This is a highly sensitive topic among Muslims

following the Salafiyya and has caused deep splits among its followers with the most controversial question being as to when unbelief (*kufr*) actually expels a Muslim from Islam. *Takfir* in chat rooms and discussion forums is therefore a ubiquitous yet contested practice as the examples in Chapter 4 illustrate (see p. 206ff.). A wide-spread technique is to do *takfir* rather indirectly through “discursive morphing”. When employing this technique, Salafi Muslims reference socio-political and theological debates from the early Muslim community after the death of the Prophet and during the first internal violent conflicts over the leadership of the Muslim community. The names of parties to the conflicts such as *khawarij* and *murji’a* are imposed on Muslim opponents with the intention to reveal their heresy.

The vehemence and the righteous indignation with which *takfir* is practised and the way it leads to outbursts of enmity and disgust in chat rooms and discussion forums are expressions of meaningful anger arising from being hurt and threatened. Interpreted within the framework of populism, doing *takfir* provides the opportunity to define and defend what is good and to agitate against what is bad which induces a sense of moral clarity and being on the right side. This feeling of moral superiority is cultivated in forums and chat rooms and culminates into a catharsis washing ambiguity and doubt away and, simultaneously, unequivocally defining communal borders.

Complementary to *hisba* and *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’*, which both translate into practices of in- and exclusion of people and beliefs, the consumption of Islamic material circulating in discussion forums and chat rooms cultivate those disposition and beliefs which are considered to be correct and part of a pious Muslim life. Salafi Muslims believe that well-performed sermons, Qur’an recitations, *anashid* or narratives address the heart and expand the chest of believers by instilling fear of God (*taqwa*), intensifying the love of God and the believer’s submission to His will and drawing him or her closer to God. It is important to understand that consumption here does not consist of passive reception but is an act of active listening or reading involving actions in form of bodily movements, exclamations or sensual experiences. Whether done in moments of private consumption behind the computer screen when reading an Islamic poem posted on a forum or as a communal performance when listening to a sermon in a chat room, the consumption of Islamic material strengthens the tie with God which also forms the strongest link among the community of Salafi Muslims and from which the norms and right dispositions towards fellow human beings derive. These practices are part of the cultivation of the subjectivity of a pious Muslim according to the ideal model embodied in the life of the Prophet and his companions.

Religious authority in computer-mediated environments

The emergence of new communication technologies usually places question marks to the fate of already established authority because they can turn into channels for alternative claims to authority put forward by groups which were rather marginalised before. This has given rise to the question as to what types of authority are constructed in CMEs and as to how they are generated. To begin with, established authority embodied in the venerated religious scholars (*'ulama'*) thrives also in forums and chat rooms of the Salafiyya and is far from being sidelined. However, their authority is more and more predicated on locally rooted mediating authorities who translate the religious work of religious scholars into vernacular languages and local contexts. I use the figure of "the translator" in order to describe form of authority emerging in CMEs of the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands.

Within Salafi understanding, authenticity is the core aspect of authority and implies that religious knowledge needs to be linked to the religious sources with the help of *dalil*. This notion of textual authenticity is complemented by performative authenticity which are practices that help to convince fellow believers of the authenticity of a person's religious statements, beliefs and practices. Performative authenticity supports textual authenticity and both need to be in tune. Several practices which generate performative authenticity help to enhance textual authenticity in order to establish a person's claims and statements as the most persuasive in a specific context. Those who put forward authority claims place themselves within a genealogy of scholars from which they take knowledge and whose knowledge they themselves in turn transmit. This chain of knowledge transmission is enacted in chat rooms and discussion forums through linkages to the religious scholars one follows and by showing that one has a direct link to them for instance by way of having studied with them or by calling them on the telephone for advice. The idea is that the authority of those revered scholars rubs off through establishing proximity. Most local Salafi authorities I have encountered in this study do not have a formal *ijaza*, an authorisation of a scholar to teach his works and transmit them to students. Those who do are held in high esteem. It is rather through informal credentials and networks of praise and dispraise than through scholarly licenses that local authorities are able to build up and maintain their authority. These credentials usually circulate by hearsay in CMEs and are meant to attest the authenticity and soundness of a person's knowledge.

In addition to the enactment of chains of knowledge transmission, performative authenticity also comprises a specific way of being sincere first and foremost towards God by living according to His will. Salafi Muslims strive to incorporate the norms and values which are

attached to the model of the Prophet such as patience, fear of God (*taqwa*), veraciousness and politeness. These moral ambitions, however, are often enmeshed in contradictions to, on the one hand, the non-Muslim surroundings in which temptations and deviations menace the purity of faith and related practices. On the other hand, contradictions emanate from within the Salafi ethical project because not all its values and norms harmonise easily all the time as is for instance the case with the claim to be veracious and, at the same time patient and polite. Those who are able to deal with these contradictions successfully by finding the right balance are thought to be sincere and authentic which adds to their claim to authority.

Textual and performative authenticity are only one part of the story when it comes to authority in discussion forums and chat rooms. It is the repeated choice of believers to link, cite, copy-paste and otherwise reference a contribution which bestows authority on the author as well as his or her contribution and turns a forum posting or a chat room lecture into a text-object circulating the web and referenced in various contexts. The more people agree to a contribution by “upping” it, linking it and citing it or, in the case of chat rooms, share recordings or talk about it, the more authority is accumulated on the side of the author. Textual and performative authenticity needs thus to be coupled with aggregate volition in order to realise its potential. Aggregate volition is the result of an “authority from below” or vernacular authority since hundreds of believers who click, link and cite are the source of it.

Authority in Salafi forums and chat rooms is thus neither revolutionary nor conservative in the sense of preserving established ways. The affordances of the communication technologies at play in these CMEs give room to locally bounded authorities who aptly translate established interpretive traditions and evidence formulated by scholars into the local context, establish their authenticity by placing themselves in a chain of transmission of authentic knowledge and are beneficiaries of the aggregate volition of fellow believers who circulate and cite their texts.

Practice theory and the study of the Salafiyya

In this final part of the conclusion I will return to some of the main issues I raised in the introduction when discussing the relevant literature in order to highlight how research based on practice theory might be able to fill some of the lacunae. Two questions are of concern here: What does a praxeological approach as employed in the present study add to the understanding of the Salafiyya, especially in the European context? And what does it add to the understanding of the part that new social media have come to play in religious movements such as the Salafiyya in Europe?

Studying the Salafiyya as practice: Identifying non-religious influences, transformations and ambiguities

To focus on religious practices from the outset of a research project does not mean that non-religious influences and elements are ignored or simply subsumed under the religious. In fact, it is a strength of practice theory that its main focus, practice, is not a fixed and stable unit but made up of several elements of religious and non-religious provenance which dynamically enter into relationships in the frame of a practice. Even a classic Islamic ritual like speaking the *shahada* in the context of a conversion ritual is shaped and mediated by influences and elements which do not stem from religious doctrine or thinking. As the analysis of this practice showed, the affordances of a chat room played a major part in the performance of this ritual and the final form it took. The example of vernacular *da'wa* in form of the circulation of Islamic material underlines how a non-religious practice (circulating material online) can turn into a religious practice when it is re-signified through a religious frame like *da'wa*. A praxeological approach to the study of the Salafiyya thus uncovers non-religious factors which play a significant role for the ways believers practice their religion. Simultaneously, it facilitates the identification of transformative moments as for instance is the case with the growing ritualisation of Islamic argumentation in forums.

The example of vernacular *da'wa* leads us to the second point of my argument. Circulating Islamic material is actually a devotional practice embedded in everyday life and specific to the medium in which it appears. It was one of the most wide-spread practices among research participants which they themselves seldom mentioned. Only by observing their doings in CMEs and explicitly asking them was I able to identify, analyse and describe it. A praxeological approach to the Salafiyya does therefore help to draw the attention to and identify elements of lived religion which would otherwise go unnoticed because they are part of the minutiae of life

and are usually left unmentioned by believers themselves.

The final point of my argument about the benefits of a praxeological approach is its persistence in revealing and analysing ambiguities and contradictions which are often left unaccounted for but are an important part of the experiences of believers. This study has shown that some practices like gender segregation in CMEs are important to believers and highlighted by them but lack a clear and widely shared idea as to how it should be practised. Likewise, the communal splits which occur around practices such as *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, Islamic argumentation (should a believer actually construct *dalil* from the religious sources or refrain her- or himself to the critical consumption of *dalil* provided by the scholars?) or the contested construction of chains of knowledge transmission point to the ambiguous or multivocal nature of many interpretive traditions.

These splits and contested issues are not always well caught by already established scientific categories. I alluded in the introduction to Wiktorowicz's categorisation of the Salafiyya into purists, politicos and jihadists. While I could observe some of the contested issues he mentions in his description (for instance, the issue of declaring Muslim rulers ruling with non-Islamic law unbelievers) in the field, other important contested issues (constructing *dalil* vs. critically consuming existing *dalil*) are missing in his description. Furthermore, I found it difficult to assign one of the three categories to those I observed and talked with because while they revealed themselves as staunch jihadists on one particular issue (for instance on *takfir*), the same person would become a politico when joining the board of a mosque which has to deal with the local authorities or show purist leanings when talking about the importance of *tarbiya* (religious education) and leading a pious life. Many informants of this study constantly crossed the lines of those pre-established categories and intermingled at times with Salafi Muslims from other factions in chat rooms and forums. Although these ideal types were helpful in the beginning in order to become sensitive to some of the contested issues within the Salafi community, the praxeological approach proved helpful in order to highlight those instances in which they lost their analytical power.

Employing practice theory is thus in particular fruitful, I argue, when studying relatively new or understudied phenomena and when doing research on highly contested subjects like the Salafiyya in Europe. Its propensity to focus on what people actually do and to describe these doings before turning to an analysis thereof helps to exclude conceptions from the analysis which are too generalising, misleading or simply not significant in a specific case. Therefore—though I criticised the radicalisation paradigm in the introduction (see p. 3)—I argue that a praxeological

approach might turn a study on radicalisation into a meaningful undertaking. My argument is twofold: First of all, a praxeological approach forces the researcher to fill the hollow and empty term with life by defining which practices or elements of a practice are exactly radical and by bolstering his or her assertions with empirical evidence taken from the observation of concrete situations. Studies based on the radicalisation paradigm have the tendency to focus on written doctrine and tactics as indicators for an ongoing radicalisation. However, doctrines and tactics need to be put into practice which embedded in their local contexts can potentially look quite different from what they mean when they are discussed within a group. A diligent analysis of practices and their contexts added to the analyses of doctrinal and tactical issues provide better empirical material for understanding radicalisation than the often abstract discussions of doctrine and tactics on their own would do.

Secondly, practice theory directs the focus to the specific contexts in which an otherwise inconspicuous practice might become a sign of radicalisation. With reference to the present study, practices of exclusion, the cultivation of a specific morality and the fulfilment of moral ambitions might under specific circumstances become an issue in terms of radicalisation. A praxeological approach helps to identify the exact elements of a potential “radical” practice and the corresponding contexts. This helps to prevent an *a priori* criminalisation of specific practices and people engaging in them and adds accuracy and consistency to the study of radicalisation.

The role of online religion for religious movements

As I mentioned in the introduction, the Salafiyya crystallized at different points in history into local and translocal movements propagating socio-cultural and, though to a lesser degree, political change. The rising levels of public activism among Muslims following the Salafiyya in Germany and the Netherlands in recent years suggest that the Salafiyya has turned or is about to turn into a socio-religious movement in these places as well. Preacher networks have become active through multifarious *da'wa* activities in the public sphere such as information booths on markets, flyer actions in streets, public praying or open air lectures. More recently, the clashes between the German police and Muslims predominantly following the Salafiyya who protested against a demonstration of anti-Islam groups showing among other things caricatures of the Prophet in Bonn on the 6th of May 2012 left 29 police officers injured, two of them seriously. Ensuing activities among the German Salafiyya leave the impression that Salafi groups are growing increasingly assertive in public in order to further what they see as their rights. The ubiquitous use of media by activists and followers leads to the question as to what role they play

in this movement and its activism.

This study has among other things shown how the Salafiyya uses chat rooms and forums in order to create a space of their own where they can realise the ideal model of a community of pious Muslims shaped after the Prophet and his companions. The chat rooms and discussion forums of the Salafiyya studied in this research are thus not so much places where attacks are planned, actions conceptualised or where groups conspire clandestinely. Rather, they link up with the everyday life of believers and provide the space for practices which “embody in embryonic form the changes the movements seek” (Edelman 2001, 289).

These cultural practices submerged in everyday life are not so much a means for mobilising followers in order to become explicitly active for the cause of the movement. They are rather a goal in itself because they bring the movement closer to the realisation of its ideal. In the language of the Salafiyya, the adherence to the Qur’an and Sunna as interpreted by the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih* is a means to approach the ideal model of a pious, God fearing and worshipping life and at the same time the goal of their existence. Narrative-performative practices of the type analysed in the preceding chapters provide the training and breeding ground for social movements. They give a taste of what it means to communally hone specific practices in order to comply with the ideal model. Furthermore, the ongoing active cooperation in chat rooms and discussion forums among Salafi followers nourishes social cohesion. One important part of social cohesion is the formation of a moral community with shared moral ambitions and similar ideas about good and evil (see de Koning 2009). Practices through which differences are performed like commanding good and forbidding wrong or *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* serve to strengthen the common moral ground while drawing boundaries around the community. At the same time, the almost notorious discussions among Salafi Muslims whenever *al-wala wa-l-bara’* or *hisba* are enacted shows that there is room for interpretation and a pragmatical approach to these demanding practices which can tell us something about the relation between the Salafiyya and the environments its followers live in.

On a slightly different note, the issue of aggregate volition and vernacular authority in computer-mediated environments is also of importance to Salafi offline activism. Activists need to root their decisions and acts in the model set out by the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih*. Furthermore, they need to acquire a certain amount of authority in order to pull people into their activism and in order to receive support. Whether they are considered to be authentic in the two senses as analysed in Chapter 5 (textual and performative authenticity), is to some extent decided by the online choices of believers. They can bestow authority on the messages and practices of

activists by, for instance, spreading corresponding material, commenting in their favour or using visual material produced and employed by activists.

Chat rooms and discussion forums are thus part of a submerged network of everyday practices which anticipate the ideal society the Salafiyya strives for and where specific practices and messages are authenticated as Salafi or truly Islamic. Furthermore, Muslims inspired by the Salafiyya learn together what it means to be an authentic Muslim true to the ideal model in all aspects of life. Whether this materialises into long-term activism with a wide repertoire of movement action remains to be seen. One of the objectives of further research into the nexus of online activities and offline activism would be the identification and analysis of intervening variables such as the perception of social and political opportunities, available resources, external pressures and individual biographies which might trigger a community to overcome internal difference, leave computer-mediated environments and challenge dominant cultural forces also offline.

Glossary

<i>adab</i>	good manners, decency, etiquette
<i>adab al-da'wa</i>	etiquette of pious exhortation, well-mannered way to invite to Islam
<i>'adhāb al-qabr</i>	the torments of the grave
<i>adhān</i>	call to prayer
<i>ahad</i>	hadith with only one or few chains of transmission
<i>ahl al-hadīth</i>	the people of hadith
<i>ahl al-'ilm</i>	the people of knowledge
<i>ahl al-sunna</i>	the people of the Sunna
<i>ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a</i>	the people of the Sunna and of the community
<i>ahwā'</i> (sg. <i>hawa</i>)	human desires, inclinations and passions
<i>akhī</i>	my brother
<i>akhlāq</i>	character, behaviour, manners, morals
<i>'ālim</i> (pl. <i>'ulamā'</i>)	scholar
<i>al-'ālim</i>	the All-Knowing
<i>Allāh akbar</i>	God is great
<i>Allāh a'lam</i>	God knows best, God is all-knowing
<i>Allāh al-musta'ān</i>	may Allah help us
<i>Allāh subhānahu wa-ta'ālā</i> (also <i>subhān Allah wa-ta'ālā</i>)	God glorified and exalted be he
<i>'allāma</i>	highly learned (used as an honorific)
<i>'amal</i>	work, deeds
<i>al-'amal bi-l-dalīl</i>	working with evidence
<i>al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar</i>	commanding good and forbidding wrong
<i>ansār</i>	supporters, followers (of the Prophet in Medina)
<i>'aqīda</i>	doctrine, the fundamentals of faith
<i>asmā' Allāh al-husnā</i>	the (99) beautiful names of God
<i>atbā' al-tābi'in</i>	the follower of the followers (of the companions of the Prophet)
<i>athar</i> (adj. <i>athari</i>)	transmission, report
<i>asbāb al-nuzūl</i>	the reasons for which God revealed specific verse to the Prophet.

<i>asl</i>	principle, precedent in Qur'an and Sunna (with reference to <i>qiyas</i>)
<i>astaghfir Allāh</i>	I seek forgiveness from God (in the sense of "heaven forbid!")
<i>'awāmm</i>	the common people
<i>'awra</i>	parts of the body that need to be covered in the presence of others, private parts
<i>barā'</i> (also <i>barā'a</i>)	disavowal
<i>baraka llāh fīka</i> (male)/ <i>fīki</i> (female)/ <i>fīkum</i> (plural)	May God bless you
<i>al-basīr</i>	the All-Seeing
<i>bid'a</i> (pl. <i>bida'</i>)	(illicit) religious innovation
<i>bi-lā kayfa</i>	without asking how
<i>bi-sm Allāh al-rahmān al-rahīm</i>	in the name of God most gracious most merciful
<i>būkhṭān</i>	slander
<i>daff</i>	frame drum
<i>dā'in</i> or <i>dā'īya</i> (pl. <i>du'āt</i>)	somebody who invites to Islam
<i>dalīl</i> (pl. <i>adilla</i>)	evidence
<i>da'wa</i>	calling or inviting to Islam
<i>dhikr</i>	remembrance of God
<i>dīn</i>	religion
<i>du'ā'</i> (<i>ad'īya</i>)	supplication, invocation
<i>durūs</i>	lessons
<i>faqīh</i> (pl. <i>fuqahā'</i>)	jurisprudent
<i>far'</i>	deduction, deducted case (in reference to <i>qiyas</i>)
<i>fard 'alā l-kifāya</i>	collective obligation
<i>fī dīn</i>	in religion, faith
<i>al-firqat al-nājiya</i>	the saved group
<i>fitna</i>	chaos, rebellion, temptation, seduction
<i>fiqh</i>	jurisprudence
<i>fiqh al-aqalliyāt</i>	jurisprudence for Muslims living in minority situations
<i>fiṣq</i>	sinfulness, debauchery
<i>fitra</i>	the natural inclination of human beings to worship God
<i>ghība</i>	backbiting
<i>ghurabā'</i>	strangers

<i>ghusl</i>	the complete ritual washing
<i>hadīth</i> (pl. <i>ahādīth</i>)	report about what the Prophet is supposed to have done, said or silently tolerated
<i>hafidhahu/-hā/-hum</i> (A)llāh	may God protect him, her, them
<i>hajj</i>	pilgrimage to Mecca
<i>hākimiyya</i>	sovereignty
<i>halāl</i>	allowed
<i>al-hamd li-llāh</i>	Praise to God (exclamation)
<i>harām</i>	forbidden
<i>hasanāt</i> (sg. <i>hasana</i>)	good deeds
<i>hayā'</i>	modesty, shyness
<i>hidāya</i>	guidance
<i>hijāb</i>	female head cover
<i>hijra</i>	migration (migration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina)
<i>hikma</i>	wisdom
<i>hisba</i>	see <i>al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar</i>
<i>hukkām</i> (sg. <i>hākim</i>)	rulers
<i>hukm</i>	ruling
<i>'ibāda</i>	worship, devotion
<i>'īd al-adhā</i>	Festival of Sacrifice (commemorating the will of Abraham to sacrifice his son)
<i>idhan</i>	thus, therefore
<i>iftā'</i>	verbal noun of <i>aftā</i> (to issue a legal opinion)
<i>ijmā'</i>	consensus
<i>ijtihād</i>	exerting oneself (verbal noun of <i>ijtahada</i>), making a decision in Islamic law by personal effort (in opposition to <i>taqlid</i>)
<i>ikhlās</i>	sincerity
<i>ikhtilāf</i>	difference of opinion
<i>'illa</i>	explanatory principle, operative/ effective cause (with reference to <i>qiyas</i>)
<i>'ilm</i>	knowledge, science
<i>imān</i>	faith
<i>inharafa</i>	to deviate, verbal noun: <i>inhirāf</i>
<i>in sha'a llāh</i>	God willing
<i>irjā'</i>	doctrine stipulating that faith comprises belief and its public confession but does not

	necessarily include acts
<i>al-isti'āna bi-l-kuffār</i>	asking non-Muslims for help
<i>istihlāl</i>	declaring something permissible which is impermissible according to Islamic jurisprudence
<i>isti'rād</i>	interrogation
<i>i'tiqād</i>	conviction
<i>itla'</i>	up
<i>ittibā'</i>	critically following a scholar
<i>jahannam</i>	hell
<i>jahd</i>	denegation, negating the truth of Islam
<i>jāhil murakkab</i>	compound ignorant
<i>jāhil basīt</i>	simple ignorant
<i>jannat (al-firdaws)</i>	paradise
<i>jazāka (female: jazaki, pl. jazakum) (A)llāh (khayran)</i>	May God reward you (with goodness)
<i>jihād</i>	verbal noun of <i>jahada</i> (to make an effort for something, to devote oneself to something)
<i>jinn</i>	Djinn (invisible beings who intercept in life in a damaging or beneficial way)
<i>kalām</i>	theology
<i>khalas</i>	that's enough
<i>khawārij (also khārijīyya)</i>	those who went out, Kharijites
<i>khayr</i>	well, good
<i>khayr ummatī</i>	the best of my community
<i>khul'</i>	divorce in which the woman pays a recompense to the man, usually her dowry
<i>khutba</i>	(Friday) sermon
<i>kafīr (pl. kuffār)</i>	unbeliever
<i>kufr</i>	unbelief
<i>kufr akbar</i>	major unbelief
<i>kufr asghar</i>	minor unbelief
<i>kufr dūna kufr</i>	unbelief that does not entail apostasy (lit. unbelief less than unbelief)
<i>lā hawla wa-lā quwwa illā bi-llāh</i>	There is no might nor power except in Allah.
<i>lā ilāha illā llāh</i>	There is no god but God (i.e., there is only one God; part of the Islamic creed).
<i>ma'a salāma</i>	with peace (greeting used when leaving)

<i>madhhab</i> (pl. <i>madhāhib</i>)	school of law
<i>madhhab al-salaf</i>	the school of the pious ancestors
<i>mafrūd</i>	compulsory
<i>mahr</i>	dowry
<i>mahram</i> (pl. <i>mahārim</i>)	male relative whom a woman cannot marry and to whom sexual relations would be illicit
<i>majāz</i>	metaphorical meaning
<i>manhaj</i>	programme, methodology, way
<i>maʿrifat Allāh</i>	knowledge of God
<i>mā shāʿa llāh</i>	What God has willed (expression of joy, praise or thankfulness)
<i>mashhūr</i>	well-known
<i>masjid</i> (pl. <i>masājid</i>)	mosque
<i>maslaha</i>	interest, advantage, benefit
<i>miskīn</i>	poor, miserable, humble
<i>muʿāmala</i>	interaction, practices pertaining to the relationship among human beings (in contrast to <i>ʿibada</i> , worship)
<i>muʿawwal</i>	in need of interpretation
<i>muflis</i>	bankrupt
<i>muhaddith</i>	hadith scholar
<i>muhkam</i>	clear, exact, unambiguous
<i>mujmal</i>	ambivalent
<i>munāfiq</i>	hypocrite
<i>munkar</i>	reprehensible act
<i>murjiʿa</i>	upholders of the doctrine of <i>irjaʿ</i>
<i>murtadd</i>	apostate
<i>mushrik</i> (<i>mushrikīn</i>)	polytheists
<i>mustafīd</i>	widespread
<i>mustahhab</i>	recommended
<i>mutashābih</i>	vague, ambiguous, in need of further explication
<i>mutawātir</i>	massively transmitted (with reference to hadiths)
<i>mutawātir bi-l-maʿna</i>	massively transmitted in their meaning (i.e., not literally)
<i>namīma</i>	malicious gossip
<i>nasārā</i>	Christians

<i>nashīd</i> (pl. <i>anāshīd</i>)	Islamic music without instruments
<i>nasīha</i> (pl. <i>nasā'ih</i>)	(sincere) advice
<i>niqāb</i>	facial veil
<i>nīya</i>	intention
<i>qalb</i>	heart
<i>qāri'</i> (pl. <i>qurrā'</i>)	Qur'an reciter
<i>qasīda</i> (pl. <i>qasā'id</i>)	long poem with pre-Islamic roots in which every line rhymes and which follows a uniform metre
<i>qawl</i>	talking, word, speech
<i>qirā'a</i>	reading out aloud
<i>qiyās</i>	reasoning by analogy based on Qur'an and Sunna
<i>radiya llāh 'anhu/ 'anhā/ 'anhum</i>	may God be pleased with him/ her/ them
<i>al-rāfida</i>	the defectors (term of abuse often used for the Shi'a)
<i>rahimahu/ rahimahā/ rahimahum (A)llāh</i>	may God have mercy on him/ her/ them
<i>rak'a</i> (pl. <i>raka'āt</i>)	movement performed during prayer (standing, bending, standing)
<i>rasūl Allāh</i>	the messenger of God (Muhammad)
<i>rāyat al-sawdā'</i> or <i>rāyat al-'uqab</i>	the black banner or banner of the eagle; the banner used by the Prophet in battle and adopted by contemporary Islamist groups with various additions in order to promote jihad.
<i>rukū'</i>	bending of the body (verbal noun of <i>raka'a</i> , to bend)
<i>sabr</i>	patience
<i>sahābī, sahābiya</i> (pl. <i>ashāb</i> or <i>sahāba, sahābiyāt</i>)	(male, female) companion of the Prophet
<i>sahīh</i>	authentic (especially with reference to hadiths), sound, healthy
<i>sajda</i> (pl. <i>sajdāt</i>)	prostration during prayer
<i>al-salaf al-sālih</i>	the pious ancestors
<i>al-salām 'alaykum</i>	peace be upon you
<i>al-salām 'alaykum wa-rahmat Allāh</i>	peace and God's mercy be upon you
<i>al-salām 'alaykum wa-rahmat Allāh wa-barakātuhu</i>	peace, God's mercy and his blessings be upon you
<i>salāt</i> (pl. <i>salawāt</i>)	prayer
<i>salla llāh 'alayhi wa-sallam</i> (abbreviations: <i>saw, sws</i>)	may God honour him and grant him peace (honorific used after the mentioning of the

	name of the Prophet)
<i>al-sami‘</i>	the All-Hearing
<i>sawm</i>	fasting (during Ramadan)
<i>shahāda</i>	Islamic creed
<i>shuyūkh</i> (sg. <i>shaykh</i>)	religious dignitaries
<i>shirk</i>	polytheism
<i>sira</i> (<i>nabawiyya</i>)	biography (of the Prophet)
<i>subhānahu wa-ta‘ālā</i>	glorified and exalted be He
<i>sujūd</i>	prostrating (verbal noun of <i>sajada</i> , to prostrate)
<i>sulūk</i>	mannerism
<i>al-tābi‘ūn</i>	the followers (of the companions of the Prophet)
<i>tadabbur</i>	reflecting
<i>tafsīr</i>	interpretation, commentary
<i>tafsīr ‘ilmī</i>	scientific interpretation
<i>tahrīm</i>	to declare something <i>haram</i> (forbidden)
<i>tajwīd</i>	the art of Qur’anic recitation
<i>takfīr</i>	to declare somebody a <i>kafir</i> (unbeliever)
<i>talāq</i>	divorce
<i>tālib al-‘ilm</i> (pl. <i>tullāb al-‘ilm</i>)	student of knowledge
<i>taqlīd</i>	following a school of law (<i>madhhab</i>) in all its rulings
<i>taqwa</i>	fear of God
<i>tarāwīh</i>	extra congregational prayers prayed in the nights of Ramadan
<i>tarbiya</i>	(religious) education
<i>tashbīh</i>	anthropomorphism
<i>tawāghīt</i> (sg. <i>tāghūt</i>)	idols, tyrants
<i>tawakkul</i>	trust, reliance on God
<i>tawhīd</i>	monotheism, unity of God
<i>tawhīd al-asmā’ wa-l-sifāt</i>	unity of names and attributes
<i>tawhīd al-hākimiyya</i>	the absolute sovereignty of God
<i>tawhīd al-rubūbiyya</i>	unity of Lordship
<i>tawhīd al-ulūhiyya</i>	unity of divinity
<i>ta’wīl</i>	(figurative) interpretation
<i>tayyib</i>	good, well

<i>tuhr, tahāra</i>	(ritual) purity
<i>ukhtī</i>	my sister
<i>‘ulūm al-hadīth</i>	hadith sciences
<i>ummahāt al-mu‘minīn</i>	the mothers of the believers (term commonly used for the wives of the Prophet)
<i>‘umra</i>	the small pilgrimage to Mecca
<i>usūl al-fiqh</i>	the basic principles of jurisprudence
<i>wa-‘alaykum al-salām</i>	(peace be upon you as well
<i>wa-‘alaykum al-salām wa-rahmat Allāh</i>	peace and the God’s mercy be upon you as well
<i>wa-salām ‘alaykum wa-rahmat Allāh wa-barakātuhu</i>	peace and God’s mercy and blessing be upon you as well
<i>wa-hamd Allāh</i>	and God’s praise
<i>walā’</i> (also <i>wilāya</i>)	loyalty
<i>al-walā’ wa-l-barā’</i>	loyalty and disavowal
<i>walī</i>	legal guardian
<i>wa-l-salām</i>	and peace [upon you]
<i>al-wāsi‘</i>	the Omnipresent, the All-Embracing
<i>wudū’</i>	ablution
<i>yawm al-qiyāma</i>	Judgement Day
<i>zakāt</i>	alms-giving
<i>zulm</i>	injustice, oppression

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