**Mounir Saifi**

UAM, Madrid, Spain

[mounir.saifi.andalusist@gmail.com](mailto:mounir.saifi.andalusist@gmail.com)

**Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis, *Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan (“Palgrave Macmillan Series in International Political Communication”), 2009, viii + 269 p., ISBN: 978-0230-60035-5, 116,04 € hardcover.**

In this book of six chapters, America-based Egyptian specialists of Arab media Mohammed el-Nawawy and Khamis Sahar carry out a qualitative textual analysis of a number of postings on the discussion forums of three of the most popular mainstream Islamic websites: islamonline.net, islamway.com, and amrkhaled.net. Through this study, they aim at testing the applicability of Habermas’ public sphere, which is defined as a social space where public opinion is formulated through critical-rational debate, to Islamic cyberspace. They pay special attention to debates around issues pertaining to Islamic identity and to the Muslim’s relationship with the “Other.”

The first chapter of the book deals with Habermas’ theory. It explains how, according to the German philosopher, the public sphere originated in the rational-critical debates that used to take place in the salons of 17th- and 18th-century Europe. Several critics of Habermas’ theory argue that his bourgeois public sphere automatically excludes women as well as ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities from public debate, as it works best when it is limited to “educated white males.” The authors of *Islam Dot Com* also look into the impact of the new media, especially the Internet, on the discursive environment as regards matters of religion in the Arab-Muslim world. They argue that digitisation has led to the “objectification” of Islam, that is a fragmentation of religious authority, which used to be a prerogative of the *ʿulamāʾ* (traditional scholars of Islam), and the emergence of a new generation of educated Muslims who immigrated to the West to study or work and are active participants in online religious debates, or what is referred to as the “new religious intellectuals.”

In the second chapter, el-Nawawy and Khamis discuss the major role played by the new religious intellectuals in explaining Islam to non-Muslims in the politically tense post-9/11 era, as opposed to a lack of online interactivity on the part of traditional religious institutions and the *ʿulamāʾ*, who have limited themselves to mainly issuing *fatwa*s (religious edicts) online. This contrast has created what the authors of *Islam Dot com* call a divide in the “virtual Islamic public sphere” (p. 62).

Contrary to the secular theory, which predicted that religious tradition and modernity could not go hand in hand, el-Nawawy and Khamis argue in the third chapter of this book that in the era of postmodernity, Islam, being both a religion and a way of life, is still part and parcel of life in Muslim societies.

According to them, the *umma*, or Muslim community at large, can undergo its own process of modernisation and democratisation without having necessarily to give up tradition and adopt the Western model of secularisation, as was attempted by the “re-Islamization” trend, namely the Islamic resurgence movements which emerged after the failure of secular nationalism. Thus, refuting Habermas’ theory, which assigns religion a place in the private sphere, they contend that Islam is very much present in the Islamic public sphere and view the *umma* in its entirety as a culturally pluralistic public sphere, thanks to its religious homogeneity and despite its political fragmentation.

In the fourth chapter of *Islam Dot Com*, its authors attempt to elicit how Islamic cyberspace, or what is called the “virtual *umma*,” acts as a non-physical public sphere where the dynamic Islamic collective identity could be (re)constructed through discussions revolving around political, cultural and social issues. To test this hypothesis, they submit a number of these discussions to the Habermasian criteria of rational-critical debate and their somewhat equivalent Islamic concepts of *iǧmāʿ*, the consensus of the *ʿulamāʾ* on a point of Islamic law; *iǧtihād*, the interpretation of Islamic sacred text; and *šūrā*, or consultation among Muslims aiming at reaching consensus.

El-Nawawy and Khamis study, in the fifth chapter, another series of discussions from the aforementioned forums around sensitive political and social topics in the Arab-Muslim world (the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, polygamy, etc.). The acceptance of, or resistance to, certain labels, or identity-signifiers, such as “infidel” or “primitive,” exchanged between the anonymous Muslim and non-Muslim participants in these heated debates led the Egyptian scholars to conclude that there exist both convergent and divergent identities within the “virtual *umma*,” as well as a rift separating the post-9/11 politicised Islamic collective identity and the Other, that is the non-Muslim, Westerner, etc., in cyberspace.

The last chapter of *Islam Dot Com* is dedicated to general conclusions drawn from the previous chapters. El-Nawawy and Khamis believe that, in the absence of the *ʿulamāʾ*, the analysed online discussions left to lay Muslims do not necessarily meet the requirements of Habermas’ public sphere, nor the Islamic concepts of *iǧmāʿ*, *iǧtihād*, and *šūrā*. The debates generally reached either an emotional consensus, reflecting identity collectivism; or no consensus at all, a sign of identity divergence. They seldom ended in a nuanced consensus though, where identity can be negotiated. Thus, the Egyptian scholars conclude that, Habermas’ public sphere turning out to be too idealistic to be applied to the “virtual *umma*,” the latter should be viewed rather as a “non-deliberative” public sphere, to the detriment of a civilisational dialogue between Islam and the West.

According to el-Nawawy and Khamis, reaching no consensus or reaching a dogmatically-motivated rather than rationally-motivated consensus in the online discussions studied in *Islam Dot Com* is mainly due to the absence of the *ʿulamāʾ*, who should play the role of “moderators.” It can be contended though that the non-deliberative aspect of the “virtual *umma*” as a public sphere is rather due to the hyper-sacred status enjoyed by Islam resulting in its immunity against criticism within the *umma* in general. This is best elicited, among other cases studied in *Islam Dot Com*, by a debate around polygamy involving mostly Muslim female participants (as clear from their usernames and the content of their postings). Although the Egyptian scholars admit that this discussion, where all participants except for one were in favour of polygamy, was by no means an engagement in rational-critical debate, they believe that for Muslim women “polygamy is not a cause for sorrow or pity as much as it is an option allowed by God to make some marriages happier. Those women are willing to do everything in their capacity to please their husbands because by doing so, they would be pleasing God.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In fact, they argue that, being ordained by God, polygamy empowers women, because “Muslim feminists are empowered, not by mundane things, but by their religion.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This line of reasoning can be viewed as exemplifying the principle that religion by definition does not suffer debating its precepts. This inherent characteristic of Islam is probably the main reason why el-Nawawy and Khamis could not apply Habermas’ theory, which excludes religion from its public sphere, to Islamic cyberspace. It also explains to a certain extent their dismissal of the Western model of secularism in their theory of Islamic modernisation.

A secondary criticism that could be directed at *Islam Dot Com* on the technical side regards its lack of automated means of text analysis. Alternating in-depth qualitative textual analysis with the then available text analytics, or text mining software, would have probably yielded a more comprehensive study of mainstream Islamic discussion forums, in the sense that such software would theoretically cover a greater number of online discussions.

In sum, *Islam Dot Com* makes a serious attempt to dissect Islamic cyberspace. It convincingly answers in the negative the question that most preoccupies it of whether Habermas’ public sphere is applicable to the virtual *umma*. However, blurred by beliefs of Islamic exceptionalism, its vision of a modernizing process of Arab and Muslim societies comes out lacking the utmost scientific objectivity that is required to tackle such a fundamental question.

1. Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis, *Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan (“Palgrave Macmillan Series in International Political Communication”), 2009, p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)