Since the mid-1990s, Islamic webcontent has grown considerably. The distribution of fatwas, one of the most booming components of Islamic webcontent, is becoming a medium by Islamic websites. In 1999 at least 10,000 fatwas were to be found online. In the year 2000 the number rose to at least 14,000 fatwas, and this year thousands more are sure to be added to the score. Since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the provision of fatwas has been an important social barometer. The interactive component of the internet has made online fatwasing not only possible, but easy and accessible as well. Such virtual services, however, impact certain Islamic beliefs and practices.

The distribution of fatwas via internet can be divided into two major groups: the first group comprises the so-called ‘fatwa archives’, which are simply compilations of fatwas that are already published in books. The second group, ‘fatwa services’, involves the process of creating fatwas online. There is usually an online form provided, where users can pose their questions. Through these services, one may ask the mufti about the users. The fatwas are then determined by muftis and subsequently published on the website.

IslamiCity (based in the USA) is one of the two main Wahhabi players on the internet – the other being Islam – Question & Answer. IslamiCity has already published about 5,000 fatwas on the internet, while the Dar al-fata al-misriyya, for example, has published about 300 fatwas online. The massive interest in IslamiCity’s fatwa service, however, has led the founders of the site to slow down the services so as to search for funds to finance the site in the future. In the meantime, fatwas from the Saudi daily, Arab News, have been added to the IslamiCity database.

IslamiCity is more than just a fatwa service. It provides information on the Qur’an, the Sunna, the Hajj, and other Islamic topics. It offers television channels, chatrooms, Islamic screensavers and electronic greeting cards. It also offers space for advertising. Users are offered the possibility to play an Islamic quiz, donate zakat online, or even order flowers. All services are guided by an Islamic committee. In this sense, IslamiCity’s web-programming could be considered comparable to the concept of Islamic banking.

Intercultural settings

IslamiCity is based in the USA and the Muslim Muhammed Musri, Dr Ahmad H. Sakr, Dr Muzammil Siddiqui and Dr Yahia Abdul Rahman, currently working and living in the USA, and Dr Dai Douwen and his Imam Team1 from Beirut handle the fatwas of inquiries. This demonstrates that virtual fatwas are different from ‘normal’ fatwas. In cyberspace, it makes no difference where the mufti and the muftis are located. Questions from all around the world can be, and indeed are, posed to IslamiCity. In this sense, IslamiCity’s technical management of the website distributes the questions to the muftis, for example in Beirut. So, it becomes abstract. The mufti no longer sees the questioner, and the muftis no longer hear his voice. In such a context, the mufti cannot determine the background information of the question, and cannot perceive the potential dubious aspects of a question. He is bound by its textual form. This was the case, for example, for a question (No. 1303) about tapai, a Malaysian dish with fermented cooked rice, which consists of 5%-10% alcohol. A religious teacher had told the questioner that if one eats halal, since the alcohol does not come from grapes. But according to IslamiCity’s mufti it is haram, because it is fermented without oxygen and this always produces ethyl alco- hol. The thing is, tapai might be a common dish in Malaysia, and a mufti based elsewhere can only abstractly solve the problem. He may not know anything about living in Malaysia. To avoid this type of rice might cause serious nutritional problems for Mus- lims. This means that even in the Wahhabi world one can be divided into two major groups: the first group comprises the so-called ‘fatwa archives’, which are simply compilations of fatwas that are already published in books. The second group, ‘fatwa services’, involves the process of creating fatwas online. There is usually an online form provided, where users can pose their questions. Through these services, one may ask the mufti about the users. The fatwas are then determined by muftis and subsequently published on the website.

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3. Dar al-Ifta al-misriyya:
http://www.fatwa.gov.eg
4. Numbers refer to those given by IslamiCity.
The fatwas can also be found in the forthcoming CD-ROM Brückner, Matthias ed. (2001), Wahhabismus und das Internet, Würzburg, Ergon-Verlag. Further information on the topic can be obtained at http://www.c心中的salaam.com/de/index.html.

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