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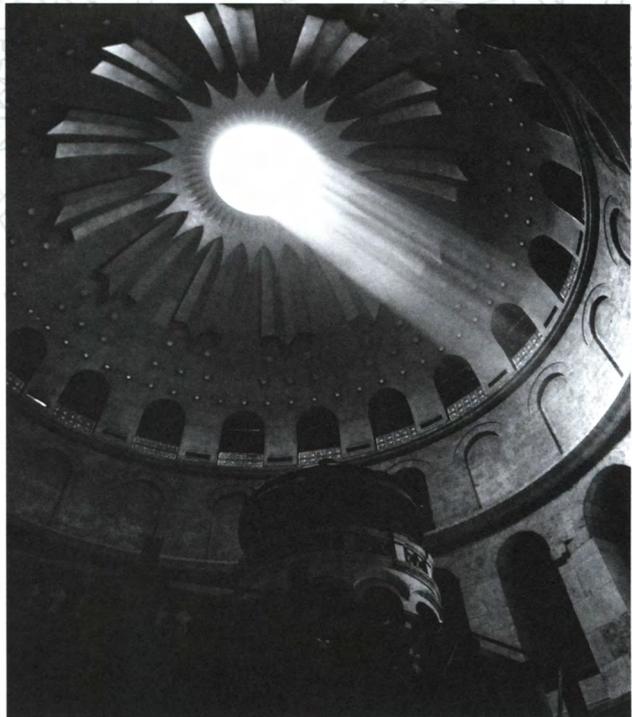
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An Engaged Islamicist: The Internet and Climbing Outside the Tower

Alan Godlas
University of Georgia

There is no question that it is easy to get lost when climbing outside the ivory tower of academia and becoming a socially engaged scholar. In my case, such engagement has substantially delayed many other projects that are dear to my heart. Nevertheless, in the course of my fourteen year sojourn on the web, all in all the time spent outside has been worth it. In this paper, I will discuss three web-based projects that I have created: my “Islam and Islamic Studies Resources” website, an international discussion group on Sufism called “Sufis Without Borders,” and a daily world news service, “Sufi News and Sufism World Report.” I will also make some recommendations based on insights gained over the course of these projects.¹

After a number of years of teaching Islamic Studies at the University of Georgia, I had become increasingly frustrated with the fact that I never had enough time to answer the numerous questions of my students and at the same time come close to getting through my syllabus for each class. I thought that putting together a website might help to solve my problem, since on the website I thought that I could address many of the issues that I did not have time to address in classes. Nevertheless, a major obstacle for scholars who would have been inclined to create web pages thirteen years ago was that in those days it was necessary to know basic html coding in order to create and frequently change web pages. At that time, although there were some rudimentary and moderately user-friendly online websites that enabled people without any technical expertise to create websites, the user interfaces were not seamless as they are now (e.g., sites like Facebook and various blog sites,² which require no technical expertise). As a result, after receiving tenure, I took a morning workshop offered by our office of

instructional development on html coding and web page development. This allowed me, in 1997, to create what is now known as my “Islam and Islamic Studies Resources” website.³ Indeed, its creation allowed me to direct my students to specific links that I had put on my website (supplemented by my annotations and comments) so that I could save class time for other things.

Also at that time, I noticed a problem, which was that good quality web-based materials on Islam were often hard to find. In 1997, Wikipedia had not yet started; and even after it began, it would still take a few years to grow into its potential as an often surprisingly useful first stop for research on various Islamic topics. Not only were there few academically useful websites on Islam, but even relatively unbiased websites on Islam were uncommon—sites were often promoting particular versions of Islam and excluding others; and still other sites were polemically anti-Islamic.⁴ In addition, even though search engines could locate link lists of Islamic sites, neither my students nor the public had the skills or preliminary knowledge needed to find and discern the articles that were jewels scattered everywhere and hidden underneath the overgrowth of the web.⁵ Hence, I realized that a virtue of a scholarly website would be that it could consist largely of links to the scattered gems of articles relevant to Islam and organized in a meaningful and balanced way.⁶ So I found useful articles on the web, created the links, and annotated them or placed them in short hypertext essays that I had written.

An additional problem was the need to facilitate ease of access to my site. I was able to gauge interest in my site by a hit counter that also indicated how people were accessing my site (i.e., which search engines or websites they were using that led them to my website).⁷ At first I self-promoted my site to public and university libraries and other academic sites. Fortunately, in 1988, others began to publicize my site by reviewing it in librarian science journals and the main academic periodical (at that time) that dealt with website reviews.⁸ As a result, more and more libraries and other sites began carrying links to my site on theirs. Prior to 9/11, my site had come to be ranked in the top ten of Google’s sites for a search of Islam, since a key criterion in search engine algorithms is when other high quality sites have links to one’s own site.⁹ Then, after 9/11, when interest in Islam increased dramatically, the number of hits on my website ultimately skyrocketed to upwards of four thousand per day.¹⁰ Together with a general increase in interest in Islam after 9/11, Islamophobia, in particular, increased. In order to try to combat Islamophobia, I also began adding important news items related to Muslim criticism of terrorism. Consequently, my site came into the public sphere in a number of ways: among them, most importantly, was

that in 2002 it was nominated for a Webby Award.¹¹ In addition, it became the subject of a feature article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.¹² Even today (23 May 2011), my site still ranks first in a Google search for “Islamic Studies” (although it now vacillates between Google’s first and second pages for a search of “Islam”), while my most significant sub-site, “Sufism, Sufis, & Sufi Orders” is ranked second for “Sufism.” Most recently, as a consequence of the significance of my website, in both 2009 and 2010 I was named as being among the five hundred most influential Muslims in the World.¹³

Although being so publicly visible has resulted in an occasional piece of hate mail, the positive response (especially in the years immediately following 9/11) has been heart-warming. In particular, I have received a number of very favorable responses from readers who have appreciated the degree to which my site has contributed to countering Islamophobia because of its balanced and academic approach. As far as the downside of my work on my website goes, since a major component of my site consists of links to other pages and since those pages often die or migrate, maintaining the links as well as adding new data consumes much of my time. Fortunately, I discovered a useful tool for anyone trying to find “dead” websites (i.e., sites no longer online): The Internet Archive (i.e., “The Wayback Machine”). In most cases, if one searches a link to a “dead” site at this website, in the very least a copy of the main page of that site can be recovered, which can assist one in finding either where the site has migrated or copies of the site.¹⁴

A second major incursion outside of the tower resulted in my establishment in 2004 of an internet community in the form of an online group for the discussion of Sufism, called “Sufis Without Borders” (SWB).¹⁵ I created it after noticing the lack of interconnectedness among websites of different Sufi orders. It currently consists of approximately 1,100 members worldwide, but most are lurkers (i.e., members of a discussion group who read the postings but do not themselves post messages and join the discussion). The membership consists of Sufis of a variety of different orders and interested non-Sufis.

Although there are a large number of internet discussion groups dealing with Sufism, SWB is easy to find since I have a prominent link to it on my Sufism website. With the traffic ranging between an average of ten to sixty messages per day, one of the main problems that I have had to solve is how to deal with “trolls,” “flaming,” or simple rudeness that all appear periodically.¹⁶ The solution has been to create “*adab*” (rules for discourse) and a volunteer moderating committee, which have made SWB less of a burden on my time. The most essential rules are on the homepage—but more extensive



Figure 1. One of the rules of *adab* on Sufis Without Borders.

descriptions and justifications for them are in the group's files, accessible to members on the homepage. One of the members of SWB is a gifted Sufi cartoonist who has created individual cartoons that illustrate some of our principles of *adab*. In addition, her "Frogs Without Borders," is one of the only ongoing Sufi cartoon strips on the Web and to varying degrees is related to Sufi principles, Sufi poetry, and postings on "Sufis Without Borders."¹⁷

My third internet effort has been to create "Sufi News and Sufism World Report," an internet news service dealing with daily news concerning Sufism around the world.¹⁸ I realized that some news services do not archive their stories on the internet after a certain time; and hence I thought that unless I put them on "Sufi News," they would be lost. Now five and a half



Figure 2. Good manners online: Starve the trolls, feed the spirit.

24,389 IF YOU CAN'T CONTROL YOURSELF, YOU YOURSELF WILL HAVE BECOME AN ADAB VIOLATOR

GUILTY OF VIGILANTEISM, OF "TAKING THE LAW INTO YOUR HANDS" (SO TO SPEAK), WITHOUT BORDERS 24,389

AARGH! CAN'T CONTROL MYSELF...

ARE ARE! HEE! HEE! JUMPING OFF THE DEPEND

IF YOU THINK THAT A MEMBER IS VIOLATING THE ADAB (SUFFIS WITHOUT BORDERS), REFRAIN FROM TAKING THE LAW INTO YOUR HANDS PUBLICLY: INSTEAD PRIVATELY E-MAIL A MODERATOR.

Op 3714, Jafar 394 a

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AMERIC MEMOS
 OR MEMOS
 This is the original,
 which links to all
 authors and associates
 a track. They may be
 carried off not only ones
 but also ones.
 Another is the knowledge
 of the author. It is
 in all ways of
 knowledge. One that was
 taken and brought in was
 about 4500 (over 15
 feet) long and 15000
 perhaps as a page. It is
 said to show all things.
 The point is over half a
 foot long. It has most of
 small text in it after
 and later 200. It comes
 out of the water and sinks
 into the sea (1942)
 or lies on the banks
 of rivers.

St. John's Episcopal
 School (1845-1846) - The
 School Library
 Designer: Printing of John
 Jones - Alfred's Abler
 since 1955 at
 a Museum of Art
 School Library or 20th
 St. John's
 compiler and printer
 of the above: Professor
 James Johnson, Butler
 of "History"
 - Savannah, 1911 /
 published, 1910

Dr. Alan Gallas University of Georgia USA. www.uga.edu/islam

www.absoleularts.com/marmo

Figure 3. Good manners online: Don't lose control!

years old, “Sufi News” currently averages about 1,400 hits per week. We republish news articles dealing with Sufism in the English and translate some articles from the French, German, Spanish, and Italian press. Our primary source is an automatic feed from Google, which we sift through.¹⁹ Like with “Sufis Without Borders,” access of interested readers to Sufi News is not a problem, because it ranks first in a search of “Sufi News” or “Sufism News” on Google and because I have a prominent link to it on my Sufism site. The main problem, originally, was that “Sufi News” took a lot of time. Fortunately a volunteer emerged from “Sufis Without Borders” who is now the managing editor and translator for “Sufi News.” An additional problem was the issue of copyright. Nevertheless, I was advised by a lawyer that it would be fine as long as we linked every article back to the original source and put a disclaimer at the home page of Sufi News, stating that if an author did not want us to republish his/her article, he/she could notify us and we would remove the article.

In addition to offsetting Islamophobia by providing a balanced and academic approach to Islam, one of the overall problems that I have been addressing by stepping into the internet fray has been the absence of Sufi discourse from many of the major Islamic websites, such absence apparently being a symptom of the overall salafization or wahhabification of Islam in the contemporary world.²⁰ Also, a problem that has probably contributed to the weakness of Sufis in the face of the widespread Salafi influence has been the lack of unity among them, historically and today. Hence, I view my climbing outside the tower of the academe and making specific forays concerning Sufism in the arena of the internet to be my contribution to facilitating communication among Sufis and to re-centering Sufism into mainstream Islamic discourse.

In conclusion, based on what I have learned as a result of creating and maintaining my “Islam and Islamic Resources” website, I recommend first that scholars and publishers not waste their time and/or money by publishing books that consist of annotated links to websites, since websites are so ephemeral, i.e., many of these websites will go offline, change their urls, or not be maintained even by the time (or shortly after the time) a book referring to them is published. Second, granting agencies should not grant money for starting a website unless it consists almost entirely of original material. Furthermore, if such a site will have links to other sites, there must be money allocated for maintaining and updating the links; and that, ideally, the one who maintains the links must be someone who has basic knowledge of web programming and knowledge of the field and must also be relatively sophisticated in searching the internet in order both to locate

sites that have migrated to new urls and to discern whether or not sites that have migrated are indeed the same or relatively equivalent to the site that was at the original link. By way of a concluding suggestion, I would encourage today's scholars of Islamic Studies, even while undergraduates or in graduate school, to begin by developing websites comprised of their own scholarly writings and links that they consider to be valuable. While it might seem that a young scholar who expresses his/her ideas on his/her website would enable others to simply steal his/her ideas, in fact, by publishing one's ideas on one's website, one does establish oneself as their originator. Hence, young scholars should not be dissuaded from creating academic websites. Also, as such scholars develop their sites, they should self-promote them to web-masters, in particular to library websites and other prominent Islamic Studies sites. Fortunately, because of the relative lack of websites with substantial content dealing with Islam, it will not take too many years for a good quality academic site to rise to search engine prominence through the morass of internet sludge, rising like a beautiful flower in a swamp. ✧

End Notes

¹"Islam and Islamic Studies Resources" originally www.arches.uga.edu/~godlas, now www.uga.edu/islam or islam.uga.edu; "Sufis Without Borders," groups.yahoo.com/group/sufis_without_borders/, and "Sufi News and Sufism World Report" www.sufinews.blogspot.com/. Note that all of the urls in this paper (unless otherwise stated) were current as of May 23, 2011.

²One of the most popular blog sites is Google's Blogspot or Blogger, www.blogspot.com and www.blogger.com.

³Alan Godlas, "Islam and Islamic Studies Resources," www.uga.edu/islam.⁴Carl W. Ernst, *Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997); reprint ed., under the title *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Shambhala, 2011).

⁴Two websites that appear at first to be comprehensive sites on Islam but which are actually Salafi sites that exclude both Shi'ism and Sufism (almost entirely) are "Islam 101," www.islam101.net and "IslamWorld," www.islamworld.net. Two examples of contemporary anti-Islamic and polemical websites are "Answering Islam," www.answering-islam.org and "Jihad Watch," www.jihadwatch.org.

⁵One scholar who also recognized the need for scholarly evaluation of websites on Islam is Gary Bunt. His "Islamic Studies Pathways" currently at web.me.com/gary_bunt/pathways/home.html, includes his brief descriptions and evaluations of the over 100 Islamic websites that are listed but not organized. What is needed is an ongoing online equivalent of *Index Islamicus* of the most significant articles on websites (not the best websites) dealing with Islam. Nevertheless, there are a few obstacles to this happening: a lack of librarian interest (print still being the

dominant paradigm), lack of funding, lack of expertise to discern the jewels, and the exponential rate of growth of the net. Hence, on-going funding either from outside granting agencies or from individual institutions should be provided to experts who compile the jewels of their field. One excellent example of a professional quality web index of websites on Islam is MENALIB (The Middle East Virtual Library) www.menalib.de/index.php?id=18, which is maintained by State- and University Library Saxony-Anhalt in Halle (Germany).

⁶The metaphor of bringing together scattered jewels or pearls in describing or titling works of Islamic literature is certainly not new, eg., *Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī, al-Durar al-muntathira* (The Scattered Pearls) *fi al-aḥādīth al-mushtahara*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiya, 1988.

⁷The particular hit counter that I settled on was a free public counter, “Extreme Tracking,” extremetracking.com. In addition to counting hits, it shows the links that readers follow to get to one’s website as well as the words they are searching for when using a search engine to access one’s website.

⁸For a list of reviews that called attention to my “Islam and Islamic Studies Resources” website between 1998 and 2002 (when I stopped keeping track of such notices), see <http://www.uga.edu/islam/awards.html>.

⁹The founders of Google, writing in 1988 about the logic behind Google’s page ranking, expressed it as follows, “Academic citation literature has been applied to the web, largely by counting citations or backlinks to a given page. This gives some approximation of a page’s importance or quality. PageRank extends this idea by not counting links from all pages equally” (Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page, “The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine,” in *Proceedings of the Seventh International World Wide Web Conference*, 1998. See <http://infolab.stanford.edu/~backrub/google.html>). See also Julie McCormick, “Truth About .Edu Domains: Registration, Links and Google Juice,” *Search Engine Journal*, 12 December 2007, <http://www.searchenginejournal.com/truth-about-edu-domains-registration-links-and-google-juice/6095/>.

¹⁰My hypothesis is that one of the reasons interest in Islam became heightened after 9/11 (aside from the fact that the perpetrators were Muslims) is that after 9/11, President Bush made a number of speeches in which he stated in many different ways that the U.S. was not at war with Islam; rather we were at war with terrorism, which had no basis in Islam. (See the collection of his remarks to this effect, “In his own words: Bush on Islam,” July 7, 2007, www.muslimrepublicans.net/Article.asp?ID=164.) This forced some Americans, who were all set to start hating Muslims and Islam, to ask what the distinction was between Islam and Muslims, on the one hand, and Muslim terrorists, on the other. Consequently, such Americans turned to the internet (and often to my website), for answers.

¹¹Joan Stroer, “And the winner is...Islam or the Vatican?” *Athens Banner-Herald*, June 16, 2002 http://www.onlineathens.com/stories/061602/uga_20020616065.shtml.

¹²Brock Read, “Georgia Professor’s Website on Islam Attracts New Attention After Attacks,” December 7, 2001 <http://chronicle.com/article/Georgia-Professors-Web-Sit/2550/> (full text accessible only to subscribers); copied at <http://it.dir.groups.yahoo.com/group/albeuropa/message/11750>.

¹³John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin, eds., *The 500 Most Influential Muslims in the World* (UK: The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center, 2009 and 2010.) See <http://www.rissc.jo/docs/0A-FullVersion-LowRes.pdf>.

¹⁴“Internet Archive Wayback Machine,” wayback.archive.org/web/.

¹⁵“Sufis Without Borders,” groups.yahoo.com/group/sufis_without_borders/.

¹⁶For “trolls” and “flaming,” see H2G2 (The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy), “Flaming and Trolling,” July 25, 2003, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A1082512>.

¹⁷Marina Montanaro, “Frogs Without Borders,” www.suficartoons.com.

¹⁸“Sufi News and Sufism World Report,” sufinews.blogspot.com.

¹⁹With Google News, one can create an automatic feed of articles in which one has an interest. <http://www.google.com/alerts>.

²⁰For the salafization and wahhabification of the Muslim world see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2005).