

Muslim Online Prayer in a Sociocultural Context

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Abstract

The article argues that the debate over the online prayer is not just an ordinary fatwa issued by religious scholars for the Muslim Ummah, but it rather goes through a complicated process of social, identarian, cultural, authoritative, and transnational caveats. The physicality entailed by this debate over the online prayer shows how the place of worship along with the physical presence in it while performing the prayer is considered as an identity marker, a tool for sustaining the social fiber and the culture of the Muslim community. The article concludes by situating the debate over the online prayer within a broader framework of online religion versus religion online and the impact of the virtualization of rituals on the perception of the religious experience.

Keywords

Online Islamic Rituals, distanced Islamic Rituals, Cyber Islam, Digital Islam, Online Prayer, Islamic Response to Covid-19, Online Islam, Virtual Islamic Rituals, and Prayer over Broadcasting.

Based on the constructivist theories, reality cannot be acquired by cognition or given objectively, since it “is always constructed” through observing “the way people, organizations, the media, and others construct” it (Bräuchler 2003, 136). So, virtualization – or virtual performance – of rituals as a product of the Internet revolution and most recently by the COVID-19 pandemic disaster has created new religious, social, and even political realities.

Online prayer is one of several issues that have recently brought to the fore under the urgency of the contemporary pandemic, COVID-19. Contextually, this issue is part of a dozen necessity-driven inquiries addressed to Muslim scholars and *fatwa* (juridical verdict) – issuing centers in the Muslim and diasporic worlds. For instance, inquiries about life and death situations and ethical questions about prioritization of medicine-serving between the young and the aged patients in case of shortage in medicines

are raised. Other questions arise about whether ritual bodywash should be performed for those dying from COVID-19, an issue that is still largely debatable among scholars, and whether it is allowable for infected people to observe the fast. All of these questions necessitate that the *mufti*¹ act as a sociologist and a physician besides being a scholar.

Online prayer shall be intensively discussed in different respects – spiritually, socially, and juridically in the field of Islamic Studies. This article examines first the juridical debates which have noticeably intensified following the global outbreak of COVID-19. Intriguingly, this juridical discussion, if we broaden our conceptualization of the virtual sense of worship, can find classical roots of it in medieval juridical minds. The article argues that the debates around online prayer are not only about performing a religious ritual per se. It is a new episode of power tension and social dynamism in Muslim communities. Religious scholars used it to improve their status as social actors after their position was declined in the last decade for different reasons. In terms of social dynamism, the online ritual debate reflects the dynamics of the prioritization process regarding collective and individual needs. In other words, the article argues that online prayer is not just an ordinary ruling issued by religious scholars for the Muslim *Ummah*, but it rather goes through a complicated process of social, identarian, cultural, authoritative, and transnational caveats. The article concludes by situating the debate over the online prayer within a broader framework of online religion versus religion online and the impact of the virtualization of rituals on the perception of the religious experience.

In terms of scope and method, the article limits its analysis to the *Sunni* literature and exclusively discusses the *Sunni* scholarly positions towards online prayer. The data are primarily collected from the original references and official platforms of the concerned religious authorities or institutions. The study uses a textual analysis approach that helps to explore the juridical attitudes towards online prayer. It is further supported by empirical data analysis for the proper situation of this Islamic online prayer within the broader framework of sociopolitical tension as well as the question of the virtualization of the religious experience.

Primarily, obligatory prayers in Islam is mandated to be done individually or in the congregation. Supererogatory prayer is an individual prayer except in some cases such as in the *Taraweeh* (night prayer in Ramadan), when it can be done in the congregation at a mosque or at home. During emergencies, natural disasters, or pandemics, Muslim jurists gave *fatwas* to suspend congregational prayers in mosques and even sometimes advised to close mosques (Sabri 2020). The current pandemic brought the jurists' discussion on the suspension of congregational prayers and the closing of mosques to the fore again. This time, however, the discussion got complicated as the current technology advancement opened the space for virtual gatherings and performances. Some contemporary scholars declared that online spaces should not change the ritual format and gave *fatwa* for holding prayer at home until the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Other scholars, however, gave *fatwa* for having an alternative online prayer. Both groups of scholars gave their own reasonings and justifications, be legal or otherwise. How to understand their complex reasonings and subtle positions within the larger framework of religious, social, and political experience is the focus of the ensuing discussion.

By analyzing the contemporary debate on this issue, it seems that there are two juridical stands: defendants and opponents. The defendants of this online prayer support it based on one fundamental principle of *Shariah* (Islamic Law) which is "protecting the religion." On the other hand, the opponents of online prayer base their opposition on the same *Shariah* principle of "protecting the religion" but through another approach.

I will start by explaining the authenticity question of online prayer and its impact on the discussion between the two parties. The point of authenticity does not concern many researchers involved in an analysis of the debate over online prayer. However, it occupies a huge space in arguments of both the opponents and the proponents of online prayer, as the authenticity by tracing the predecessors' *fatwas* has been noticed in both discourses. The proponents refer to the predecessors' *fatwas* when they defend the legitimacy of performing this new form of the congregational prayer. It may represent the point of strength that supports their argument. They trace the issue

back to the 9th century when Sahnoun² (Al-Dhahabi 1983, 64) ascribed the *fatwa* of the legitimacy of having prayer by people who follow an Imam in a separate ship. Sahnoun says: “as for a group of people in a ship who perform prayer while their imam who leads the prayer is in a separate ship, Malik (said) if the ships are adjacent to each other, (the prayer) is allowable.” (Sahnoun al-Tanoukhi n.d., 82)

While all proponents of online prayer use the Maliki *fatwa* of the prayer behind an imam in a separate ship, the opponents of online prayer believe this issue did not even come to the minds of Muslim jurists in premodern times and has no equivalent or corresponding issue today. They base the authenticity of their argument on the lack of having similar *fatwas* from the predecessors.

Basically, building a ruling on the opinion of previous scholars is acceptable, but building respective authenticity on the recurrence of similar precedents is somewhat disputable. It is well-known that *fatwa* is like a living being that evolves to accommodate the space and the time. It shall not be constant and fixed for everyone at every time and everywhere except in rare cases. One may acknowledge conservative scholars’ avoidance of *fatwa* renewal under new circumstances as a preference of *Taqlid* (imitation), which implies prioritizing the precautional and the easier option, though without agreeing with such argument. Scholars may refer to the social reservation which will be discussed in detail later. But they left a vacuum for the laypeople to follow. By blocking the door for renewing *fatwas* based on new circumstances, they create a method of necessitating the following of predecessors.

This debate also raises the authority question that revolves around the text and the predecessors. It has led me to raise this question: why shall every *fatwa* have a similar precedent to acquire authenticity? This is not an issue of juristic rulings formulation in the Islamic jurisprudence for some of those who adopt *Taqlid* (imitation) and attack the *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) only but it extended to most of the social sciences which go back and quote from the past to authenticate the present attitudes. I argue based on the *Hanafi* basic rule: “what came from the Prophet (peace be upon him) is absolutely accepted as we never go against Him, what came from His

companions is optional for us that we choose from, but otherwise we cannot absolutely accept it as they are [competent] men and we are [competent] men as well”³ (Ibn Hazm n.d., 188). What if we have an outstanding dignified scholar who competes with the premodern scholars in knowledge and intellectuality? Why is the past always better than the present? Why must the people from the past demonstrate the authenticity to interpret the texts while the more qualified scholars who may be more aware of the legacy and have extra tools for acquiring knowledge do not have such authority? The same voice resonates with Ibn Malik, the famous linguist and Andalusian polymath (died 1274), when he says: “if knowledge is a gift from God and an exclusive attribute given by Him, it is not impossible that God may save what was hard to be digested by most of the predecessors to some of the successors” (Ibn Malik 1967, 2). Therefore, the *Ijtihad* (legal reasoning) does not require any conditions of times to be provided in the *mujtahid* (a scholar who gives legal reasoning), but rather it is confined to the personal and scientific qualifications. As defined by al-Shatibi (died 1388), an Andalusian brilliant Islamic scholar, *Ijtihad* is “exerting one’s utmost efforts to reach out a legal opinion” (Al-Shatibi 1997, 51). Thus, the core idea of *Ijtihad* is about bringing something new, which does not mean to simply repeat the same past *fatwa* and apply it to a new situation. It implies a renewal and a reform of inappropriate inherited legal views, which are no longer suitable for the current times. In fact, Ahmad Atif elucidates the issue of belittling the contemporary time in favor of the past in the following lines:

Every age is characterized by a sense of “loss” of knowledge, the knowledge that used to be available to previous authorities. These previous authorities (as they present themselves to the imagination of their successors) are always better, more knowledgeable, and closer to some “origin” than their scholarly heirs. This is behind the saying that “contemporaneity serves as a veil” (*al-mu‘asaratu hijab*) – it makes scholars belittle the achievement of their contemporaries, perhaps for no good reason other than the fact that they share the same “corrupted age.” (Ahmad 2012, 40)

It is worthy of mentioning that being aware of modern technology as well as new medical, and social sciences has become a requirement of the *mufiti*. I also agree with Gary Bunt (2009, 84) that *Ijtihad* “is synonymous with

renewal and reform within certain Islamic contexts, although reevaluation and realignment may be appropriate alternatives.” For example, in his argument about the legitimacy of the online prayer, Mauritanian scholar Muhammad al-Hassan Ould al-Dadaw al-Shanqīti (born 1963), details how sound waves work to transmit the sound from the Imam to his followers having studied how microphones or radio transmit sound simultaneously to the followers. That is why his *fatwa* and other *muftis’ fatwas* about the legitimacy of online prayer were restricted only to online broadcasting not extended to recordings of prayers. (Al-Jazeera 2020)

In the same vein, the opponents’ position against online congregational prayer reminds me of the conservative positions of some religious leaders during the 1990s about the use of television in general. Some Islamic religious leaders issued *fatwas* about the prohibition of using the television at that time such as sheikh Ibn Baz (died 1999; Al Jawab Al Kafi 2015, 1:37). Similarly, the virtualization of rituals may be seen as a threat against religious authority and a collapse of the traditional religious community. However, the online community is thought to provide multiple sources and diverse religious authorities who give the follower freedom of choice and space to know different opinions. The religious authority is particularly a crucial issue here because online worship is seen as if it distorts the traditional religious authority and creates parallel authorities. It is plainly noticed that the *fatwa* of rejecting online prayer is adopted by mostly all *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) institutions all over the world (Sabri 2020; Resident Fatwa Committee 2020; The European Council for Fatwa and Research 2020). For instance, the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), The Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA), The Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia, Council of Senior Scholars of al-Azhar, and others were from these institutions. On the contrary, the *fatwa* of permitting the online prayer was from some individual muftis and jurists, however, they are considered more influential and outstanding jurists worldwide. For instance, al-Shanqīti Ayaat Said (a prominent Moroccan scholar), Mohammad Fawzy Abdul-Hay (a former head of Islamic studies at al-Azhar university and a member of Fatwa center at al-Azhar), Ahmad al-Ghamdi (the former head of the Commission of Promotion of Virtue

and Prevention of Vice), and Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl (one of the world's leading authorities on Islamic law and Islam and a prominent scholar in the field of human rights) were the famous defenders for online prayer.

This almost unanimous agreement among contemporary scholars was taken to express the collective identity of *Ummah*⁴ through the collective *Ijtihad*. In his *fatwa* about the illegitimacy of online prayer behind an imam through a broadcasting device, Khalid Hanafy (2020a), the vice president of the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), maintains that one of the strengths of this *fatwa* is that it enhances the unanimous agreement of the contemporary Muslim scholars than the individualized *fatwas*. He thinks that by doing so, the *Ummah* will preserve the collective identity of the Muslim community and support the unified religious authority of the collective *fatwa* institutions versus the individualized *fatwas*.

Although this is not the only issue being debated amongst contemporary scholars, the affirmation of religious authority when tackling online prayer reflects the fear of dismantling the traditional religious authority. But the question is, to what extent do the individualized *fatwas* represent a threat to the traditional religious authority? After analysis of the opposition's *fatwa* of online congregational prayer, it seems that traditional religious authorities feel threatened when opening the door for such online worship. Generally, the online religious world is thought to open the door for new competitive religious authorities who can compete with or even replace the traditional ones. This may happen especially when we shed light on the fact that the virtual world as a unifying atmosphere does not require uniformity (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, 2). This discourse resembles the idea that the virtual world turns to be like *Souq* (Bunt 2009) – a “market-place” through which you can pick whatever religious practices you wish. This idea helps to turn even the religious bloggers into religious authorities who can issue *fatwas* and influence a range of followers. Scattering the religious authority is one of the Internet consequences when religious experience manifests in cyberspace. The matter does not stop at this point, but it extends to have a new conception of religiosity. This phenomenon is sweeping the virtual world and it has created what is called online religion.

Online religion is different from religion online in which the first concept denotes producing religious content for all people from different religions and affiliations while the latter is for affiliated rituals that target a certain audience (Helland 2005). The audience of the first kind of website seeks a spiritual experience more than theological or religious instructions. For instance, *Inyati* American Sufi group provides through their websites many programs for spirituality and even teaches people the techniques for involving in the mystical practices (Rozehnal 2019). The audience of this kind of website is a diverse audience which may include Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist followers. Further, Gary Bunt in his study *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority* (2018) refers to a substantial transformation and evolving in the religious authority through cyberspace. It is what he calls “machine-driven *fatwa*” authority. For most audiences of Muslims in cyberspace, this new form of authority replaces the traditional authority. The authority here is going back to either the text or the electronically issued *fatwa* process. “The relationship is between a digitally mediated interface and a person, which negates the need for face-to-face etiquette demanded in an analog context, such as a mosque, while also extending the public space beyond traditional political, religious, or geographical borders” (2018, 81).

Meanwhile, the concern of the European Council for Fatwa and Research about the authority for issuing the *fatwas* is shared by other voices (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, 116) which always ask: “who speaks of/for Islam?” The same concern is issued by other juridical institutions such as Al-Azhar and Dar ul-Iftaa (Fatwa House) in Egypt, Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia, and others that keep telling people to seek *fatwa* from the institutions, not from individuals. But Muslim audiences turn a blind eye to these calls and choose their own religious authorities. It became difficult to direct people’s loyalty to official or governmental religious authorities. In this sense, we can imagine why the virtualization of religious experience as part of the Internet revolution, which is consequently an integral part of modernity as a whole, is a revolutionary step towards the new form of religious experience.

The virtual religious experience is mostly considered a fragmentation of religious authority. In general, the cyber world is seen as a tool that weakened the universality of the *Umma* by allowing for a volatile mix of competing opinions including serious divisions over who speaks for Islam (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, 116). Although the virtualization of the religious experience is an ideal chance for diversity and pluralism, the problem lies in its anonymity (2009, 116), which can render much confusion for the Muslim audience according to the conservative theory that goes against the virtualization. In fact, this is not accurate, because the virtualization is not responsible for scattering or fragmenting the religious authority. The virtualization of the religious experience resembles the real religious experience with little nuances. The online space can produce unexpected results for the Muslim *Ummah* through the religious experience. Khamis and Al-Nawawy (2009, 116) give an example of the moon sighting issue which usually causes disagreements among Muslims whether in Muslim and non-Muslim countries. They said that several Islamic websites have coordinated data on the new moon sighting, and thus have unified Muslims' celebrations at the end of Ramadan. This has helped create a sense of "uniformity" within the virtual *Ummah*.

In the same vein, Islamic cyberspace which opens the door for contesting traditional authority has also helped to create a space for gender equality. Islamic cyberspace is a great opportunity for female religious authorities to challenge the traditional male ones. These new cyber environments may be considered to fulfill the female demands for having virtual spots led exclusively by female religious figures. These Muslim female leaders struggle for having "a just Islamic society . . . that strives for a recognition of and respect for compatibility between the sexes instead of competition between them" (Karam 1997, 21).

In terms of identity, the online prayer as an alternative solution for the problem of blocking mosques during urgent times is seen by the opponents as a threat to the identity of the Muslim community as a whole. Having prayer online is presented as an easy way to dissolve the fiber of the traditional Muslim community. Even if blocking of mosques would remain for years,

the prohibition of a virtual form of prayer is the absolute and unified *fatwas* recurred among the Muslim scholars in the conservative team. The answer that I received when I raised this question for a scholar⁵ from this team was that how we could prevent people from staying at home and leaving mosques after the end of the temporary situation of the current pandemic. He added that we do not have a remote control button to ask people to go back to mosques after we let them abandon these mosques by providing the alternative solution of online prayer during urgent times.

The striking question that came to my mind at that time is whether is mosque central in rituals to such a serious extent? If so, why? It is not only the mosque that has been considered as central in the worship life of Muslims but the physicality of rituals as a whole. The physical attendance in the place of worship is viewed as crucial as the worship itself. It is also seen as if it shall not be replaced by an alternative even in urgent cases. Then, the value is not only considered for prayer itself, but also for the place in which the worship is performed. It is argued that one benefit of physical attendance in the mosque is the societal goal achieved by the congregational physical prayer. While the online interactions compete with or even mostly replace the physical interactions among individuals as it creates extra spaces for communications, the insistence of the opponents of online prayer on the physical attendance as a form of supporting the societal bonds implies the centrality of the mosque in creating the collective Muslim identity. The *fatwa* of the prohibition of online prayer goes beyond the juridical caveats and into the social caveats. One implication that I noticed in the *fatwa* of the vice president of the European Council for Fatwa and Research about the prohibition of online congregational prayer through the broadcast of TV or the Internet was that the permissibility of such kind of prayer would threaten the existence of mosques in the Muslim community as it will degrade the role of mosque in shaping the Muslim community. (Hanafy 2020b)

For the opponents of online prayer authenticity, a mosque as an identity keeper is not only a sacred religious place for performing the rituals but its mission goes beyond that.

Historically, the first effort made by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to form a Muslim society and an Islamic state in Medina was to build a mosque. The Nabawi Mosque in Medina was the pulse of all important events during the time of the Prophet (pbuh), where he taught people to organize their lives and religion completely beginning from the individual to the family, community, and country. Thus, the mosque has played its role extensively covering all aspects of worship, science, politics, economy, military, administration, the establishment of national policy, relations between countries, and so forth. (Wahid 2011, 2)

Given the centrality of the mosque in the life of Muslims in rituals and social life, why do the opponents of online prayer accept the blocking of mosques during the pandemic, blocking which may be extended to years without having an alternative virtual mosque that holds the congregational prayer and provides other rituals even during this urgent time? The identity of the virtual is variable according to the opponents of the virtual mosque. However, virtual mosque services and rituals are a reality and are providing some acts of worship to Muslim homes with Internet access such as online Quranic sessions, *dhikr* sessions, *tajweed* (teaching rules of the Quran recitation) sessions, and even online sermons.

Obviously, the identity question through the virtualization phenomenon of rituals is particularly asserted in the diasporic Muslim context. It is clearly observed that most opponents of online prayer *fatwas* are resident scholars in non-Muslim countries. Their *fatwas* are actually influenced by an appreciation of the holistic Islamic existence in the West. This may explain the uniqueness of the identity-making process of Muslim minorities in the West. "Diasporic identities do not function in a vacuum, but they are, to a large extent, affected by the discursive contexts in which they are shaped" (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, 117). In fact, there is an opposite perspective for the impact of virtualization on the identity-shaping process for diasporic Muslims. "These migrants' participation in the cyber world, with its discussion boards and chat rooms, can nurture a sense of belonging and common identity with those 'back home' and with fellow members of

the diaspora” (Wahid 2011, 2). However, I agree that the full absence of physical attendance and physical locality of Muslims particularly in rituals has serious consequences. The difficulties that Muslims face when trying to issue licenses for establishing mosques force them to take into account every possible issue that may arise in attempts by the Western authorities to prevent the establishment of mosques. In one *fatwa* of the prohibition of doing online congregational prayer through broadcasting, the chair of the Fatwa Committee in the European Council for Fatwa and Research maintains that the consequences of legitimizing the online prayer will affect the Muslim presence in the West. Because having this alternative of doing virtual rituals may make Western authorities stricter in licensing the mosques. (Hanafy 2020a)

Although the multiple advantages of performing the online prayer, its opponents are maximizing the risks of approving such *fatwa*. It may refer to two things: (1) identity shaped by the Internet is distorted and variable and (2) the crucial role of physical attendance in rituals is shaping a strong identity. Therefore, it leads us to wonder about the nature of identity that virtualization may shape. The answer comes through the study of Gary Bunt in his book *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (2000), that the virtual world may have identity-less participants. He explains that this wide space does not require affiliated participants but rather it is open for all audiences whatever their religions or affiliations. Because of anonymity, it is widely argued that the online identity is more fragmented and distorted than the offline identity. But in her study about a group of minority ethnic women in the UK, Helen Kennedy (2006) says:

We should move away from a preoccupation with the generalized, enduring claim that the internet identities are anonymous, multiple and fragmented – not only because, in some cases, online identities are continuous with offline selves, but also, more importantly, because common uses of the concept of anonymity are limited as starting points for carrying out analyses of internet experiences.

Furthermore, it is more appropriate to mention the argument that letting virtualization to sweep the Islamic world helps to formulate a collective identity that may resemble the identity shaped by the physical presence in rituals such as the *Hajj* (pilgrimage; El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, 115). If we think about the virtual mosque as an idea that may simulate the actual mosque, it may be argued that this idea can bring Muslim individuals from different locations and creates a religious and social bond that may lead to shaping a form of collective identity. For the diasporic minorities, virtualization may be the ideal chance to make up the lost identity by forging a new one. Ideally, we should speak about the hope that virtualization gives to the hopeless migrants who have been scattered in different locations and they may lose their social bonds and links to their societies. “The Internet may be the only available means to reestablish the local communities they lost in the past decades or even in the past centuries. Here, it might be appropriate to speak of re-embedding instead of disembodiment” (Krueger 2004). This is the collective identity that Khamis and Al-Nawawy suggest and it goes in line with the definition provided by Saskia Witteborn that collective identity is “alignment between people who express and enact themselves as members of a group. Alignment can mean certain modes of action and lifestyles, orientations, and expectations of what it means to be a person and a member of a group” (Witteborn 2007, 559). In brief, virtualization is not the main factor for creating variable identity, but this is a product of a long-term process of dynamics of globalization, modernity, and postcoloniality. This non-fixed identity is very noticeable in the second and later generations of diasporic minorities on a worldwide scale.

On the other hand, the proponents of online prayer tackle the issue differently. For them, online prayer is an urgent alternative solution for preserving the symbolism of prayer in Muslim life. Protecting the congregational prayer in the consciousness of Muslims was crucial in their *fatwa*. Contrary to the opponent team of online prayer who think that there is no blame for such temporary stopping of the congregational prayer during this temporary pandemic, the proponent team seriously affirms the cruciality of having an online congregation and its impact on the Muslim individual and community as a whole. The basic *maqsid* (purpose) behind this *fatwa*

is a spiritual one that is embodied in linking Muslims with worship (as in congregational prayer). The argument of this *fatwa* is stronger than the last argument as they further drew similarity with *Tayammum* (Ritual purification using purified sand or dust) and wiping over socks (Fawzy 2020). They argue that although *Tayammum* and wiping over socks do not physically purify the organs of the body as water and as washing the legs without socks, God commands to do them for keeping the symbolism of the purification (Fawzy 2020). They also quote from Shah Waliullah (died 1762), a famous Indian scholar, about the significance of *Tayammum*, or symbolic ablution as he said, “*Tayammum* is instituted to ensure that we never forget the importance (i.e. the habit of purification) and that we should go back to regular purification (with water) as soon as our situation changes – i.e. when water is available or can be used once again” (Islamic Institute of Toronto 2020). They added that “we can extrapolate from this, that an action which keeps up the intent and spirit of *Jumu’ah* that we can institute in the extraordinary situation we find ourselves in, such as praying together online, will be an effective temporary measure that will allow us to maintain the practice or the habit of *Jumu’ah* until it is reinstated as normal” (Islamic Institute of Toronto 2020).

Affirmation of the spiritual role of the imagined mosque in shaping the psyche of Muslims seems to be more efficient and productive in the debate of the online prayer. It is worthy of mentioning that physical attendance in prayer is not required in many cases such as health circumstances, natural disasters, and the absence of physical mosques in non-Muslim countries. The point of assertion in the online prayer *fatwa* of the proponent’s team is attracting the Muslim younger generations who may not share the same traditional culture of the physicality of worship as their parents, especially in the Western countries. Having the virtual mosque accessible through their smartphones and being in touch with their religious leaders throughout the day will affect their mentality positively. This virtual presence of a mosque in their consciousness is not subject to emergent absence as in the physical mosque. The point of strength in this perspective is that these scholars who support the virtualization of worship do not suggest that this new form of worship may replace or even compete with the actual religious world. But

it is integrated with the actual physical world and only replaces it in urgent cases. This view is not a full revolutionary step towards the complete virtualization of the religious world. This is a balance between the conservative and the renewal standpoints which will help to preserve the centrality of the physical attendance in the religious places and the virtual attendance as well.

The renewal or the revolutionary view of expecting the turning of the traditional religious experience into a full virtual religious experience has emerged in the late 1990s literature as Heidi Campbell (2012) observed. She says: “early scholarship often suggested that using the Internet for religious purposes might possibly transform religious practice and ideology in revolutionary ways, from challenging the roles of traditional religious authorities to altering religious expectations of community and connection.” She also describes those who expect a full revolutionary step towards the virtualization of religious experience, describing their argument instead as naïve and lacking the necessary nuances of critical reflection. This resonated with a comment from my advisor Ahmad Atif while I was presenting a draft of this study in his nation and *Shari’ah*⁶ class at Spring 2020 that this early scholarship is like the scholarships in the late of 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century which expected the demise of religion. On the contrary, religious practice is flourishing and will keep flourishing.

On the other hand, recent scholarship thinks that the online world is just a mirror of the actual world. Online religious experience does not invent a new experience. Instead, it is an extension of the real religious experience. In her study *Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society*, Campbell (2012) suggests that networked community works like a lens that helps to see that the religious community is not a single static unit, but rather that religious people live in religious social networks that are emergent, varying in depth, fluid, and highly personalized. For her, the online religious world is nothing except a simulation of the actual religious world. Based on this perspective, the virtual religious experience does not represent a threat against the construction of the religious communities in terms of culture, identity, and religious authority.

Conclusion

Offering the virtualization of prayer as an example, I have explored the internal debate among the Muslim legal scholars for the repercussions of perception of the online rituals. In fact, the debate on online prayer reflects the main issues facing Muslims around the world especially in the West. It mirrors the dreams and the prospects of Muslim religious leaders for a better Muslim religious life in the West. At the same time, it demonstrates the difficulties and challenges facing the Western Muslim minorities and Muslim individuals. It makes clear why the Muslim religious leaders are mostly concerned with the identarian, cultural, and social implications of their perspectives. It sustains the idea that “law is a sociocultural construct and local knowledge. Because law and sociocultural phenomena are interlinked and there is no absolute autonomy, any change in law or culture inevitably will influence the other” (Yilmaz 2003).

It may be assumed that the issue of online prayer is recently raised due to COVID-19. Even long before the Internet, Moroccan Muslim scholar Sheikh al-Ghumari (died 1960) wrote a book about the legitimacy of performing Friday prayer with radio, which he supports (Al-Ghumari n.d.). But the issue of the distanced rituals intensified after the emergence of live broadcasting via television and the Internet. One key question raised by this issue is about religious authority: who has the authority to issue a *fatwa*? Juridical institutions are worried more about the individualized *fatwas* issued by “unofficial” scholars who may compete with or even replace those who work in these juridical institutions. The same concern is shared for the identity of the community constituted through this online prayer.

Basically, the opponents of the online prayer validity build their rejection on different caveats, one of which is that supporting the individualized *fatwas* maintaining the permissibility of online prayer is a threat to the religious authorities as represented in the collective juridical associations. Their attitude resonates with the conservative perspective against the virtualization of the religious experience. This conservative view considers that the religious experience through cyberspace causes fragmentation of the religious traditional authorities. On the contrary, the supporters of the religious

experience through cyberspace defends the production of uniformity and unification via the cyberspace religious experience. For them, it helps create the “fellow-feeling” and unifying diasporic Muslims through one religious authority. However, the virtualization can cause both results and does not bring a unique conception to the actual practice. Surprisingly, virtualization combines the discrepancies and can be a two-edged tool. Pluralism in religious authority does not exist because of the virtual experience that has swept the religious space. It is the real impulse for the substantial change and modernity happening in Islamic thought. This is what Peter Mandaville (2007, 302) reminds us of when he says: “there exists in the Muslim world today a highly pluralistic understanding of Islam, linking liberal interpretations of the Qur’an and Sunna with forms of social activism and politics usually associated with progressive causes.”

However, the debate between both teams is very rich and valuable. Both the proponents and the opponents of online prayer share the same point of departure. It is the *Maqasid al-Shariah* (General purposes of Islamic law). Protecting the religion is one of the five necessities or five *Maqasid al-Shariah* which includes protecting soul, offspring, intellect, and wealth as well. This is a general umbrella that any *Mujtahid* or *Mufti* should produce his *Ijtihad* or *fatwa* accordingly. Although both teams of Muslim legal scholars consider the same *Maqsid of Shariah* when considering online prayer fatwa and how to protect religion during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, they differ in their approaches and methods.⁷ The first team of the proponents of the online prayer considers keeping the symbolism of the mosque through the virtual mosque, which broadcasts live prayers to Muslim individuals in their places is the ideal way to help to preserve the religion and the status of the mosque in the hearts of Muslims. The opponents of online prayer consider the protection of religion can only be achieved by preserving the identity of Muslims. They maintain that the identity of Muslims is linked to the actual physical mosque and that protecting the status of the mosque is surely helping the full protection of Muslim’s identity. The virtual simulation of the mosque as a place of rituals is seen by this team as a threat to the identity of Muslims and that is why they strictly go against it.

Finally, this study is an attempt to explain that the physicality in rituals is a complicated issue in Islam. It is for some religious authorities an identity marker, a tool for sustaining the social fiber and the culture of the Muslim community, and for others, it is not.

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Notes

¹ A Muslim legal scholar who is authorized to give juristic rulings on religious issues.

² Sahnun Ibn Sa'īd Ibn Habib at-Tanukhi (born 776–7 [160 AH], died 854–5 [240 AH]) was a Maliki jurist, the judge of Qayrawan in the 9th century, and the author of a leading book *Al-Mudawwana* in Fiqh.

³ This saying is attributed to Imam Abu Hanifa, the greatest Imam of *fiqh* and the founder of the Hanafi school.

⁴ This term is basically used to refer to the larger Muslim community tied by the religious ties.

⁵ Khalid Hanafy, professor of Islamic law at al-Azhar and vice-president of the European Council for Fatwa and Research.

⁶ Shari'ah means Islamic law.

⁷ This obviously appears in both discussions of opponent of online prayer team as in Hanafy (2020a) and the proponent of online prayer team as in Fawzy (2020).