THE EDITORIAL

An Introduction to the Interaction of Religion and Virtual Space

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The modern era is characterized by a plethora of mass media and virtual spaces, each with unique capabilities and features. Communication in today's globalized world has made it common and easily accessible to exchange opinions, spread negative culture, and propagate false and biased information about various factions, groups, personalities, and especially religions. Throughout history, the culture and fundamental religious texts and divine beliefs have been subjected to attacks, including in the form of anti-religious propaganda in cyberspace.

The rise of new mysticism, the emergence of terrorist groups, and the proliferation of pseudo-religious networks and organizations have distorted the true image of religion and presented it in a different light, particularly to the younger generation. In particular, Islam has been the prime target of such attacks. Amidst such circumstances, it is crucial for virtual space to facilitate the promotion of Islamic culture by establishing accurate networks, groups, and links that can correctly present Quranic interpretations and sources, while simultaneously combating anti-religious propaganda.

Today, virtual space presents both opportunities and threats to humanity. While the threats have caused concern among

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Muslims, the conditions for harnessing their opportunities are extremely favorable. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has also emphasized the importance of utilizing the opportunities presented by virtual space, as he states:

Virtual space has now expanded to many times the size of our physical world, with some individuals living and breathing solely within its confines. For such individuals, their entire existence revolves around virtual space. Young people, in particular, engage in various activities within virtual space, such as utilizing its scientific programs, browsing the internet, and using social networks. Some individuals have created a channel, which has come to be known as virtual space or the cyber world. Use it, but use it properly. (Supreme Leader, meeting with teachers and educators, May 13, 2015)

In the era of information and communication, the ubiquitous presence of virtual space in various aspects of human life has created new demands on the primary institutions, structures, and organizations of every society.

Virtual space is a novel form of social space that, despite its relatively short history, has firmly established itself in people's lives. It has enabled individuals from diverse social backgrounds and of all ages to come together and communicate with each other, regardless of the physical distance between them in the real world. In contemporary times, the Muslim family is confronted with a diverse cultural landscape that includes satellite networks, virtual spaces, and modern media, each of which seeks to exert its influence on different facets of family life.

Certain satellite networks, virtual groups, and channels have increasingly focused on the family, promoting disorderly and unbridled family structures while normalizing spousal infidelity, premarital sexual relations between individuals, and cohabitation instead of marriage. The impact of satellite network programs on Muslim audiences has raised concerns among the scholarly community due to its potential consequences.

Religion, as one of the longstanding institutions of human life, is not immune to the impact of contemporary cultural trends. Therefore, it is necessary for religion to adapt and

redefine its form and means of interacting with its audience and society of believers in light of the new conditions of the world.

Religion can utilize virtual space to showcase and introduce itself, as well as the society associated with it, thereby creating opportunities for recognition and differentiation from other religions. The utilization of virtual space has enabled less hierarchical and rigid forms of communication with the audience, creating a platform for members of the religious community to address their doubts and confusions with less fear and anxiety. This allows them to seek answers that bring peace to those who seek the truth.

Nevertheless, taking advantage of these benefits while also avoiding the associated risks requires careful preparation. It is essential to provide the necessary training through supportive institutions, such as families, media, and educational institutions, to increase media literacy and skills among people, particularly the younger generation. This would help to reduce errors in selecting appropriate networks or channels, and provide guidance on how to interact with the content of virtual social networks. By doing so, the potential for harm can be minimized.

Conducting a thorough needs assessment and increasing awareness about the audience and their preferences, particularly within the context of the younger generation, are other crucial factors that can enhance the effectiveness of religious content in virtual networks and cyberspace. By doing so, religious decision-makers can optimize their approach to these spaces and increase their ability to meet their objectives.

Instead of relying on defensive and security-based approaches, adopting a creative approach that integrates foresight and innovation can facilitate the creation of up-to-date, engaging, and attractive religious content that is likely to attract a larger audience and enable the dissemination of religious teachings. On the other hand, coercive and defensive measures can hinder the positive impact of virtual space in the realm of religion and limit its potential benefits.

The decision to enter virtual space and use it for religious purposes should be an intelligent move that takes into account the needs of religion, the religious community, and the diverse

interests and tendencies of audiences who have different dispositions and attitudes, and may be inclined towards negative and irrational reactions. Given the diversity of religious teachings and propaganda in virtual spaces, adhering to the above-mentioned points can help establish a stable and positive interaction between religion and the virtual world, ultimately benefiting religion.

In the present issue of the *Al-Mustafa Journal*, various authors have explored different aspects of the interaction between religion and virtual space. We look forward to continuing this discussion in future issues of the journal.