

American Muslims and Online Mosque-Finding

by Andrea Stanton

I teach about Islam at the University of Denver, a secular institution. Our department requires students to make site visits to houses of worship for each religious tradition they study – ones that are new to them, even if they grew up in or identify as part of a particular tradition. After their complete their visits and submit their reflection papers, we spend an hour or more of class time discussing their experiences – including how they found the house of worship they visited, and why they chose that particular site. Our conversations expanded to discussions about how people identify houses of worship to try when they are traveling, have moved to a new town, or are looking for a different community: they might talk to friends, they might ask family in the area, and – especially – they might go online to search for houses of worship near them, and to gain a sense of what the space and community might be like. Like my students, some might use Islam-specific websites and apps for this process, while others might use general-purpose ones.

This research project developed out of those discussions, with the goal of better understanding how American Muslims find houses of worship that are a good “fit”, spiritually and in other ways that people find meaningful.

Imagine that you are an American Muslim traveling to a different United States city for work or vacation – or moving to a new city. Imagine that you are among the estimated four million American Muslims identified in the 2020 *The American Mosque* report as “mosqued”, or as attending at least the annual Eid prayer services at a mosque.¹ Perhaps you attend services regularly in your home city. Perhaps you don’t attend services but send your children for Sunday school classes. Perhaps you attend some community iftars, or just appreciate having the mosque community as a resource for when you need to hire a lawyer or a Realtor. You might engage with your local mosque communities in a changing and diverse set of ways, and you want to continue that connection in the city you are visiting or moving to. How do you find a mosque – at all – and then how do you determine whether it will be a good fit for you?

My research examines the ways in which American Muslims negotiate these questions, focusing on online mosque finding, and comparing Muslim-specific sites and apps like Salatomatic with general-purpose sites and apps like Yelp and Google Reviews. I draw from lived religions and digital religion approaches, as well as from scholarship on review websites. Lived religion focuses on the religious or spiritual beliefs, practices, identities, and experiences of ordinary people – complementing and complicating religions’ institutional and scriptural aspects.² A lived religion approach can foreground the agency that individuals have in shaping and developing their beliefs, identities, and practices in relationship to their religious affiliation, helping nuance

¹See Bagby, Ihsan. June 2021. *The American Mosque 2020: Growing and Evolving. Report 1 of the US Mosque Survey 2020: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque*. <https://www.ispu.org/report-1-mosque-survey-2020/#summary>.

²See for example Meredith B McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

assumptions that religion is found in religious institutions or other official bodies.³ Digital religion is considered a growing sub-field of lived religion, and research on Islam-related digital religion has also grown.⁴ Finally, I draw from scholarship on review websites and apps – generally for-profit online spaces where users post reviews and ratings for businesses, products, or services and experiences. In the United States, review websites like Yelp have become increasingly important for restaurants, travel, and healthcare, among other arenas – as have map-based sites like Google Reviews.⁵

Believers turn to websites, social media platforms, and apps in search of information, community, and opportunities for pious self-fashioning, suggesting that contemporary Muslim religious life-worlds, at least in the United States, take place across a continuum of online platforms.

This paper argues that American Muslims find information, community, and support for personal piety across websites and apps, with a declining frequency in the use of Muslim-specific sites like Salatomic and an increasing frequency in the use of the general purpose, location-based Google Reviews. Migrating their reviews away from Salatomic and toward Google, suggests the integration of United States mosques into the broader sphere of United States for-profit and non-profit businesses and services, while also raising the possibility that mosque leaders will begin to respond to large-scale ratings and reviews as American businesses have: by reading them, responding to reviewers, analyzing reviewer comment trends, and adjusting their business practices to meet consumer desires.⁶

³See for example Line Nyhagen, “The lived religion approach in the sociology of religion and its implications for secular feminist analyses of religion”, *Social Compass* 64 (4) December 2017, 495-511.

⁴See for example Elisa Innerhofer, Giulia Isetti, Harald Pechlaner, and Michael De Rachewiltz, editors, *Religion in the Age of Digitalization: From New Media to Spiritual Machines* (New York: Routledge, 2021) and Heidi Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2021).

⁵See for example Saba Salehi-Esfahani and Juhee Kang, “Why do you use Yelp? Analysis of factors influencing customers’ website adoption and dining behavior”, *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 78 April 2019, 179-88; Ping Want and Hongxiu Li, “Understanding the antecedents and consequences of the perceived usefulness of travel review websites”, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 31 (3) April 2019, 1086-1103; and Joschka Kersting, Frederik Bäumer, and Michaela Geierhos, “In Reviews We Trust: But Should We? Experiences with Physician Review Websites”, in *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Internet of Things, Big Data, and Security* (SCITEPRESS, 2019), 147-55.

⁶Putting here as a placeholder: *Future research*

Further research could include surveys, pathfinding research on how people search for mosques and decide which to try. Could also look at these ratings / reviews as historical data, for longitudinal research. Could also look at relationship between online and offline mosque finding: Digital as a supplement to word of mouth, other ways of finding mosques. Future research could also expand to include metropolitan areas in the American South, which had 31% of United States mosques as of 2020 (Bagby 9).