

**Counselling Muslim Selves on Islamic Websites:  
Walking a Tightrope Between Secular and Religious  
Counselling Ideals?**

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**Abstract:**

This article focuses on the interactive counselling service *Problems and Answers* (PS), an Arabic language and Islamic online counselling service, which draws on global therapeutic counselling trends. For over a decade, PS was run and hosted by [www.IslamOnline.net](http://www.IslamOnline.net) (IOL). Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article aims to provide a layered, contextualized understanding of online Islamic counselling, through addressing the ‘invisible’, ‘behind the screens’ aspects of PS counselling and the meaning making activities that inform the online output. In particular, I examine: 1. The multiple ways in which ‘religion’ shapes the PS counsellors' counselling output, and 2. The extent to which secular and religious counselling

ideals clash, in PS counselling. Drawing on a mixed methods approach, I demonstrate instances in which offline data nuance and generate new understandings of online data. The findings demonstrate the multivocality and variations in the PS counsellors' perspectives on both religion and counselling psychology, and shed light on possible tensions between professed ideals and actual online practices.

### **About the Author:**

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## **1. Introduction**

Islam Online forged a link between the religious, the social and the psychological (...) it is difficult for the questioner (online counselee) to get this mixture of expertise elsewhere.  
- Saftwat (2010).

Muslims have been seeking advice on Islamic websites for over a decade. While numerous studies have dealt with Islamic advice or fatwas (religious opinions on what is

permitted or prohibited in Islam) in a variety of contexts both on- and offline (Agrama, 2010; Bunt, 2003; Kutsher, 2009; Larsen, 2011; Mariani, 2006; Masud et al., 1996; Sisler, 2009; Skovgaard-Petersen, 2004; Stowasser and Abul-Magd, 2004), there has been little scholarly documentation and analysis of other forms of counselling services on Islamic websites. In contrast, this article focuses on the interactive counselling service *Problems and Answers* (PS), an Arabic language and Islamic online counselling service, which draws on global therapeutic counselling trends.<sup>1</sup>

Many studies of online expressions of Islam have been framed by what Hoover (2006) identifies as a 'transformationism' approach. Such studies often ask questions such as 'how does the internet transform religion?' and 'what is *new* about religion in new media?'<sup>2</sup> According to Hoover (2006, p. 69), this entails too much focus on the 'implicit and assumed characteristics of the media and too little focus on the wider social and economic context'. Hoover calls for a shift of focus 'from the medium to meaning'. This article is an attempt at shifting the focus to 'meaning' through the examination of how PS counsellors make sense of their PS online counselling practices.

Contrary to numerous previous studies that nearly exclusively focus on the online output of Islamic websites, this article develops out of a mixed method approach consisting of: 1) a longitudinal (offline) ethnographic study of the work-environment in Cairo where PS was produced, and 2) online research of counselling content.<sup>3</sup> As such, I tap into what Krüger (2005, pp. 11-12) calls 'invisible aspects' of online religious communities. In a similar vein, Orgad (2009, p. 37, 51) maintains that offline data have the potential 'to reveal something significant about the context being studied that could not be obtained from online data' and may 'enhance the interpretation of the online data'. Following in these methodological footsteps, this article aims to provide a layered, contextualized understanding of online Islamic counselling, through addressing the 'invisible', 'behind the screens' aspects of PS counselling and the meaning making activities that inform the online output.

As the introductory quote by PS counsellor Saftwat indicates, one of the distinguishing factors about PS may well be that it provided an online platform which 'forged a link between the religious, the social and the psychological'. It is precisely this 'link' that I seek to explore in this article through discussing the following two questions: How does religion shape the PS counsellors' counselling output? Do secular and religious counselling ideals clash in PS counselling? In my exploration of these questions, I employ an anthropological approach and give centre stage to the PS counsellors' own voices and reflections, in line with a meaning-approach. I strive to highlight the multivocality and nuances in the PS counsellors' perspectives

on both religion and counselling psychology.<sup>4</sup> In addition, I demonstrate instances in which offline data nuance and generate new understandings of online data.

For over a decade, PS was run and hosted by www.IslamOnline.net (IOL), which has been characterized as one of the most popular and successful religious websites worldwide (Gräf 2008, Hofheinz 2007). IOL's main headquarters were in the outskirts of Cairo, in a fancy office building with characteristic blue glass windows and an impressive glass roof, a striking sight contrasted to its surroundings of what seem to be endless golden sand. The furnishings of the offices are uniform, modern and could be anywhere on the globe. This is in stark contrast to the dated computer equipment comprised of an array of different PC brands, visible on the desks. The old IT equipment is somewhat surprising for an enterprise that runs a *website*. This is perhaps the one observable clear reminder of this office being in Egypt. Another reminder of geographical location is the regular electricity cuts. These power cuts never last long but they do disrupt work and computers have to be restarted.

Despite visibly modest technical equipment, Sisler (2007) found IOL to be more interactive than its competitors. IOL offered a wide range of interactive services such as fatwas and counselling, in addition to a spectrum of specialized subpages about worship, religious scholarly advice, news, health and family matters. According to Gräf (2008: 1-2), IOL was envisioned from the outset as a website that should deal with all aspects of life, employing knowledge from all possible sources, including the expertise of non-religious scholars such as social counsellors or psychiatrists. 'This is due to a belief among IOL founders that muftis cannot often give answers to questions which require special knowledge outside the framework of Islamic jurisprudence and theology' (Gräf 2008: 1).<sup>5</sup> IOL differed from other Islamic websites in this respect.

Ideologically, IOL identified as '*wasatiyya*' (centrist Islam). *Wasatiyya*, as defined by its adherents, promotes the middle ground of Islam, offering balanced opinions that are neither too strict nor too lenient. Moreover, *wasatiyya* aims at being in dialogue with the concerns of contemporary society, and therefore seeks to find solutions to modern-day problems (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, Gräf 2009, Høigilt 2008).

PS was the epitome of how IOL sought to provide an online counselling service that was relevant to the everyday lives and problems of contemporary Muslims. PS was launched on IOL in the late 90s. Indeed, PS was the counselling service which set IOL (and later On Islam) apart from other Islamic websites. It provided a platform for Muslim users to seek online counselling about all sorts of personal and relational problems and had a therapeutic focus.

Following a major dispute between employees in Cairo and funders in Qatar, the IOL

Cairo offices of IOL were shut down in March of 2010. In August 2010, the PS service migrated to a new website called On Islam, created by previous employees of IOL. At the time of writing (July 2014) new exchanges on PS are temporarily suspended following lack of funding for the Arabic language website version of On Islam. However, previous counselling PS exchanges are still available online.

'Counselling' as defined by Hough (2006:1) consists of a 'helping relationship', 'is based on the principle of "empowerment" and 'seeks to help people identify their own resources'. According to Rose (1999a:217-8), counselling can be seen as part of a 'therapeutic movement for "growth" and "human potential"'. Elaborating on this notion, Miller and Rose (2008), Illouz (2008) and Rose (1999a, 1999b)<sup>6</sup>, argue that the therapeutic movement has provided a 'set of ethical techniques for self-inspection and self-evaluation', centred around the buzzwords self-autonomy, self-actualization, empowerment, life-skills and freedom. In his earlier work, Rose (1999a:217-8) contended that 'The vocabularies and mechanisms of psychotherapy are not merely addressed to those unable to conduct a life, but to living itself.' In Miller and Rose's (2008:18) more recent description, 'We saw the birth of a new ethic of the active, choosing, responsible, autonomous individual obliged to be free, and to live life as if it were an outcome of choice.'

On a similar note, Hoover argues that:

in our individual practices of meaning-making, we see ourselves as both at the center of the process, and autonomously responsible for generating the process. The culture of therapy has arisen in part to address this new reality (Hoover, 2006:52).

Hoover (much like Miller and Rose) argues that the making of our "selves" has become an essential activity and is increasingly considered the individual's own responsibility. Hoover considers this evidence of the rise of the "culture of therapy". The acts of seeking self-improvement and developing a reflexive consciousness are central to this trend. According to Hoover (2006: 53), part and parcel of this societal development is that "religious identity becomes less ascribed, and more of a voluntary, subjective and achieved phenomenon." Hoover's argument is that religious media have adapted to this trend.

PS's counselling services appear to demonstrate this point. As shown in subsequent sections, PS's counselling services can be seen as part of a "culture of therapy" that facilitates development of self-reflexivity and improvement of the self. Of particular analytical interest is how PS counsellors deal with the tensions between counselling psychology principles and

Islamic ethics.<sup>7</sup> I turn first to how the PS counsellors self-identify their practice.

## 2. PS Counselling and Counsellors

All (PS) counsellors have religious ideas, I mean we are all religious, otherwise we would not have chosen IOL, you know.

- Khadiga (2010).

Users filled in an online form for PS counselling, and received their response via email.<sup>8</sup> PS counsellors responded to a limited number of questions on a weekly basis.<sup>9</sup> During fieldwork, I witnessed how the high demand for the service regularly interrupted other work activities. Weekly editorial meetings were paused as an employee rushed out to switch off the automatic counter in order to block the entry of additional PS forms. The employee would often return slightly out of breath and with a report on how many PS questions had gotten through. I believe this ritual functioned as a strengthening of my research participant's *raison d'être*, and as an affirmation of the dire need for an interactive, Arabic language, counselling service couched in Islamic ethics, like PS.

All PS questions and answers were anonymised and then posted online.<sup>10</sup> Each individual response was linked to similar and/or other counselling exchanges that might be of interest to the questioner. This practice can be interpreted as part of a commitment to displaying a plurality of views on a given topic, particularly considering that PS moderators frequently sent complex questions to more than one counsellor, and subsequently published opposing views on possible solutions to the problem online. PS counsellors and moderators alike were intent on reaching as many users as possible even if they were unable to meet the high demand for the interactive PS services. Indeed, the multitude of (non-interactive) counselling essays<sup>11</sup> were published in attempt to reach a wider readership than those who were privilege to a one on one dialogue with a counsellor. Counselling essays summed up common PS problems and provided step-by-step guides on how to solve them, and often included a spectrum of counselling views on the matter in question. The body of online counselling material analysed in this study demonstrates a clear dedication to showcasing a plurality of views. There is however one striking difference between the interactive PS counselling and the non-interactive counselling essays,<sup>12</sup> namely that the former appear to be far more laden with religious references than the latter, a point I shall return to.

PS counsellors pride themselves on developing PS counselling, which they consider to be the first online counselling service in Arabic that offered counsees guidance from counselling professionals. It is significant that the PS counsellors have secular education and training in counselling psychology and social counselling, as opposed to training as religious scholars (*'ulama*). In interviews, the PS counsellors classify their counselling as 'social counselling' rather than 'religious counselling' in order to differentiate it from e-fatwas.<sup>13</sup> In Khadiga 's opinion, choosing to counsel on IOL can be equated to having religious ideas that will be incorporated into the counselling. As will be demonstrated in this article, PS counsellors do not have a uniform conception of Islamic ethics, and subjective understandings of Islamic ethics shape each counsellor's counselling output. PS counselling can be classified as part of a wider therapeutic trend which fuses counseling psychology with religion. This form of therapy is termed 'religious counselling' in the US, and for the most part draws on a blend of Christianity and counselling psychology. The case of PS can be considered an Islamic, Arab version of the 'religious counselling' therapeutic trend as it is defined in the U.S.

According to Onedera & Greenwalt (2008), Worthington et al. (2008) and Zinnbauer and Pargament (2000), 'religious counselling' is not a clear-cut phenomenon. Consequentially, religious counselling cannot be classified as a series of systematic methods but rather takes the form of home-grown counselling psychology models and 'adaptations or spin-offs of established secular'<sup>14</sup> practices' (Worthington et al. 2008:25). This description matches the case of PS.

In my analysis, PS counselling draws on a person-centred or humanistic counselling approach. This counselling approach, according to Hough (2006:119-21), rests on the assumption that all counsees hold the potential to solve the problems in their lives, if given guidance. The goal is to help clients identify their own resources, and to counsel clients on how to use their inner resources to improve their situation (Hough 2006:129-35). Ideally, the counsellor is non-judgmental in her or his approach to the client. This does not necessarily mean that the counsellor will agree with all the client says or does. The counsellor's task is to identify recurring patterns and themes for or with the client and this task may often entail *challenging* the client (Hough 2006:49-52). In the case of PS, this humanistic counselling outlook is adapted to Islamic values and ethics.

All of the founding PS counsellors relate that the (offline) counsellors' meeting was instrumental in constructing an overarching PS counselling approach and in their development as counsellors. At the outset, the meeting was an arena to create what Ziad calls 'founding answers' of the PS school of thought. Likewise, Leila maintains that the counsellors' meeting was instrumental in creating a 'religious and social policy' for the counsellors. Dina explains that:



The counsellors' meeting is a fantastic idea (...) (Teaching you) how to read the text, how to answer, with distance, with religion (but) without preaching (*wa'z*), how not to give a direct answer but develop their brain so that they see things from a wider perspective.

Dina's emphasis on widening the questioner's viewpoint without preaching goes to the core of the (ideal) PS counselling philosophy, as will be illustrated.

'How to read the text' in this context refers to the art of counselling based on text. Without the presence of body language and tone of voice, e-counselling requires learning how to interpret clues in the text. PS counsellors exchanged expertise, such as how to look for: key phrases, uneven first person narration, use of punctuation, clarity and formulation of problem, repetitions, (dis)organisation of thoughts, and aspects of the situation that may have been left out - all of which to the trained eye can reveal a lot about the counselee's life, personality and mental state.<sup>15</sup> Amongst other things, counsellors discussed their interpretations of particular 'nicks' (usernames) or email addresses which may at times reveal something about the counselee's perspective on herself, with nicks like 'sadrose', 'lovelygirl', 'desert jasmine' or 'lonely forever'. According to Omar, these meetings were 'an environment for thinking' and 'developing possible ways of solving' problems, drawing on 'different skills and perspectives'. Nadya emphasizes the importance of the transfer of knowledge that took place: 'The counsellors' meeting contributed to the development of our counselling skills through the exchange of expertise and opinions.' Thus, for PS counsellors, self-reflexivity is not just an ideal for their counsees but also for themselves.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, the PS counselling philosophy appears to have been created and developed in the counsellors' meetings. More specifically, the counsellors' meetings can be considered the structure for which, in Miller and Rose's (2008:151) terminology, 'experiential learning' is the goal, achieved by drawing on the 'technology of the group', i.e. the collective knowledge of the counsellors. Thus it can be argued that counsellors' meetings construct the PS counselling approach as a 'living methodology' (Miller and Rose, 2008:162), to be constantly developed on the basis of the contributions of the counsellors' experiential learning and expertise. In my reading, the counsellor's meeting constructed an 'Islam-near' form of humanistic counselling which PS counsellors aspire to.

In the following, I will be examining what constructing an 'Islam-near' form of humanistic counselling means to the different PS counsellors, and the potential tensions in fusing these two approaches. I now leave the stage to the PS counsellors, and their reflections on the



religious aspects of PS counselling.

### 3. Within Religious Boundaries

IOL has its own identity and particular context. The one who enters IOL is doing so on the basis of the answer being within the boundaries of Islam. It [PS counselling] has parts [that are] social, psychological, educational, etc. but the user wants it Islamic. If he just wanted counselling, he would have gone elsewhere. You do not close in on his choices. Within Islam there are many choices, like driving on the <autostrada>, he is turning right and left, overtakes, slows down, etc., but all the same, does not cross the white line outlining the road... In order to avoid dangers... But all the time, he is going right and left. [...] This does not mean that he will be imprisoned, but here are the boundaries ... He cares about the boundaries. He entered IOL because he wants to care about the boundaries.<sup>17</sup> - Saftwat (2010).

This viewpoint is consistent with the religious counselling literature (Onedera et al. 2008; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2000; Onedera & Greenwalt 2008; Worthington et al., 2008). Saftwat's statement also supports Agrama's (2010:6) argument that Muslim clients seeking advice may wish to abide by authoritative religious guidelines and directive instruction.<sup>18</sup> Inherent in Saftwat's stance is that abiding by religious boundaries and self-autonomy need not be considered opposing forces. By way of example, Dina (2010) explains how the concept of religious boundaries may be practiced:

We may not necessarily say, 'And God said... and the Prophet said', but it is important that we do not contradict religion. Someone wishing for more sexual desire will not be told to go watch porn movies. [...] We will not contradict religion, the intentions [*māqāsid*] of *shari'a*.

The concept *māqāsid* is often translated into 'intentions' (Nielsen and Christoffersen, 2010:5). Furthermore, *māqāsid* is associated with reform-oriented Islamic thinkers, and can refer to non-literal interpretations of religious sources with an emphasis on religious values and ethical principles and adaptation to contemporary society (March, 2010:10). Another example of staying within 'Islamic boundaries'<sup>19</sup> is provided by Saftwat (2010) who states that 'IOL cannot for

instance accept <open marriages>'.<sup>20</sup> The example provided by Saftwat represents a rather uncontroversial religious view that most PS counsellors could subscribe to. Likewise, for the case provided by Omar (2010):

For example if a woman commits illicit sexual acts or adultery [*zinā*] with her neighbour, I cannot tell her to continue this relationship. It is outside the religious boundaries [...]. So I must advise her to drop that relationship or legalize it [marry him]. [...] It is not enough to confess. We must look at the next phase. *Not doing so would be akin to deception.*<sup>21</sup> There are religious boundaries ... there is a red line we do not cross. [...] But if an Islamic rule is not applicable [relevant] to a situation, then there is no need to tighten the rope, or make the opening too narrow.

A key point raised by Omar is that not mentioning religious boundaries 'would be akin to deception'. This pertains to the assumption that clients seeking counselling on PS, want and expect the counselling answers to be within the religious boundaries. Moreover, it is important to note that several counsellors remark that considering adultery undesirable is not only 'Islamic' but 'universal'. According to Dina (2010):

What is prohibited in religion is limited [...] it is prohibited because it harms. Infidelity in the West... Like *zinā* ... The couples may not be married but they are connected, and if they have any relations outside, this is infidelity. [...] To use a metaphor, think of an electrical appliance: the manual<sup>22</sup> says 'do not pour water on it, it will be ruined'. This is the same in marriage. The manual says do not do this, because it will harm the marriage.

Dina's statement can be interpreted as a claim to universal ethics that cut across religions and regions. Nonetheless, assisting a counselee in avoiding harmful actions is a guiding principle in most counselling models.

More importantly, what is deemed the *māqāsid* of a religious notion – and by extension where to draw the religious boundaries - is often subject to individual interpretation. Indeed, the analysis of online PS counselling exchanges reveals that determining the *māqāsid* on certain issues can be a fuzzy process. For instance, the PS counselling exchanges demonstrate that the counsellors have differing opinions on why, whether, and to what extent divorce and polygamy are permissible within an Islamic framework. Moreover, the question of counselees' transgressing religious boundaries links in to Worthington et al.'s discussion about a counsellor's

‘zone of toleration’ and how clashes of value are managed by individual counsellors:

A few therapists have a zone of toleration that is narrowly centred on their own values. They tolerate few differences with others. Most therapists - by selection and by training - have a wide zone of toleration. (...) Most therapists have some limits to their tolerance. Often these limitations arise from religious beliefs and values. (Worthington et al., 2008, p. 28)

These varying zones of tolerance manifest themselves in the online counselling responses of PS counsellors, a point that will be revisited. An important question against this backdrop, then, is whether PS counsellors condemn acts considered *ḥarām* (prohibited) or even reject clients on such grounds. I will return to this query in more detail later, but for now, view Omar’s (2010) reflection on this point:

You must be soft with a person who is being counselled. Do not blame them, even if this person is wrong... we should not harm them, nor reject them. We want to make him closer, make him feel better, and help him.

Omar is one of the counsellors who identifies his counselling style as ‘gentle’. For him, rejection or blaming the counsellee is not an option. Nonetheless, all PS counsellors assume that counselees expect and want counselling answers that are consistent with Islamic ethics.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the counsellors choose to counsel for PS because they are religiously committed. In the next section, the religious identity of the counsellors will be examined.

#### 4. *Wasatiyya* Influence

IOL wanted the just line, the spirit of the religion and the meanings behind it, and to use these, to love and respect each other, regardless of our differences. The real Islam, its essence [is] you answer to God, not to me. [...] God is forgiving [...] I treat you the way I want to be treated. If I do wrong, I must apologize. [The Prophet] Mohammed [was] of noble ethics. Everybody [these days] is talking about the *ḥigāb*<sup>24</sup>, [but] this is with God [between humans and God], what I need from him [my fellow human] is that he does not

lie to me, that he is decent in his interactions. – Khadiga (2010)

Here, Khadiga states that Islam sends a message of love and respect and paints the picture of a forgiving God and the Prophet as a role-model for ethical interactions. Furthermore, Khadiga emphasizes the point that what she needs from her fellow human 'is that he is decent in his interactions'. Khadiga's emphasis on *mu'amalāt*, i.e. interactions between humans, is typical for PS counsellors. This may perhaps seem self-evident to most secular counselling practitioners. However, it is significant in religious terms. While a number of religiously-oriented individuals may direct most of their efforts towards ritual and worship (*'ibadāt*), this does not suffice in the opinions of PS counsellors. Likewise, all the counsellors repeatedly underline that their counselling deals with 'reality', 'real problems' and 'real life', as illustrated in Ziad's (2010) statement: 'We deal with *reality*. We do not just spray on a few religious words'. Moreover, the counsellors reflect on how their religious standpoint is *wasatiyya* (centrist or moderate) and appear to consider the goal of dealing with 'reality' contingent on a *wasatiyya* perspective. It is the view of the counsellors that *wasatiyya* is characterized by being neither too harsh nor too categorical, as can be seen in the following statements:

- [...] *Wasatiyya* accepts diversity, is not too harsh, and [does] not only [present] one opinion' – Manar (2010).

- It would be easier to say halal or *ḥarām* - Dina (2010).

- IOL is Islam only, not extremism - Leila (2010).

Islam, and more specifically *wasatiyya*, in this understanding, is moderate, contemporary, malleable and encourages pluralism.<sup>25</sup> Some counsellors express their understanding of *wasatiyya* in metaphorical terms, speaking of confined versus open spaces.<sup>26</sup> For instance, Omar says (quoted earlier), 'if an Islamic rule is not applicable to a situation, then there is no need to tighten the rope, or make the opening too narrow'. In a similar vein, Selim (2010) says, 'I do not see *wasatiyya* as blinding my eyes to reality... I also see it as inclusive not exclusive ... When I have a room that I do not open, I am not *wasatī*'.<sup>27</sup>

Intriguingly, when counsellors situate themselves in the Islamic and Islamist landscape, they often do so via contrast. That is, not only do they tell me who they are, but also who they are *not*. Most commonly counsellors contrast themselves to salafis and fatwa issuers:

- *Wasatiyya* represents a diversity of opinions, not a judgement like a fatwa - Manar (2010).
- Salafism is an import. The Egyptian *wasatiyya* in IOL has a more forgiving spirit - Ziad (2010).
- We do not take the salafism of Saudi Arabia [...] We have a forgiving religious spirit [...] God forgive me! (laughter), the salafis have idiotic sayings that defy description! (laughter) - Khadiga (2010).

These two 'out groups' (fatwa issuers and salafis) are considered unduly conservative and narrow-minded, and often ridiculed for these very reasons. Another example of ridicule is when Ziad (2010), while discussing masturbation, suddenly slips into a parody of such a narrow-minded religious character. He switches to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), alters the pitch of his voice, and bangs on the desk for emphasis while he roars: '[...] And *you!* ... You will burn in hell for eternity for this atrocious deed!' After which he switches back to his regular voice and Egyptian colloquial dialect, and says laughingly, 'Hey people! The world is much simpler than God being angry at you for masturbating!'

Selim (2010) provides a similar theatrical performance when he says 'we do *not* tell people' in his regular voice, before altering his dialect to MSA and an angry tone of voice when delivering: 'You will go to hell and you will burn in hell!' These can be considered examples of 'code-switching'<sup>28</sup>, that is, the 'changing between two linguistic varieties which are perceived by their speakers to be different languages or dialects [...] for humorous effect' (Siegel 1995:95). A related point is that several counsellors emphasize that their approach encompasses the 'forgiving spirit' of God and/or Islam and a 'we all make mistakes' - attitude. In other words, the counsellors emphasize 'forgiveness' rather than inducing 'fear-based' behavioural change in their clients.<sup>29</sup>

## 5. Religion as a Key

'Religion is one of the keys, so we have to use it' – Leila (2010).

Considering religion a 'key' refers to religion being an important factor in Arab societies and thus in people's lives. In this sense, Islam is considered an important frame of reference not only for the counsellors, but also for the counselees. The statement also refers to religion being one of several 'keys' or entry points from which the counsellor may tackle the problem. As Dalia (2010) elaborates, 'Religious sentences have an impact and can be integrated into the answer, and still be within [the] boundaries of counselling'. Several counsellors note that faith can be comforting, and gives strength,<sup>30</sup> although Dalia cautions that 'what is not acceptable is that the whole of the counselling response is religious'. In a similar vein, Saftwat (2010) contends that religion 'can direct behaviour in a positive direction' and that 'when in despair religious understandings can have a positive effect'. Moreover, he underlines that for severely depressed or lonely clients, 'having a merciful God at your side... even if no one else is there... being close to God... is a tranquilizer for people... it gives people strength'. This is an example of the 'religion as strength' argument that religious counselling literature also discusses, and supports the notion that hope and religious belief may be closely intertwined as argued by Onedera et al (2008:256). Saftwat (2010) provides another example of how religion may have an impact:

For instance with marital relations, for the man who harms his wife a lot, you might include (Quran) verses or *aḥadīth* that illustrate good treatment of women. The Prophet PBUH<sup>31</sup> was always good to women. But it [the use of religious sources] has its time and place. Maybe the client [already] knows these sources, but when the counsellor puts them in this context... the religious... in its place ... it will have a positive effect. Not that the whole response is preaching [*wa'z*], that might lead to the opposite.

Although Saftwat is suggesting the use of religious examples to enforce positive counselling goals, he cautions that counsellors ought not to go overboard with religious content. A related concern for PS counsellors is correcting erroneous Islamic interpretations.

Dina (2010) explains:

[If or when] they say it is religious, then, we have to use religious arguments to break these ideas. For example [if they say] 'women cannot talk about this,' then you must hand it to them as 'Sayyida Aisha did...' [...] or 'changed his army for women...' [...] or 'the Prophet's nature as an individual'...

Part and parcel of PS's counselling is thus contributing to correcting religious misunderstandings that lead to undesired behaviour. This evidenced in the online PS material studied. PS responses display a range of desirable ethics and behaviours, which are attributed to the Prophet Mohammed and his contemporaries, and offered as blueprints for emulation by PS users. Examples include how to romance your partner, harbouring healthy intimate relations, combating marital silence, bettering dialogue and understanding, and developing egalitarian relations, to name just a few (Abdel-Fadil, 2011b, 2013). Thus, PS contains content that can be considered an example of what Woodhead and Heelas call (2000) 'detraditionalization from within', i.e. challenging religious tradition from within that religion.

Initially, prior to fieldwork, I interpreted the use of religious sources and arguments in online PS counselling as an expression of the personal religious conviction of the PS counsellors. Yet my offline fieldwork provided a more layered understanding of these practices. Intriguingly, I discovered that near all PS counsellors say little or nothing about their *own* religious convictions when speaking of incorporating religious sources into their online counselling. Instead, they express a pragmatic attitude with regards to employing religious references in their PS counselling response, because references to Islamic sources 'have an impact' on the *users*.

This can be analysed as a form of instrumentalism. Arulmani's (2009) concept of 'cultural preparedness' may serve as an illustration: religious references strengthen the effect of counselling in religious societies because counselees are 'culturally prepared' for religious referencing and religious healing. One could argue that one of the main reasons that religious values and models of emulation are integrated into PS counselling responses is because the counsellors believe that their counselees are 'culturally prepared' to respect Islamic references, and that the counselling in this manner will therefore be more therapeutically effective.

These insights on 'instrumentalism' and 'cultural preparedness' are the result of triangulation of methods. My offline fieldwork and interviews contributed to a more in depth understanding of how and why religious references are incorporated into PS exchanges in order to encourage ethical behaviour amongst PS users.

## **6. Do the 'Religious' and 'Social' Counselling Models Clash?**

The counselling ideals of PS counsellors corresponds to an 'Islam-near' form of humanistic counselling. To what extent do aspirations match actual counselling practices? 'We cannot accept the unlawful [*hurminyāt*]', says Khadiga. Is this a stance that harbours consensus



amongst PS counsellors? This section deals with tensions between professed ideals and practice, and religious versus 'social' or psychological counselling models. Some individual differences between the counsellors on what they consider PS's counselling philosophy and ideals come to the foreground.

Analysis of the PS online counselling exchanges yielded intriguing findings, when compared to other online counselling material and counselling ideals expressed by PS counsellors in interviews. A striking discovery was that the PS counselling essays<sup>32</sup> contained few or no explicit references to Islam and Islamic sources, while a number of the interactive PS counselling responses are nearly *exclusively* comprised of religious quotes and references. In the latter type of online PS exchanges, the influence of humanistic counselling models is elusive and thus at odds at how PS counsellors construe their counselling philosophy in conversations with me and with one another.<sup>33</sup> My analysis of PS counselling exchanges establishes that there are, in effect, three types of PS online counselling responses, the first and third of which were most prevalent:

1. *Counselling answers with no explicit emphasis on Islam.* Such answers represent a wholesale American humanistic counselling trend, and their content could just as well have been published on a non-religious counselling website. Nonetheless, such PS answers can be interpreted as representing a blend of Zinnbauer and Paragment (2000)'s 'constructivist'<sup>34</sup> and 'pluralist'<sup>35</sup> approaches to religious counselling.
2. *Responses that are exclusively Islamic.* These types of answers do not comply with the expressed counselling goals or the American humanistic counselling model. Rather, they are heavy with references to Quranic verses and *ahadith* and place much emphasis on Islamic boundaries. Such responses may be classified as *wa'z* (preaching) rather than counselling in their approach. These types of counselling answers correspond to Zinnbauer and Paragment (2000)'s classification of an 'exclusivist' approach.<sup>36</sup>
3. *Responses displaying a mixture of religious and non-religious counselling objectives.* Such counselling answers adhere to the goals of the American humanistic counselling trend, while simultaneously using and contextualizing religious sources to underline their counselling objectives. These responses seem to mix Zinnbauer and Paragment (2000)'s 'pluralist' and 'exclusivist' outlooks. These types of responses are in accordance with PS counselling goals.

Against this backdrop, it is notable that *none* of the counselling essays are penned in the exclusively Islamic style. Indeed, most of the counselling essays display very few or no explicit signs of Islamic affiliation whatsoever.<sup>37</sup> These findings serve as an example of how the triangulation of data may reveal variations between different types of online data, in addition to pointing to tensions *between* online and offline data.

In interviews, I shared my preliminary analysis of the online counselling material, and invited comments on the findings. When discussing the three types of PS counselling responses with the counsellors, they were, to a large extent, uniform in their reactions. Most counsellors emphasized that the first type of response, represented ‘social counselling’ within the PS counselling ideals. Furthermore, they underlined that such counselling is still within the Islamic or religious boundaries (*ḥūdūd*) even if no explicit religious references are made. This is a valid point. Counsellors also asserted that the third type, the mixture, is also an ideal match for PS counselling. However, most counsellors were surprised by the existence of the second exclusively religious type of response, which they considered *wa’z* and in contradiction with their counselling ideals. Dalia and Ziad, in particular, discussed this at great length with me. Dalia (2010) related:

That is very strange. I am very surprised that you found this [...] You know, in the beginning, I got some of my responses *rejected* for this very reason! (laughter) ... because we do not preach.

Both Dalia and Ziad wondered whether there could be a difference between new and old (i.e. founding) counsellors. Against this backdrop, Ziad (2010) said that ‘Perhaps the new counsellors have not internalized (literally: drunk from) the soul of the page’ and in his characteristic humorous manner adds, ‘The new counsellors descended upon us like parachutes! (laughter).’ When I asked the counsellors which style they reckon they use, most of them say that they do *not* fit into the purely religious style of answer. This also reflects the general scepticism of that type of answer amongst most PS counsellors. In their own words:

- I hope I am doing the mix – Manar (2010).

- I never take the [only] religion one. I cannot. But, also it does not work because people misunderstand religion - Leila (2010).

- You will not find me doing the religious style. Leave that to the fatwa section. The religious frames my opinion. The mix is my personal style, I lean towards the logical, not the religious style. This is what I think people want. - Ziad (2010).

- You will not find me in the religious quoting type. It's not about good or bad. It's just not me. (...) If my mind thinks of something religious that conveys the meaning I will use it... if not, I won't. You will find that religion is in the <analysis>, in the imagination, in the <frame of reference>. - Selim (2010).<sup>38</sup>

- Once in a while I use a hadith. I try not to do *wa'z* and use the halal versus *ḥarām*. It can create problems for the person. It can also make it less realistic or less based on counselling, social, or psychological knowledge. If someone writes about anger, you cannot just write a hadith about not getting angry. You must give him a programme for handling this. - Nadya (2010).

Only one (out of 10) of the counsellors, Khadiga (2010), spoke of the purely religious style of counselling answers as desirable and as one she occasionally employed. In her own words:

I think I have probably used all three, depending on the circumstances. For example, if a boy writes, 'I am very religiously committed (*multazim*) and very lovely' and stuff, [and then], 'I started to hug and kiss my fiancée, and then one thing led to another and we erred [meaning: had sexual intercourse] and she got pregnant', what religion?! There are rules! 'Islam Online' was the heading, I mean, if you wanted a non-religious answer, go elsewhere, you know. [...] I doubt you will find that one counsellor uses only one style. We do not always agree. [...] I am one of the ones who is considered a bit harsh with regards to halal and *ḥarām*.

Khadiga is the only PS counsellor to acknowledge employing counselling responses that may be exclusively religiously framed. Yet, as the analysis of the online data indicates, the purely religious responses are much more prevalent in PS responses than in other online counselling output hosted on the same website. In interviews, most of the PS counsellors express that they attempt to steer away from the exclusively religious type of answer in their online

counselling. This is often formulated as a question of personality ('It is not *me*'), or is expressed in terms of 'who I am not' (fatwa issuer). However, as the triangulation of methods suggest, avoiding the formulation of exclusively religious responses cannot (in practice) hold true for *all* PS counsellors. Moreover, Khadiga's deliberation points to two important factors that might influence the 'religious style' of a PS counselling response: 1) differences in opinion amongst counsellors about the appropriate level of religious conservativeness and 2) the adaptation of answers to the individual counselee.

Indeed, the corpus of online counselling exchanges analysed suggests quite a range of religious interpretations and differing opinions amongst PS counsellors. One such topic is 'polygamy'. Several exchanges demonstrate that a number of counsellors are opposed to polygamy and believe that the religious premise on which it rests, namely equal treatment of the wives, is unachievable, hence the *maqasid* is understood as such: a man may wed one wife (only). The concept *maqāsid* is often translated into 'intentions' (Nielsen and Christoffersen, 2010:5). *Maqāsid* is associated with reform-oriented Islamic thinkers, and may often refer to non-literal interpretations of religious sources with an emphasis on religious values and ethical principles and adaptation to contemporary society (March, 2010:10).

Other counsellors believe that Islam has endorsed a man's right to marry more than one wife, but that certain criteria of fair treatment must be met. It is also evident that the counsellors have different opinions on what constitutes valid grounds for divorce, ranging from very liberal to more conservative stances.<sup>39</sup> These differing religious interpretations are at times vocalized in interviews. More importantly, a spectrum of religious stances surface in the body of online counselling material analysed, resulting in de facto fluctuating religious boundaries and varying degrees of admonishing clients for doing something *ḥarām*.

When I ask counsellors how they respond to clients who have done something *ḥarām*, they often respond that this will depend on how the questioner writes about it, whether she displays indifference or regret, for instance. I will return to this in the next section. Still, a general observation can be made at this point: while some counsellors underline the importance of being crystal clear on morals, ethics and religious boundaries, formulated as imperatives such as 'you cannot do that', not all counsellors see this as their task. Some counsellors take a slightly different stance, claiming that they are 'not moralistic' and 'non-judgemental' in their PS counselling responses. In Dalia's (2010) words:

We are not floggers! It is not our job to judge you. It is not our job to judge you.<sup>40</sup> We help you so that you can judge yourself, leading to you accepting or not accepting your actions.

But we are not judges, neither judges who judge, nor floggers who punish.

Dalia does not consider it to be the counsellor's job to judge or punish the counselee. Rather, she emphasizes the concept that it is the client's own responsibility to judge themselves and evaluate their actions. This relates to a counselee's capacity for self-reflexivity and ties into what Hoover (2006) has called 'the project of the self'. Furthermore, Dalia also brings the theme 'acceptance of self' to the table, which will be revisited in a moment. Another variant of an approach that is not judgemental is stated by Selim (2010):

I am <non-judgemental> to a very large extent, I try to understand their problem [...] I do not judge <morally> ... It is not my job.

Both Dalia and Ahmed, when probed, identify their counselling style as gentle and high on empathy. Much like Omar, Dalia and Ahmed emphasize the importance of siding *with* and supporting the counselee. While we are talking about personal style, Nadya inquires whether I have met with Ziad, and then in a humorous manner snaps her fingers into a whipping gesture, accompanied by the line, 'Ziad has his own school! (laughter)'. What is interesting about Nadya's humorous remark about Ziad is that it indicates that PS counsellors are well aware of and categorize each other's styles as well their own.

Ziad's own response to the question of style lends support to Nadya's description. 'Yes, I have a particular style!', he responds theatrically with his characteristic deep voice, before adding the following with perfect comic timing: 'They call me... <the psychological surgeon>! (laughter)... Because I use the shock method I sometimes use painful honesty. I am famous for this.' On the question of judging the client, Ziad says he operates with a distinction between judging morally and socially. He uses the example of a man who writes in to PS about having had sexual relations with a woman prior to marriage, before allegedly turning a new 'religious' leaf and subsequently abandoning the woman due to her 'impropriety and immorality' (for engaging in such illicit acts with him). Ziad (2010), appears to be expressing his repulsion and outrage with every fibre of his body, before roaring the following admonishment:

I mean, were you doing it alone?! [...] Your freedom of choice is absolute. I do not judge you <morally>. I judge you socially. I judge responsibility. It is *your* responsibility for getting into a[n] [extramarital] sexual relation with this girl.

In his counselling response, Ziad states that the freedom of choice is ‘absolute’. Nonetheless, Ziad refers to employing the technique of ‘challenging’ clients. While some PS counsellors may be concerned with the immorality of *zinā*, and it being beyond the religious boundaries (*ḥarām*), Ziad is preoccupied with the man in question taking social responsibility for his own acts. Ziad is relentless. He refuses to let the client off the hook or allow him to place the blame and responsibility on the girl alone. In many ways, Ziad’s harsh response slices the client up, just as his nickname ‘the psychological surgeon’ suggests.

Another interesting reflection on the freedom of choice is provided by Dalia (2010), renowned for her gentle counselling style. Dalia recollects the following PS online counselling exchange, recounting the tale in a soft but lively rendition with a twinkle of the eye:

I remember this one problem we had, from a young man who wrote that it is a pity that his youth had passed without him being able to live, without him being able to play around or sleep with any girls! (laughter). [...] I told him: ‘It did not pass, by the way. If you want to do all these things, you can. Because, the beauty of these things is in the first time! Its beauty is not related to our age. If you taste it when you are 40, it is also good. The first time, is the beauty. If you are upset that that your time is gone, that your friends were happy and you are not, I tell you that the time has not passed. I am sure you will enjoy these pursuits. But, you sit and think about whether you can accept yourself. If you think you will accept yourself... I say do it! (laughter). If you think you will not accept yourself, do not do it. But if you are asking about whether the chance is bygone or not. I tell you it has not.’ You understand [me]? Everybody is free to do what they want! But, they must know if it is accepted by religion or not.

Dalia employs this amusing counselling example to underline the importance of freedom of choice. She even goes far in suggesting that the counselee engage in illicit acts, perhaps an attempt of reverse psychology or an element of surprise. More importantly she encourages the counselee to choose a path or solution that he can *live* with, in acceptance of himself. Furthermore, Dalia contends that the client must *know* that such actions are outside the boundaries of religion – whatever he chooses.

The PS counsellors’ responses dealt with in this section suggest that the individual counsellors have different zones of toleration. Still, all counsellors appear to agree that the religious boundaries ought to be made *known* to the counselee in the PS counselling exchange. What they disagree on is whether to admonish illicit conduct or simply clarify the religious

verdict on the matter. Arguably, there may at times be a fine line between challenging and passing judgement. Returning to Saftwat's likening of Islamic boundaries to the white lines of the *autostrada*, one could argue that the counsellors differ on whether to say 'Stay within the white lines' or 'Here is the road, the rest is up to you.' In this sense, PS's counselling approach can be said to be a mixture of an exclusivist and a pluralist religious counselling approach. Of course, the spectrum of religious views amongst the PS counsellors may determine just where the road is situated and how wide it is. The variations in 'zones of tolerance' expressed by the PS counsellors in interviews, is mirrored in the PS online counselling exchanges I analysed. Nonetheless, the PS counsellors appear to be highly aware of the variety of views among them. The next and final section deals with more individual differences.

## 7. Adaptation to Clients

Each question has a key ... the trick is not to drown in all the details - Saftwat (2010).

Contrary to scholarly claims that online Islamic counselling leads to less individualised and more deterritorialised, generic content (Larsson 2011), the PS counsellors underline the importance of adapting their answer to each individual counselling case.<sup>41</sup> They emphasize the importance of a questioner's age, family status, social and educational background, geographical location, and tailoring responses to each questioner.<sup>42</sup> In addition to geographic and social background and the cues in the users' formulations and nicks sketched out earlier, counsellors are alert to the possibility that a questioner may wish to portray himself or herself or the problem from a particular angle, while omitting other angles. The counsellors' own formulations articulate this point very well:

- He (the PS user) often blames his problem on someone else! – Nadya.
- Users may be looking for an 'OK stamp' for their actions. - Leila.
- Often the user tries to make you choose one [particular] solution! - Manar.
- What does he *not* say? Does he hide part of the problem to get the counsellor's empathy?  
– Omar.



The PS counsellors contend that some counsees may be trying to sway the counsellor into producing a particular (favourable) solution or would like to be able to select a favourable solution to their problem amongst several opinions.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, this is in contrast to Agrama (2010)'s study of the Fatwa Counsel, in which fatwa seekers are portrayed as *not* trying to seek a particular outcome. Moreover, several of the PS counsellors joke about how counsees tend to write that they are '(very) religiously committed' as if they think it is some kind of prerequisite to write this, sometimes without further regard for the 'catastrophes in the rest of the question!' This ability to joke about religiosity, both their own and that of others, is quite typical for the PS counsellors.

Intriguingly, all of the counsellors invariably speak of 'keys' to questions, problems and personalities. In my understanding 'keys' are *entry points* or *clues* from which to assess and respond to a questioner and his or her problem. Sometimes, as previously discussed, 'religion' may be considered a 'key' on the basis that 'religion has an impact' or from the perspective of cultural preparedness. On a similar note, counsellors at times perceive a (micro-level) problem as interlinked with a widespread and overarching social or societal problem, and believe it must be tackled from this angle. At other times, 'the key' signifies, in Saftwat's (2010) words, 'the essence of the question or problem'. In a more elaborate manner, Khadiga (2010) describes her view on keys or entry points and individual adaptation:

It is about an individual fit, to me. There is a key to each personality. [...] I try to put myself with them in their house, in their shoes, and walk the steps with them. Sometimes I will say 'turn a new page', other times 'take a stand', depending on the problem. I do not follow one rule. I try to imagine their context. [...] I start to imagine all [the] elements like a mini-film, and then start to sort [them] out. [...] There are no rules or steps suitable to all. You must know a society, and people change, and there are individuals [individual differences]. [...] You cannot give [identical] 1,2,3 [steps] for all. There are individual traits. This will influence how I see the question, and how to solve the problem. There is always a key to each human being, from his home, his circumstances, and the things he experienced.

Khadiga is articulate about the need to adapt a counselling response to the particularities of each counslee, and professes a clear stance: one size does *not* fit all. Furthermore, Khadiga reveals that she may answer the same question differently based on her assessment of the

questioner and his or her context. This is a point several counsellors make. They mention how they tailor their answers to the background and personal history of the questioner. Sometimes however, it is a question of attitude. Several counsellors state that they also adjust their responses based on whether the counselee comes across as indifferent or remorseful about their transgressions of religious boundaries. To my question, ‘how do you respond if someone has done something *ḥarām?*’, Omar answers:

My response depends on the user's description of problem... redemption, guilt, etc. But, if creates excuses...[I say] ‘You are responsible for yourself’.

Although there may be an implied condemnation of the user’s wrongdoings, what Omar explicitly addresses is the question of taking responsibility for one’s own actions. This is, as has been illustrated elsewhere, a core value for the PS counsellors (Abdel-Fadil, 2011b). Moreover, the subtext of Omar’s response seems to be that a user who displays signs of redemption will be met with a more forgiving tone from him. These points are elaborated on by Khadiga (2010) in her response to the same question:

[It] depends on how he writes about it. There are people who talk while they are ripping themselves apart, then I am very helpful and encouraging, because this person is beating himself up about it. He does not need me to do that for him. [So I say], ‘Go on, forget it, everyone makes mistakes, do not let this stand in your way. You are wonderful, but try not to go there again, at least until you are hard enough not to weaken again.’ But if he says, ‘Ah you know, the circumstances... when my dad threw me out, I had to...’ I have to tell him, ‘Is your father bad or are you talking about yourself?’ When he creates excuses, I am not able to stand on his side. Not everybody whose father is harsh and mean became a drug addict and lived with a belly dancer!<sup>44</sup> On the contrary, everybody is responsible for themselves. ‘Go work, and get away from your father. Be responsible!’ So it depends...

These responses indicate that PS counsellors, in addition to having their own characteristic individual counselling styles, may alternate between the techniques of reflection, challenge and expressing support and acceptance, depending on their assessment of the individual case and its ‘keys’. This is reminiscent of the ‘*tarbawiyah* element’ referred to in Agrama (2010)’s ethnographic study of the Al-Azhar Fatwa Counsel. Indeed, despite the fact that PS counsellors often identify themselves as *different* from issuers of fatwas, there are also

intriguing similarities in that they both appear to be assisting questioners in the quest for the ideal Muslim self, using at least some of the same techniques. Another aspect that surfaces in the PS counsellors' accounts and PS counselling exchanges is frequent reference to God's forgiveness.

While counsellors have individual zones of toleration, their zones of toleration tend to shift according to a questioner's attitude. Counsellors maintain that they tend to be 'softer' towards remorseful counselees. This claim corresponds to the PS online counselling exchanges examined. I believe that the understanding of Islam that underpins the PS counselling service can be considered an example of what Woodhead and Heelas (2000) call 'religions of humanity'. Such religions are characterized by depicting God as 'approachable, tolerant and compassionate' rather than fearful. Religions of humanity tend to embrace modern science (such as psychology) and be critical of religious tradition. Moreover, 'religions of humanity' are held to have a 'characteristic confidence in the powers of human reason', and consider it essential that individuals are 'free to choose, decide, believe, and make up their own minds'. Adherents of religion of humanity tend to be concerned with ethical *conduct* rather than talk. In effect, PS online counselling, which fuses counselling psychology with religious ethics, makes for the perfect match for promoting a religion of humanity approach to Islam.

PS counsellors appear to be remarkably aware of their own stances, zones of tolerance, and the differences amongst them in terms of personal style, religious interpretations and fluctuating boundaries. All of these differences manifest themselves in the online counselling material analysed. Indeed, there is a very high correspondence between what was said in interviews, observed during fieldwork, and the content of the online counselling exchanges, on all notes but one: the existence of the purely religious form of counselling response (online). PS counsellors were oblivious of the latter and baffled by this discovery. Indeed, it is striking that the PS counsellors, despite their heightened levels of self-reflexivity, were unaware of tangible discrepancies between professed counselling ideals and actual online practices.

## 8. Conclusion

PS can be analysed of a "culture of therapy" in that it provided a service that responded to users' quest for sense-making and the project of the "self."<sup>45</sup> More specifically, the case of PS serves as an example of how therapeutic, *wasatiyya* and humanistic modes of religiosity together informed the counselling output.<sup>46</sup>

Offline fieldwork and interview data have unravelled numerous invisible, "behind the

screens” aspects of PS counselling, such as how the counselling model was constructed during counselling meetings and how it functions as a ‘living methodology’ (Miller and Rose, 2008). It is also through interviews that PS counsellors were able to outline PS counselling goals and share their reflections on the balancing act of adhering to and incorporating (secular) counselling models and Islamic values and ethics in their online counselling practices.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, fieldwork and interview data shed light on interpretations of *wasatiyya*, a variety of positions on the halal vs. *haram* axis and fluctuating religious boundaries. Another example of ‘hidden knowledge’ is the discovery that religious referencing in PS counselling may at times be applied in instrumentalist fashion because of the presumed positive impact on the questioner.

The triangulation of online and offline data yielded intriguing findings. First, the purely religious PS online counselling responses expose a strong discrepancy between professed counselling goals and (some of the) actual counselling practices. Second, the comparison of different types of online counselling data, disclosed that the purely religious style only existed in the interactive counselling exchanges and was entirely absent in the counselling essays. Moreover, the shift from medium to meaning facilitated this layered understanding of the invisible aspects of PS counselling and the conclusions of this article. Indeed, the PS counselling case demonstrates that studies of online religion and/or religious counselling run the risk of distorted findings by analysing *only* online *or* offline data.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am truly grateful to the anthropologists Gunhild Tobiassen and Sarah Jurkiewicz for their valuable and constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, several scholars have argued that the internet contributes to the erosion of traditional religious authority, facilitates the discussion of Islamic knowledge in new ways by new lay interpreters, and ultimately leads to new content and interpretations of Islam (Anderson, 2003; Bunt, 2003; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; Mandaville, 2002; Sisler, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> This article draws extensively on semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews, conducted with 10 PS counsellors between March and June of 2010. I also analysed online data from the IOL website which spans from 1999 to March 2010. Online monitoring and analysis was carried out from January 2009 to March 2010. I logged tendencies and coded the following online material: a) Counselling essays (protocols) about marital communication and b) PS exchanges about pre-marital and marital problems. The overall analysis is informed by in-depth ethnographic knowledge obtained through longitudinal fieldwork in the offices where PS was produced. Fieldwork was conducted from the beginning of December 2009 until the end of June 2010. I conducted all interviews in Arabic (Egyptian dialect), and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in Nvivo. Initially I had planned to use the counsellor's real names in this text, in line with Tilley and Woodthorpe's (2011) discussion of how anonymity may not necessarily always be the ideal for contemporary qualitative research, especially when conducted in urban settings with educated informants who are well aware of what research actually entails. One of the aspects they discuss is that certain research participants *want* to be identified. Tilley and Woodthorpe

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argue that at times it might be *unethical* to deny research participants ownership to their conceptualizations. The recent arrest of one of the key figures of former IOL Arabic, while I prepare this manuscript for publication (October 2015) prompted me to revisit my original intent. In light of political tensions in Egypt, I have taken the extra precaution of anonymizing the citations in this chapter, so as to minimize any potential harm that may be bestowed upon my research participants as a result of this publication.

<sup>4</sup> Arguably, this an important aim in itself, and can be seen as an attempt to counter culturally reductionist approaches to ‘*the Muslim counsellor*’ or ‘*the Muslim counselee*’ which sadly dominate in many of the entries in the *International Handbook of Cross-Cultural Counseling* (Gerstein et al 2009). In contrast, I demonstrate that not even online Muslim counsellors practicing within the *same* counselling platform need be uniform when voicing their counselling perspectives or their understanding of what is to constitute Islamic ethics.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the ‘institutional narrative’, see Abdel-Fadil, 2011a.

<sup>6</sup> Rose, Miller and Rose and Illouz provide decidedly insightful analyses of new conceptualizations of the self and ‘the culture of therapy’. However, they are all highly critical of the whole therapeutic industry and its commoditization. Both Illouz and Rose go as far as arguing that the therapeutic industry has cynically succeeded in transforming ‘everyday events’ into ‘problems’ that require assistance from experts and is thus an exploitation of people’s aspirations for a better life. This criticism may certainly be valid for particular forms of commercialized psychotherapy. However, it is less applicable to free therapeutic counselling forms such as PS and overlooks therapists who genuinely believe that they may help improve the lives of those they counsel.

<sup>7</sup> It is also of relevance that I myself have several years of (social) counselling experience. In this sense, my study can be classified as a case of what Hannerz (2004) has called ‘studying sideways’, i.e. studying individuals with comparable or intersecting competencies to the researcher’s own ‘modes of knowledge’.

<sup>8</sup> PS counselling functioned in the following manner: a user sent in his or her question, and received an answer from a counsellor within two weeks. In this sense, the counselling service resembled an email exchange. Questioners sent in their questions via an online form, in which they had to include information

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about their background, such as marital status, geographical location and education, in addition to elaborating on the problem itself. Online forms could be filled out anonymously. There was no limitation to the length of text with regard to describing the problem for which counselling was sought. This was a conscious choice so as to not disrupt the potential cathartic function of writing for the counselee.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to PS, users could send in questions to pre-announced ‘Live Dialogue’-sessions with selected counsellors, or browse the many online counselling essays (protocols) that dealt with common counselling topics, in a slightly more generic manner.

<sup>10</sup> With the exception of particularly sensitive problems or if the user explicitly requested a private answer.

<sup>11</sup> The emic term for these counseling essays was ‘protocols’.

<sup>12</sup> Here I am referring to differences between PS and protocols / counseling exchanges in the Arabic language (only).

<sup>13</sup> The Arabic term for ‘social problems’, much like its English equivalent, also connotes ‘societal problems’.

<sup>14</sup> The term ‘secular’ is not clearly defined in this article, but is repeatedly contrasted to religious or faith-based counselling. ‘Religion’ is defined a person’s search for the sacred within an organized worldview of specified beliefs and values that are lived out within a community of faith’ (Worthington et al 2008>25).

<sup>15</sup> These techniques of textual analysis correspond to counsellor guides for online counselling in other corners of the world (Murphy and Mitchell 1998, Pollock 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere I argue that PS was created in an environment that served as a micro cosmos of the society that was envisioned by the creators, moderators and counselors of PS. For more on how the work tasks were organized see for instance, Abdel-Fadil, 2011b.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Saftwat says that he may answer the same question differently at his private practice, where he does not advertise as an 'Islamic' psychiatrist.

<sup>18</sup> Agrama argued this point about fatwa-seekers, but it may be equally relevant to PS counselees as well.

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<sup>19</sup> For instance being a practicing homosexual is considered unlawful (*haram*) by the PS counsellors, and beyond the boundaries of Islam, although the counsellors' terminology and judgement differs. A discussion of homosexuality is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>20</sup> <Open marriage> is said in English. Open marriage refers to marriage arrangements in which spouses agree that they may pursue sexual relations with partners other than their spouse.

<sup>21</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>22</sup> The actual word used was '*al-catalog*' (a hybrid of Arabic and English). However, I chose to translate this into 'the manual' because I think this is a more accurate portrayal of the meaning intended.

<sup>23</sup> This is reminiscent of Agrama (2010)'s argument that counselees may be searching for and cultivating an ideal ethical Muslim self, which does not necessarily run counter to the search for authority on a matter.

<sup>24</sup> Egyptian pronunciation of j is g (*higab* rather than *hijab*).

<sup>25</sup> *Wasatiyya* is often held to have a balanced gender perspective. For instance, Dalia (2010) contrasts a *wasatiyya* view on women to an extremist and misogynistic view that women should be locked up, unheard and unseen. Several counsellors mention this. A thorough discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Damarki and Sayed (2009:466) argue that the Arabic language is distinctly metaphorical and that Arabic language counselling will necessarily be packed with metaphors. This may be a valid point. However, in my reading the 'global counselling lingo' draws heavily on metaphors, which might be accentuated in an Arabic language setting but are nonetheless not unique to it.

<sup>27</sup> Selim discusses being an adherent of *wasatiyya*.

<sup>28</sup> In many other studies, the term 'code-switching' is used more broadly to signify shifting and adapting situational behaviours to various cultural contexts.

<sup>29</sup> This lack of emphasis on fear is in stark contrast to the pedagogies of the Egyptian mosque movement that Mahmood (2005) studied.

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<sup>30</sup> For instance, Dalia likens the religious foundation of PS counselling to KISS, a Christian-founded counselling programme for combating addiction. She maintains that when a counsellor tells a client that God is at their side, this may serve as 'support and strength'.

<sup>31</sup> Peace Be Upon Him, standardized English abbreviation of Arabic equivalent.

<sup>32</sup> This is in reference to the Arabic language counseling essays. These were penned by the moderators of PS counselling or by the PS counsellors themselves, which means that authorship alone cannot explain the difference in explicit Islamic emphasis between PS and essays. Curiously, English language counselling essays on the English website were found to be heavy on the religious referencing. The Arabic and English websites were run by different teams and were not meant to be identical. The difference in style of the counselling essays is nonetheless striking. (For more details see, Abdel-Fadil 2013, 2011b).

<sup>33</sup> Another difference is that contrary to Arabic counselling essays, advice from the popular bestseller *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* does not appear to feature in PS counsellors' responses to any noteworthy degree.

<sup>34</sup> The *constructivist* approach 'denies the existence of an absolute reality but recognizes the ability of individuals to construct their own personal meaning and realities' (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2000:166). Moreover, the counselor does not need to be religious to work with religious clients, but can work within the religious worldview of the client.

<sup>35</sup> The *pluralist*: 'This approach recognizes the existence of a religious or spiritual absolute reality but allows for multiple interpretations and paths towards it (...) the pluralist recognizes that this reality is expressed in different cultures and by different people in different ways' (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2000:166).

<sup>36</sup> The *exclusivist*: 'The central tenet of this approach is a fundamental belief in the ontological reality of a religious or spiritual dimension of existence. Included in this orientation are assertions such as God exists, spiritual experiences influence human behavior, absolute values exist and are grounded in scripture or religious texts, and counselors must share the religious or spiritual worldview of clients to be effective. Also associated with this view is a belief that there is a single route to the religious or spiritual reality.'



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(...) if the client does not initially believe in this specific religious or spiritual world, it is the counselor's job to bring the client to it' (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2000:165).

<sup>37</sup> It must be noted that here, I am discussing the Arabic language counselling essays (protocols) only. The English language counselling essays are far more 'religious' in style.

<sup>38</sup> Says <more analytical>, <analysis> and <frame of reference> in English. The rest of the quote is in Arabic.

<sup>39</sup> Some counselors argue that initiating a divorce should be far easier, while others maintain that divorce is taken too lightly and should only be considered as a very last resort. Nonetheless, the counsellors were unison in their commitment to combatting social stigma for divorcees. Moreover, the same website that hosted PS also hosted a divorcee club, which functioned as a support group for divorcees (mostly female).

<sup>40</sup> The same sentence was repeated twice in a row by Dalia in the interview.

<sup>41</sup> In his discussion of the Islamic website Islam Online, Larsson argues online fatwas are becoming less individualized and more deterritorialized than their classical counterparts. Larsson contends that online fatwas are placing less emphasis on the specific background and context of the individual questioner than was traditionally the case with classical fatwas. While, I recognize the goal of answering a user's queries in a fashion that will benefit users other than the questioner, in my understanding, the one does not exclude the other. Rather, in my analysis the answers to fatwas and other forms of counselling produced by Islam Online sought to simultaneously address the individual grievances of the questioner, while at the same time formulating generic content that could be of use to other users.

<sup>42</sup> For instance, life in an Arab Gulf society entails stricter gender segregation than life in Egypt, which must be taken into consideration with regards to options or paths that the counsellors might sketch out. Upon probing, the questioner's gender was held to not have more significance than any of the other background factors. However, Selim states that 'gender is mostly relevant if their question relates to particular societal expectations from that particular gender'. In this sense, gender and societal problems can at times intertwine and thus constitute the framework or context within which a counsellor is to tackle an individual user's problem.

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<sup>43</sup> The data outlined here indicate that IOL users consider it their privilege to mix and match various counselling opinions in seeking an opinion that resonates with their inner convictions. Although PS's projection of a plurality of opinions may make the task of mixing and matching easy for users, one should be careful in considering this activity an effect of Islam going online. Similar offline tendencies exist both within Islam and in other religions (Abdel-Fadil 2002, McGuire 1997).

<sup>44</sup> Often used as a synonym for 'prostitute'.

<sup>45</sup> A growing number of studies on religion highlight how modern forms of religiosity are increasingly focused on the self. The most salient expression of this is perhaps the development of the 'cult of the self' in New Modern Religions (NMR) or New Age religions, which construe the self as 'sacred' (Woodhead and Heelas, 2000). This is entirely different from cultivating the self in terms of ethics, awareness or self-reflexivity, all of which signify the 'project of the self' embedded in PS counselling. The most fundamental difference between the 'cult of the self' and the 'project of the self' is that my informants' dedication to the latter is firmly rooted in counselling psychology.

<sup>46</sup> PS with its firm footing within counselling models and counselling psychology, appears to be markedly different from other forms of online Islamic advice (fatwas). Rather, PS resembles (offline) cases of religious adaptation of secular counselling models by religious counsellors of various faiths in the US, i.e. 'religious counselling' and can be said to represent what Woodhead and Heelas (2000:71-2) call a 'turn to the human'. The dedication to the religio-therapeutic 'project of the self' is something particular to PS. While PS counsellors contribute to what Ismail (2007) calls 'ethical formation' and can be seen to cultivate an 'ideal Muslim ethical self' along the lines suggested by Agrama (2010), the focus on the 'therapeutic self' and therapeutic healing appears to be unique to the case I have studied and integral to the PS counsellors' dedication to Islam as a religion of humanity.

<sup>47</sup> This study's empirical data illustrates that PS counsellors hold fluid rather than absolutist stances as they engage in reflections about their own counselling perspectives, various counselling cases, and in what way religion informs their individual and communal PS counselling practices. Thus, this case provides important nuances to cross-cultural counsellors' more generalizing discussions of 'the Muslim counsellor' in Gerstein, L. H. et al. (2009).