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The Ahmadiyya in Germany

An Online-Platform as a Multi-Functional Tool

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Abstract

This article describes the online-platform of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Germany (AMJ D) <<http://www.ahmadiyya.de/home>>. It argues that not only does this media-portal serve as a source of information for members and as a tool for missionary activity, but also as a platform on which the AMJ D consciously constructs a media-persona designed to appeal to the societal context of Germany. The article shows that the AMJ's online-persona is carefully constructed to soften the tensions between German-European lifestyles and Islam. This attentively planned media and PR outlet, the article concludes, is proof of the self-awareness of Ahmadis in Germany and of the reflective way new media are used in this context.

Keywords

Ahmadiyya, Germany, Islam in the West, public relations, religion online

1 Introduction

In the first issue of *Online – Heidelberg Journal of religions on the Internet*, Oliver Krüger describes the empirical difficulties one encounters when using the internet, or computer mediated communication, as a tool for empirical studies (Krüger 2005). One of the factors, that the researcher of religions online should be aware of, is that certain technical selection effects take place once one begins the search for sites on the specific topic of interest. Krüger rightly argues that search engines operate by way of complicated page ranking technologies that determine which sites come to be identified as most important (Krüger 2005, pp. 8-10). This is true using Krüger's mixed-methodology approach augmenting discussions observed in online-forums with classical qualitative empirical fieldwork through interviews (in which evaluating sample choice is paramount). But it is not, however, if the focus of one's study is how a religious movement presents itself to the public by

way of the online medium. In that case, the official webpage of the group in question (which is usually the first or second result in a search engine enquiry) becomes fundamentally important as it may constitute the first resource an interested individual comes upon when trying to find out more about a certain expression of faith. Here the pre-determined selection becomes part of the validity of using this page in particular to assess how an online-persona is constructed.

The focus of this paper will be such an online self-presentation of the German branch of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat (AMJ [D], Ahmadi or Ahmadiyya henceforth). The AMJ is a younger Islamic sect¹ founded in the Punjab (today part of Pakistan) by the religious reformer Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian (approx. 1835-1908) who allegedly received visions from God ordering him to reform Islam and to found a new movement along these lines (Lavan 1974, p. 50). After Ahmad's death the movement began to split along theological and institutional lines regarding the question of who should be his successor (caliph) and what kind of role this person should play. The AMJ believed Ahmad to be a prophet and the promised *mahdi* (messiah) and chose his son Mahmood Ahmad as the second caliph (the first having been Noor-ud-Din, a companion of Ahmad's whom the whole community was able to agree upon) (Lavan 1974, pp. 98-101).² The movement developed a strong missionary zeal that also encompassed endeavors to establish missions in Europe (Haddad & Smith 1993, p. 60). The first two missionaries for Germany arrived in 1920 but could not gain a foothold in the country. In 1949 the movement returned and established their first mosque in 1957 (Wunn 2007, p. 156; Kandel 2006, p. 293). Since then Ahmadis have been very active in missionary propagation of their faith, establishing their own publishing house (Verlag der Islam), building mosques and engaging in interreligious dialogue by organizing workshops, lectures and conferences. In 2013 the AMJ became the first Islamic organization to gain recognition as 'Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts' (KdöR) in Hessen, giving it legal status on par with the Christian churches and allowing it to establish faith-based universities and to collect religious taxes (Heimken 2013, sec. 1). In 2014 the same result was achieved for Hamburg. This shows that the AMJ is recognized as practicing a form of Islam that is considered compatible with German societal values such as liberalism, democracy and a state organized along secular lines.

Currently I am studying the AMJ D to discover how this group constructs a favorable public persona as a peace- and dialogue-driven group to gain the trust of and influence with government agencies. I have noticed a considerable shift in favor toward the AMJ D in German media coverage and in their overall perception by policy makers during the last ten years. My hypothesis is that this is also a result of extensive media and PR work by the Ahmadis themselves. In this paper I want to

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- 1 The AMJ is deemed heretical by the Sunni Muslim mainstream and thus not classified as Islam unconditionally in the academic context. I am in the process of publishing a paper which argues toward categorizing the AMJ as a sect of Islam and not as a non-Islamic new religious movement (Drover forthcoming).
 - 2 The other group, the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, will not feature in this paper.
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show that the online-platform <<http://www.ahmadiyya.de/home/>> is part of the Ahmadi's conscious reaction to certain fears and accusations leveled against it by German society. Thus, the site acts as a multi-functional tool not only providing services for members and religious seekers but also actively constructing a positive 'status' (speaking with Anselm Strauss' theory of identity construction; Strauss 1959, p. 76) for the group in the German public sphere. Elaborating on four "diffuse fears" or perceived problems that are often mentioned regarding Islam in Germany, I will show how the online-presence of the group answers to these and is thus used to carefully manage the AMJ's public persona according to the "mirror image" it receives from society. But, before this argument can unfold a few theoretical and methodological considerations have to be made.

2 Basic functions of a religious online-platform

To establish that the AMJ D uses its online platform as a multi-functional tool we first have to take into consideration which functions have been attributed to official online-pages by scholars of religions on the internet thus far. The most extensive research on official representations of religious institutions on the internet was carried out by Sara Horsfall (Horsfall 2000). Giving a broad macro-perspective of five religious groups she establishes a typology that identifies three large categories of functions, which a web-presence may serve: external communication, information sharing, and internal communication (Horsfall 2000, pp. 173-179). Public relations, the topic of this paper, are identified as part of external communication and further divided into the strategy of public relations, the countering of negative publicity and the promotion of values (Horsfall 2000, p. 174). As is the case with every typology the categories have to be regarded as somewhat fluid because more minute micro level studies of a single web-presence may show that in fact a great number of text materials on websites oscillate between different categories or serve multiple functions. Regarding the AMJ D this seems to be true as that what Horsfall terms "public relations strategy" and the "countering of negative publicity" (Horsfall 2000, p. 174) merge seamlessly. Whereas the examples provided by Horsfall for countering negative publicity (the Mormon Church, the Unification Church and Scientology) seemingly reduce this category to pages that directly address misconceptions and rumors (and name the page accordingly) the AMJ D (as will be shown below) incorporates these into the strategy of public relations by addressing them within the pages describing the basic tenets of faith, albeit indirectly. This may show that the AMJ D is aware of the accusations brought against it and reacts accordingly by addressing them within its public presentation. This would verify my hypothesis that this group is highly self-aware and manages its public persona reflexively and carefully according to the perception it receives from society.

Krüger (Krüger 2004, p.185) offers a more simplified approach. Arguing against dividing religions on the internet into communicative and unilateral presences, he emphasizes the textual dimension of websites dividing their content into syntactic, pragmatic and semantic spheres. The pragmatic dimension is in turn further subdivided into the functions of presentation, communication, and religious services (some of which have a commercial function). He proceeds to give examples of several religious traditions fitting this typology concluding that religious institutions often mirror their real-life hierarchies in their manifestation on the internet: whereas the homepage of the Vatican provides no address for personal contact, the Zoroastrian website opens up a place where priests and laymen can mingle and discuss the faith freely (Krüger 2004, p. 188). This cannot be verified for the AMJ D, which is a highly hierarchical institution (being itself a local branch of a worldwide religious movement) but nonetheless provides several avenues of contact and communication, not only for the local mosques, but also for central institutions via an email query form or free of charge telephone services. Krüger's second conclusion refers to processes of religious traditions becoming "disembedded" from their original cultural context while the diasporic adherents may become "re-embedded" into their culture of origin by means of religious services found online (Krüger 2004, p. 188). This is also not in evidence regarding the AMJ D's homepage. In fact, as we shall see, the online-presence is used mainly to de-emphasize ethnic specifics and present Islam as a decidedly German religion, even though the AMJ is still made up to a high degree of migrants hailing from the Indian Subcontinent (Kaweh 1997, p. 5). This may be attributed to the fact that the AMJ D's public relations work has been dominated by German converts for the last several decades and is now augmented by second generation migrants (and children of German converts) that are very firm in both language and cultural expressions signifying "Germanness".

All these theoretical aspects of studying religion on the internet have one thing in common: to know what groups using the internet are using it for, aspects outside of the pure textual analysis of online content are seen as vital (Krüger 2005, p. 13). The web-presence analysis is usually augmented by descriptions of the situation of the group within the public sphere, by personal communication or by qualitative interviews (Krüger 2005, pp. 18-19). Here, using my extensive research on Islam in Germany, I can read the AMJ D homepage as part of public discourse on Islam and as a tool creating a favorable public persona because the overall societal context is taken into account.

3 Construction of a positive status using the platform as a tool

Islam as a religion and Muslims as adherents of this religion are seen as ambivalent and untrustworthy at best (Kandel 2015, p. 225) and as dangerous and malignant at worst (Bielefeldt 2010, p. 173) within German public discourse. The kaleidoscope of interpretations and representations of Islam to be found here is in turn mirrored by an equal number of ways in which the religion is criticized or questioned (Bielefeldt 2010, p. 175). This is of course far too extensive to be analyzed here. I will limit myself to four discursive fields which may show how the AMJ D constructs their public persona regarding topics that are of interest to the German public sphere, including other German Muslims.

3.1 Terrorism or Peace

The greatest perceived threat to German societal values leveled against Islam is the unclear relationship between the religion and acts of terrorism committed in its name. Several statistical evaluations seem to indicate, that the German public sphere equates Islam with terrorism to a high degree and fears that German Muslims may secretly be terrorists (cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung 2015, sec. 1). Many mainstream Islamic groups and bodies of Islamic representation in Germany are regularly criticized for maintaining too little a distance to so called ‘Islamist’ agendas (Bielefeldt 2010, p. 184). The AMJ uses this public fear to their advantage by distinctly distancing themselves from terrorism on the first page of the section of their website titled ‘What is ‘Ahmadiyyat’?’³ After giving a few facts concerning the group a sort of mission statement is formulated. The AMJ thus strives for:

Mercy for all people, absolute justice, the equality of woman and man, the separation of religion and state, the termination of violent actions committed in the name of religion, and the implementation of human rights as laid down by the Quran.⁴

This rigid and very openly articulated rejection of acts of terrorism is explained more fully under the section of frequently asked questions (FAQs) where the question “Why does the Ahmadiyya not protest against Islamic terrorism?” is answered:

We are often asked the question when and how our Islamic reform-movement is supposed to articulate our stance toward the inhuman acts committed by humans in the name of Islam. For over one hundred

3 All translations from the German in this paper are mine.

4 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/ahmadiyya/einfuehrung/>.

years we have pointed out indubitably that the holy Quran fiercely condemns such aggressions and has harsh punishments laid out for people who commit such atrocities. Whereby it is irrelevant if they are committed from religious conviction or not. Furthermore wherever members of our community live they are perceived as peaceful and law-abiding.⁵

The incorporation of this statement within the FAQ section apparently shows that the AMJ has to formulate a clear rejection of organized terrorism fairly often. The same goes for other Muslim communities in Germany who are regularly accused of not doing enough in this regard (Eißler 2015, p. 95). This augments the hypothesis of this paper that the AMJ is aware of the position Islam occupies within the public sphere and that it reacts accordingly. This is amplified further, if one also refers to the part of the homepage titled ‘Islam’ where the AMJ present their interpretation of the main religion separated from the Ahmadi-specific doctrines. If one chooses the section ‘Islam and fanaticism’ one is treated to a long and detailed study of the topic with several subsections to choose from. First, the word and concept of jihad is explained (divided into “small”, “middle” and “large” jihad) augmented with relevant quotes from Quran and sunna ending with a conclusion:

Concluding we can say that the gruesome and scurrilous murders (through which innocents lose their lives) committed by self-proclaimed “warriors of faith” are incompatible with the peaceful message of Islam. We can also say that the fairytale (invented to scare the people of this country) that Islam demands the destruction of all unbelievers has no textual base within the holy Quran or the life of the holy prophet Muhammad (saw). [...] More than one hundred years ago the founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat, the promised Messiah, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (as), proclaimed that according to the teachings of the holy Quran and the teachings of the holy prophet Muhammad (saw) the use of violence regarding religious conviction is absolutely prohibited and that it was his goal to end the religious wars of Muslims.⁶

Here again we find an argumentative style, that shows how well attuned the AMJ is to its audience. Not only is the rejection of violence expressed unmistakably (to ward off any doubt as to its affiliation) there is also a reference to the age of the AMJ giving this doctrine a stable historic base. This is another problem of Islam as it is perceived in Germany. Of course there are other ‘liberal’⁷

5 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/ahmadiyya/haeufige-fragen-zur-ahmadiyya-muslim-jamaat-faq/allgemeines-zur-ahmadiyya/>.

6 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/islam/islam-und-fanatismus/dschihad-im-islam/>.

7 The categorization of Muslim groups or individuals as ‘liberal’ (as opposed to ‘traditional’ or even ‘radical’ interpretations of the religion) is highly problematic because the term is used in the German media discourse without scientific reflection or clear definition. Usually it tends to refer to Muslims that are less strict in their religious practice and tend to display behavior considered more in line with the overall German society (e.g. not wearing the ‘veil’, not adhering to dietary rules etc., cf. Bielefeldt 2010, pp. 181-182). Paradoxically the media

Muslims here working on an interpretation of Quranic verses that disown the claims of terrorists and fundamentalists. Unfortunately these liberals are often perceived as lone fighters against an overwhelming enemy and may have intellectual capital and thus a voice that is heard but no leverage to change how institutionalized Islam operates (Kandel 2015, p. 253). By referring to its century-long history, the AMJ tries to show that it is a liberal institution that can protect this outlook over a long period of time without succumbing to the pressure of mainstream Islam's apparent *laissez faire* attitude toward terrorism.

But the AMJ also takes this topic one step further by not only rejecting religious violence but also by interpreting Islam as a religion designed to foster peace on earth. The AMJ's slogan worldwide is 'peace for all, hatred for none' and that of the AMJ D is 'Muslims for peace, freedom, loyalty'. The word 'peace' appears in many PR print materials (emphasized by depictions of doves) and is topic of many of the caliph's speeches which shows that it is one of the central points Ahmadiis try to make in their interaction with the public sphere. The 'about' pages analyzed here have several sections where the reader is confronted with this specific take on the religion. Once there is a sub-header on the 'about Islam' pages titled 'Islam means peace'⁸ and within the topical cluster of 'Islam and fanaticism' analyzed above, immediately following the rejection of armed jihad. The first of these is actually a collection of excerpts from several speeches by the fifth caliph, Mirza Masroor Ahmad, who has been in office since 2003 and who chose peace as the motto of his caliphate. In one of these, 'Islam is a peaceful religion' he states: "The Ahmadiyya's point of view is that the holy Quran promotes peace. We have to spread this message across the whole world."⁹ He unfolds his argument by analyzing Quranic verses and giving their interpretation by Ghulam Ahmad. From these he extrapolates, that Islam is a religion calling all its adherents to be kind to others and have compassion toward them. Masroor Ahmad further cites traditions from the sunna in which Muhammad prayed for his enemies and defended the religious freedom of Jews and slaves to show that Islam tolerated religious choices and was not a religion "spread by the sword." Here it is clear that the tropes surrounding Islam as intolerant and exclusivist are faced head-on and turned around. Through the showing of Muhammad praying for his enemies and having compassion toward the whole world comparisons with other religious figures (such as Jesus or the Buddha) come to mind challenging preconceptions the reader may have about Islam. Printing speeches such as this one in the 'about' section of a web presence may furthermore draw more attention to them, then simply providing them labeled 'writings of the current caliph' might as interested members of the public or legislators would probably not refer to such a section until much later while gathering

tends to refer to the AMJ D as 'liberal' although most adherents do not display such behavior (cf. Hoffmann 2014, pp. 1-2, dpa/hmh 2015, sec. 2) probably referring to the supposed compatibility with 'liberal' German democracy instead.

8 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/islam/islam-bedeutet-frieden/eine-botschaft-des-friedens/>.

9 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/islam/islam-bedeutet-frieden/islam-ist-eine-friedliche-religion/>.

information, if at all. Again this may hint at how well managed the AMJ D's media outlet is and how they obviously reflect what information to provide in which context and how to present their teachings in the most favorable light.

3.2 Gender or Equality

Another area of perceived incompatibility of Islam with German values can be loosely grouped as gender-related. This encompasses questions surrounding the equality of the sexes, Islamic legislative regulations defining women's roles in public and private life, sexual segregation of unrelated men and women, and Islamic female dress in public (most notably "the veil" in all its manifestations). These 'gendered' religious rules are usually justified by referring to biological differences between the sexes that condone separate spheres of duties and rights (Kandel 2015, p. 255). This is considered a pre-modern notion by most private and public bodies in Germany as it reduces women to the spheres of childbearing and -rearing and domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning or caring for the elderly, solely because of their biological sex. Women, the public opinion goes, are oppressed in Islam and are not given equal chances for personal, professional, or sexual fulfillment and are also discouraged from gaining academic education or learning a profession. The AMJ faces this accusation head on in the mission statement cited above, where they claim to strive for the equality of woman and man. The 'About Ahmadiyya' page also claims very early on:

The AMJ is the only Muslim community which possesses an independent self-governing women's organization in the 'Lajna Imaillah', founded in 1922. It is the first Islamic women's movement of its kind. The community champions the education of women. Forced marriages or oppression of women are considered incompatible with Islamic teachings.¹⁰

This quote shows two aspects the AMJ considers important for viewers of the site to be aware of when they start to gather information about the group. On the one hand, they mention education (in this case of women). This is interesting regarding a debate in German public discourse that is very much intertwined with the discourse on Islam as regards how well migrants (especially of Muslim faith) are integrated into society (Bielefeldt 2010, p. 178). Here, gaining access to academic education is considered to be the solution to most of the perceived problems migrants seem to have, along with acquiring sufficient language skills. Secondly by referencing forced marriages, the AMJ here is alluding to what is often deemed less of an Islamic but therefore more of a cultural phenomenon: patriarchal structuring of family life where male relatives manage the life-choices of women under their care (sometimes with dire consequences should they resist this; Schneider 2011,

10 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/ahmadiyya/einfuehrung/>.

pp. 246-249). These values of purity and honor are considered folkloristic by many liberal Muslims in Europe, not belonging to the ‘real’ Islamic religion but constituting a deviation from it (Zaid 2007). Here the AMJ makes its position unmistakably clear regarding this: It wants to be understood as an Islamic reform movement, not as another ethnic community reinforcing pre-modern societal values in the guise of religion.

The ‘about Islam’ section provides the reader with a whole category of topics on ‘women in Islam’. The first page of this topical section starts by expounding the soteriological equality of woman and man, using Quranic verses as proof of this, where God speaks to both men and women and claims that they have equal chances of reaching paradise. This is a theological position unquestioned in even the most conservative readings of Islam (albeit what constitutes the correct moral conduct for a woman to fulfill her obligations to God varies considerably). The AMJ takes this one step further: the next paragraph claims that women may also receive messages directly from God, thus being something akin to ‘secondary prophets’ in the AJM theology.¹¹ As examples from scripture, the mother of Moses and Mary (mother of Jesus) are mentioned.¹²

Most interestingly the next paragraph considers the duties men and women must fulfill to gain favor with god. As mentioned women are usually understood to have a set of duties different from those of men which they have to fulfill in order to serve God properly, whereas men are seen as providers for the family and thus “in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth.” (Quran 4:34, Sahih International translation). Considering these duties the AMJ webpage quotes the same verse but in their own translation as: “The men are responsible for the women because Allah has distinguished one over the other and because they give from their wealth.” The topic is the same: men have the duty to provide for their families, but the connotation is different. The comment on this verse on the website explains that men are physically stronger than women and thus burdened with the responsibility of providing for them (not, because they are in charge of them by some divine right). This furthermore, says the AMJ, does not mean that women should not work, that they may if they wish to do so, but it is nevertheless their husband’s duty to provide for them: “But the man has to provide the woman with food, clothing, shelter and an allowance, while the woman, if she works, may keep her earnings for herself.”¹³ This position virtually turns the traditional concept in mainstream Islam on its head: the husband has the duty to provide for the family while the wife is free to pursue any career she wishes. In consequence the husband would be the one who is less free in this scenario, as he would be bound to find employment stable enough to provide for his family

11 The AMJ differentiates between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ prophets in order to legitimize their concept of continuous prophesy within Islamic theology which regards Muhammad as the last prophet (cf. Lathan 2008, p. 376).

12 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/islam/die-frau-im-islam/die-stellung-der-frau/>.

13 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/islam/die-frau-im-islam/die-stellung-der-frau/>.

even without his wife's additional earnings (which he has no right to claim toward the family funds). In this interpretation the woman has no additional duties because her husband provides for her, in fact, she has less. Regarding the AMJs public persona vis-à-vis the German public, interpretations like these serve to stress that the movement considers itself a modern and reformed Islam where women are no longer subject to the old patriarchy culturally associated with nations of the so called Islamic world. Policy makers and journalists researching the AMJ on this site are thus very likely to view this approach to women's rights favorably.

There are many other sections of the website that similarly use Quranic verses to postulate that women in Islam are by no means an exploited group but actually enjoy much personal freedom. As they cannot be reviewed in their entirety here I will only refer to one more: the question of female access to education. The sub header 'Education and striving for knowledge' under 'Women in Islam' deals with this topic.¹⁴ First, Quranic verses are expounded that describe how Muslims are instructed by god to strive for knowledge and use their cognitive powers in order to understand the world around them. It is worth noting here, that these verses speak to Muslims (m/f) in general but here that they specifically include women is emphasized. Usually studies regarding images of women in the Quran only analyze those verses referring to rules that are specifically directed at women (cf. Bilgin 2013), whereas all the other verses are (at least implicitly) regarded as being male only¹⁵ (this is a common phenomenon in the gender studies of religious scriptures by which women are separated from the rest of humanity as the analytical "other"; Schüssler Fiorenza 2011, p. 29). Here though the AMJ shows that they are prepared to practice an inclusive reading of the Quran and the sunna. After quoting a hadith that defines striving for knowledge as a duty for every Muslim, the webpage states:

As can be seen from this hadith the holy prophet (saw) not only ordered the men to strive for knowledge, but women simultaneously. It is deplorable that despite this clear command the education of Muslim girls is valued so little in the Islamic world. According to a tradition by the holy prophet (saw) the education of girls should be attended to with great care. The holy prophet Muhammad (saw) said: 'He who raises a daughter well and supplies her with a good education will gain paradise' (Tirmidhi) [...] The Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat can therefore claim a near complete alphabetization not only in Germany but in many countries of the third world too. Another observation says that within this community women have the same access to education as men.¹⁶

14 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/islam/die-frau-im-islam/die-bildung-und-das-streben-nach-wissen/>.

15 Not being able to read the Arabic text in the original I cannot determine if the wording "every Muslim" in these verses is gendered in the original or not. The German translation regardless 'jeder Muslim' is definitely gendered male grammatically thus excluding Women from the text. Defining it inclusively is thus important in the context of a German-language webpage.

16 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/islam/die-frau-im-islam/die-bildung-und-das-streben-nach-wissen/>.

Given the stress the debate in German public discourse puts on education as a motor of integration (Schneider 2011, pp. 212-227) this social activism in educating women and girls not only in Germany but worldwide may serve as a more favorable argument toward a positive public image of the AMJ than re-interpreting Quranic scripture in a pro-women way as shown above. Showing that Ahmadi-girls are encouraged to pursue education may reinforce the AMJ's claim to being a liberal and reformed group.

3.3 Islamic State based on *sharia* or Loyalty to the German constitution

Another point in which Islam and the German societal values are seen as being at odds with each other is the perceived interconnectedness of legislative and jurisdictional elements and religion within Islam. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the laws thus extrapolated from the Quran (*sharia*) are seen as an opposing system to the German secular jurisdiction and incompatible with the country's constitution (Hafez 2010, p. 104). Furthermore Muslims are constantly accused of trying to undermine the division of state matters and religious matters in Germany's secular political system and of trying to establish a theocratic 'state within the state' (Halm 2008, p. 106; Kandel 2015, p. 255). Although most Muslims (even very conservative ones) understand the necessity to adhere to German laws and legislations, they seldom do so explicitly giving constant rise to the suspicion that they are merely accepting the situation of Islam as a minority religion for the time being but wouldn't hesitate to change this situation should they be in power some day (Bielefeld 2010, pp. 201-203, Kandel 2015, p. 255). The AMJ, as we have seen, claim in their mission statement that they not only adhere to German laws but that they also actively strive for the separation of religion and state.

This claim is further dealt with under the first section of the 'about Ahmadiyya' page that gives an overview of the theological teachings of this group. Here it is declared that:

The AMJ is furthermore the leading Muslim community that decidedly rejects violence and force in religious matters and that advocates the strict separation of state and religion. It actively backs the view that it is a Muslim's duty to be loyal toward a non-Islamic government.¹⁷

This quote again shows how attuned the PR team behind this internet page is to the overall societal situation. Not only is the de-facto situation of simply having to live under a non-Islamic government accepted, Muslims (of the AMJ) are implored to be loyal toward their non-Islamic government. Using very clear statements such as this is probably one of the reasons why the AMJ managed to gain such great trust with German policy makers, especially compared with other Muslim

17 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/ahmadiyya/einfuehrung/>.

organizational institutions in the country. Whereas the latter often stay too vague for the taste of critics and then are accused of merely pretending to be compliant when in reality they are still advocating for an Islamic state, the AMJ manages to dilute such suspicions by making clear statements. The wording is also worth note in this regard as ‘loyalty’ (Loyalität in German) is a word saturated with many emotional undertones bringing to mind images of protecting the constitution, fighting for the ‘homeland’ and patriotic feelings. As we have seen it also features in the AMJ D’s slogan and is furthermore topic of several speeches the current caliph gave while visiting the German community (Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Deutschland e.V. 2012). So not only is the group very aware of the publicity factor in using the internet as a tool and of the position it is working from vis-à-vis the societal discourse, but there are also certain reflections on language and emotional meaning involved here.

Closely related to this fear for secularity is the fear of charismatic religious leaders (often named ‘hate preachers’ in the German discourse). While for decades German policy makers have tried to find a centralized Islamic institution with which they can engage in dialogue, plan academic programs, and build integration courses, they also seem very cautious toward Mosques and societies dominated by single charismatic figures (Tibi 2001, pp. 41-44; Halm 2008, p. 108). The AMJ as an international organization with a caliph at its head seems to be in equal measures the centralized bureaucratic organization with a unified voice that speaks for all its adherents¹⁸ that the German government has wished for and a potential hazard. The fear constantly was that the caliph (historically a political title) might also have political aspirations as the head of an international Muslim community (Schröter 2002, p. 28). The AMJ seems to have realized, that the concept of a caliph can cause misunderstandings of this nature with European governments. So they make it a point to emphasize two aspects of their concept of the caliphate wherever they are active in PR and missionary work: the democratic voting process by which a new caliph is chosen and the purely spiritual nature this figurehead of the movement has for its adherents. The ‘about’ page states:

Since the death of the founder the AMJ is lead by his elected successors, the caliphs. The head of the movement is named Khalifatul Massih, which means the successor (caliph) of the promised messiah. He is elected by a committee to this position for life. The current head of the movement (his Holiness Mirza Masroor Ahmad (atba)) was voted the fifth successor of the promised messiah in 2003.¹⁹

This quote shows how the AMJ emphasizes the way in which the caliph is chosen. The process reminds one of the way in which the catholic pope is chosen, through an election of a committee of his peers (the conclave). This likening of the caliph to the pope is no coincidence but a comparison

18 In my opinion this is the first and foremost reason why the AMJ D was granted ‘KdöR’-status.

19 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/ahmadiyya/einfuehrung/>.

often referred to by Ahmadis to show why their organizational hierarchy is more compatible with German society than that of other Muslim communities (cf. *Ahmadiyya Islam*, min. 3:18-3:52). This mirroring of Ahmadi Islam and Catholicism furthermore makes the Ahmadis seem less foreign and reinforces the hierarchical bureaucratic and thus (allegedly) transparent nature of their movement. The spiritual nature of the caliph's role is furthermore accentuated:

Accordingly, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat is lead by the successors of the founder – the caliphs. But the role of caliph in the Ahmadiyya is not inherited, one is elected to it. Furthermore the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat thoroughly rejects any blending of politics and religion, making the caliphate of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat a purely spiritual one, calling for peace in the world.²⁰

It seems to be clear that the AMJ wants to make the reader understand, that not only is the secular nation state tolerated for the sake of spreading Islam, but that it is one of the primary pillars of Ahmadi Islam that the caliphate is a non-worldly institution. Why this is the case (and how this is explained theologically) is not clarified. The emphasis here seemingly lies in making the nature of the caliphate clear throughout the web presence so there are no misunderstandings for readers who might also be people of the public sphere such as policy makers or journalists. This shows, once again, that the AMJ knows how to use the Internet as a tool to forge a positive public image.

3.4 Soteriologic exclusivity or salvation in all religions

The last point in this analysis in which Islam (and by extension the AMJ) is seen as at odds with the overall German concept of a compatible religion, is the exclusivity of salvation Muslims in general credit to their own religion. Of course every religion to some degree considers its teachings to be the only true way to real salvation. In the German public discourse however, the mainline Christian churches have opted for a partial salvability of non-Christian persons, especially in the wake of the second Vatican council which declared this to be possible (Racius 2004, p. 141). Put very simply Muslims, because of their obvious and visible emphasis on personal piety are attributed with a certain degree of religious snobbery and accused of feeling superior toward adherents of other religions. This may be a less prominent area of discussion when it comes to Islam, but it seems to effect the overall perception of Muslims in public negatively all the same. Whereas most Germans in the public discourse tend to be liberal toward different religious beliefs and react negatively to claims of religious exclusivism, Muslims often dodge the question if they believe that their dialogue partner is destined for hell and damnation.

20 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/ahmadiyya/die-institution-des-khalifat/>.

The AMJ, unlike other sects of Islam, has an inclusivist outlook because of the special theology formulated by Ghulam Ahmad. Probably due to the South Asian nature of his religious understanding, he opted for partial salvation and truth in all religious traditions (that nevertheless are a preliminary to the true religion of Islam). This practice of incorporating other religious traditions into one's own theology, as a lesser or 'deviant' version of it, is quite common in South Asian morality (Buddha is incorporated into Hinduism as an *avatara* of Krishna, the Hindu Gods are converted to Buddhism by listening to the teachings etc.; Nehring et. al., pp. 134-140). The webpage of the AMJ presents these views on their 'about' page:

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (as) claimed to be the promised messiah of Islam and the awaited reformer of all large religions during the final days due to the revelations he received from God. Consequently he recognized the inherent truth the great founders of the world religions had realized (according to Quran 35:25) including Zarathustra (as), Abraham (as), Moses (as), Jesus (as), Krishna (as), Buddha (as), Confucius (as), Lao Tzu (as) and Guru Nanak (as)²¹ and explained how their teachings culminated in Islam.²²

Interestingly proclaiming these theological positions may serve the AMJ by making them appear more favorable in the eyes of the German public, but may have the exact opposite effect regarding how the AMJ may be viewed by other Muslims (as there are many that would consider such a statement heresy). This may imply that the AMJ considered to whom to appeal in the online presentation of their teachings very carefully and chose the overall multi religious public over downplaying these aspects to gain more favor with other Muslims.

This also seems to be a particular nod to the German concept of the multicultural state, which, unlike other European or North American countries handles this by accepting multiculturalism as a part of society and fostering the expression of different cultural identities (unlike, for example the Netherlands who prefer non-majority cultural identities to be relegated to the private sphere, or the USA with its 'melting pot' concept; Korteweg & Yurdakul 2010, p. 75). This makes clear that the AMJ employs experts for their PR outlet, that understand how German society works and how best to emphasize those aspects of theology that comply with it. Another statement of this kind concerns the fate of non-Muslims in the afterlife:

21 This list seems to expand on Ahmads original theology for, as far as my research goes, I am only aware of him mentioning the Jewish and Christian prophets, Zarathustra and Krishna explicitly. Especially the Chinese philosophers on this list seem to be an addition by later Ahmadi-thinkers. Although many of Ahmads works are not available in published form so there may be a chance that there are references to Chinese wisdom somewhere as yet unanalyzed.

22 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/ahmadiyya/einfuehrung/>.

Furthermore it [the AMJ] recognizes the prophets of all other religions and denies that only Muslims are able to enter paradise. Therefore it considers heaven and hell to be spiritual not actual places.²³

This statement again emphasizes the AMJ's inclusivity and furthermore explains, that they do read certain aspects of the Quran as metaphors rather than as literal descriptions. Although the AMJ is known for its 'fundamentalist' reading of the Quran (wherein even abrogation and diacritical symbols are rejected, Kandel 2006, p. 295)²⁴ they have taken to present certain verses (such as those referring to paradise) as metaphorical in public outlets during the last couple of years. This may be due to the certain sufistic (mystic) elements in the teachings of Ghulam Ahmad that are emphasized more now than before. In any case, referencing a metaphorical reading of the Quran here helps to highlight the inclusive reading the AMJ wants to present.

4 Conclusion

This analysis of the AMJ D's official web presence showed that it is a vital tool in constructing a public persona and managing the public opinion towards (in this case) a group that is doubly marginalized: on the one hand by the public perception of Islam as a 'dangerous' religion, on the other by other Muslims. The quotes from the page show, that it doesn't merely serve as a place where information about the movement can be gathered but that it incorporates the "countering of negative publicity" within the first pages that actors in the public discourse are likely to read when consulting this page. The wording, placement and emphasis put on certain sections of the site demonstrate that the AMJ not only most likely employs people who analyze the media for what is written about Islam and the AMJ to carefully plan the public presentation accordingly, but also understands what kind of language has to be used in order to make their arguments sound valid. Furthermore, it has become clear, that those who manage this website are very attuned to the methods of discourse that are specific for Germany whereby the movement seems less 'ethnic' viewed from the webpage alone than it may seem otherwise. All these aspects taken together, the AMJ D can be considered a community with high media and PR skills as it is not only aware of the importance an official web presence but also of the technicalities of the internet in which search machine results will feature this page as one of the first references. Regarding the overall study of religions on the internet this study shows how fruitful micro-level analysis can be regarding the few macro-level theory models that have been carried out thus far. With enough grasp of the societal discourse homepages can be read as part of it and as reaction to it. Further small-scale studies such

23 <http://www.ahmadiyya.de/ahmadiyya/einfuehrung/>.

24 Abrogation is a theological concept by which older suras are replaced by newer ones if they contradict each other.

as this could augment our understanding of religious movements in special national or local-level contexts and would furthermore be a fruitful field of comparative religious research, for example by comparing web presences of the same group in different countries.

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Biography

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