

## **Resilient Religion: The Online Presence of Dutch Mosques in Times of COVID 19**

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**F**or more than one year already, mosques throughout The Netherlands have been largely empty. The coronavirus pandemic has impacted the lives of individuals internationally, robustly defying previously assumed ‘normalities’ of societal life. As such, religious communities have been forced to reimagine their communal activities to comply with measures intended to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. In these circumstances, the online presence of Dutch Muslims, Islamic charities, and Dutch mosques is visibly growing. Be it through the streaming of the weekly Friday-sermon and prayer, as undertaken by Imam Abdelouahab Bozhar in Rotterdam; the organizing of public lectures by Islamic scholars on Facebook; or the mosques’ local fundraising through online payment requests,<sup>1</sup> virtual space is the ‘place to be’ The pandemic gives mosques and Islamic centers not yet active in the online public sphere now an extra incentive to explore the virtual possibilities for religious communities and institutions.

Although internet use by Muslim individuals has received scholarly attention, few studies have focused on internet use by Islamic institutions themselves. In this article, I seek to address this gap by studying the online presences of mosques in the Netherlands. Building upon a research trend that focuses on the presence of religious communities in virtual spaces, my research is two-fold. First, it intends to examine how the online initiatives of Dutch mosques create a semblance of religious communal life on the *Web*

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<sup>1</sup> Bozhar, “Moskeeën moeten nu online sterk zijn.”

2.0,<sup>2</sup> a term I use to refer to the Internet as a social space of communication characterized by user-generated content. Second, it examines how such ‘virtual mosques’ influence and preserve a sense of community through these online initiatives. The aims of this research, then, are to examine the elasticity of the concepts of both “mosque” and “community,” to delve into the complex relation between online and offline religion, and to discover how religious communities preserve their communal ties in times of crisis. Approaching the topic through a lens of resilience, a term which Ana María Fraile-Marcos understands as “the capacity of beings – human or nonhuman, individual or collective – to withstand adversity, to endure by being flexible, to adapt to conditions of crisis,”<sup>3</sup> I examine how the *Web 2.0* provides alternative spaces for religious communities.

My primary research method is virtual ethnography, an approach which Robert Kozinets defines as “ethnography conducted on the Internet.”<sup>4</sup> This qualitative and interpretive research method makes it possible to study online cultures and communities and obtain empirical evidence of religious communal life online as facilitated by a traditional religious institution. Combining direct observations of the “computer-mediated communications”<sup>5</sup> of Centrum de Middenweg, a mosque and Islamic center in Rotterdam, with several in-depth interviews of individual members of the Centrum de Middenweg congregation, my research provides insight into the possibilities and limitations of the virtual for one religious community in particular. I will demonstrate how the Web 2.0 provides an alternative space where the communal characteristic of the offline mosque can persist and be strengthened, despite the fact that such virtual spaces will not replace their physical counterparts: both the offline mosque and in-person religious communal life. That said, I aim to highlight the elasticity of the concept of “mosque,” focusing on the virtual possibilities of which this traditional Islamic institution might make

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<sup>2</sup> For research on this topic, see for example: Castells, “The New Public Sphere,” 90; Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship,” 64-93.

<sup>3</sup> Fraile-Marcos, *Glocal Narratives of Resilience*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Kozinets, “Netnography,” 135.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

use. This will allow for a deeper understanding of the various forces at play when thinking of the traditional Islamic institutions in the Netherlands, the creation and strengthening of religious communities, and the perseverance of religious communal life online.

Studying Centrum de Middenweg's use of Facebook and Instagram for online communication and virtual programming allows us to consider some of the ways in which members of religious communities make use of online media to engage with one another and preserve a sense of religious communal life. Unlike most mosques in the Netherlands, Centrum de Middenweg mosque is not organized along ethnic lines, as in the more common 'Moroccan' or 'Turkish' mosques in which the language of use is mostly either Arabic or Turkish. Rather, the Centrum de Middenweg community is highly diverse in ethnic background, and the mosque welcomes around 250 to 300 members using the Dutch language. The community is also highly diverse in age and religiosity. For these reasons, the mosque has been referred to as "welcoming" and "hospitable" to anyone.<sup>6</sup> My decision to study this specific mosque is based on its accessible character: not only is the mosque known for its diverse membership, its leaders – Imam Abdelouahab Bozhar and founder Jacob van der Blom – both engage actively in public debates and in the news media. The mosque's proactive public presence online in the Web 2.0 is another reason to examine this particular Islamic institution in a study of the online presences of Dutch mosques and religious communities. During the first "intelligent lockdown"<sup>7</sup> in the Netherlands, which began on March 23, 2020, Centrum de Middenweg was one of the first mosques to temporarily stop holding physical gatherings, and improve its already-existing online streaming services to better migrate religious life onto Facebook and Instagram.<sup>8</sup> The Centrum de Middenweg Facebook page, active since July 31, 2013, has a substantial online audience [which has only grown following the mosque's increased online engagement during the pandemic], and as of March 1, 2021

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<sup>6</sup> Bozhar, "Moskeeën moeten nu online sterk zijn."

<sup>7</sup> Rijksoverheid, "Maart 2020: Maatregelen tegen verspreiding coronavirus, intelligente lockdown."

<sup>8</sup> Van der Blom, "Bij Centrum de Middenweg gaat de imam digitaal."

this page had received 8,321 followers, and 7,137 likes.<sup>9</sup> On this page, the mosque live-streams Friday sermons, promotes virtual lectures, and raises money for charitable causes through an online payment processor. Centrum de Middenweg also has an Instagram account, which has been active since May 14, 2014 and as of March 1, 2021 had 2,062 followers.<sup>10</sup> Through these social media profiles, offline religion finds an online counterpart.

With an estimated 5.7 percent of Dutch citizens claiming to be Muslims,<sup>11</sup> and with around 450 mosques currently active in the Netherlands, it should be noted that Centrum de Middenweg is not representative of all Dutch Muslims. Nevertheless, this mosque is worth studying because its online public presence is highly visible and its heterogeneous, welcoming, and accessible identity – reflecting the ethnic, cultural, and geographic diversity of Rotterdam’s multicultural context – might be considered analogous to the diverse character of the *ummah*, the Islamic community worldwide. The mosque’s online information materials illustrate this point, presenting the Centrum de Middenweg in community in the following way: “Centrum de Middenweg is unique in its ‘place for everyone’ approach. Have you just repented or have you always been a practicing Muslim? Be welcome!”<sup>12</sup> Focusing on this particularly heterogeneous and visible mosque’s response to a situation of crisis allows us to delve deeper into the possibilities and challenges of online religious life and the resilience of religious communities in times of crisis.

Recent and ongoing circumstances of crisis have proven an important incentive to study of religious communities online. Since March 12, 2020, the Dutch government has taken measures to contain the spread of coronavirus which not only affect everyone’s daily life, but also many peoples’ communal religious lives. In the Netherlands, as internationally, the coronavirus response required that residents stay at home as much as possible and socially distance. In addition, meetings with more than two people became

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<sup>9</sup> Centrum de Middenweg (@demiddenweg), “Community,” Facebook.

<sup>10</sup> Centrum de Middenweg (@demiddenweg), Instagram.

<sup>11</sup> CBS, “Diversiteit Religieuze Stromingen.”

<sup>12</sup> Centrum de Middenweg, “Community.”

prohibited, and quarantine protocols were developed.<sup>13</sup> Besides impacting the private lives of individual citizens, these measures also created obstacles to the weekly gatherings, prayers, and communal life of religious communities. In March 2020, hundreds of mosques voluntarily closed their doors and restricted their physical gatherings despite the approaching holy month of Ramadan, which ran from April 23 to May 23, 2020.

Although houses of worship have been exempted from many of the official coronavirus containment measures throughout the pandemic – they are legally permitted to open their doors and welcome their congregations provided that 1.5 meters of distance can be maintained – several of the nation’s largest religious organizations have cooperated on a joint coronavirus response, coming to several voluntary agreements on coronavirus containment measures more stringent than those mandated by the government.<sup>14</sup> These voluntary agreements, contained in the communiqué “*Behoedzaam vieren van geloof*” (“Carefully Celebrating Faith”), discourage in-person religious community gatherings by imposing a maximum gathering size of 30 persons and limiting singing. These agreements also encourage digital gatherings until it is safe to ease the restrictions.<sup>15</sup> Clearly the coronavirus crisis has deeply impacted the religious lives of people throughout the Netherlands and it is no wonder, then, that religious communities have increasingly focused on developing their online presences. The online visibility of Dutch Muslims, Islamic charities, and Dutch mosques is growing rapidly under the present circumstances.

### **A “Virtual” Mosque**

Various scholars have studied the importance of the internet in the lives of religious people. In his work on digital Islam, Peter

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the list of corona-preventions taken by the Dutch government. Rijksoverheid, “Kort overzicht coronamaatregelen, De Nederlandse Aanpak en Maatregelen, Coronavirus COVID-19.”

<sup>14</sup> This interreligious dialogue comprises different domes of religious communities, such as *Centraal Joods Overleg*, *Contactorgaan Moslims en Overheid*, *Hindoeraad*, the *Boeddhistische Unie* and *Interkerkelijk Contact in Overheidszaken*.

<sup>15</sup> Rijksoverheid, “Behoedzaam vieren van geloof.”

Mandaville notes that “the encounter between Islam and the transnational technologies of communication will be as multifaceted as the religion itself.”<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that a considerable amount of scholarly work has been dedicated to the role of cyberspace in contemporary Islam. This research considers the internet as a space of representation,<sup>17</sup> as a space for discussing and contesting interpretations of Islam,<sup>18</sup> and as a space information on Islam and Islamic resources.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, much of this scholarly work focuses on individuals’ uses of online spaces and the implications of such use for individual Muslims, neglecting to consider the possibility that a traditional Islamic institution such as the mosque might itself make use of the internet and be virtualized. Underlying this gap in research is the fact that mosques have generally been considered “object-centred building[s],”<sup>20</sup> emphasizing aesthetics over functionality. Although mosques have been a popular topic of study in recent years, with research ranging from architectural interest in the materiality of the building<sup>21</sup> to anthropological interest in the mosque as a site of contemporary religion,<sup>22</sup> too often these studies have neglected to consider the function of a mosque as a gathering place and cultivator of Muslim community. Considering an online gathering as a form of religious devotion challenges the widely accepted assumption that a mosque has a fixed, solid, and material shape, and that it is merely a type of building one recognizes through its two iconic architectural attributes: the dome and the minaret.

If we consider the historical development of the mosque as a physical space, such an assumption is untenable. “The mosque” has never been explicitly characterized by a definite and specific architecture. When considering the etymology of the word “mosque” in Arabic, *masjid* (مسجد) deriving from the word *sajada* (سجد), it can be translated as “to bow down” or “to prostrate before.”

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<sup>16</sup> Mandaville, “Digital Islam,” 23.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Anderson, “Transnational civil society.”

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Bunt, *Hashtag Islam*.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Lawrence, “Allah on-Line.”

<sup>20</sup> Baharudin and Ismail, “Communal Mosques,” 107.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Farrag, “Architecture of mosques,” 613-620.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Arab, “The Biggest Mosque in Europe!”

Although praying is one of the “Five Pillars of Islam,” the act of prayer need not be performed in a specific space. Rather, it can be performed anywhere, so long as the worshipper is oriented toward Mecca. According to a *Hadith* – the record of words, deeds, and approval of Prophet Muhammad – the Prophet himself said that “all of the earth” can be considered a mosque for the duration of prayer.<sup>23</sup> A synonym for mosque in Arabic, additionally, is *jāmi’ā* (جامع) indicating a second and different characteristic of “mosque.” As the word translates as “to gather” or “to assemble,” its usage indicates a more communal and collective feature of the religious space. Like the act of prayer, gathering can occur in any space. Etymologically speaking, then, a mosque need not be a built structure. Nevertheless, the architectural space we refer to as a “mosque” is an important part of Islamic culture throughout history.

Presumably the house of Prophet Muhammad in Medina was the first mosque to emerge, merely consisting of a simple rectangular building with a courtyard and shaded by palm trees on one side of the building. Throughout time, however, the basic outlines of mosques transformed in line with the changing needs of the Muslim community, different geographical contexts, and the different building materials available in these contexts.<sup>24</sup> The diverse architectural forms of the mosque reflect different locally determined interpretations of the initial mosque. These forms range from domes or minarets in the Mediterranean and North Africa to prayer halls in former shops and school buildings in Western European countries. The rapid incorporation of the mosque as a prominent place in Islam is most likely due to the multifaceted function of the mosque “as a space for the community, as a provider of diverse social services and education, and as a means of representation.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, mosques and their particular architectural features took shape in order to fulfil the needs of their communities, their physical forms dependent upon the resources available in their local contexts. Such a functional and community-oriented perspective towards religious space is of particular interest

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<sup>23</sup> “The Book on Salat (Prayer),” Hadith 317, Jamī at-Tirmidhi, Sunnah.Com, accessed on April 14, 2021, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:317>.

<sup>24</sup> Aksamija, “Dare to Wear,” 27-28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

in a non-Muslim majority country such as the Netherlands, where mosques “symbolize Muslim existence,”<sup>26</sup> and are “heterotopias ... in opposition to the secular surroundings”<sup>27</sup> functioning as community centers for Muslim citizens. In such a context, the most important function of the mosque, is to fulfil the needs and desires of its community and subsequently generate a communal living environment. Such “community architecture,” then, describes the architectural space for the conduct of communal activities, a space that becomes “the catalyst to the development of the surrounding area within the aspects of physical needs.”<sup>28</sup> The meaning of a mosque, in this sense, is not necessarily tied to its materiality, its building or the physical spaces of its activities. Rather, it is the functions of the mosque – particularly prayer and the communal activities, where Muslim communities gather, develop, and strengthen their faith – that might turn any space into a “mosque.”

At a time when people are discouraged to meet one another in person and must socially distance when doing so, the usage of online spaces by Muslim communities in order to continue participating in religious life illustrates the elasticity of the concept of the mosque. Mosques are multi-faceted, and one of their main functions is as a center of communal activity. Beyond COVID-19 as a health crisis, one could say that the limited ability of individuals to meet one another in person and come together in one localized space is a crisis in itself: a crisis of communal life. Giving the lie to the assumption that the essence of a mosque is its minaret and dome, the usage of the Web 2.0 by mosques in order to gather, develop, and strengthen community – the main functions of the mosque in a non-Muslim majority context such as the Netherlands – shows that mosques utilize diverse tools and practices to provide their communities with a sense of communal life. The mosque proves to be crucial in giving structure to a Muslim community, offering individuals not simply a site to practice faith, but also a sense of belonging. It is useful to consider, then, is the question how digital technologies contribute to an alternative understanding of what comprises a religious community.

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<sup>26</sup> Baharudin and Ismail, “Communal Mosques,” 107.

<sup>27</sup> Verkaaik, *Religious Architecture*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> Baharudin and Ismail, “Communal Mosques,” 107.

### **Community Online**

Given that “the internet and the entire technological cosmos created around it provide a community that transcends geographical and institutional borders in real time,”<sup>29</sup> online communities often seem – to put it in the language of Benedict Anderson – “imagined.”<sup>30</sup> Just as Anderson calls the nation an “imagined community” on the basis of the fact that the vast majority of a nation’s members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion,” a similar charge might easily be made against an online religious community.<sup>31</sup> But the online religious community of Centrum de Middenweg challenges such an assessment. Not only is this community derived from on a house of worship with a physical presence, it also mostly consists of individuals that know each another personally. Lorne Dawson, a sociologist who has studied communities that exist both in person and online, argues that a feasible community is more than the sum of its members, and that trust and intimacy must be considered when discussing intra-communal relations. In his perspective, “virtual life contributes to communal life ... because it augments the pre-existing communal relations more than creating new strictly virtual ones. The internet does not compete with the rest of life, it extends it.”<sup>32</sup> Dawson’s work shows the heuristic value of the notion of community in studying religious communities, allowing for a broadening of our understanding of the term *community* itself. This term is ambiguous and multifaceted. Employing the term *community* to describe a group of people is to specify the nature of the group’s togetherness, rather than to merely describe its ways of congregating. The use of the term ‘religious community’ generally implies a record of the religious culture that is valued, but in order to understand the meaning of a religious community it is important to consider its meaning of membership, the ways in which members experience and create intra-communal ties and the means by which communal life is negotiated. According to Heidi Campbell, a community

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<sup>29</sup> Varisco, “Muslims and the media,” 174.

<sup>30</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Dawson, “Do virtual religious ‘communities’ exist?,” 35.

occurs as individuals assemble “to form networks of interdependent relationships based on common vision, care, and communication.”<sup>33</sup> In the case of a religious community, this interdependent relationship is based upon common faith and practices. A community is inherently a social entity comprised of individual members. It is important to distinguish between different forms of Islamic religious communities: the collective Islamic community worldwide, known as the *ummah* (أمة, literally translated as ‘community’), the community of Muslims living in the Netherlands, and the community of one particular mosque such as Centrum de Middenweg. Whereas the first two communities bring together community members on the basis of a shared devotion to the Islamic faith, the third form of community is localized, centering itself around one particular mosque. The mosque serves as a multipurpose community space that facilitates harmonious communal experience. Although a mosque might not necessarily be tied down to its physical location, as discussed above, it could be argued that a religious community in such cases does center around its physical space, the mosque, which is to be understood as both a social center as well as a space for performing religious activities such as prayer. Such a localized understanding of the notion of “community” considers the social ties between community members that come about in a particular setting or space, based on a particular commonality. The current context of COVID-19 illustrates how individuals and communities continually adapt to external changes. Their adaptations, based on “established localized relationships” and “local embeddedness,”<sup>34</sup> respond to the absence of their usual community spaces. In this, local embeddedness can be understood as the investment of a community in a specific house of worship and in the individuals attending this place.

In interviews with some members of the community of Centrum de Middenweg, it became clear that local embeddedness is indeed regarded as an important characteristic of community. Although the Islamic identity remains the core of the Centrum de Middenweg religious community – as people have created this

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<sup>33</sup> Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, xvi.

<sup>34</sup> Bryson, Adres, and Davies, “Covid-19, Virtual Church Services,” 363.

community on the basis of shared Islamic values and beliefs – it is also the local and societal context that characterizes this community. Besides its religious purposes, one member of the Centrum de Middenweg says, the mosque serves as a “living room,”<sup>35</sup> a non-religious community space where one can meet one another, eat, study, and attend classes on topics like tax preparation and legal issues. Another characteristic of the community, according to this member of Centrum de Middenweg, is its involvement with and contribution to Dutch society and the local neighborhood. By organizing yearly “neighbors days,” introductory Ramadan classes and *‘eid* (عيد) festivities for the neighborhood, Centrum de Middenweg localizes its community: “if the neighbourhood needs anything, we [Centrum de Middenweg] are here.”<sup>36</sup> The Centrum de Middenweg community is thus rooted in Islam itself but has local connections to the neighborhood and to Dutch society. Investigating a localized example such as Centrum de Middenweg illustrates how the COVID-19 crisis has altered that locality and its community.

### **Centrum de Middenweg Online**

When you enter the Facebook page of Centrum de Middenweg, it is clear that despite the virtual environment, the mosque has attempted to make its followers and visitors feel “at home.” Welcoming online visitors to the mosque through the page’s banner, a photograph of the interior of the Centrum de Middenweg building, the mosque has attempted to recreate its physical space online. Importantly, the space that is depicted in the Facebook banner is the central area of the mosque, its usual prayer space. In this space, one can find the *mihrāb* (محراب),<sup>37</sup> the prayer niche that shows the *qibla* (قبلة), the direction toward Mecca, which Muslims face in prayer.<sup>38</sup> One also finds the *minbar* (منبر), the raised pulpit

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<sup>35</sup> Anonymous member of Centrum de Middenweg mosque, in interview with the author, March 19, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Fehérvári, “Mihrāb.”

<sup>38</sup> Wensinck and King, “Kibla.”

from which announcements to the community can be made and from which the imam preaches sermons.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 1

This picture conveys the welcoming and community-oriented character of the mosque’s online initiatives. By choosing to depict the interior, rather than the exterior of the building, the mosque actively welcomes its members and guests “inside” the community, inside the space where the main activity taking place in the mosque, prayer, is practiced in a communal setting. This welcoming depiction of the mosque’s interior showcases to the online visitor that the mosque’s online initiatives resemble the mosque’s normal offline programs. The mosque’s other efforts to recreate the typical elements of communal life on its Facebook page include offering a livestream of Friday prayer, online religious lessons provided Mohamed Abdulahi, a popular influencer and soon-to-be-imam known as the “the cosiest Salafist of The Netherlands,”<sup>40</sup> and discussions of issues such as Ramadan preparations, health, and relationships. The mosque also uses its Facebook page to raise money to support the Uyghur Muslim community center, as well as to fund the rebuilding of the mosque itself. Directly and indirectly fostering communal engagement with the local community, the

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<sup>39</sup> Pederson, Golmohammadi, Burton-Page and Freeman-Grenville, “Minbar.”

<sup>40</sup> Abdulahi (@mohamedsmening), Instagram, biography.

mosque's online initiatives appeal to the community as a whole, but contribute especially to the enhancement of "local social infrastructure."<sup>41</sup> Examples of this social infrastructure include religious rituals, weekly Friday prayers, and the mosque's social and educational activities.

The Facebook and Instagram posts through which Centrum de Middenweg replicates its communal life online can be called "de-territorialized" in that it can be accessed from any physical location.<sup>42</sup> This content can be divided into three different categories, which each reflect a different interplay between online and offline practices. One category of posts concerns events and practices occurring in the physical space of the mosque. These posts promote and solicit feedback on in-person events taking place at the mosque's physical location. Given the gradual relaxation of corona-measures throughout the year, opportunities for the mosque to welcome its members in person for important occasions have been



Figure 2

<sup>41</sup> Bryson et al., "Covid-19, Virtual Church Services," 363.

<sup>42</sup> Lewis, *Modest Fashion*, 48.

increasingly emerging. Posts promoting “territorialized” activities directly link the online sphere back to offline life. An example of this kind of post would be the financial and material fundraising campaign for the Islamic food bank.



Figure 3

A second category of posts dedicates itself entirely to online interaction, as through the virtual social activities which the mosque sponsors. These activities include speeches, talks, lessons, and discussion sessions conducted through Facebook and Instagram livestreams, as well as through ZOOM. The Friday prayer, for example, is professionally recorded and filmed at the mosque and livestreamed on both Facebook and Instagram. While the livestreamed Friday prayer is organized and produced by the mosque itself, a frequent Centrum de Middenweg visiting imam, Azzedine Karrat, independently decided to also broadcast his Friday sermons on Clubhouse, an increasingly popular live audio platform. These activities illustrate well how religious user communities negotiate processes related to new media technologies, according to the assumed advantages of specific technologies and their potential

impacts on the community itself.<sup>43</sup> Whereas the provision of information and reporting on continuing physical events may easily occur through the sharing of posts and pictures online, it is clear that certain aspects of communal life, such as prayer and religious dialogue, require different formats. Real-time livestreaming recreates the *feeling* of belonging more effectively than does the mere sharing of posts containing text and photographs. One member of Centrum de Middenweg demonstrates this point by pointing out that the online opportunities provided to the diasporic members of the community are particularly interesting to recent converts to Islam: “For them, we initiated the livestreaming of speakers, prayers, and communal dialogue. We realized that, to celebrate Ramadan without any friends, family or community that co-celebrates this holy month, the feeling of belonging to our community was the more important.”<sup>44</sup> Reacting adaptively to the interests and needs of the community, the virtual mosque makes use of media technologies and communication styles to engage its members.

A third category of posts illustrates the direct relation between the online and offline engagements of the mosque. These posts



Figure 4

<sup>43</sup> Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 193.

<sup>44</sup> Anonymous member of Centrum de Middenweg mosque in interview with the author, March 19, 2021.

concern searches for volunteers and online fundraising to benefit the mosque and the local community. These last kind of posts illustrate how the mosque, in these times of social distancing, can be considered a “liminal, in-between” space that is sometimes opened for specific initiatives while remaining closed for larger communal gatherings and “public worship.”<sup>45</sup> This kind of content illustrates a clear linkage between virtual and offline practices. Although some of Centrum de Middenweg’s online content is intended to interest a general online audience, most of this content targets an audience that is already familiar with the community, the mosque itself, and the mosque’s weekly practices. As I have shown, Centrum de Middenweg uses various strategies to allow for the main functions of its physical mosque to be possible online.

The ways in which the Centrum de Middenweg community engages with the activities and events that the mosque organizes and promotes online, however, differs per activity and medium. The mosque’s virtual services allow members to be “present together in experience, and, potentially, in time, but not in place,”<sup>46</sup> making it possible for religious communal life to continue beyond scheduled dates and times. In theory de-temporalized services are more inclusive than the traditional in-person approach, which is necessarily time-bound, but in practice various levels of online community engagement are observed.

Although these disparities in engagement were already visible in pre-COVID times – as certain volunteers, regular visitors, and actively engaged members of the mosque effectively “ran” the place – this stratification of the community became even more noticeable under current circumstances, influencing the nature of the mosque’s hybrid activities. Those members that are actively involved in the creation of online content, often volunteers and interns of the mosque, are capable of being physically present at Centrum de Middenweg. A member of the mosque states that “only a limited number of new volunteers and interns can be welcomed these days,”<sup>47</sup> indicating that, indeed, the hybrid system of both offline and

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<sup>45</sup> Bryson et al., “Covid-19, Virtual Church Services,” 361.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*, 362.

<sup>47</sup> Anonymous member of Centrum de Middenweg mosque in interview with the author, March 16, 2021.

online activities generates “different levels of participant engagement.”<sup>48</sup> On one hand, a hybrid system that offers both inclusive online and rather exclusive offline activities to its members may lead to increasing differentiation and distance between online and offline communities. Those members of the organization who work to recreate communal life online experience a feeling of community belonging on a physical basis more than those who are not as much invested or engaged with the logistical side of facilitating online communal life. On the other hand, the digital mosque opens a space for religious communal life any time and in any place. In the case of Centrum de Middenweg this consequence of digitalization becomes clear, as a member observes, in that some members who previously never participated in the mosque’s activities now find opportunities to be present in the online mosque. If nothing else, religious communities online “are more accessible to people who, for whatever reason, cannot, or will not, step inside”<sup>49</sup> a physical mosque.

Online spaces provide engagement opportunities to those members that have fully planned schedules, are recent converts, or are only interested in stepping inside the mosque. These capabilities are especially important for a relatively young mosque and community such as Centrum de Middenweg. Visitors of the mosque online might consist of “‘dislocated’ visitors who were previously locally embedded but have relocated, or they may be ‘strangers from without’ who have no direct connection”<sup>50</sup> to the local community:

You can imitate many things, but not the congregational prayer. Even if you listen to the Friday sermon, the online prayer seems to have become more of a lecture. I think people miss that aspect very much. On the other hand, there may be people who are normally ashamed to go to the mosque but want information or want to be involved. Suppose you are not powerful in prayer and when you go there you really expose yourself to the idea that you do not know

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<sup>48</sup> Vitullo and Campbell, “Assessing changes,” 79.

<sup>49</sup> Price, “Digital Media as Sacred Space,” 46.

<sup>50</sup> Bryson et al., “Covid-19, Virtual Church Services,” 365.

it yet, but online it is very easy to access and obtain information in an accessible way. We see more and more interaction of this kind.<sup>51</sup>

Switching to an online platform has proven to be easy for the majority of members. Indeed, the switch has resulted in the inclusion of those who did previously not participate in communal life. Nevertheless, while Centrum de Middenweg's use of digital technology provides new opportunities, it also impedes the community involvement of those who are illiterate, those who do not have access to the Web, and those who have not been raised this new technology or taught about its possibilities. In the process of transferring mosque online some members seem to have been unintentionally neglected. One member states that:

Because it is quite a young mosque, the switch to an online platform was very easy. For example, Clubhouse, many elderly people do not have that. But I have seen what really affects people, that is really the elderly, sometimes they do not talk to someone for days. That may well be our pitfall. It has always been a young mosque and the online switch seems easy, but the elderly (especially come for prayer, they will also come) but whether they also come for the activities online, that is difficult to estimate - we only see the numbers / likes / comments.<sup>52</sup>

The mosque has experienced difficulty in reaching out to some of its elderly members, a result of their sometimes inconsistent level of access to digital technology. In some cases, younger members have taken up the task of helping some of these elderly members in finding their ways online, but broadly speaking, the transfer of community from a physical to digital space has not been a seamless transition for the elderly.

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<sup>51</sup> Anonymous member of Centrum de Middenweg mosque in interview with the author, March 21, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Anonymous member of Centrum de Middenweg mosque, in interview with the author, March 19, 2021.

### **Religious Resilience**

COVID-19 challenges the Centrum de Middenweg and its community to rethink the locality of the mosque, shifting emphasis from physical gatherings to a hybrid system combining both physical and virtual activities and events. A question then arises as to how the community is capable of withstanding this adversity and to what extent it proves to be “resilient” in times of crisis. Resilience refers to “the capacity of beings – human or nonhuman, individual or collective – to withstand adversity, to endure by being flexible, to adapt to conditions of crisis.”<sup>53</sup> Fundamental traits implied in this definition are the ability to be flexible, to adapt, and to absorb disturbances in times of transformation or change. One of the members of Centrum de Middenweg affirms the importance of this process of adaptation and flexibility in times of crisis, stating that “necessity is the mother of innovation.”<sup>54</sup> Referring to the immediate changes implemented in the mosque from the start of the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020, this member highlights an important aspect of resilience: creativity and innovation.

The ongoing coronavirus crisis has changed the rules, everyday norms, practices, and routines of every individual internationally, including both temporary and permanent changes in the daily lives of people across the world. One specific change in the lives of religious congregants is the increased adoption of “telemediated or virtual services,” characterized by their “open access, online intersacred space” that allow members of religious communities to share in worship and communal life despite physical distances.<sup>55</sup> In times of social distancing, Centrum de Middenweg demonstrates that “resilience” is more than mere community-survival. Beyond that, it is “flourishing in the midst of difficulties.”<sup>56</sup> The mosque’s increased online presence has allowed not only local members of the community to engage with the activities and information shared online, but also non-members and even non-Muslims, who are provided with the opportunity to visit and

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<sup>53</sup> Fraile-Marcos, *Glocal Narratives of Resilience*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Anonymous member of Centrum de Middenweg mosque, in interview with the author, March 19, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Bryson et al., “Covid-19, Virtual Church Services,” 365.

<sup>56</sup> Fraile-Marcos, *Glocal Narratives of Resilience*, 1.

participate in the mosque's community. The open access approach of Web 2.0 creates unlimited possibilities for community-construction, as the internet transcends not only physical but also institutional borders.

In a sense, then, resilience does not necessarily refer to coping mechanisms that eventually allow for a return to the past, but rather it implies continuation, change, and even resistance to a previous state of being.<sup>57</sup> The future of Centrum de Middenweg, according to many of its members, is hybrid:

Now that we have invested in an online platform, camera, sound, and light, it would be interesting to set up a hybrid system for the community. Those who want to can be present physically, but others can decide to follow certain classes or talks online. All of this depends on the desires and needs of the community.<sup>58</sup>

As I have argued, the “communal mosque” focuses on cultivating community and adapts its practices and habits according to its members. Centrum de Middenweg has proved to be adaptive in a time requiring flexibility and innovation, as one of the first mosques in the Netherlands to invest in technologies useful for reaching out to a distanced community. In this, the community proves to be resilient in the sense that it is able to absorb the difficulties inflicted upon it, whilst preserving its most important features. Developing and delivering new understandings of and methods for communal practice, Centrum de Middenweg demonstrates the ability to respond to rapidly changing circumstances. Activities regarded as ‘normal’ elements of communal life continued during lockdown, although by different means. The example of Centrum de Middenweg underscores Campbell’s argument that community is “determined by personal needs and choices,” but most of all “dynamic and changeable”<sup>59</sup> when necessary.

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Anonymous member of Centrum de Middenweg mosque in an interview with the author, March 21, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Campbell, “Religion Embracing,” 9.

## **Conclusion**

Living in the digital era, a time that is characterized by new technologies for communication through online spaces, it is impossible to ignore the impact and implications of such technologies on religious life. Dutch mosques that were not yet actively present on the web were challenged to find their way online, adapting Islamic tradition to the Web 2.0. Having examined how mosques in the Netherlands generate an online communal presence, this article has discussed the online spaces and activities of Centrum de Middenweg. Not only does this article make an argument about what constitutes a mosque, it also sheds light on the relation between the online and offline world. The internet provides a hybrid discursive space where the normative ideas and understandings of religious knowledge and community can be challenged and reformulated. That said, it is also important to consider the disadvantages to religious communities of the online realm. As mentioned above, while the internet allows for increased audiences, it also precludes community engagement by those who are illiterate, those who do not have access to the web, and those who have not been raised with or taught about the possibilities of this new technology. It is therefore important to consider the implications of the fact that many Muslims that do have access to the internet, and also to acknowledge the limitations of this research, which is not representative of the global Muslim community.

Nevertheless, as I have discussed, unlike any other communication technology, the internet provides a vast array of possibilities for the construction of communities that transcend physical and institutional borders alike. Times of crisis require adaptation and transformation, ranging from the purchasing of suitable communications technologies to the persistent question how best to reach out to community despite social distance. Centrum de Middenweg illustrates how not only Muslim individuals but also traditional Islamic institutions have increasingly created online presences that suit the desires and needs of their communities. Despite unforeseen external circumstances, the mosque has constantly considered and reconsidered its ways in reaching out to its local community. In some cases, this effort has resulted in the re-welcoming of members who previously did not

participate in religious communal life. Yet in other instances, the shift to an online environment has been an obstacle to a sense of communal life. With the slow relaxation of corona-measures, the mosque's online presence and services is also transforming. Whereas in the earliest period of the lockdown, the mosque's communal life fully occurred online, a more hybrid system is increasingly emerging in which both offline and online activities are possible. This point illustrates the adaptable and fluid character of "community," which shapes itself to both external and internal forces, continuously seeking opportunities whilst taking into account the desires and needs of its members. Proving itself to be resilient, this combination of both online and offline practices will continue in the near future, illustrating the flexible character of both mosque and community. Crisis requires us to rethink the normal. As Centrum de Middenweg demonstrates, this challenge provides the opportunity for innovation and transformation.

#### **List of Figures**

Figure 1: The Facebook banner of Centrum de Middenweg, showing the mosque's interior, including its mihrāb, the minbar and space of prayer. Centrum de Middenweg (@demiddenweg), Facebook banner, accessed on March 1, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/demiddenweg/photos/a.138967292980088/823171274559683>.

Figure 2: An Instagram post of Centrum de Middenweg, showing two active members of the mosque collecting food, money and groceries for the Islamic foodbank. Centrum de Middenweg (@centrumdemiddenweg), 'Vandaag hebben we houdbare producten en geld ingezameld voor de islamitische voedselbank; @intercultureleestichtingsalaam. Alhamdulillah hebben we veel producten ingezameld en een mooi bedrag van € 764,5! Moge Allah de donateurs rijkelijk belonen! Hartelijk dank. Wil jij ook nog bijdragen? Check dan hun Instagram pagina en stuur een berichtje!,' Instagram post, accessed on March 8, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNLAOt4DWIT/>.

Figure 3: An Instagram post of Centrum de Middenweg, containing information on a Ramadan Livestream by guest speaker Anne Dijk on women in the Qur'an, held on Facebook and Youtube. Centrum de Middenweg (@centrumdemiddenweg), 'Vanavond schuift Anne Dijk aan voor de ramadan live stream! Ze gaat het hebben over vrouwen in de Koran. Kijk jij mee? #ramadanlivestreams #ramadan#vrouwen #koran,' Instagram post,

accessed on March 8, 2021,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CNzcXoWK0FL/>.

Figure 4: An Instagram post of Centrum de Middenweg requesting volunteers who are willing to help the mosque with the designing of flyers, with the organisation of events or the livestreaming of activities. Centrum de Middenweg (@centrumdemiddenweg), Instagram post, accessed on March 8, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCp0qUSDqw-/>.

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