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Emoji Dei: Religious Iconography in the Digital Age

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In September 2016, Rayouf Alhumedhi, a fifteen-year-old high school student living in Berlin, submitted a proposal to the Unicode Consortium, a non-profit corporation "devoted to developing, maintaining, and promoting software internationalization standards and data" (Unicode 2017). Although little known outside the world of coders and computer programmers, the Unicode Consortium exerts a significant impact on twenty-first century life through its regulation of emoji—the colorful pictographs that increasingly punctuate our texts, emails, and social media posts.¹ Alhumedhi's proposal—a formal draft running to almost seven pages, which she developed with the help of a Consortium subcommittee—requested that the organi-

A potential design for the new emoji by Aphelandra Messer. zation approve a new emoji, one that represented girls and women like her: a hijab, or headscarf, that can be superimposed onto pre-approved human characters.

By November 2016, Alhumedhi's proposal had been approved. The hijabi-emoji—hijabiji?—was unveiled on July 17, 2017, as part of Apple's celebration of a paradigmatically twenty-first century holiday: World Emoji Day (Hern 2017). It is due to appear on Apple and Android phones by the end of the year. Speaking to *The Washington Post*, Alhumedhi said: "There will be people like, 'It's such a trivial topic, why are you worrying about this?' But once you wrap your head around how influential and how impactful emoji are to today's modern society, you'll understand. Emoji are everywhere" (Ohlheiser 2016).

Alhumedhi is right: emoji are everywhere. There are more than 1,200 approved emoji, ranging from food, plants, buildings, and vehicles, to faces representing different emotions (the most popular worldwide being the "face with tears of joy," 🤩 which was the Oxford English Dictionary's "Word" of the Year for 2015). Many smartphone operating systems offer emoji suggestions after a user enters a certain word—"love," for example, will prompt the offer of ❤️—allowing users to replace the written word with its pictorial representation. Indeed, in Alhumedhi's words, emoji are "the new language" (Ohlheiser 2016).

But if emoji are a form of expression, then what, exactly, do "religious" emoji—such as the optional headscarf—express? What does Unicode's list of approved religiously themed emoji tell us about the construction of this category in the digital age? How are emoji deployed by those whose social media use is dominated (or supplemented) by religious considerations—those who'd rather *sectxt* than *sext*?

In this exploratory article, we offer some preliminary—and, of necessity, inchoate—reflections on the question of religious representation in the digital age, and outline possible avenues of research for colleagues and students to pursue. Of crucial importance, we argue, are what religiously themed emoji might suggest about the default world in which they operate; a default, we submit, that functions to affirm the normative ascendancy of the secular.

"Religion" is not the first category of difference to have emerged as a site of claims for recognition and equality in the context of emoji. A 2015 Unicode Consortium draft document recognized a demand for a greater diversity of "skin tones":

People all over the world want to have emoji that reflect more human diversity, especially for skin tone. The Unicode emoji characters for people and body parts are meant to be generic, yet following the precedents set by the original Japanese carrier images, they are often shown with a light skin tone instead of a more generic (nonhuman) appearance, such as a yellow/orange color or a silhouette. (Unicode 2015)

Later that year the Consortium approved a range of five different skin tones, based on the Fitzpatrick scale used in dermatology, from which users can choose, as well as a default yellow tone.²

As with skin tone, diversity (or its absence) has also been a point of contention as regards emoji depictions of sexed faces and bodies. Until recently, there were few overtly female emoji, and those that did exist—such as a bride, a princess, and a woman having her hair done—seemed to reinforce surprisingly crude gender stereotypes. In May of last year, Google proposed a new set of emoji to "reflect the pivotal roles that women play in the world," and in July 2016 the Unicode Emoji Subcommittee approved eleven new "professional" emoji, in female and male variations, with optional skin tones, as well as female and male versions of thirty-three existing emoji (Bleuel 2016). These were first made available on iPhone iOS 10.2 and include a police officer, a chef, a welder, a pilot, and an astronaut.³

In the cases of race and gender, the quest for greater diversity has involved a recognition that existing emoji conformed to, and arguably reinforced, the normativity of whiteness and maleness, respectively. The process of diversification has accordingly involved expanding the repertoire of available options to include otherwise unrepresented colors and genders (albeit still within limits), so that users can express themselves using emoji that look more like themselves. As such, religious emoji raise interesting questions about both *normativity*—what is considered "normal" in this context—and the *matrices by which religious diversity is conceptualized*—that is, which "units" of (religious) diversity are represented or elided.

Alhumedhi's headscarf emoji (like emoji representing other categories of difference, including gender and skin tone) is evidence of the complexity of identity construction in both on- and offline

worlds, with generic images signifying both individual persons (Alhumedhi had first been troubled by the lack of an hijabi emoji when seeking to select an icon to represent herself in a group chat), and the wider imagined community of which these individuals are ostensibly a part: “I wanted something to represent me, alongside the millions of women who wear the headscarf every day, and pride themselves on wearing the headscarf” (Ohlheiser 2016). In this sense, emoji can function on both singular and plural levels, generic images that denote named individuals; one sign, many possible “signifieds.” The flexibility enabled by this interplay of general and specific is, we suggest, at the heart of emoji’s popular appeal. As we argue below, however, it is also the source of the ambiguity that may plague Alhumedhi’s design.

The approved headscarf will join an array of existing emoji that denote or connote religion in various ways. Here we might distinguish roughly and somewhat artificially between *religious* emoji—i.e., emoji that express “religious feelings” or practices—and emoji that represent *religions*. Among the former, we count such emoji as the praying hands 🙏; among the latter, we include symbols such as the three-barred Orthodox cross ☩. Whereas the expressive emoji might be said to function grammatically as modifiers and verbs, the representational ones play a more noun-like role in the language. Given the greater volume of emoji that represent religions (as opposed to those expressing religious sensibilities), it is to these that we turn our attention first.

The “nouns” are perhaps the most obvious of the emoji that have to do with religion. These include most notably a set of abstract *symbols* representing various so-called major religions and another set of images of *buildings*, some general and others specific. The former includes two crosses, a star and crescent, an *Om*, a Dharmachakra (Dharma wheel), two variations on a Star of David, a menorah, and a Tao (note also the kneeling figure at prayer) 🧎. The latter includes two churches, a temple, a synagogue, a torii, and the Kaaba 🕌.

Scholars of religion will recognize in these noun-like emoji the general contours of the “world religions” model, according to which the genus of “religion” is imagined to comprise several species, usually said to include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Shin-

to, among others. It would appear that an effort has been made to create emoji corresponding to (many of) these various taxa, albeit with greater weight assigned to some (e.g., Judaism) than to others (e.g., Buddhism). The effort at inclusion, combined with the standardization of the representational symbols—the assumption seeming to be that each “tradition” assigns the same kind of significance to a symbol as, say, Christians historically have assigned the cross—suggests a rough parity among religions: each is a token of the same type. Interestingly, these emoji correspond to the “emblems of belief” that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has approved for inscription on military headstones, which suggests that the iconography of “religion” is undergoing increasing standardization in the digital age (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2017).

The focus on buildings is also consistent with the “world religions” paradigm and points to the spatialization of religion in modernity. It is worth noting that these “sacred spaces” occur among a group of emoji that also includes “secular” buildings, such as a bank and a hospital. Whereas the word “secular” originally referred to a way of understanding time, in modernity secularity has come to be conceived of *spatially*, as the shared location of publicity. Similarly, “religion,” which once meant *piety*, has come to be understood as a distinct and ideally private “sphere,” to be contrasted with the secular. Buildings provide one way of representing this spatial dimension of our modern imaginary, although it is worth noting that the represented edifices are of varying degrees of emic significance (the Kaaba being a case in point). As in the case of the more abstract symbols noted above, the etic effort at equality and standardization is in some tension with the understandings internal to the groups it seeks to include.

The “verbs”—such as the “praying hands,” the face with a halo 🙏, and perhaps the men wearing turbans—are less easily amenable to standardization across the “traditions” represented by the nouns. Yet they too can be seen to express a certain normative understanding of religion, one which suggests a Frazerian take on the religious life; that is, a desire to placate or conciliate “powers superior to man” through the performance of ritual action, including prayer and obligatory dress codes.

Alhumedhi's draft proposal, which lists a number of rationales for the introduction of a headscarf emoji, draws upon both grammatical pools (that is, religion as noun and verb), proffering the headscarf as a representation of "religion" itself and as expressive of the subjectivity or interiority that religion is often thought to generate. For example, the proposal argues that the headscarf "can represent Ramadan [and] Eid" (Ohlheiser 2016), suggesting that a religion—in this case, Islam—can be conjured by reference to its rites of intensification. In this sense, a headscarf is equivalent to a menorah (or perhaps a Christmas tree)—a metonym from which an entire "religion" is extrapolated. Yet Alhumedhi also frames the emoji in terms of the communication of a religiously-informed ethic, one which she extends outwards from Islam to incorporate two more so-called Abrahamic monotheisms: "Women wear headscarves across many religions as a sign of modesty, including parts of Christianity and Judaism" (Ohlheiser 2016). More explicitly still, she suggests simply that the proposed emoji "can convey religious feelings" (Ohlheiser 2016).

Yet "religious feelings" are not all that religiously-themed emoji can convey. These symbols, and particularly those signifying sentiment or action, are not straightforwardly pious. After all, scholars of religion have long noted that the symbols used in religious practice may be multivalent, ambiguous, and even contradictory. While we are unaware of any comprehensive treatment of the use of religious emoji from a participatory, ethnographic standpoint,⁴ anecdotal evidence suggests that they may be used to demonstrate devoutness and its opposite in equal measure. The haloed figure's beatific smile, for example, seems to represent piety in an almost ironic sense, suggesting the guilty party's "who, me?" as much as it does the subject of hagiography. This ambiguity also extends to the praying hands, which are sometimes conceived and used as a "high five." Interestingly, they also seem to represent "namaste," suggesting less a shared religious practice than a homographic slippage in meaning.

Further, there is a range of emoji which might or might not have religious connotations. Is a Christmas tree, for example, merely "cultural"? Similarly, the representation of *mochi* 🍡 —confectionary made of pounded glutinous rice, which is pre-

pared to celebrate the New Year in Japan and is associated with the arrival of the Kami—raises questions about the interaction of the spirit and digital worlds. Alternatively, perhaps *all* emoji have religious potential, which is a function less of explicit content than of use. For example, on the *Bible Emoji* website, which "translates" Bible verses into emoji and common language shorthand, virtually any symbol has the capacity for religious communication.

Finally, it is worth noting that representation can itself pose religious risks: the assumption that more options for representation will necessarily conduce to the benefit of diverse religious perspectives is itself questionable in light of various forms of iconoclasm. This applies as much within religious movements as it does between them. While many Muslims would likely be happy to have Islam represented by an optional hijab, they might feel differently about emoji representations of the Prophet.

Unlike so-called natural languages like English or Spanish, the written language of emoji is subject to top-down, corporate control (with a rather opaque process governing decisions over new additions). Yet the role of the Unicode Consortium is ultimately limited by the fact that meaning is a function of use. Because users are free not simply to propose new emoji but also to invent novel uses for existing ones, Unicode controls the symbols, but not their meanings.

Given the complexity of a symbol—and its capacity to generate both prescribed and unorthodox readings—it is worth asking what unexpected connotations Alhumedhi's proposed headscarf might take on. The presence of a term in a language is not necessarily an affirmation of its referent, even if the absence of a term might be experienced as a slight. Indeed, every symbol opens itself equally to both affirmation and negation. While the Unicode Consortium has framed its increasingly diverse emoji world as an example of the recognition and celebration of difference, diversity is certainly not celebrated by all. Emoji carriers might have to ensure that the optional headscarf cannot be added to emoji upon which it could be considered blasphemous or hateful; non-human animals are one such category, while devils and demons—of which the emoji world has a surprising number 🤖—might constitute another.

The possible proliferation of optional religious signifiers—after the hijab, might we see emoji bindis,

rosaries, and kippot?—also raises questions about the logic of separate spheres noted above. In the context of spatialized, enclosed religion—that is, religion as it is performed within synagogues, mosques, churches (or, as with the kneeling figure, in airport and train station prayer rooms)—the hijab emoji, which Alhumedhi's proposal frames as representing both *religion* and *the religious*, risks troubling the sacred/secular divide by removing religion from its prescribed space and reinserting it into the quotidian. After all, one imagines that headscarf-wearing emoji won't be confined to the synagogue, mosque, or church. Rather, we will see a proliferation of ice-cream eating, tennis playing, career-having, airplane-boarding, bank-visiting, headscarf-wearing women.

Earlier we noted that efforts to diversify emoji in relation to race and gender involved the recognition that existing defaults were not neutral. What do efforts like Alhumedhi's to diversify emoji imply about the religious defaults of the twenty-first century digi-sphere? Does non-religion, atheism, or secularity currently hold a position analogous to that previously enjoyed by whiteness and/or maleness?

Atheism poses an especially interesting set of questions in relation to emoji. Is it the default, in relation to which the various explicitly religious emoji constitute corrections? Or is it excluded from the religious panoply, lacking the sort of representation and social recognition afforded the "world religions"? Is atheism *everywhere* (as the invisible background of normalcy) or *nowhere* (lacking a determinate building or symbol)? It is worth noting that near the symbols for the world religions there is a symbol resembling an atom , which is similar to the design created by Madalyn Murray O'Hair to represent the group American Atheists, and which since has been adopted by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs as an official "emblem of belief," though whether it is meant to signify atheism is unclear.

Notwithstanding the various concessions to religion discussed above, it might be concluded that emoji are expressive of a fundamentally secular sensibility. If *the secular* is the frame of reference within which "religion" is thematized as a specific object of attention, then the language of emoji is secular, not in spite of but *because of* its inclusion of explicitly "religious" symbols.

Notes

1. The term "emoji" (plural: emoji or emojis) is a portmanteau of the Japanese terms for "picture," "writing," and "character." The various facets of the term point to the complex status of emoji, which are images that function as graphemes and may be used in place of words. Despite its origins, many English speakers associate the term with the expression of emotion. This may be linked to their precursor, emoticons—"icons for emoting made out of conventional typographic characters" (Richardson, 2016), such as :-) and :-(—which have been used on Internet message boards since the 1980s.

2. Yellow, which suggests cartoons, is presumably meant to offer a "color-blind" option, but in practice it arguably functions as a proxy for white. Writing in the *Atlantic*, Andrew McGill (2016) notes that many of the default emoji are "phenotypically white." But the problem may be structural rather than merely phenotypic: if "whiteness" is less a "tone" than a default or hegemonic social position, then it is not hard to appreciate how "yellow" could play the role of "white" in the linguistic system of emoji. Yellow, like white, "doesn't see race," only because it is the presumed standard by which it is rendered visible.

3. Here too it is worth noting the limits of officially sanctioned diversity: the male-female dichotomy appears to exhaust the available options expressible in emoji; there is no overtly third-gender emoji, and gender-neutral emoji tend to be coded male.

4. Ethnographic accounts of social media and online worlds, such as Facebook and Second Life, are increasingly plentiful (e.g., Miller, 2011; Boellstorff, 2008). Rarely, though, do these accounts deal with the use of emoji.

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Who Says a Headscarf Emoji is Religious? (And Why?)

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As someone who does not use emojis, I initially could not imagine anything more banal than a teenage girl's petition to create a new one. But McIvor and Amesbury have persuaded me that this is an interesting case study for considering both how the field of "religious studies" is imagined and how the discourse of "religion" is deployed. In this brief response I would like to muse on whether certain emojis are actually "religious" and how the idea of "religious and secular" emojis might leverage certain interests. In the fourth paragraph of their essay, McIvor and Amesbury suggest that there is a category of religious emojis and that an optional headscarf image is an example of this category. The key question is *why* the headscarf warrants this designation. It is certainly Islamic, although in her proposal for the new emoji, Rayouf Alhumedhi argues that it could represent *any* woman with covered hair, including "women with cancer" and "simply a woman who enjoys wearing a headscarf" (Alhumedhi 2016, 4–5). The proposal is also part of a larger trend of "diversification" by Unicode in which emojis are offered to portray a wider range of cultures and ethnicities. On what grounds then does this particular mark of identity warrant the designation *religious*? Arguably, a headscarf emoji used to represent "people like Alhumedhi" is no more inherently religious than a Stetson hat emoji used to represent people from my state.

As anyone who has read J. Z. Smith will likely

agree, religion is a second-order category. Of the myriad objects and signs in the world that have been rendered as emojis there is no inherent reason why some should be designated as "religious" and others not. So the question we should be asking is *who* employs the category of "religious emojis" and for what purposes? I spot three agents in this situation. First, there is the Unicode Corporation itself, which does *not* directly employ the label "religion." In fact, it seems incentivized *not* to invoke this category as doing so might invite public controversy about which emojis should be deemed religious and which not. And yet, Unicode still *implies* a category of religion simply in the way they group certain symbols. McIvor and Amesbury also refer to religious emojis. As scholars of religion they are entitled to define what falls within their field of study and their essay raises interesting questions about how emojis might be usefully framed as objects of religious study. Finally, Alhumedhi refers to "religious" meanings and feelings in her proposal of the new emoji. Her goal seems simply to persuade Unicode to adopt the headscarf. However, her deployment of the category "religion" to accomplish this aim is significant.

Most corporations regard opinions about religion as bad for business. And yet, catering to consumers invariably entails "grouping" various goods for easier consumption. These groupings are not meant to be theoretically coherent but merely intuitive. Often, they amount to a "folk taxonomy" that reveals cer-