Islam Online: A Netnography of Conversion

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Introduction

Whilst the number of sociological publications devoted to the relationship between religion and the web is growing rapidly, providing a significant contribution to interdisciplinary research focused particularly on the intersection between the evolution of new media and contemporary Islam, the phenomenon of online conversions to Islam does not seem to have gained sufficient attention as yet to engender a specific scientific literature. Our present work is aimed at a first investigation of this topic.

While it is not possible here to even attempt a discussion of the overarching theme of Islam on the web, it might nevertheless be appropriate to highlight some fundamental traits of the new media that come to influence the manifestation of religions in contemporary society. When they enter the web, religions become part of a dimension in which, rather than religions that communicate through the net, we can speak of religions of the net. In this space, spreading in a great variety of directions and being reinterpreted in the most diverse ways, the message cannot remain bound to the initial intention with which it was given (Helland 2005). The web harbors and intensifies a radical change in the relationship between the individual and the sacred (Schroeder, Healther and Lee 1998), an effect that seems to be intertwined with a tendency described by sociologists as the shift from religion to spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2004; Flanagan and Jupp 2007), and linked in turn to the transition from a materialistic to a post-materialistic system of values (Inglehart 1983). In this religious experience modality, the intellectual and emotional perceptions of the individual prevail over the reference role of religious institutions and their theological and normative systems. In this context, old and new religions and their various denominations have to compete when facing what has been described as the religious market (Berger 1979, Stolz 2006, Norris and Inglehart 2004). They are obliged to operate in an environment in which their progress is constantly questioned by the way in which their image is redefined through the interactions that take place on the web.

All this applies to Islam too. There is now a body of scientific literature\(^1\) on the presence of Islam on the web in the last twenty years, a presence that is

now very widespread. These investigations have started to highlight a number of subthemes: from the relationship between religious authority and Islam on the web to the online diffusion and production of fatwas, to the development of highly sophisticated informatics tools (such as Apps that can communicate the correct time for prayer, the direction of Mecca, the nearest mosque, all without even the need for an Internet connection). Only in a few cases has the phenomenon of online conversions been specifically addressed, taking second place after other topics that were given more attention.

My contribution brings the theme of online conversion to the fore. At present, the concept of conversion can only be interpreted against the backdrop of the irreducible plurality of meaning given by the different religions and the disciplines that study them (Rambo and Farhadian 2014: 10). It lies at the intersection between individual paths and the sociocultural context of present-day religious plurality (Giordan 2009), in which the web pervades nearly all dimensions of the life of the individual and of the group. So much so that conversion is offered as practicable on the web in all its stages: from the onset of the desire to convert to the ritual act that marks the entry into a religion. Therefore, the study of online conversion provides elements that could enrich the dialogue between the different interpretative models provided so far on the theme of conversion. From this perspective, rather than looking at the causes of conversion (Lofland and Stark, 1965, Snow and Machalek, 1984), the reason why someone converts, or the reason why someone approaches the Internet for conversion, I have focused on the interaction that occurs during the exchange between an individual who decides to rely on the web and those who offer advice and guidance on a possible conversion, aiming particularly to analyze the communication strategies and discursive styles employed, and their relationship with Islamic religious heritage. More specifically, the online materials and services considered here are mainly aimed at users who are assumed to belong to the Western world. In this study I have therefore decided to set aside aspects that pertain to individual life paths before and after conversion, to the sociocultural profiles of potential converts and the other parties in the exchange, and their respective motives. I have also disregarded the online communication offered by radical or so-called jihadist groups, which seems difficult to analyze within the methodological framework I have adopted.4

4 It must be said that all too often, and not only in the social media, the attention paid to Islam on the web veers rapidly towards the topic of Islamic extremism and terrorism; the same