Check for updates

Article

social compass

Social Compass
2016, Vol. 63(1) 93–108
© The Author(s) 2015
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0037768615606619
scp.sagepub.com
SAGE

Between real and virtual communities: Sufism in Western societies and the Naqshbandi Haqqani case

Francesco Piraino
Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy
École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, France

Abstract
Sufism, the mystical/esoteric Islamic path of soul purification, is spreading extensively throughout Western societies. The internet is one of the most important vehicles of this diffusion. This article first describes the use of the internet in four European Sufi orders, underlining how the internet: (1) is an instrument of promotion, information and knowledge about Islam and Sufism; (2) reduces the distance between disciples and Masters; (3) is a digital space where religious experiences are reaffirmed, not lived. The second section of the article concerns the Naqshbandi Haqqani case, which is completely different from the other orders studied. For some Naqshbandi disciples, the internet is also a place in which to practise religion through rituals, prayer requests, initiation and religious experiences. Through an analysis of this particular use of the internet, the author explores the transformation of European Sufism both in the frame of post-modern religiosity and in the frame of transnationalism.

Keywords
internet, Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya, online religion, religion online, Sufism

Résumé
Le soufisme, la voie mystique/ésotérique de purification de l'âme dans la religion islamique, se répand largement dans les sociétés occidentales. Internet est l'un des canaux les plus importants de cette diffusion. Cet article décrit en premier lieu

Corresponding author:
Francesco Piraino, Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzo Strozzi, Piazza degli Strozzi, Florence, 50123, Italy
Email: francesco.piraino@sns.it / francesco.piraino@ehess.fr

l'utilisation d'Internet dans quatre ordres soufis européens, en soulignant (1) la manière dont il est un instrument de promotion, d'information et de connaissance sur l'islam et le soufisme ; (2) la façon dont il réduit la distance entre les disciples et les Maîtres ; et (3) comment il est un lieu numérique où les expériences religieuses sont réaffirmées, pas vécues. La deuxième partie de l'article concerne le cas de la Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya, qui est complètement différent des autres ordres étudiés. Pour certains disciples naqshbandis, Internet est aussi un lieu où la religion est pratiquée au niveau des rituels, des demandes de prière, de l'initiation et des expériences religieuses. Cette utilisation particulière d'Internet permet d'explorer la transformation du soufisme européen à la fois dans le cadre de la religiosité post-moderne et du transnationalisme.

Mots-clés
Internet, Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya, online religion, religion online, soufisme

Western Sufism: an introduction

Sufism (*Tasawwuf* in Arabic), the esoteric or mystical path to soul purification within the Islamic religion, is spreading extensively today – throughout Western societies[1] and in various domains: (1) cultural: there is a large production of Sufi music, both traditional and revisited, as well as contemporary literature and cinema productions (Hermansen, 2006; Sedgwick, 2009); (2) intellectual: the academic literature on historical, philosophical and sociological Sufism has been growing since the 1970s; (3) religious: within religious movements, Western Sufi orders are expanding in both number and importance; all the *turuq* (Sufi orders, *tariqa* singular) I have studied are increasing in size and looking for new places in which to carry out both religious and nonreligious activities, while many *Shaykhs*[2] and *khalifas*[3] have become political and cultural reference points for certain Islamic communities and national institutions.[4]

Western Sufism is the complex intersection of different sources: (1) 'traditional' religious Sufi organizations formed by migrants and second- and third-generation migrants (e.g. Werbner, 2003), labelled as 'transplanted' by Hermansen (2004); (2) European esotericism – more precisely the figures of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon – which has influenced the composition of European Sufism (Bisson, 2007; Sedgwick, 2004a); (3) 'New Age culture' (e.g. Hammer, 2004; Hermansen, 2004; Sedgwick, 2009); and (4) scholarly Sufism, which has often gone beyond an academic context to influence contemporary Sufism (Louis Massignon, Henry Corbin, William Chittick, Patrick Laude, Eric Geoffroy, etc.). In fact, these different sources must not to be understood separately; they all participate, to different degrees, in the constitution of Western Sufi groups.

Religion and the internet

The online presence of religion is growing daily all over the world. There are increasing numbers of religious websites, blogs, social networking groups and other platforms. The sociological fieldwork of religion and society has overcome the utopian or dystopian

biases, according to which the internet was the new frontier of freedom or the triumph of alienation (Dawson and Cowan, 2004), and has started to challenge the classical sociological categories, such as community, virtual experience and context (Dawson and Cowan, 2004; Højsgaard and Warburg, 2005).

It is impossible to summarize this broad and complex field, but I would like to highlight a few characteristics that are relevant to my research. First of all, the distinction between 'religion online' and 'online religion' (Helland, 2000): the first deals with information and content about religious movements or institutions; the second deals with religious experience online. This distinction, as argued by Young (2004), must not be understood as dichotomic, but as a continuum. Second, the interconnections between the 'real' and the digital worlds: 'The internet is not a reality separate from "the real world", but an electronic extension of it' (Dawson and Cowan, 2004: 12). On the other hand: 'the virtual technologies and agencies … cannot be viewed as instruments in the service of pre-given bodies and communities, rather they are themselves contexts which bring about new corporealities and new politics corresponding to space-worlds and time-worlds that have never before existed in human history' (Holmes, 1997: 3). In fact, according to McLuhan (1965), 'the medium is the message'. Third, religions and the internet are intertwined with 'religious modernity' or 'postmodern religiosity'. The internet is the ideal stage where we can observe the 'subjectification of religion' (Berger, 1979) and 'believing without belonging' (Davie, 1994). The chains of religious institutions are now loose, and religion has become a 'free-floating cultural resource' (Beckford, 1989). Stark and Bainbridge (1979), Heelas (1994) and Hervieu-Léger (2001) identified another dimension of postmodern religiosity, closely linked to mass consumption. Religion has become another good to consume.

From these perspectives we can better understand the 'more fluid doctrinal environment' and the 'levelling effect' (Beaudoin, 1998: 56–58) and the 'homogenizing effect' (Holmes, 1997: 17) in online religions. In fact,

> anyone with sufficient motivation can create their own Web site and express their own personal religious beliefs … [B]y allowing those people who practice a form of mass religiosity the ability to pick and choose their beliefs and log on when they feel the need, the Web's structure caters to today's preference to choose various levels of religious participation that occur when and only when one wants (Helland, 2004: 33).

Nevertheless, the religious use of internet, as also argued by Lundby (2011), cannot be reduced to the postmodern frame, which can be summarised as 'self-made religion' and commodification. Following this perspective, we will see how the internet can also represent a new strength for religious movements without changing their communitarian forms.

Of course, the complex relations between religion and the internet affect many aspects of the Islamic religion: Roy (2004) gives us an introductory perspective on this phenomenon and Bunt (2003) describes the development of 'E-Jihad'. Islamic spirituality, of which Sufism is one of the most important forms, is influenced by this process of 'virtualisation'. This article is an attempt to describe and to comprehend the intertwining of the 'real' and the 'virtual' spheres of the European Sufi frame.

Aims

The first aim of this article is to describe how the *turuq* employ the internet and to comprehend the relations between virtual and real. I will focus on the reciprocal influences between the traditional organisational forms and the new online forms. I therefore adopt a double perspective, a double ethnography on European Sufi groups, focusing on, but not limited to, France and Italy.

I will argue that the majority of the *turuq* studied use the internet: (1) to provide basic information about Islam, Sufism and the *tariqa*'s history; (2) as a new promotional instrument to increase visibility; (3) reduce the distance between the Sufi Masters and the disciples. The internet seems to be a place where religious experiences are reaffirmed, not lived. On the other hand, the Naqshbandi Haqqani case is qualitatively and quantitatively different and will be treated separately. In fact, for some Naqshbandi disciples the internet is a place where charisma is constructed and where rituals and feelings can be experienced and shared. Moreover, through this topic I will analyse the influence of post-modern religiosity on Naqshbandiyya, in both the 'real' and digital worlds.

Methodology

The methodological approach is ethnographic, consisting of weekly participation in prayer meetings during 2013 and 2014 for at least six months per *tariqa*. In addition, I had the opportunity to visit the mother *zawiya*[5], and to undertake pilgrimages with the *fukara*[6]. The ethnographic research is supported by more than 70 in-depth interviews. The criteria for selecting the *turuq* were: (1) my research locations, which were centred on Milan and Paris; (2) that they practised Islamic Sufism; (3) their importance/visibility in terms of their historical context and number of disciples. The selected *turuq* are Alawiya (*Shaykh* Khaled Bentounes), Budshishiyya (*Shaykh* Hamza al-Boudshishi), Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya (*Shaykh* Mehmet), Ahmadiyya Idrisiyya Shadhiliyya (*Shaykh* Abd Al Wahid Pallavicini) and Jerrahiyya-Khalwatiyya (*Shaykh* Tugrul Inancer).

The digital ethnographies were conducted on the main *turuq*'s websites and Facebook pages, but in contrast to the 'traditional' ethnography, which was conducted mainly in France and Italy, with some short fieldwork in Algeria, Morocco, Cyprus and Turkey, it was possible to conduct digital ethnographies across the entire world, since a disciple from one country can use a website hosted in another country. Indeed, even if a website is connected to a local group, its services can be transnational.

The synchronic perspective allowed me to overcome the problematic issue of 'validity of data' (Wittel, 2000) that besets virtual ethnographies, whereby

> a thick description of networks requires a thick description of connections and connectivity. The connectivity in virtual spaces is represented by hyperlinks. Hyperlinks are an impoverished and one-dimensional way to represent and express social ties [so that] fieldwork in virtual spaces cannot rely on external forms of structuration (Wittel, 2000: 6–7).

The double perspective allows us to check the 'validity of data', and compensates for the impoverished and one-dimensional structure of websites.

Sufism online: AIS, Alawiya, Budshishiyya and Jerrahiyya-Khalwatiyya

Alawiya – the social commitment

Alawiya, founded in the 1920s in Algeria, is led by *Shaykh* Khaled Bentounes. Since its inception, this *tariqa* has been characterised not only by its metaphysical teachings, but also by a strong ecumenical spirit and a social commitment. Khaled Bentounes, an iconoclastic *Shaykh*, without the long beard and traditional clothes, is strongly present in Algerian and French public debate (Werenfels, 2013). He has further developed the *tariqa*'s ecumenical and social spirit through many activities: Muslim Scouts, META (Management Etique Traditionnel Alternatif) and the promotion of women's rights and environmental awareness. In 1978, he founded the *Alif* Institution, with the aims of training young people and introducing computer science to 'Third world countries'. *Alif* produced the first digital versions of the Quran and the Hadith (Bentounes, 2009), and *Shaykh* Khaled and his *fukara* are currently undertaking the digitalisation of old Arabic-Islamic books to preserve them from ageing and to make them available online worldwide. They are also working on a museum about Islam and Sufism in Algeria; it will be both a traditional museum and an online museum.

Tariqa Alawiya has been organised as a federation of local associations, the Association Internationale Soufie Alawiya (AISA), whose principal branches are in Algeria, Morocco, France, Switzerland, Canada and Germany. The main website, aisa-net.com, is a reference point for French speakers. It contains a large amount of information about the *tariqa*'s history and the numerous conferences, publications and interfaith dialogue activities in which it is involved. The Canadian, Swiss and German branches have their own websites, which mirror the main site but focus on local activities. The Facebook groups (e.g. AISA Net) provide the same information as the websites. In addition there is an Algerian Facebook group '*Tariqa* Alawiya', which is mostly an archive, where documents and pictures are posted. There is also a mailing list service, which facilitates the organisation of social activities and the sharing of non-public *Shaykh* teachings (documents and videos).

Ahmadiyya Idrisiyya Shadhiliyya (AIS) – the esoteric path

Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, born in Milan in 1926, converted to Islam in 1951, taking the Islamic name of the famous French esoteric René Guénon. He travelled in Asia and took *bay'a*[7] with AIS in Singapore. In 1980 he received authorisation to organise an autonomous branch in Europe (Sedgwick, 2004a). At the beginning of the 1990s, the *tariqa* reached a turning point: intellectual debates on metaphysics gave way to politics and interreligious relations, and Coreis (Italian Islamic Religious Community) was created.

Pallavicini's AIS is reserved, disciplined and homogeneous. This *tariqa* rejects every form of proselytism; it is composed of fewer than 100 disciples. Coreis is an organisation that aims to represent Italian Muslims and play a harmonising role between mainstream Italian culture and institutions and Islam. Its website provides information about Coreis' charter and activities, its agreements with Italian institutions and interfaith dialogue. Moreover, there are links to books and a few pictures and videos of its activities.

Pallavicini's AIS also has some disciples in France, who founded the Institut des Hautes Études Islamiques (IHEI), whose website provides information about conferences, books and interfaith dialogue events. There is also a Facebook group, 'Coreis Italian Muslim Youth', which provides information, plus some pictures. AIS also has a mailing list to assist in the organisation of its activities and to share private documents. For instance, every week the *Qutba* (the Friday prayer speech) is sent to all the disciples who cannot be present at the Mosque.

Qadiriyya Budshishiyya – the living saint

Since 1972, *Tariqa* Budshishiyya has been led by *Shaykh* Hamza, who revolutionised the *tariqa*'s practices, transforming them 'from the *Jalal* [majesty] way to the *Jamal* [beauty] way'[8] – in other words, from ascetic and rigid discipline to merciful and embracing love (Ben Driss, 2002). *Shaykh* Hamza is considered by his *fukara* to be a 'living Saint' or the *Qutb* (axis) of this historical period. From humble origins, in a little village – Madagh – with few *fukara*, *Tariqa* Budshishiyya has become one of the most important *turuq* in Morocco, with tens of thousands of *fukara* and sympathisers. Budshishiyya has also become highly influential in both the political and the cultural spheres (Dominguez, 2014; Sedgwick, 2004b). It is currently also developing in the US, UK and France.

The main Budshishi website, saveurs-soufies.com, provides information about Islam and Sufism, and videos of *Sama'* (Sufi music), conferences and spokesperson's speeches, which are mostly in Arabic, although the website itself is in French. There is also a forum, where internet users can ask questions and discuss a broad range of topics, such as *Shari'a*, Sufi metaphysics, science and ecology. It seems that this forum is more a means of gaining information and deepening intellectual discussions or of finding other *fukara* around the world than a way to live an online religion. The website soufisme.org mainly targets French *fukara*; there are articles about Islam and Sufism, and information about conferences held in France. Parisian Budshishi *fukara* founded the *Isthme*, an association that organises concerts, conferences and religious celebrations; its website provides information concerning these activities. In the US there is a minimalist website, sidihamza.us, with two pages of explanation about Sufism, Budshishiyya and *Shaykh* Hamza, which also provides the opportunity to listen to the *Wadifa* online, though this is reserved for disciples (it requires an account number and a password). There is also an English website, thesufiway.co.uk, containing basic information about Sufism and local activities (London, Birmingham, Nottingham, Manchester, Bradford). The Canadian website institut-soufi.ca (in both English and French) is similar.

As regards Facebook, there is *Shaykh* Hamza's page, which has 5,000 likes[9] but provides only pictures of *Shaykh* Hamza as a 'public figure'. There are also local Facebook groups, but these have very few members and the discussions are short. It is clear that they are a resource for the community rather than having a strictly religious focus. Finally, there is a group called 'The Youth of *tariqa* Budshishiyya', with more than 3,000 followers[10], which deals with religion and spirituality but not exclusively. For example, it also contains posts about football and general current events.

Jerrahiyya-Khalwatiyya – rituals online

Jerrahiyya-Khalwatiyya is based in Istanbul and has been developed in Western societies thanks to Muzaffer Ozak. Today, there are several *zawiyas* in the US, South America and Europe (Rausch, 2009). The Italian branch was founded by Gabriele Mandel, a multi-faceted intellectual and artist. *Tariqa* Jerrahiyya does not have a central public website; an unofficial website, available only to disciples and requiring an account number and password, hosts video-streaming of the main weekly rituals. In fact, the *zawiya* in Istanbul has cameras in almost every room, allowing disciples who are far from the *Shaykh* to follow the rituals. This is not the only digital service, however. The mother *zawiya* provides other services, such as interpretation of disciples' dreams on request via email.

The most important Jerrahi website is the American jerrahi.org, which includes the *tariqa*'s history, its charitable activities and many Sufi books available online. This website also provides the contact details of all the Jerrahi *zawiyas* in the world. As with the other *turuq* studied, there are local Jerrahi Facebook groups, in which videos, music and documents are shared.

Between Sufism online and online Sufism: the Naqshbandi Haqqani case

Shaykh Nazim founded this new branch of Naqshbandiyya in 1973, after succeeding his master *Shaykh* Abdullah al Daghestani, who had asked his disciple to spread Sufi knowledge in the Western world. *Shaykh* Nazim changed the silent *dhikr* into a vocal one and allowed the *hadra*[12], which had not been performed under *Shaykh* Abdullah al Daghestani, and, from the end of the 1970s, took yearly trips to London, visiting the US, France, Switzerland and Germany during the 1980s. Within a few years, Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniya had become one of the best known *tariqa* in Europe and today, the majority of his *fukara* are in Europe and the United States, although he is also well known in Turkey and Indonesia. *Shaykh* Nazim died in 2014 and his son *Shaykh* Mehmet took over the leadership of the *tariqa*.[11]

This sudden and universal openness was due to *Shaykh* Nazim's strong conviction that the end of the world is near, but the spread of this *tariqa* was also tied to charismatic local leaders such as *Shaykh* Hisham in the US, and *Shaykh* Hassan Dyck and *Shaykh* Burhanuddin in Europe. It is quite difficult to define the theological-political position of Naqshbandiyya on account of its huge production of speeches (*Shaykh* Nazim spoke every day through Saltant.org) and the multitude of charismatic *khalifas*.

It should be noted, however, that the number of Naqshbandi centres is widely overestimated. On sufilive.com and in the iShaykh application for iPhone, for example, is a list of 'Sufi Centres in the world' that includes two Naqshbandi centres in Milan; however, from what I saw in 2013/2014 the Milanese Naqshbandi comprises a mere handful of disciples, who meet irregularly. This overestimation is visible not only in Milan, but generally in Italy, where there is no *zawiya*, but rather several small gatherings at the disciples' houses. A similar situation has been observed by Haddad (2008) in Canada and by Damrel (2006) in the US. According to Schmidt (2004: 118),

quantity here is an argument for authority. To present many pages, to be able to serve readers in several ways, religiously as well as commercially, creates more than a Sufi cyberspace; it also underlines symbolic magnitude, power and devotion, even when the price is linkage to multinational corporations such as Walt Disney. The large quantity of home pages underlines a global ambition. This ambition is underlined by the option for reading the page in more than one language.

To study this *tariqa* means dealing with a complex, nebulous structure, where, as we will see, a traditional *tariqa* coexists with a new religious movement. However, we can briefly identify two opposing dimensions: a universal afflatus and a sense of superiority.

The universal spirit recognises all mankind and all religions with great mercifulness and love and motivates the *tariqa* to accept everyone. On the other hand, this spirit of mercifulness and universal love is associated with an anti-modern spirit and a sense of superiority. *Shaykh* Nazim was not only the unquestionable *Qutb*, but Naqshbandiyya is considered by many *fukara* to be 'the only Sufi *tariqa* still working'.[13] Moreover, *Shaykh* Nazim made many speeches against modernity, secularism and democracy; his political-theological model was the Ottoman Empire.

There are more than 30 Naqshbandi websites and as many Facebook groups – a huge number compared with the *turuq* described above. The websites not only provide practical information about the *tariqa* and general information about Islam and Sufism, but also offer services including a Sufi dating website (sufimatch.com) where you can find your Sufi wife/husband among the 5,241 members[14] and a shopping website where you can buy a mug or a baseball cap with the pictures of *Shaykh* Nazim or *Shaykh* Hisham. However, the Naqshbandi presence is not limited to these websites: there are also Naqshbandi YouTube Channels, Google groups, Yahoo groups and blogs, a Naqshbandi presence on Foursquare, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Iconosquare, Web.stagram, Instagram, and three Naqshbandi applications for iPhone.

Why is Naqshbandi Haqqani so well represented on the internet? It is not solely because of the high number of disciples around the world; Budshishiyya and Alawiya also have many thousands of disciples. Nor is it due to Naqshbandi's political activism in the advocacy of religious authority; this may be a contributory factor in the United States (Dickson, 2014) and the United Kingdom (Stjernholm, 2011), but does not apply to continental Europe, where Naqshbandiyya is not involved in politics.

The first explanation is the disciples' average age, which, according to my ethnographic fieldwork, is lower than that of the other *turuq*. This can be explained by the way in which Naqshbandiyya is promoted, with an emphasis on Sufi music (often elaborated with modern music) and speeches about love, courage, passion, nature, beauty and ecology – in contrast to the classical Sufi metaphysical theories and ascetic practices.

Second, in the Naqshbandiyya the *khalifa*'s role is very important, as he is not only the *Shaykh*'s delegate, but also the bearer of charisma and sometimes of mystical powers, through which he may attract new disciples, mostly via concerts or spiritual retreats. This explains why there are three Naqshbandi websites in Paris, for example, corresponding to the three *khalifas* (naqshbandia.fr, naqshbandi.fr, naqshbandi-rabbani.fr). Indeed, many websites and online groups do not represent a unique local or global voice for the *tariqa*, but mostly the local *khalifas*, who often have personal websites or Facebook groups: *Shaykh* Hisham and *Shaykh* Hassan each have a website and two Facebook pages.

Third, the *tariqa*'s structural fluidity allow disciples to create their own websites, through which they share their experiences and beliefs. It seems that there is no central control; therefore, anyone can use the Naqshbandi name in order to create a blog or website, where alleged Sufi Masters can teach omnium-gatherum, from 'Naqshbandi Ninjutsu' to 'Naqshbandi Cartoons' and so on (e.g. berabbani.com).

There are other possible explanations for the considerable Naqshbandi online presence; in particular, the compelling need to spread Naqshbandi Haqqani truth, due to the belief in the imminent end of the world and to the powerful emotional charge expressed by *Shaykh* Nazim and his *khalifas*, an emotional charge that Schmidt (2004) calls 'online charisma'.

The huge number of websites makes it extremely difficult to describe the variety of online Naqshbandi content. On the one hand, these websites provide the same services as those of the other *turuq* studied: general information about Islam and Sufism and practical information about local activities. On the other hand, there are important differences. First, interfaith dialogue and descriptions of charitable activities are rarely present, since *tariqa* Naqshbandiyya is not committed to either. Second, several Naqshbandi websites provide the *dhikr* online, which is, for the other *turuq*, a private matter. But the most interesting difference is the websites' languages and forms.

In contrast to the other *tariqa* websites studied, which are structured around the provision of information and dissemination of knowledge, Naqshbandi expresses an online charisma based on images of the *Shaykh*, videos and music, rather than written documents. The *Shaykhs*, with the traditional long beard and turban, are often portrayed against a starry sky or a full moon or surrounded by beautiful flowers. Online charisma is also emphasised by the Masters' biographies.

> He wears the Cloak of the Light of the Divine Presence. He is unique in his time. He is the orchid planted in the earth of Divine Love. He is the Sun for all the universes. He is known as the Saint of the Two Wings: the external knowledge and the internal knowledge. He is a Miracle of Allah's Miracles, walking on the earth and soaring in the Heavens (Naqshbandi Sufi Way, nd).

Naqshbandi Sufism swings between classical Sufism and a modern, appealing Sufism (Damrel, 2006; Nielsen et al., 2006; Stjernholm, 2011) – a fluctuation that can be found even within the same website. The appealing version of Sufism is focused on love, nature, life balance and well-being, it tends 'to minimize explicitly the Islamic language' (Nielsen et al., 2006: 106).

> The Sufi Path of Love intends to be a platform and a refuge for Brothers and Sisters seeking Real Spirituality, Truth, Happiness and Love … It is open for everyone who wants to follow or carry out the 'Rainbow Path of Love'. (Sufi Path of Love, nd)

> Peter Hassan Dyck is also an excellent 'storyteller', who invites the listener on a voyage into the mystical magical world of Sufi stories and tales. His virtuoso style on different musical instruments brings us the Orient's beauty and magic. (Sufi.it, nd)[15]

The Naqshbandi message is that Sufism is not something difficult and elitist but something readily accessible. Sufism is sometimes represented using the orientalist

stereotypes of magic and mystery. This vision of Sufism is far from its ascetic practices and metaphysical teachings.

This appealing Sufism is not only easy and accessible but also spectacular. There are several online videos of *Shaykh* Hassan Dyck, who is one of the most important *khalifas* in Europe and who travels extensively with his band. His music is a mix of classical Sufi music-dhikr, rock-blues and world music played with cello, harmonium, tabla, didgeridoo, sitar and so on.

Unlike those of the other *turuq* studied, many Naqshbandi websites make religious services available to all internet users, rather than limiting them to registered disciples. This can be read as a way of promoting Sufism, and, more widely, as an instrument to close the gaps in the communitarian bond.

The American website naqshbandi.org provides prayer instructions, complete with audio files; an online *Taweez*, that is, a talisman for protection; the *dhikr*, both written and recorded; and even the opportunity to take the *bay'a* (the esoteric initiation, which has to be repeated in person) online. Another American website, eShaykh.com, also provides 'Prayer requests', 'Dream interpretations' and responses to questions about *Shari'a*, Sufism and general topics. The questions are often far from Sufi and Islamic topics, regarding health, love and sex – subjects that would be considered at the very least out of place by the other *turuq* studied. Two examples serve to illustrate the wide variety of these questions:

> Because of this my *iman* [faith] is low. I don't want to pray or make *dua* [prayer]. I'm a single girl and Allah knows my state, yet for three years I have been asking and I have got nothing. I can't even pay my basic necessities. Please pray for Allah to take me out of this or to take my life in a *halal* way before I do something to myself. (eShaykh, 2014a)

> Can I buy my wife leather trousers or leather, PVC or latex catsuits, as they really sexually excite me? I am talking about the kind of clothes that American women wear in films to look sexy. My e-mail address is … in case I miss the answer on this website. (eShaykh, 2014b)

The main online video libraries are saltanat.org and sufilive.com. The former, with 2,250 videos, is focused on *Shaykh* Nazim's speeches as well as on *Shaykh* Mehmet and *Shaykh* Bahauddin (two of the Nazim's sons). The videos can be subtitled in Arabic, Turkish, English, French, German, Italian or Russian. The latter, with 5,142 videos, provides *Shaykh* Nazim's and *Shaykh* Hisham's speeches, live broadcasts and a chat service.

There are also three applications for iPhone: 'Shaykh Nazim', 'Shaykh Hisham' and 'iShaykh'. We will focus on iShaykh, which comprises all the features present in the other applications. iShaykh provides: (1) information about the *tariqa*'s *silsila* (transmission from *Shaykh* to *Shaykh*), (2) *Shaykh* Nazim's and *Shaykh* Hisham's biographies; (3) pictures; (4) instructions for prayers; (5) a charity box, which allows donations by credit card; (6) a calendar of events; (7) *etashbeh*, that is, the digital Islamic rosary in order to count God's name, during the *dhikr*; (8) teachings (videos and documents); (9) a live question-and-answer service; (10) the 99 names of God; (11) natural remedies developed from Naqshbandi and Islamic medicine; (12) Quran recitations; (13) information about the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca); and (14) information about the Mahdi (eschatological Islamic figure).

The characteristics of Naqshbandi websites can also be found in Naqshbandi Facebook groups and pages. The importance of pictures is even more evident in the Facebook pages; these pictures or calligraphies are often matched with short, easy-to-read quotations. Teaching videos (from saltanat.org or sufilive.com) and advertisements for spiritual retreats and Sufi workshops are also posted. Facebook is a place where pictures of spiritual events are posted and commented on by the disciples. These can be described, according to Collins (2004: 99), as the 'secondary circulation of symbols'. However, there is something more: for some disciples, Facebook has become a place to live religion.

During the spiritual retreats I attended in Italy, many disciples used their phones or cameras to take pictures or videos, and some of these were posted on Facebook during these same events. The use of a telephone in the other *turuq* studied would be considered out of place at the very least, and is often prohibited. In contrast, for *tariqa* Naqshbandiyya, Facebook is a place in which to share emotions and experiences; for instance, love for the *Shaykh* is often expressed by statements and emoticons. 'Sufi language', which manifests itself in the repetition of *Alhamdulillah, Mash'Allah, Insh'Allah*, is also common. Facebook is also a place in which to share advice about practices and *Shari'a*. A striking example of this religious digital living is *Shaykh* Nazim's illness and death, which was discussed 'live' on Facebook, where videos taken at the hospital could be streamed. Finally, it is interesting to note how for some Naqshbandi Facebook users, Sufism is the main or the only issue: all the posts are related to Islam or Sufism. Even in the profile's information section – *About* – we read that disciples 'work' or 'have studied' at Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya or with *Shaykh* Nazim, or their names are combined with the terms 'Naqshbandi', 'Haqqani', '*dervish*', '*murid*' and so on. In the 'Religious views' section, some identify themselves as 'Mystic, Naqshbandi Haqqani, Muslim Sufist'. This commitment to Sufi digital identity is a Naqshbandi peculiarity, which is not found in the other *turuq* studied.

Conclusion: between real and virtual, between Sufism online and online Sufism

Applying Helland's (2000) categories to Sufism, I have distinguished between 'Sufism online' and 'online Sufism'. The Sufism online of Alawiya, AIS, Budshishiyya and Jerrahiyya-Khalwatiyya can be described in terms of the following characteristics: (1) The first aim of all Sufi websites or Facebook groups is to provide basic information about Islam and Sufism. In fact, all the *turuq* studied feel the urgency to communicate a different Islam from the Islam often depicted in the mass media. At the same time, they feel the urgency to communicate what Sufism is for them, beyond the Western stereotypes. The audience of these websites comprises not only potential disciples but also people who want to learn about Sufism and Islam. (2) The internet acts as a new instrument for the promotion of the *turuq*: conferences, workshops, concerts and spiritual events are promoted via the internet. (3) Many *turuq* are committed to interfaith dialogue, charitable activities and mediation with institutions. The internet is both a showcase where these activities are promoted and an instrument that facilitates the organisation of these events. (4) The internet is an instrument to reduce the distance between the *Shaykh* and the disciples. Rituals streamed live (Jerrahiyya-Khalwatiyya, Budshishiyya) or private documents distributed via mailing lists help disciples to live a transnational Sufism. It

should be noted that the *dhikr* are not available to the general public, but reserved for disciples (with an account number and password). (5) Sufi websites and Facebook pages are the *turuq*'s official voices. There is no place for individual perspectives, statements or improvisations, and if disciples' stories appear, they are posted according to the *tariqa*'s values. Even in Facebook groups the individual dimension is reduced to the minimum; 'status' is mostly expressed in terms of Sufism, Islam and religious activities, rather than on personal feelings or emotions. (6) In accordance with Collins' (2004: 99) 'secondary circulation of symbols', online forums, mailing lists and Facebook groups are virtual places where videos, pictures and experiences about the 'real' religious life, lived within the religious community, are shared. The internet seems to be a (sometimes private) place where religious experiences are reaffirmed, but not lived.

This overview of Sufism online allows us to comprehend that even if 'the medium is the message', which reshapes the organisational forms, allowing the promotion of another Islam and the creation of a more transnational Sufism, this does not involve the weakening of communitarian living, or promote individualism, 'believing without belonging' or 'self-made religion'. On the contrary, the internet seems to sustain communities, insofar as there is no difference between the virtual and the real.

The Naqshbandi Haqqani case is completely different: in contrast to the other *turuq* studied, Naqshbandiyya is very conservative politically (advocating a new Sultanate) and in terms of *Shari'a* (e.g. regarding women's roles). But on the other hand, around this traditional *tariqa* has grown a loose movement of people who seem to reflect the characteristics of post-modern religiosity rather than 'traditional' Sufi values.

One of the most common narratives among Naqshbandi disciples relates to Naqshbandi openness: '*Shaykh* Nazim has opened the doors of Sufism to the world', which can be explained by the imminent end of the world (Damrel, 2006) or by the *Shaykh*'s extraordinary charisma. Openness is, of course, not only a Naqshbandi characteristic; we can find similar narratives in Alawiya and Budshishiyya, but their openness is qualitatively different. Naqshbandi openness involves: (1) the ease with which initiation is given, which in the other *turuq* implies a preparation period of variable length; (2) a relaxed discipline concerning *Shari'a*, Sufi rituals and code of conduct; (3) a 'looseness of definition of "membership"' (Nielsen et al., 2006: 104); and above all (3) strong proselytism, which sometimes involves a spectacularisation of Sufism and loose control from the *tariqa*'s local leaders.

The extent of openness varies from country to country. For instance, Naqshbandi 'nebulosity' is less apparent in France, where the large presence of lifelong Muslims limits the presence of both syncretistic and identitarian perspectives. The French Naqshbandi in Paris is more similar to the other *turuq* studied: the prayer meetings are regular, there are Quran, Hadith and Arabic language lessons, spiritual retreats and interfaith dialogue activities.

The consequences of Naqshbandi openness are: (1) the *tariqa*'s destructuration: relations among disciples are weaker, spiritual meetings are irregular and the place of meeting (*zawiya* or *dargah*) is less important, changes or is non-existent – i.e. virtual; (2) the absence of control by local leaders, which often leads to confusion: there have been false *Shaykhs* and it is difficult to understand the hierarchies. This often involves the creation of different Naqshbandi local groups in competition and sometimes in opposition, as has happened in Italy, England (Nielsen et al., 2006), the US (Stjernholm, 2011) and

to a lesser extent France; (3) a high turnover of disciples: it is as easy to become a Naqshbandi disciple as it is easy to abandon this fluid community; (4) loose discipline.

Therefore, during a Naqshbandi meeting in Italy, you can sit at a table and speak with traditional disciples, who follow Sufi rituals, code of conduct and *Shari'a*, and at the same, people who could be described as a 'Sufi not Muslim' or 'a Sufi who is not sure he believes in God' or a 'syncretistic believer' who is Buddhist on Monday, Muslim on Friday and Catholic on Sunday. At this same table you can hear speeches about universal love and speeches about the Islamisation of Europe. This makes it extremely difficult to describe the Naqshbandi *tariqa*.

This openness is also a problematic issue among many disciples, who regard the digital proselytism of *Shaykh* Hisham in the US with suspicion. Its consequences, as described here, reflect the characteristics of post modern-religiosity. Many Naqshbandi disciples 'believe without belonging' (Davie, 1994). Meetings are irregular, the 'Sufi life' is in some cases limited to few seminars per year, and bonds among disciples are weak. Some even 'belong without believing'. Musical events and seminars can involve syncretic believers who are there for the 'spiritual experience', as part of the creation of their own religion beyond the Sufi (or Islamic) frame. Moreover, we can detect traces of consumerism. Naqshbandi has became a brand: you can buy Naqshbandi DVDs, shirts, bags, mugs and T-shirts, and Sufi seminars are sometimes subject to an admission charge.[16]

The consumerist dimension is not limited to the act of buying, but extends to the whole approach to religion (cf. Stark and Bainbridge, 1979), which ceases to be a set of practices, teachings and morality, but becomes a therapeutic relationship between client and healer. Some Naqshbandi disciples do not embrace a 'Sufi life', but they attend seminars in order to 'release stress' or 'to have spiritual experiences'.[17] An illuminating example is a disciple who told me the shock she suffered when, after many Sufi seminars in Europe, she went to the *zawiya* in Lefke (Northern Cyprus), where she encountered traditional Sufism and not the 'artificially sweetened one'.[18] Another striking example is the participation of *Shaykh* Ahmed Dede, *khalifa* in Amsterdam, in the British television series on Channel 4 'Spirituality Shopper' in 2005 – a series focused on how spirituality can help to improve the lives even of non-believers, with little regard to religion.

Naqshbandi nebulosity achieves its maximum complexity in the digital world, where the borders between membership and Islamic Sufi teachings are blurred. The Naqshbandi use of the internet is not limited to promotion of the *tariqa* and the dissemination of information; it also expresses a form of proselytism, sustained by the construction of 'online charisma'; the filling of the vacuum created by the loss of 'real' social religious life. The community's fragmentation is compensated for by virtual practices and relationships. In fact, the internet becomes one of the principal places in which to experience and share religious feelings. To a large extent, online Naqshbandi Sufism is no longer a *tariqa*, but an 'audience' or 'client cult' (Stark and Bainbridge, 1979).

Acknowledgements

This article is based on a paper given at the conference 'Religion, Media and Culture' held at the University of Kent on 4–6 August 2014. I wish to thank Professor Mark Sedgwick and Professor Khalid Razzhali for their support and intellectual generosity.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. It should be noted that Sufism is experiencing a new phase of expansion even in many majority Muslim countries, such as Morocco (Dominguez, 2014), Indonesia (Day Howell, 2007) and Algeria (Werenfels, 2013).
2. A *Shaykh* is a Sufi Master.
3. A *khalifa* is a local leader.
4. E.g. *Shaykh* Hisham in the US (Dickson, 2014; Stjernholm, 2011), *Shaykh* Pallavicini in Italy (Sedgwick, 2004) and Abd Al Malik in France (Jouili, 2013).
5. Literally meaning 'angle', the *zawiya* is the house of prayer.
6. Sufi disciples.
7. The *bay'a* is the esoteric initiation or pact.
8. Ethnographic fieldwork notes.
9. Accessed 27 July 2014.
10. Accessed 27 July 2014.
11. *Shaykh* Nazim united the traditional *tariqa* and its nebulous appendix: 'the *tariqa* only fully exists where Shykh Nazim is' (Nielsen at al, 2006: 113). Therefore, *Shaykh* Nazim's death in May 2014 was an important test for the *tariqa*'s unity. *Shaykh* Mehmet's leadership is now accepted throughout Europe and in Turkey, but the *tariqa*'s leadership in the UK and the US is not clear, and many disciples have recognised *Shaykh* Hisham as the new *Shaykh*.
12. The *hadra*, an ecstatic dance, is a Sufi ritual.
13. The Naqshbandi claim to be the best *tariqa* is based on different narratives. One of them relates to the direct relation of Naqshbandiyya with Abu Bakr rather than with Ali in the esoteric chain (*silsila*), unlike the majority of the Sufi orders; this means a closer connection with the Prophet Mohammed. Another narrative is related to the connection with the Mahdi, an eschatological Islamic figure, who will fight the antichrist. The last and the most common narrative is based on the belief that *Shaykh* Nazim was the *Qutb*, the axis, that is, the saint of his period, and for many *fukara* the very 'bearer of existence'.
14. Accessed 27 July 2014.
15. Translated by the author.
16. I participated in two seminars, in Paris and near Rome, which had paid entry.
17. Ethnographic fieldwork notes.
18. Ethnographic fieldwork notes.

References

Beaudoin T (1998) *Virtual faith: The irreverent spiritual quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Beckford J (1989) *Religion in advanced industrial society*. London: Unwin Hyman.

Ben Driss K (2002) *Le renouveau du soufisme au Maroc*. Beirut-Milan: Albouraq-Arché.

Bentounes K (2009) *Soufisme, l'héritage commun*. Algiers: Zaki Bouzid Editions.

Berger P (1979) *The heretical imperative: Contemporary possibilities of religious affirmation*. New York: Anchor Press.

Bisson D (2007) Soufisme et tradition. *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions* 140: 29–47.

Bunt GR (2003) *Islam in the digital age: E-jihad, online fatwas and cyber Islamic environments*. London: Pluto Press.

Collins R (2004) *Interaction ritual chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Damrel D (2006) Aspects of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order in America. In: Malik J and Hinnells JR (eds) *Sufism in the West*. Abingdon: Routledge, 115–126.

Davie G (1994) *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without belonging*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

Dawson L and Cowan D (eds) (2004) *Religion online: Finding faith on the internet*. New York: Routledge.

Day Howell J (2007) Modernity and Islamic spirituality in Indonesia's new Sufi networks. In: Van Bruinessen M and Day Howell J (eds) *Sufism and the 'modern' in Islam*. London: Tauris, 217–241.

Dickson WR (2014). An American Sufism: The Naqshbandi-Haqqani order as a public religion. *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* (1): 1–14.

Dominguez M (2014) *Women in Sufism: Female religiosities in a transnational order*. London, New York: Routledge.

eShaykh.com (2014a) Available at: http://eShaykh.com/prayer_request/why-does-god-keep-testing-me (accessed 21 July 2014).

eShaykh.com (2014b) Available at: http://eShaykh.com/halal_haram/sex-in-marriage (accessed 21 July 2014).

Haddad M (2008) Zawiya réelle, zawiya virtuelle. Soufisme, francophonie et nouvelles technologies au Québec. *Globe: revue internationale d'études québécoises* 11(1): 197–208.

Hammer O (2004) Sufism for westerners. In: Westerlund D (ed.) *Sufism in Europe and North America*. London: Routledge, 127–143.

Heelas P (1994) The limits of consumption and the 'postmodern religion' of the New Age. In: Keat R, Whiteley N and Abercrombie N (eds) *The authority of the consumer*. London, New York: Routledge, 94–107.

Helland C (2000) Online religion/religion online and virtual communitas. In: Hadden JK and Cowan DE (eds) *Religion on the internet: Research prospects and promises*. London: JAI Press/Elsevier Science, 205–224.

Helland C (2004) Popular religion and the world wide web: A match made in (cyber) heaven. In: Dawson L and Cowan D (eds) *Religion online: Finding faith on the internet*. New York: Routledge, 23–35.

Hermansen M (2004) What's American about American Sufi movements? In: Westerlund D (ed.) *Sufism in Europe and North America*. London: Routledge, 36–63.

Hermansen M (2006) Literary productions of Western Sufi movements. In: Malik J and Hinnells JR (eds) *Sufism in the West*. New York: Routledge, 28–48.

Hervieu-Léger D (2001) *La religion en miettes ou la question des sectes*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.

Højsgaard MT and Warburg M (2005) *Religion and cyberspace*. London, New York: Routledge.

Holmes D (1997) *Virtual politics: Identity and community in cyberspace*. London: Sage.

Jouili JS (2013) Rapping the Republic. *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31(2): 58–80.

Lundby K (2011) Patterns of belonging in online/offline interfaces of religion. *Information, Communication & Society* 14(8): 1219–1235.

McLuhan M (1965) *Understanding media*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Naqshbandi Sufi Way. Available at: www.naqshbandi.org/living-masters/shaykh-muhammad-nazim (accessed 21 July 2014).

Nielsen JS, Draper M and Galina Y (2006) Transnational Sufism: The Haqqaniyya. In: Malik J and Hinnells JR (eds) *Sufism in the West*. New York: Routledge, 103–114.

Rausch MG (2009) Encountering Sufism on the web. In: Stenberg L and Raudvere C (eds) *Sufism today*. London: Tauris, 159–176.

Roy O (2004) *Globalised Islam: The search for a new ummah*. London: Hurst.

Sedgwick M (2004a) *Against the modern world*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sedgwick M (2004b) In search of a counter-reformation: Anti-Sufi stereotypes and the Budshishiyya's response. In: Browers M and Kurzman C (eds) *An Islamic reformation?* Oxford: Lexington Books, 125–146.

Sedgwick M (2009) The reception of Sufi and neo-Sufi literature. In: Geaves R, Dressler M and Klinkhammer G (eds) *Sufis in Western society: Global networking and locality*. London: Routledge, 180–197.

Schmidt G (2004) Sufi charisma on the internet. In: Westerlund D (ed.) *Sufism in Europe and North America*. London: Routledge, 109–125.

Stark R and Bainbridge WS (1979) Of churches, sects, and cults: Preliminary concepts for a theory of religious movements. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18(2): 117–131.

Stjernholm S (2011) *Lovers of Muhammad*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Lund, Lund.

Sufi.it. Available at: http://www.sufi.it/sufismo/appuntam.htm (accessed 27 July 2014).

Sufi Path of Love. Available at: http://sufipathoflove.com/over (accessed 27 July 2014).

Werbner P (2003) *Pilgrims of love: The anthropology of a global Sufi cult*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Werenfels I (2013) Beyond authoritarian upgrading the re-emergence of Sufi orders in Maghrebi politics. *The Journal of North Africa Studies* 19(3): 275–295.

Wittel A (2000) Ethnography on the move: From field to net to internet. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 1(1): Art.21. Available at: http://www.qualitative-research.net (accessed 21 July 2014).

Young G (2004) Reading and praying online: The continuity of religion online and online religion in internet Christianity. In: Dawson LL and Cowan D (eds) *Religion online: Finding faith on the internet*. New York: Routledge, 93–105.

Author biography

Francesco PIRAINO is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the Scuola Normale Superiore in co-tutorship with the EHESS, Paris. He has been visiting researcher at Aarhus University and Lund University. His interests include the sociology and anthropology of religion, spirituality, mysticism, popular religion, and the relationship between religion and politics, with a particular focus on Islam. His PhD research deals with the development of European Sufism.

Address: Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzo Strozzi, Piazza degli Strozzi, Florence, 50123, Italy
Email: francesco.piraino@sns.it