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## **COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND PUBLIC COMMITMENTS: THE EXAMPLE OF A SUFY ORDER IN EUROPE**

Loïc Le Pape

As a political science graduate, I came to work with believers converted to Islam and its mystique (*al tasawwuf*, Sufism). They are all European natives and, between family traditions and early religious socializing, have been all nurtured by Roman Catholicism. Therefore they have never had any objective tie (whether family and residence) with the Arab world where the Brotherhood they adhere to is based (*Al Ahmadiyya al Idrissiyya*, in Malaysia, Sudan, Morocco and Libya for the most important countries). All French residents, they were my first “field contacts” with European Muslims. Keeping a low profile for various reasons, members are carrying out an important work in the public space, participating in conferences or educational, theological and spiritual programmes.

As a beginner, I have plagued them with questions about their commitment, which marginally religious, could be anything but political. Considering, after others, that faith belongs to the private

sphere of the expert “homo religious”, managing his relationship with the Divinity (on his own), the presence of the faintest public commitment to me seemed a form of militancy nearing proselytising. Along the three years I have spent discussing with these Muslims and in response to my endless questioning over the nature of their commitment, they have all given the same answer, in the same way : “it was indeed commitment in the world but based along the lines of belief and testimony (*as shahada*). What does this clearly religious response correspond to, when adopted to characterize commitment in the public space (testimony bearing being the first pillar of Islam)? To testify by one’s religious commitment in the public space is to expose oneself. It is also to commit oneself, no matter how. Locked inside my early categories, I could not hear what I was told by the persons I was interviewing.

Moreover faced with the range of their means of communication (conferences, periodical publications, summer classes) and faced with the double rationality of the group (*Cheikh Abd al Wahid Pallavicini* is an Italian citizen, living in Milan whereas our interlocutors are living in France) I deemed interesting to start thinking over the links between these believers’ means of communication and their commitments, keeping in mind that these commitments might belong to the private, public or political sphere.

### ***Preliminaries***

#### *The mediatic maze*

The sociologist who has to work out the notion of communication is faced with a brick wall, what with no end of common places and truisms. What is communication ? Who uses it ? What are its techniques ? What is at stake ? So many topics debated

by media sociologists, so many life time subjects of sociological research that can be mind boggling for a short contribution.

The sociologist must therefore often make quick and questionable choices that have the advantage circumscribing issues at stake, relevant to the study. In that sense, communication is only one possible guideline to our analysis of a brotherhood and its commitments. Judging that “arbitrariness is preferable to partiality”, it has been our methodological standpoint not to hide our inevitably personal choices of terminology.

#### *Definitions : Irreducibility of media to religion and communication.*

Analysing media parallel with religions requires postulating that both social systems can be apprehended according to the same technique on the same analytic level : churches are media and media are religions. When you unravel this postulate it is possible to even go further : associating media and religions comes to associating two identical notions, in an apposite way : religion, the result of a historic revelation and evolution would stand for tradition while communication boosted by television and information highways would represent modernism. Moreover, if media are religions, seen as systems, one may wonder what is not religious today, which means that religion needs redefining, an almost impossible task (Lambert, 1991).

This is the reason why, trying at definitions, we are obliged to state from the start that religions and media are not equal : the use of communication strategies illustrate our point. Media are only a tool used to communicate. Thus, along with F. Balle we may say :

“media are a technical equipment enabling people to convey the expression of their thoughts, whatever the final form of this expression” (Balle, 1985 : 64).

With this definition, we can see the possibility of correspondences between both notions : churches may mobilise media to secure some type of communication whereas media can be characterized along religious analytical concepts (sacred, ritual, etc. see Dayan, 2000). We are moving towards correspondences between interdependent and interacting objects. Besides, the whole gamut of media is being used by all churches : on internet, along with the Vatican and “Islam in France” websites, one may browse through pages witnessing to the vitality of sectarian groups. The Pope’s and Komeini’s preachings enjoy worldwide diffusion by satellite, whereas the Dalai Lama is as comfortable in front of a camera as any U.S. televangelist. The pattern we have laid out between religious and mediatic techniques (the dependence of the former on the latter) is not the indispensable way of analysis. Some groups are actually advocating an “out of the World” attitude, refusing cooperation with media and keeping away from them (Pina, 2000). To be able to consider mediatic strategies as a whole, we shall use communication, a more comprehensive notion to study the links between religious and media.

#### *Three types of communication*

In the mediatic maze, we shall precise three forms of communication, three distinct levels that are relevant to this contribution : the spheres of reception of information from the members of the brotherhood. Through the communication strategies we shall identify “who” is involved and “what” is at stake.

F. Balle differentiates three types of communication : informal, mediatic and institutionalised (Balle, *op. cit.* : 65). We shall only adopt those titles because the distinction he draws (fitting the purpose of his work) makes very little case of communication types we think paramount, such as informal (inter-individual)

communication. Lumping everything that is technical into one group is the best way of leaving non-technical and non-modern forms of communication aside, which doesn't mean non analysable at all. We shall therefore substitute the contents of the distinction so as to match three types of communication with three social spaces closer to our study.

- 1) Informal communication corresponds to social exchanges "within" the brotherhood : exchanges between brothers and privileged exchanges between each one and the *Cheikh*. Generally private, this type of communication belongs to the intimate field and is very seldom available to the sociologist.
- 2) Institutionalised communication occurs within the limited and secret world of esoteric circles in which the Brotherhood evolves. These circles have little homogeneity, there are rather efficient and discreet, and keep a good control over information.
- 3) Mediatic communication at last is "what converts are willing to show". A public oriented communication where information is readily available. This communication is said mediatic because that's where the widest range of techniques is mustered (the Press, television, radio, conferences...).

This distinction may look rough it is our methodological choice : choices are imposed by our attempt at terminological defining. Some arbitrariness is needed when we tackle such polysemic notions as communication. The distinction however offers two useful advantages :

- 1) It doesn't presuppose any link with the media. The technique comes second, which fit our purpose not to give it more importance than it actually has. Media are only props and I mean them to remain so.

- 2) It has some inner coherence. The concentric pattern of this division will enable both reflexion and demonstration to develop on those three levels gradually revealing communication strategies at work.

### *Mediatic strategies*

We are borrowing "mediatic strategies" from Christine Pina's remarkable study of French charismatic groups because it helps us think out the multiplicity of relationships a social group has with the media. Yet, this declared plurality of strategies never means one way relationships. The already mentioned interdependence is still operating. In other words, mediatic strategies are not only a more or less extensive media use but also a social group's policy towards a technique that is far from being neutral, a policy that may escape the actors' free will.

"Communication (...) would thus meet a constant shift between finalities of emission planned by the group and the representations it carries over from its social and mediatic environment" (Pina, 2000 : 139).

Referring to mediatic strategies in such terms, allows the analyst to differentiate a group's policy towards media and therefore to correlate the plurality of means of communication and the plurality of public commitments.

### *Personal exposure and public commitment*

This paragraph is taking its title from a collective work, coordinated by M. Peroni and J. Ion that sheds a new light on the ways public commitment is operating (Ion, Peroni, 1997). The authors are carrying out a deconstruction of notions that are

generally used in social sciences while fostering other paradigmatic couples which we shall try to explain.

### *Personal exposure versus the distinction private / public*

The concept of personal exposure is suggested to take into account the involvement factor of individuals into public commitments, mobilizing more than their own will to act collectively. In other words, the new forms of commitment make use of some of the actor's pre-involvement capitals such as professional expertise or fluency in a foreign language. Thus, what belonged to the private field (professional or linguistic skills) gets sometimes unwanted attention : an accountant wishing to do volunteer social work may find himself keeping the books of the association. In that example, an individual's private competence is put to public use. C. Dourlens and P. Vidal-Naquet (Dourlens, 1997) show the same evolution in the civil service. As an example, they take the expert whose role is to evaluate risks and who ends up involved in the definition of a prevention policy. His professional skill being only over the evaluation of risks, the expert is overexposed because involved in decision making.

The same authors show that involvements today are short-lived, sometimes plural and non-committal : the "post-it" of today's militant, stuck here and there according to various involvements and replacing yesterday's membership stamp is for J. Ion a good illustration of the fact : involvements are often casual and non committal sometimes professionalized (Ion, 1997 : 78).

In those instances, the private / public distinction tends to lose its efficiency in sociological analysis. Used ever since it was defined by Greek philosophers, the couple is nonetheless relevant : it might simply not be a "theoretical ground" of the analysis of mobilisations. But it remains very interesting in the sociology of

religions, witness the retreat of public religiosity into the intimate and private domains under the wave of laicism (in France) and the modernisation of public life (in general).

### *Public commitments and involvement*

Personal exposure, professionalisation, plurality and relativity of commitments are so many facts and tentative studies pioneered by J. Ion and M. Peroni. But the authors don't limit themselves to facts, they further advance concepts of a more general scope which are meant to allow analysis. They thus manage to revive the notion of commitment and to supply such concepts as involvement, personalisation and publicisation while keeping the idea of a paradigmatic change.

For the authors, the concept of public commitment is still strong with meaning, developed along three philosophical conceptions whose sociological correspondences are not convincingly established. Commitment is thus seen 1) As "personal projection and reaching beyond oneself", 2) as "exposure of the self to the face of others", 3) as "postponed approval and answer to a question" (Joseph, 1997 : 244). Among those elements we shall dwell on the involvement of the individual (free from any calculation) and the ensuing action reaching out the individual (but not necessarily the community). Thus, Muslims got involved into public actions about the future of their community, such as talks over Muslim sections in cemeteries or the financial issue of Hallal butchery (Kepel, 1991).

Below the notion of commitment, the authors suggest involvement to account for some forms where individuals are called upon without necessarily leading to all out commitment. Urged to react, people are touched in their feelings, their opinions, their physical being and must get involved : mendacity is a staging of the

beggar who imposes himself on us (Pichon, 1997). In such a case, two persons are involved and interact : the actor, who ask for help and the spectator who is asked. Both are involved : the beggar is exposing himself as he is soliciting some involvement from the on-looker passing by. The reaction of the spectator (averting eyes, ignoring, giving money, etc.) becomes the result of this involvement. That concept aims at explaining some forms of public actions (publicized) in which a person is called upon and must response whether bodily as the example or sometimes sympathetically (J. Ion proposes a critical reading of Luc Boltanski's *La souffrance à distance*, Ion, 1997). Involvement induces two remarks :

- 1) it allows us not to imagine public commitment behind all individual actions
- 2) it can also account for the relationships between the interviewer and his field, from a methodological viewpoint.

Public commitment, involvement, self-exposure, are but developments of the suggested paradigmatic couple : personalisation / publicisation. Personalisation aims at replacing the couple individual / individuation through the disclosing of the process which leads to the coming-out of “me” and “we” in the “society of individuals” (Norbert Elias) : “one is ontologically plural” (Lahire, 1999 : 149), in turn actor, spectator, author and witness, engaged in self-representations on different stages. On a parallel, publicisation is the “practical organization of exposure protocols through which personalisation are carried though” (Ion, Peroni, *op. cit.* : 9), and aims to replace the couple society / sociation.

### *Post-script : what is the use of speaking of ‘passage to politics’?*

The notion of “passage to politics”, I shall use here, enables me to assume a change in the various commitments of the

brotherhood : from religious or at any rate social commitment to a strictly political commitment. Moreover, what is blurred in the diachrony will allow us to characterize mediatic acts and strategies that qualify the passage. Besides the notion doesn't let us assume the irreversibility of the process. In the brotherhood's activities, all is not political, as the status of the religious fact is not unchanged.

The major snag of the notion is the tricky question of the political field : what is and what is not political ? When does commitment becomes political and how ? I will qualify political their commitment because my informants' aim is shaping Muslim representativity in France, a political issue identified long ago by G. Kepel (Kepel, 1991 : 361-377), and felt and interpreted as such by themselves. As a consequence, I call “passage to politics” the moment (November 1998) when the brotherhood and its members joined the ‘Conseil Représentatif des Musulmans de France’ (C.R.M.F.), a panel trying to represent Muslims, along with and against others, in some interactions with the French Home Office.

### *From conversion to testimony through public commitment*

#### *From Guenonism to mystical Islam : religious commitment*

Deciding to convert is the result of some inner process, defined as “a religious shaping founding its legitimacy in the authority of a religious tradition” (Hervieu-Léger, 1999 : 23). The converts I met, would all attest to this personal process, which unfolded on a set pattern : meditating Guenon's work, then converting, eventually joining in an institution, a prelude to various commitments.

*Searching for primordial religious traditions : the impact of Guenon's work.*

All interviewees claim Guenon's teaching as their true model. According to Sadek Sellam, Guenon "is the most famous among French mystics, because of his intellectual status, of the debates caused by his publications, (...) and of the many French people who keep claiming them as their master for them incomparable and incontestable for them" (Sellam, 1986 : 306). Born November 15, 1886, in Blois provincial catholic middle class, Guenon was a brilliant high school student who graduated in 1903. he decided to move to Paris to major in mathematics, but, before long he dropped out to attend classes at "L'Ecole Supérieure Libre des Sciences Hermétiques", headed by *Papus*, a leading figure of the occultist world. He was then initiated into the main so called esoteric societies such as "The Martinist Order" or "The Free Masonry of Mason Knights, Cohen elect of the Universe". He broke away from the occultist circles in 1908, reading from Hindu sacred texts, and studying Islam spirituality in depth, and being an active contributor to "La Gnose". This publication stopped in 1912 but Guenon had already published a series of articles : "Le Démiurge", "Les principes du calcul infinitesimal", which were to be the foundations of his later works (Guenon, 1970). In 1910 he met *John Gustav Angeli* (1869-1917) famous under his painter's name *Ivan Anguéli*. The man had converted under the influence of *Cheikh Elish Abder Rahman al-Kébir* from the *Chadhiliyya* and claiming himself a follower of *Muyhi al Ibn al Arabi* (1165-1240), the historical Sufi master. In 1912, Guenon got married and the same year converted to Islam (M. Valsan argues that "his inner conversion" dates from 1911). He left a civilisation he had already given up inside and settled down in Cairo to never come back to France. He led a deep contemplative life and supervised his publications from a distance. He had married an Egyptian *Cheikh's* daughter, with whom he had

two daughters and two sons. Guenon died in Cairo under his Muslim name, *Abd el Wahid Yahia*, on January 9, 1951, the year when *Cheikh Abd el Wahid Pallavicini*, "his self-termed spiritual descendant" converted to Islam (Allievi, 1999 : 132, note 1).

Thus Guenon's was a life of intense spiritual searching during which he published theories were put to practise. Due to the particularity of his work, many endorse his thought actually unaware of what it is implying. Our informants have followed Guenon's recommendations along three distinct stages : First reading and meditating the master's work, then back to their original religious tradition, seeking out a spiritual way, eventually converting to Islam and Sufism. Following to the word the master's spiritual teaching gives the converts a legitimising base :

"there are two sorts of Guenonians, those who are practising Muslims, who are integrated in the world and who are not trying to reinvent Guenon. Well, we are not attached to his person, besides himself never was. But you have to manage to assimilate a doctrine theoretically before practising it" (Interviews in 1999).

Coming across Guenon's work is often pure chance : "by chance", "I saw it and I brought ignoring what it was about"...

"Meeting Guenon ? At random, in a bookstore where books were sold at a discount. There were several by him, I had heard about, I can't tell where. It's like a commercial : you hear and buy. God only knows why I reached out for this book ! [laughs]".

Perhaps chance met, the work triggers questioning in the readers ("at once, I started wondering about my life") or the contrary, provides them with answers ("Guenon, that was clear, I understood and agreed with everything"). From then on, readers return to religious life and the quest of catholic spirituality never to be found. Doesn't it

exist any longer, as Guenon argues, or didn't they find it, that is point less, but wasn't the importance of Guenon's work inducing conversion ? It was indeed.

Conversion to Islam was the next stage : "it happened back in 1982, in Paris. There were of course several of us. But we had shared a lot of questioning, reading out of Guenon, the spiritual quest (...). Then, after conversion, we went looking for a spiritual guide". Our interlocutors were still looking for a mystical way, they would soon find joining the brotherhood, following Guenon's steps. Applying their master's teaching, disciples speak of a double bind necessary to any religious life : a formal one to a confession (Islam for them, this is exoterism) and a spiritual one (Sufism that is esoterism). This Guenonian distinction further blurs the boundary between formal and spiritual, both belonging to religious practices, therefore private commitments.

#### *A shared experience becomes Institution : L'Institut des Hautes Etudes Islamiques (I.H.E.I.)*

After conversion, for over 10 years, our informants have been living somehow anonymously, limiting themselves to their religious duties. We may only identify here a first stage of communication : inter-individual communication. For ten years, frequent contacts have been kept with others Italians converts and with a *Cheikh*, Italian himself. Italian members of the brotherhood share the same sociological characters as the French converts. They too have been reading Guenon, gathering around the *Cheikh Abd al Wahid Pallavicini* who claims Guenon's inheritance. Members meet about once a month, most often in Italy for prayer meeting and *dhikr*, a mystical invocation which consists in chanting Allah's names. The *Cheikh's* travels, brotherhood meetings are elements of communication, most of the time underestimated and yet important.

This is indeed traditional, yet it is Islam's daily reality in Europe, so discretely lived that is skies away analysis. This type of communication however deserves a lot of attention since brotherhood meetings are ever more frequent. Besides, as evidenced in Fanny Colonna's study of pilgrimages to holy shrines in Algeria, visiting a *Cheikh* or a holy man had long been highly commended (Colonna, 1996).

After those first experiences, the next stage was the creation of an association : "people must be informed about the reality of Islam in order to debate on clearer terms". We may find here the brotherhood's mistrust in mediatic communication, as it is operating today : "media are a major source of misinformation, which has nothing to do with Islam". In 1994 the 'Institut des Hautes Etudes Islamiques' (I.H.E.I.) was created. Initiated by a group of friends mainly university people, this non-profit association's goal is not cultural Members abstain from proselytising and since the beginning, membership has been unchanged. This get-together meets the needs of a "mutual validation of the believing act" (Hervieu-Léger, 1999, *op. cit.*). Naimly progress and belief are ascertained through converging individual exchanges (contacts and discussion allow brother's to interiorise each other's experiences).

From the start the creation of the I.H.E.I. has been underlined by a strong will to act in public life :

"The French Republic, because of his very restrictive concept of Laicism only judicially recognizes individuals and not communities. Misinformation about Islam added to the fear of political movements using Islam as an alibi, has paralysed all actions able to ensure freedom of worship and freedom of Islamic teaching in some satisfactory way. That's why it has been the I.H.E.I.'s ambition to start a reflexion and a teaching programme both doctrinal and up to date, with the aim of working as



a bridge, a counselling and observation board”  
(document IHEI, 1997).

Commitment is implicit in that document. Members are advised by their Italian colleagues who have played an important role in building an Italian Islam. From a similar association, they have gradually shifted from contemplative and mystical life to public commitment in favour of Islam, yet without turning away from mystique and esoterism. We shall try to parallel both evolutions in their passage to politics.

### *From spiritual to politics*

#### *Associations and media techniques : conferences, debates and publications.*

There are two Italian associations. Either has its own characteristics and ways.

- 1) CO.RE.IS. (*Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana*), is an association that replaced the *Associazione Internazionale per L'informazione Sull' Islam* in 1997. CO.RE.IS. is mainly made of converts and is working for the recognition of Islam in Italy. It is led by *Cheikh Abd al Wahid Pallavicini*, and would like to represent Italian Islam. It is involved in national negotiations, nowadays between university and government (for more details, see Vincenzo, 1998 in I.H.E.I. publications).
- 2) The C.E.M.M. (*Centre d'Etudes Métaphysiques de Milan*), the Italian counterpart of I.H.E.I., is a Guenonian association that takes into account Guenon's metaphysics and contributes to the dialogue of religions. It is led by the same *Cheikh*, a “free lancer” according to S. Allievi and Dassetto.

Communication strategies are similar for these associations. Besides inter-individual communications which knight brothers together, the most common interventions are conferences, international meetings and seminars. As institutionalised strategy, conferences open to all bring into public light the faithful and their reflexions. Topics are many, but all combine two ideas : the link between Islamic and western traditions and the all-importance of spirituality :

Paris, 1996 : “the identity of the one and only God of Christianity and Islam”.

Grenoble, 1997 : “Knowledge and teaching : the part of Islamic tradition in Europe”.

Palermo, 1997 : “Islam and Italia”.

The renown of these associations enables them to be invited to international meetings :

Varenna, 1997 : “Scienza, filosofia e teologia di ponte, alla nascita dell' universo”.

Berkeley, 1997 : “Science and the spiritual quest”.

Casablanca, 1998 : “Islam et musulmans en Europe”.

This regular attendance to conferences, the members' increasing participation in various projects allow them to be known and become prestigious guest-lecturers (collège international de philosophie, preaches at Paris's Mosque...).

Actually the relative importance of the commitments is no reflexion of the mystic's diffidence towards Academics.

Among seminars and meetings, one must keep in mind esoteric circles that are heterogeneous and difficult to evaluate. In esoteric circles, nevertheless, Guenon's thought is very much alive and our interlocutors are contributing to Guenonian reviews. It is a multifarious milieu with low-key communication strategies, limited to a minimum (institutionalised communication strictly controlled to

establish “discreet contacts”), gathering masons, Sufis (most European converts), Guenonians or believers from mystical denominations, these circles unite around common metaphysics (ex. C.E.M.M.).

These associations are archetypal “discreet societies” (Allievi, 1999 : 64 et 141) as opposed to secret societies (free masons or Rosicrucian). Examples of specialised publications are “Vers la Tradition” (Guenonian) and “Connaissance des Religions” (Schuonian, a follower of Guenon, turned his favourite detractor). I.H.E.I. is a correspondent of “Vers la Tradition” and members give regular contributions. Both reviews are sparsely but faithfully distributed in esoteric bookstores.

The second use of media is the publication by I.H.E.I. of newsletters which collect proceedings of conferences and miscellaneous articles. A theme is being treated in each issue, this written medium (contrary to the fleeting oral contributions at conferences) is edited to more than thousand copies. Out of 60 articles, 30 are too a degree dealing with knowledge, teaching university and/or education, a favourite topic among converts in mystical circles and 11 are strictly dealing with the situation of Islam in Europe. 19 articles (including a translation) are contributed by I.H.E.I., 20 by CO.RE.IS. members, 8 are by the *Cheikh*, 3 are C.E.M.M.’s. contributions, the remaining 10 are written by occasional collaborators. This publication bears witness to the vitality of the brotherhood’s activities, whether or the French or the Italian side. Diffusion however remains somehow confidential and limited to subscribers even if it is available during conferences. Contribution to collective work is rare apart from the proceedings of a conference organised with Palermo university (It.) which is the brotherhood’s first participation to shape Italian Islam. (within the judicial prospects being debated), *L’Islam e l’Italia*, la sintesi editrice, Milano, 1996.

As far as institutionalised communication is concerned, mediatic strategies are the same on either side of the Alps. Then, what about strategies and their context when political commitment is concerned ?

*Passage to politics : placing in the field of Islam in France and in Italy. Mobilizing capitals.*

The I.H.E.I.’s political commitment, takes place inside a panel of Muslims associations : le ‘Conseil Représentatif des Musulmans de France’ (C.R.M.F.), which strives to be the only representation of French Muslims. This representation has been a recurring issue with the Home Office, the cult trustee. Under the instance of home ministers, after 15 years, conditions for the existence of Islam as a field have eventually been established in France.

In Italy, the situation is slightly different : if the C.E.M.M. is active in metaphysical debates, it is the CO.RE.IS’s share to deal with the Italian religious field. Moreover the number of Muslims (one million, high estimate) is a lot less than in France (4 millions, half of whom French citizens), but the problems of official recognition are the same. The 1929 Latran Treaty between the Roman Catholic Church and the state is basically ruling the relationship between the state and the churches which then have to come to separate arguments. Churches come under the constitutional law, but they enjoy a total independence of organisation and status. The CO.RE.IS. is very active in the talks with state representants to adopt a new agreement, which is being reached.

On the other hand fighting between associations for the monopole of the field has gone one for a long time in France... None may boast any legitimacy except the Muslim Institute and the Paris’ Grande Mosquée, that put forward their historical role of reference

but which are too close to Algerian state for French authorities. We are defining the field of Islam in France by four characteristics borrowed by M. Arliaud (Arliaud, 1986), in a re-lecture of Bourdieu's most important works (Bourdieu, 1971, 1980, 1994) :

- 1) *The existence of a "common practical belief"*. Central here is the reference to Islam since none but Muslims are concerned by the organisation of Islam in France. From the creation of CORIF by P. Joxe to J. P. Chevenement's charter all governmental initiatives have failed and the Home Office's position has remained unchanged : it is the Muslims' business to get organised. Being a Muslim is a condition to take part of the game. Converts have always played their own particular part in the various attempts of union (see the F.N.M.F. and Daniel Youssouf Leclerc in 1984, related in Kepel, 1991 : 363-367).
- 2) *The presence of an issue supported by a specific capital*. The issue has long been identified even though representation needs to be fought for. Far from being symbolical this representation carries with it the responsibility of some practical organisation of the cult, for instance approving and supervising the market of Hallal butchery for Aïd el Kebir and conciliations procedures where mosques are built. The summoned specific capital is anything but monolithic : it is neither purely social, symbolical and cultural, nor entirely linguistic and economic.
- 3) An unequal distribution of the capital. This multisided capital that needs to be mobilised is unequally distributed. Very few inner city youth associations are involved in the fights for representative-ness. Closer to the Muslim community than our converts, they are nevertheless unable to summon as many different capitals to enter the field.

- 4) A legitimacy struggle for domination and appropriation of the field. This is the focus of our study. The fight for domination of the field can only be fought by groups, the only legitimacy to enter the game. This domination is also evidenced by the pretender's media exposure. By default, the unofficial spokesperson of Islam the Grande Mosquée of Paris takes advantage of a long relationship with public authorities. for example, at Ramadan time it fixes and transmits prayer timetables, with the Home Office agreement.

The passage to politics through the I.H.E.I.'s to C.R.M.F. and the nomination of 3 converts to regional position marks the entry in the struggles for Islam representativeness. The will of the group to act in front of civil authorities and other Muslims associations proves that intimate religious commitment is not necessary private but may overlap with public activities. Organised in august 2000, the last meeting bears witness to the problems experienced by today's Islam. One of the guests was the cabinet director of the Home minister of the time. That invitation and meeting within the public space, under local media exposure is an evidence of media use to found political commitment.

### ***Conclusion : towards two types of commitments***

After giving the converts credit for their political commitment, we must re-examine what is at stake in their communication strategies. It was our assumption that to public commitment there were mediatic strategies to match. Two of them were identified corresponding to two versions of commitment : both are political, one is more institutional than the other. One must keep in mind that along with commitment the practice of devote life is

never forgotten by the faithful : thus what is achieved in the public space is also done for one's inner development.

*“Know thyself and make thyself known”*

The first communication strategy consists in a moderate use of media : local press and radio, publications and counselling to communities and authorities. That leads the associations to stake their ground and make themselves known. It could be their goal to impose themselves as interlocutors to local authorities and try to inform about Islam. This is the reason why along with local media, meetings and conferences are regularly organised. Such topics as spirituality and today's religious daily needs are discussed. The priorities of this strategy are to inform and to offer different perspectives in treating such problems as laicism.

This seduction and information strategy corresponds to a public commitment that claims to be a think tank while maintaining a politically correct believer's ideal. There are quite interesting postures because they urge us to think about the place and role of a religion, that is asserting itself today both in France and Italy, without any official recognition from states at a loss to deal with it. Commitment is indeed political but it is a long range effort of intellectual production of learning. Parallel to this commitment there is a policy to be spiritually active in esoteric and mystic circles, taking part in conferences and contributing to specialised reviews, which are ways to informing without losing a spiritual dimension deemed important by our interlocutors. The key word of this mediatic strategy could be *opening*.

*To achieve (oneself) and to get achieve.*

The second strategy is more institutional. Without giving up the testimony principle (*as shahada*), Italian and French converts want to weight on public decision making. Strategies are more clearly stated in Italy than in France : the goal is to represent national Islam (both in Italy and in Europe). In such a case, national T.V. channels and daily and weekly papers approached. Networks are established which ease out contacts with lawmakers, cabinet members, Arab and French intellectuals. One of our interlocutors used to host the only Islam programme in Europe : a Sunday programme on a French public channel. That show was discontinued because it was no longer “the most representative one of the Muslim cult in France”. “T.V. exposure of Islam is linked to the organisation of the cult” (see Willaime, 2000 : 311 for more on the subject). With that in view, our interlocutors are multiplying initiatives to push the case of representation through, just as their Italian brothers have shared in the bases of an agreement with the state. This strategy is supported by a totally political commitment, aimed at lobbying national decision makers.

Despite their denying as they claim to be think tank, French and Italian converts are involved in their respective field struggles. Their commitment aims to gain some symbolical capital and the Muslims' recognition as regard righteous behaviour. Justifications are both religious and political : they cut through religious involvement and its corollary, testimony bearing.

Both strategies of communication of course and their respective commitments never impede the pursuit of individual spiritual progress and inter-individual communication. Combining both strategies would make the believer an accomplished man (*însan al Kamil*).

### *Epilogue : the gate and the bridge(Stefano Allievi)*

What do converts bring to Europe, to Islam, to European Islam ? The metaphor of the gate conjures us opening ; the bridge illustrates crossing over.

The gate may picture Islam's opening to European countries and hopefully the opening of European countries to Islam. The Muslim community is redefining his boundaries : Muslim Europe is a periphery (the European segment of the Umma), that is aspiring to become a centre (of identity and community building and of intellectual exchanges). I am afraid that Europe, doesn't actually give it that opportunity. As a witness and sympathetic observer, I must admit that in people's minds Islam remains radically alien, disturbing and yet seducing. Converts are sometimes unwillingly playing the part of "Samaritans". They testify in favour of Islam's and the faithful's harmlessness. Their religious commitment is ontologically political.

The gate is also the opening of the minds. Muslim communities in Europe are carrying out a controversial reassessment : witness the multisided reactions to Tariq Ramadan's work. A lot of Muslim thinkers are calling for a re-opening of the gates of interpretation (*bab al ijtihad*).

Converts to Islam also act as a bridge : the crossing form one side of the Mediterranean to the other with exchanges between cultures.

Both bridge and gate symbolize interactive fields. The double cultural ties of converts and their marginal status between a parental and a host community are so many factors that could be used to bridge the gap of suspicion.

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