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Ambivalence, Virtual Piety, and Rebranding: Social Media Uses among Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia

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Abstract:
Advanced smartphone technology and easy access to the internet have contributed to the embeddedness of social media in the daily lives of many Indonesians. However, among conservative Muslims, social media are regarded as potentially harmful, and their use is largely discouraged. The article discusses the ambivalence that characterizes social media usage within the Tablighi Jama'at*, an Islamic reformist movement known for its missionary activities. Many Tablighis believe that social media potentially imperils their faith as it provides access to a wide range of non-Islamic content, a perspective that has led to restrictions on smartphone use and internet access. Yet, as this article highlights, several social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, are widely used among Indonesian Tablighis as they consider these platforms as a means to improve the efficacy of their face-to-face preaching and to display their pious practices as well as their personal transformations to a more pious self. In addition, their virtual piety goes hand in hand with attempts to rebrand their movement by countering negative stereotypes and by trying to position themselves as legitimate Islamic player in Indonesia.*

Keywords:
Social Media, Tablighi Jama'at, Indonesia, Piety

Introduction

One afternoon in 2017, a friend drove me to Temboro for the first time.[1] We parked our car in a spacious field across an old building with a board displaying the words "*Pondok Pesantren Al Fatah* [Islamic Boarding School Al Fatah]"[2] hanging on one of its walls. I walked over to four students who were standing nearby to ask them about the location of the *istiqbal*

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(reception). I was surprised when one of them responded by asking in return, "are you from Grabcar?[3]" This response instantly made me question my concept of typical, traditional Islamic boarding schools that supposedly strictly regulate the use of mobile phones or any other means of modern communication technology – the internet had clearly already become a part of the daily lives of the people in Temboro, a village that has come to be known as a national center of Tablighi Jama'at[4] in Indonesia. This first encounter certainly challenged the representation of Tablighi Jama'at as a movement rejecting Western inventions in general, and technological development in particular, a representation that circulates widely among Indonesian Muslims.

While living in the village for my ethnographic research, I often met Tablighis who criticized the use of the internet and the technology that goes along with it. Some elderly or religiously more conservative even forbade it as *haram* (forbidden) since it might imperil the Islamic faith. Nevertheless, when I typed "Jamaah Tabligh" in the search engines of my Facebook and Instagram accounts, I instantly found many accounts belonging to Indonesian Tablighis. In addition to uploading pictures from missionary tours, these Tablighis use social media to preach and to keep in touch with their fellows, like many other Indonesian Muslims do (Barendregt 2012; Slama 2017a). Although there is a considerable amount of academic literature on Tablighi Jama'at (e.g., Metcalf 1993; Sikand 2002; Noor 2012; Bustamam-Ahmad 2015; Kahn 2016), no attention has been paid so far to how the movement deals with the increasing role of social media in everyday life and religious life in particular. Therefore, this article seeks to address the question of how, in contemporary Indonesia, Tablighis negotiate the use of social media, between prohibition and taking part in digital piety.

Tablighi Jama'at was found in India in 1927 by Maulana Ilyas, a Deobandi seminary graduate, as a response to the emergence of Hindu revivalists and Christian missionaries in the region. The ideology of Tablighi Jama'at was influenced by the traditions of the earliest Islamic reformist thinkers in India, such as Shah Waliu'llah and Sayyid Ahmad.[5] Therefore, the Tablighi shared ideas with other Islamic reformist groups that also emerged in the

19th and 20th centuries, aiming, for instance, to create a faithful Muslim community based on the Koran and the Hadith. However, the Tablighi differed from other reformists who believed that Islamic society could only be shaped through engagement with political activism. Tablighi Jama'at took an apolitical stance (Metcalf 2003; Sikand 1998, 2002; Pieri 2015) and developed the methods of the Prophet Muhammad for spreading Islam through face-to-face preaching (what in Indonesian is referred to as *dakwah cara nabi*), known as *dawat* in India and Pakistan. In this article, I use the term *missionary tour* instead of face-to-face preaching, since the majority of Indonesian Tablighis that I met during my fieldwork used the word *khuruj*[6], *gerak* (literally, moving), or *keluar* (literally, going out), followed by the number of days that they had spent preaching, to refer to their missionary activities.

Spread throughout more than one hundred and fifty countries and with adherents from various sociocultural backgrounds, Tablighi Jama'at practices are influenced by local contexts (see Noor 2012; Janson 2014; Pieri 2015). However, both the method and the practice of the missionary tour invented by the founder are still central to the movement. According to Tablighi Jama'at's doctrines, the missionary tour represents its most sacred practice. Each Tablighi is required to take part in the tour and to practice each of its steps precisely, without substituting it by any other means of preaching. To obtain Islamic virtue, one must follow the way of the Prophet: an unmediated, devotional, and collective practice in preaching Islam, reflected in the Tablighi Jama'at's missionary practices. This differentiates Tablighi Jama'at from other Islamic reformist groups, which tend to be strict on the content of religious doctrines, yet rather more flexible with regard to preaching methods (Kahn 2016, 97).

In Indonesia, Tablighi Jama'at was introduced by a small group of Indian and Pakistani missionaries through two different routes: one which started in Medan in 1952, and the other in Jakarta in 1955 (Noor 2012). Institutionally, Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia does not have a clear standpoint on the use of social media. This is unlike the Tablighi Jama'at in Pakistan, for instance, that strongly criticizes other Islamic reformist groups for actively engaging

with mass media and social media in the name of religion (Kahn 2016). However, if we consider the position of the Tablighi Jama'at Indonesia through the attitudes of two of its prominent figures – for example, the leader of the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) Al Fatah in East Java and the leader of the *pesantren* Krincing in Central Java[7] – it is apparent that the use of the internet is not recommended. In the boarding schools led by these two Islamic leaders, the use of cellular phones and other electronic devices is forbidden. These devices are considered distracting for students and it is feared that such technologies could possibly lead to moral chaos since many feeds on the internet contain un-Islamic content.

The different takes on the use of social media that coexist within the Indonesian Tablighi Jama'at are also related to the different socioeconomic and ideological backgrounds of its members. A loose organizational structure has allowed the membership of Tablighi Jama'at to be open to any Sunni Muslim who commits to taking part in a missionary tour or is just interested to join the Tablighi's *bayan* (religious sermons). Thus, the group not only consists of rich and poor, lay and religious Muslims but also members from different Islamic traditions like the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Such an organizational framework has, on the one hand, facilitated Tablighi Jama'at in recruiting new members, but on the other hand, it has created ambivalence in relation to some practices, and this is particularly true for the use of social media.

"No worries, this is break time anyway"

The fact that the Tablighi Jama'at movement has grown to such an extent in the village of Temboro is unusual, as the movement is tightly intertwined with a *pesantren*, an institution of religious education in the village. This proximity between the *pesantren* and the Tablighi Jama'at contradicts the nature of the movement, which aims at moving the dissemination of Islamic teachings away from religious educational institutions to the involvement of lay Muslims in preaching Islam (Metcalf 1993). Presumably, the first contact that the village had with Tablighi Jama'at happened around 1984 when a group of missionaries from India and Pakistan visited *pesantren* Al

Fatah during their mission in East Java (Suparta 2009). Kyai[8] Mahmud – the leader of *pesantren* at that time – eventually decided to join Tablighi Jama'at after visiting the headquarters in Delhi in the early 1990s and learning that he and the founder of Tablighi Jama'at shared a Sufi bond[9]. In fact, the Sufi dimension of Tablighi Jama'at, like the virtues of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and the *ikhlas-i niyyat* (sincerity of intention), partly explains why this movement was warmly welcomed by traditionalist Muslims in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries.

The rapid development of Tablighi Jama'at in Temboro has also gained international attention. In 2017, a mosque belonging to Al Fatah was appointed as one of the national *markaz* (centers) by the Indian headquarters of Tablighi Jama'at. Its role is to help the national *markaz* in Jakarta to organize missionary tours. In addition, as a national *markaz*, the Tablighi Jama'at committees in Temboro also have the authority to send missionary groups internationally. The village also becomes an entrance gate for foreign Tablighis to conduct missionary tours in Indonesia. During my fieldwork in 2019, for instance, I recorded that up to four different groups of foreign missionaries arrived in this village within a month.

The involvement in transnational missionary tours certainly has prompted Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia to have a more flexible approach to the use of technology. There are also pragmatic reasons. In terms of the passport application process, for example, the Tablighi had no choice but to engage with the online application system that the Indonesian government recently put in place. In relation to this, the *markaz* Temboro created a special committee called the *maktab foreign*[10] to assist Tablighis who are illiterate with the online system and to support people needing a visa application or purchasing a flight ticket. In addition, according to Isya, the administrator of the *maktab foreign,* the existence of the internet nowadays has also sped up the organization of missionary tours abroad, especially regarding the process of obtaining the permit from the Indian headquarters to send a missionary group to another country. In the past, such coordination involved a lengthy process, involving letters sent via postal mail, but nowadays, Isya explains, the process is more efficient as the whole communication takes

place via email. Although the internet has helped the members of Tablighi Jama'at organize their movement, the use of technology like mobile phones remains strictly regulated in Tablighi religious programs, as I will illustrate below.

When I joined a three-day missionary tour with a small group from the village, in the morning before we left, like others before us, we gathered in a small circle to listen to the *bayan hidayah* (religious sermon) of a senior Tablighi member, instructing us about things to do before leaving Temboro for our place of mission. One of the things he emphasized in his sermon was that we were to devote our whole time to Allah: to pray and invite people to the mosque. He encouraged the group to leave any worldly matters at home, including not having any contact with family, in order to keep the intention of the missionary tour:

> The world is only temporary; the afterlife is forever. Some practices in the next three days will be blessed and we will gain rewards from Allah as long as we keep our concentration away from the worldly errands. If we have mobile phones, these are best left at home, so we won't check them many times, be anxious about what could be happening at home, or be updating friends with news. This will only lead to a waste of our three days.

Since it was my very first time joining a mission with a group from this village, my expectation was that its members would obey the rules, as instructed. However, during our tour, I found that some Tablighis disregarded the advice of their elder, brought their smartphones along and used them during leisure time. Pak[11] Ud (in his forties), an entrepreneur, came over to me as I was lying on the floor during the afternoon break. On his smartphone, he showed me a picture of a village in a mountainous valley somewhere in Switzerland and, knowing that I was pursuing a PhD in Switzerland, asked me if it was a real village. He then went on to ask me about goods from Switzerland that might have the potential for trade in Indonesia. He told me a friend of his had successfully traded imported sweets from Turkey and Malaysia. He then opened his Facebook, scrolled

to his friend's name, and showed it to me to make sure that I knew what he was talking about. Feeling awkward, I looked to my left and right, and then whispered to him "Is it okay for us to talk about something non-religious like this and access a smartphone during our tour?" He answered casually, like nothing had happened: "No worries, this is break time anyway."

On several missionary tours that I joined, I found Tablighis using their devices quite like Pak Ud. Some of them quietly played with their smartphones, but others accessed them in very obvious ways. Pak Din (in his forties), another example, is an experienced Tablighi who had been to India and had just recently returned from a 40-day missionary tour in Cambodia. He was appointed as an *ameer* (leader) for our three-day missionary tour. As an *ameer*, he was a role model for other Tablighis in the group in terms of his adherence to *adab* (moral conduct) during the missionary tour. However, he had his mobile phone with him during the mission and would leave the mosque for personal errands. When he used his phone, he showed no signs of awkwardness in the presence of others. Sometimes, he shared content of the news he had accessed from WhatsApp or showed videos from YouTube to the other Tablighis around him.

I assumed everyone in the group was aware that Pak Din's attitude was contradicting the *adab khuruj* that had routinely been voiced before we departed for a mission, but that they had chosen not to complain in order to avoid conflict, which is also part of the *adab khuruj*. Tablighis who appeared to be uncomfortable when Pak Din used his mobile phone would not comment, but instead, practice *dhikr* (remembrance of God), or simply leave for *wudhu* (ablution) and then go inside the mosque. One Tablighi in the group that I knew to have a different attitude than Pak Din regarding the use of mobile phones was Mas[12] Idris (in his thirties). Although younger than Pak Din, he had actively joined numerous missionary tours, including to India and the Philippines. In one conversation, I had a chance to ask him about his WhatsApp status during one of his missions that said "*off tiga hari* [off for three days]." He explained that he never brought his mobile phone on a missionary tour and felt he needed to inform his friends by publishing such a status so that they would understand if he did not respond to any of

their messages or calls during that period. For him, following a missionary tour is an attempt to "*nge-charge iman* [charge one's faith]," ironically using an expression that is generally used for technological devices. To him, worldly matters, like family and mobile phones, have to be left for a moment, simply because they could distract him from worship. While the female, middle-class Indonesian Muslims that Martin Slama has written about use their smartphones to "*nge-charge hati* [charge the heart]" by connecting with a preacher in order to seek guidance (Slama 2017b), Mas Idris, on the contrary, temporarily suspends his access to his smartphone to "charge his faith." In both cases, however, Indonesian Muslims use the metaphor of the battery to talk about the heart (or the faith), which, when empty, needs recharging to get its energy back.

Islamizing social media

In order to seek more answers concerning whether Indonesian Tablighis are also active social media users – and if so, how they deal with its uses – I expanded my research to the platforms Facebook and Instagram. Finding an account that belongs to a member of Tablighi Jama'at on those two most popular social media platforms in Indonesia is not a difficult task. I entered the keywords *Jamaah Tabligh*[13] and *Khuruj* in the search engines and found that many accounts have been established using a combination of these three words, be it by groups or individuals. I decided to begin with the private Facebook group of *Jama'ah Khuruj*[14]. This account has more than 27 thousand members (in June 2020), with daily posts from its members sharing photos, videos, Koran or Hadith verses, information on Tablighi Jama'at, and posts about Islam in general. Meanwhile, on Instagram, I began my online research with an account named *dai_dakwahtabligh* which has more than 61 thousand followers. As I write this article, the *dai_dakwahtabligh* (2020) Instagram account has posted as many as 4,444 posts[15]. In contrast to Facebook groups, which usually allow their members to post content on the page, the content on Instagram, although designed for the public, is posted by the account's owner. People following *dai_dakwahtabligh* on Instagram can only press "like" or "comment" under the content provided.

The circulation of photos of missionary tours and other Tablighi Jama'at practices, either on Instagram or Facebook, proves that not all Tablighis leave their smartphones at home during missionary tours. As discussed in the previous section, the use of smartphones can lead to silent tension within missionary groups. The tension I witnessed never escalated into an open public conflict since both parties usually do their best to display some sort of wisdom by trying to understand each other. They agree that the missionary tour is a time to *menyatukan hati* (unite the hearts) of the Tablighis, so they resort to various ways of minimizing conflict. For example, they use the expression "*pecah hati* [breaking hearts]" to describe a conflict in this situation.

During our mission with the small group from Temboro, as I mentioned, some Tablighis had brought along their mobile phones. Most of them seemed to use their mobile phones in secret and only during free time, not when they were engaged with the religious programs. Tablighis who used their phones would usually do so in the cooking area or stand alone somewhere on the porch of the mosque. Tablighis who oppose the behavior would try to stay calm and quiet and act like they never saw it. On one occasion, Ustad Tanwir (50 years old), a senior Tablighi who is against mobile phone usage during the mission, whispered to me as he observed from afar Wawan smoking his cigarette and playing with his mobile phone on the mosque porch:

> Look at him. He actually knows that smoking[16] is harmful and that bringing along mobile phones is forbidden, since it brings more *mudarat* [disadvantages] than *manfaat* [advantages]. But he still insists on bringing it. Well, we know better, but it's best to stay calm. He'll slowly realize as he gets direction from Allah. We don't warn him right away, or he'll get offended and doesn't want to join us *keluar* [missionary tour] again.

The tension that can arise over the use of social media is highlighted in content uploaded by Tablighis on their social media. Through their posts on Facebook, they seem to be justifying the use of social media for Islamic

purposes. Their posts have the intent of legitimating their views to both non-Tablighis and Tablighis who oppose social media usage. For example, such posts can be seen on their Facebook accounts:

> To preach religion (*berdakwah*) is worship, but the means used for delivering it should not be a *bid'ah*[17] according to religious terms. Like the use of a microphone to make a voice louder, Facebook and email can replace letters; religious sermon videos [...] All of these are means (*washillah*) of worship: not replacing the worship itself. That is called *mashlahatul marsalah*.[18]

This excerpt of a long post by a Tablighi argues against a group of Muslims that prohibit the use of any technological advancement, including telecommunication tools. As these tools did not exist in the past, they are considered as *bid'ah* by some literalist Muslims. Thus, the point of this long post was to highlight that social media are media that can be used for preaching Islam, just like the letters that were used by the Prophet Muhammad as a medium for preaching Islam. On other Facebook accounts, Tablighi also legitimate their mobile phone use by quoting a statement by the prominent Islamic figure Habib Ali Masyhur that has been translated into Indonesian:

> Do realize that mobile phone is something easy to carry in the world, but it will become heavy in the afterlife. So, use your mobile phones for your religion, for the sake of your own everlasting happiness in the afterlife (Al-Habib Ali Masyhur – Mufti Tarim).[19]

Mualimin emphasized the use of smartphones for something good and useful, something religious, in order to obtain merit that may lead to heaven. Similar posts by Tablighis are easily found on Facebook. In such posts, Tablighis assert that for a Muslim, Facebook or other social media platforms can lead to the field of merit, the so-called *pahala jariyah*[20], or can become a *dosa jariyah* (source of sins). Figure 1 engages with these themes with the slogan *Pahala jariyah, atau dosa jariyah?* (the field of

merit, or the source of sins?). This perspective assumes that a social media account can still be accessible to the public, even after someone has passed away. If during his or her life a Muslim posted good things (according to Islam), the posts will still be leading the readers to something good, even after death. Therefore, they will still obtain blessings. On the other hand, if someone posts something bad or harmful by Islamic standards, and if those posts negatively influence people, that person will continue to sin, even after death.[21]

Figures 1 and 2: Screen capture of a Tablighi's posts on Facebook, June 3 and 6, 2020.

Exploring Facebook accounts reveals yet another tension among Tablighis on the question of how to use social media without violating Islamic morality. Indeed, those Tablighis who are active online seem to agree that the use of social media is allowed as long as it is for "posting Islam."[22] There are ongoing debates concerning the question of whether displaying self-portraits or people's photos is allowed[23], but also about other practices that violate Tablighi Jama'at ethics regarding "*amr bil-ma'ruf wa nahi 'anil munkar* [enjoining the good and forbidding the evil]," such as involvement in political discussions, arguments about different *mahzab* or *ulama*, and gossip. Arguments regarding "selfies" are more frequently found among female Tablighis – for example in Figure 2, which states "*saudariku jangan upload fotomu* [my dear sister, don't upload your photos]." Social media users that voice strong disagreement with women who post selfies, even when they wear a hijab and veil, are easy to

find online. Some of them criticize self-portraits on the grounds that these photos are shared by the women to make themselves visible in public, which is a contradiction to the initial purpose of wearing the hijab itself – to cover particular parts of the body from others (see Jones 2017).

Virtual piety and rebranding the movement

The use of social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook to propagate Islam and the *Sunnah* (behavioral concepts; the way of life of the Prophet Muhammad), indicates that at least some Tablighis are not passive internet users. When promoting the Sunnah, many use up-to-date graphic designs, intended to attract wider Muslim audiences. Mualimin's Facebook page, for instance, is dominated by posts with animated pictures or vectors that support verses from the Koran or Hadiths. In the middle of February 2020, this account uploaded a picture (Figure 3) of a man with a long beard combined with the caption "*memelihara jenggot adalah perintah nabi* [growing one's beard is the Prophet's order]." To give religious legitimacy, he also recited *Hadith Sahih Muslim* (Book 1, Hadith 69) about the command for Muslim men to shorten their mustaches but let their beards grow long. In May 2020, similar to Mualimin's Facebook account, another Tablighi account also promoted the Sunnah through a social media post. He posted a picture of a man's hairstyle (with only eyebrows drawn in the facial part) along with Hadith verses, narrated by Muslim and Bukhari, about the hairstyle of the Prophet Muhammad and Prophet Isa (Figure 4).

Figures 3 and 4: Screen capture of a Tablighi's posts on Facebook, February 4 and May 28, 2020.

The Facebook and Instagram accounts belonging to Tablighis reveal that some were already using both social media platforms long before they devoted their lives to this religious movement. One example is a Facebook account with the name Abidul, whose photo history indicates that he has been actively posting on social media since 2010. It was evident that this account belonged to a Tablighi because of the use of various Tablighi Jama'at terms and symbols. Interestingly, the content that can be considered typical for Tablighi Jama'at only started flooding his Facebook page at the end of 2016. The content posted from 2010 until 2016 was in complete opposition to the values of the Tablighi Jama'at. In this period, Abidul often posted photos wearing casual t-shirts, posing with women (without hijabs), sitting in a pub with bottles of vodka on the table. Hence, for Tablighis like Abidul, social media seem to provide the perfect space to build a conversion narrative, popularly known as *hijrah*[24] among Indonesian Muslims.

The conversion narrative is stored on Facebook's history, and a friend can easily peruse the account owner's journey of obtaining *hidayah* (enlightenment) and finally changing from an *ahli maksiat* (expert in sinning) into an *ahli ibadah* (expert in worship). The narratives themselves are strengthened by the use of the "before" and "after" conversion photos. Tablighis with tattoos, such as on the Facebook accounts of Ahmad and Ibrahim, have documented their conversions in particularly manifest ways. Both regularly upload photos wearing Muslim clothes, but their arms full of tattoos are still on display. I went through Ahmad's Facebook profile, opened one photo, and skimmed all the comments under the posts. The majority appreciated his current look and left comments such as "*tetap istiqamah, bro* [stay faithful, brother]."

For Tablighis, the concept of piety is defined as a form of obedience to God, which is manifested in their responsibility to do missionary tours. In this sense, Tablighis like Ahmad and Ibrahim generate virtual piety on Facebook by consistently posting photos or short videos of them in the middle of missionary tours to places as far away as India and Bangladesh. Also interesting from both Facebook accounts are the photos and videos displaying the account owners giving sermons in religious congregations.

Such posts are combined with citations of Hadith verses, which not only strengthen the narrative of the account owners in redefining their image from sinful Muslims to pious ones but also display virtual piety by showing that they are religiously knowledgeable.

Using social media to display one's conversion to a pious Muslim is also popular among public figures that have become Tablighis. Sakti, who is now popularly known as Salman Al-Jugjawy, for example, used to be a famous musician who quit his music career long ago to focus on religious activities. A few months after he quit his band *Sheila on 7*, he suddenly appeared with a new name and a completely changed appearance, more in line with Islamic fashion. The moral logic following his *hijrah* certainly has similarities to the case of the Tablighis with tattoos that I just discussed: a nominal Muslim has become a pious one. Yet, he also framed his *hijrah* within Tablighi Jama'at's moral logic by leaving behind all the worldly matters (abundant money from music) for the sake of happiness in the afterlife. He began to actively join missionary tours, hosted a religious program on TV, and in 2015 he also started posting Islamic themes on social media. Although he was never formally trained in Islamic theology, he slowly began to enjoy his popularity as a tele-*da'i* (Muslim preacher), through which his *hijrah* inspired Muslim youth and his celebrity status reflected the broader rise of Islamic revivalism in Indonesia over the last few decades (see also Hoesterey 2008; 2016)[25].

The proliferation of *hijrah* stories on social media confirms Slama's (2017a) point that the advances of internet technology in the last two decades have brought about new online religious practices among Muslims in Indonesia. In the case of Tablighis, the posts related to missionary tour activities, such as the *jaulah* (a group's visit to people's houses) or the journey to their destination, implicitly communicate communal pious experiences. Some pictures are also intended to convey Tablighi Jama'at morality, for instance when a pious experience involves struggles and sometimes can only be obtained through sacrificing time initially reserved for family or work. In April 2019, a Facebook group named *Khuruj Indonesia* posted photos of a missionary somewhere on a tour (Figure 5). One of the photos focused

on a Tablighi wearing a backpack, walking across a river with his right hand holding a *melon gas* (a green gas cylinder for a stove weighing five kilograms), while his left hand was hugging the thick book of *Fadhilah Amal* (one of the compulsory books of Tablighi Jama'at). The photo itself tells already a story of obstacles that Tablighis must face in propagating Islam. The account holder chose to add the following caption:

> Tablighi Jama'at is a weirdo … he is unpaid but is willing to cross the river tirelessly, hike up the hills and down again to deliver God's religion […] A man will usually collect money, but he prefers to spend wealth in the way of God. He leaves with some money, and goes home without any.[26]

Figure 5: Screen capture of a Tablighi's post on Facebook, April 2, 2019.

Figure 6: Screen capture of a Tablighi's post on Facebook, October 4, 2019.

It is undeniable that social media have provided a space for Tablighis to communicate their faith, but these online religious practices also hold the risk of *riya'* – an act of showing off (Husein and Slama 2018). When reading through the comments under various Tablighi posts, however, I did not find any comments accusing them of *riya'*. This might be the case because *riya'* is often understood as being "invisible;" it is a relationship between each individual and God. Thus, in addition to God, only the person themselves knows whether his or her online religiosity is a genuine practice of worship or merely aimed at receiving praise from others (Hoesterey 2016, 180). In fact, the anxiety of committing *riya'* is also developed by the conscious feeling that there are other people who are always observing and who will not hesitate to judge whether an act of worship displayed in public is considered as *riya'* or not (Husein and Slama 2018, 90). However, when replying to comments containing compliments, Tablighis seem to be aware of the potential of *riya'* and anticipate it with more humble comments. They try to avoid that their posts are received as *riya'* by replying in ways that suggest they do not deserve to get such compliments and write, for instance, "*doakan semoga tetap istiqomah* [pray for me to stay committed to the good deeds]" or "*masih terus belajar* [I am continuously learning]." Meanwhile, many Tablighis also avoid *riya'* by responding to compliments with Islamic expressions like "*subhanallah*" or "*masyaallah*" that mean that all this happened because of God's will.

Posting Islam, for some Tablighis, is a means to give advice to themselves in order to stay motivated and to seek self-improvement. Additionally, they hope that their posts on social media will influence other Muslims in general, and other Tablighis in particular, to keep up their good deeds. This thought is similar to a Facebook post of a Tablighi who plays with a homonymous caption "*kami bukan ustadz, kami hanya ustat* [we are not teachers–religious experts; we are just '*ustat*'[27]]." This statement is strengthened by another post of his which reads: "someone's faith is not measured from their Facebook account, a good status is not an intention to show off that 'we are the most or the best at something,' but simply as a self-reminder, and to hopefully motivate anyone who reads it, to be a better person" (see Figure 6).

These expressions of virtual piety go hand in hand with attempts to counter negative images of Tablighis that are widespread in Indonesian society. Reminiscent of other Islamic players' efforts to rebrand Islam and themselves by using electronic and digital media as well as marketing strategies, as James Hoesterey (2016) has shown in his analysis of the celebrity preacher Aa Gym, Tablighis also use social media to portray their movement in a positive light. For example, their postings can be read as a response to the accusation that they possess only shallow religious knowledge[28]. Responses to such accusations, through public religious debates or seminars, are difficult to find, as one of the ethics of the movement is to avoid speaking about *khilafiyah* (differences in arguments, perspectives, and attitudes). However, social media have become an alternative tool to ward off any suspicion towards Tablighis as a result of current public stereotypes. The Instagram account of *dai_dakwahtabligh*, for example, often uploads short videos of preachers belonging to other Muslim groups (such as Salafists), or of national Islamic figures talking about the importance of respecting the diversity of *manhaj*[29] among fellow Muslims.

Figure 7:
Screen capture of a Tablighi's post on Instagram,
September 15, 2018.

Apart from the above concerns, members of the Tablighi Jama'at have also regularly been suspected of terrorism by the broader public, mainly because of their performative attributes (white loose robe combined with their pant legs raised above ankles, flowing beards, and known as a rather closed group).[30] Here, social media play a significant role in providing other Muslims with transparency regarding the Tablighi Jama'at movement. Tablighis also respond on social media to this accusation by proclaiming similarities to some national Islamic figures, for instance by posting excerpts of Aa Gym's or Ustad Abdul Somad's religious sermons. In addition, Tablighis also upload photos that narrate their relationship with the state, such as photos showing celebrities, retired army generals, the police, or other state bureaucrats involved in Tablighi Jama'at programs. The movement's harmonious relationship with the state is also displayed in photos showing Tablighi members involved in religious sermons in front of convicted criminals in prisons[31] (see Figure 7). Such photos certainly contradict both deviant and terrorist group stereotypes that have long haunted the Tablighi Jama'at and show, without needing any captions, that Tablighi Jama'at has been accepted by the Indonesian state. The transnational Islamic movement is thus at least partly rebranded as an Indonesian one.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, social media have been continuously shaped and reshaped by Muslims, making them into a socioreligious sphere with various kinds of Islamic content. Yet, the use of social media to perform certain forms of piety and–or worship can also cause ambivalence and even anxiety within the Muslim community (Husein and Slama 2018). For Tablighi Jama'at, the absence of a clear policy on social media usage from the headquarters in India or their Indonesian leaders has led to ambivalence and disagreement amongst members. Those who are more conservative are restricting social media use due to its wide range of non-Islamic content which they regard as having the potential to trigger moral chaos and create an addiction that may lead to Muslims neglecting their religious duties. This perspective, however, certainly does not reflect the voice of every Indonesian Tablighi. Others have displayed obvious engagement with social media platforms, such as

Instagram and Facebook, by posting their Islamic practices. This group may refute the conservatives by arguing that the various Islamic content that one can find online today has reshaped social media into something suitable for Islamic purposes: every Muslim can potentially learn to be pious through social media. Nevertheless, given the lack of agreement among Tablighis on how to approach social media, their relationship with the online world often remains informed by the ambivalence that one can observe in the ways some Tablighis try to reconcile their offline proselytization activities with their uses of digital platforms.

Despite these disagreements over social media usage, some Tablighis seem to enjoy using Instagram and Facebook as sites of virtual piety where they communicate their faith, display their Islamic practices, and narrate their own conversion to being a pious Muslim to a broader public. The feeling of ambivalence is mitigated by these Tablighis through reflection on how to use social media without violating Islamic moralities and how to navigate social media to comply with Tablighi Jama'at's ethic of "*amr bil-ma'ruf wa nahi 'anil munkar* [enjoining the good and forbidding the evil]." Thus, their virtual piety is not simply a display of their own pious lives online but is also always part of the attempt to preach Islam to other Muslims through the promotion of the *sunnah* (Prophet's traditions). They are aware though that preaching Islam via social media can never replace their conventional offline *khuruj* (missionary practice). Preaching via social media is rather viewed as a new form of religious expression that can widen the opportunities for individuals to perform good deeds. In other words, social media is defined by those Tablighis that use them as an additional *pahala jariyah* (field of merit) as they believe that their posts could influence someone who saw them to become a "better" Muslim, for which the Tablighi who is responsible for the posts would be rewarded in the afterlife.

Individual Tablighis have also capitalized on the nature of social media as means of communication to engage in virtual piety and display their identity as pious Muslims. This particularly applies to those Tablighis who have undergone a significant personal transformation after joining the movement. These online representations of personal transformation go hand in hand

with attempts to rebrand Tablighi Jama'at as an organization. Posting content about Islam that contains Tablighi Jama'at's practices, such as images of their annual preaching to convicted criminals in prisons or short videos of their leader's religious sermons, can bring a kind of transparency to the movement and provides insights for other Muslims who may be skeptical about it. Such posts can be read as a strategy to counter negative images that are circulating in the Indonesian public sphere, such as suspicions concerning the movement's alleged relationship to transnational terrorism or purported theological deviance. The transparency displayed in social media also invites other Muslims who might refuse to be associated with the movement when they encounter Tablighis in offline everyday life to connect with them. In this sense, just as social media use can cause various anxieties, ambivalences, and tensions among Tablighis, it can also be used to ameliorate national anxieties about the extent to which Tablighis are indeed Indonesian Muslims.

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Notes

[1] The data presented in this article will also partially be used in a chapter of the author's forthcoming PhD dissertation written at the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies (ISEK), University of Zürich. I would like to thank to Prof. Dr. Annuska Derks for her invaluable input as my PhD supervisor, to all my colleagues in the *Social Transformation Processes* group for their comments on an earlier draft, and to

two anonymous reviewers. This article has benefited from the generous comments and critical insights of Dr. Martin Slama and Dr. James Hosterey at various stages of the writing process.

[2] All translations are by the author unless stated otherwise.

[3] *Grabcar* is a transportation service platform similar to Uber.

[4] In some literature, this movement is called *Tablighi Jamaat* – without apostrophe in the word *Jamaat* (Kahn 2016). In Indonesia, people often call the movement *Jamaah Tabligh* (literally: group of conveyors [of Islam]).

[5] The ideology, however, tolerates Sufi practices like Dhikr and follows the Hanafi school of law, yet is flexible to the three other Islamic jurisprudences (see Metcalf 2003; Reetz 2006; Pieri 2015).

[6] *Khuruj* is derived from Arabic and means "going out." The term *khuruj* is specifically used by Tablighi Jama'at to refer to their missionary tours, visiting Muslim communities for periods like three days, forty days, four months, or one year. During the *khuruj*, Tablighis are required to stay in mosques and move on every three days.

[7] Both *pondok pesantren* are actually rooted in a traditionalist Islamic current represented by Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia.

[8] Islamic teacher or scholar who often becomes a spiritual guide or a model Muslim for his students and community.

[9] Throughout his life, Kyai Mahmud was a *mursyid tarika* (guide or teacher of a Sufi order) of *Naqasabandiyah-Khalidiyah*. This title was inherited by his son, the late Kyai Udzairon who was also known as a member of the *syuro* (consultative committee) of Indonesian Tablighi Jama'at.

[10] *Maktab* is an Arabic term for office, while the word *foreign* is used to refer to the international setting. Broadly speaking, the *maktab foreign* is responsible for international relations, either relating to the departure of "local" groups or to the welcoming of foreign missionary groups.

[11] *Pak*, literally "father," is a respectful form of address in Indonesia.

[12] *Mas*, literally "elder brother," is a respectful form of address in Indonesia, especially in Java.

[13] As mentioned earlier, *Jamaah Tabligh* is an Indonesian emic term for this movement. By using this term in the search engine, many Indonesian accounts appeared.

[14] I use the actual name of the Facebook group or Instagram accounts that are open for public in this article, while I made it anonymous for all personal accounts – both with private and public access, in order to keep the privacy of the accounts' owners.

[15] Although not every day, the account's owner regularly posts content on Instagram. The content is a combination of his own photos and reposting other Tablighis' posts.

[16] Smoking prohibition, observed by most of the Tablighis in Temboro, is in line with the perspectives of the *kyai*s in Al Fatah boarding school. They consider it *haram* (forbidden or unlawful) because it harms the human body, something of God's creation; thus, if we harm others or ourselves, we are harming God.

[17] A religious innovation that is not rooted in the Islamic canonical texts and is thus considered a sinful act.

[18] This refers to *maslahah mursalah*, which means something that brings goodness or advantages and is in line with Islamic law. Abidin, 2019, *Facebook* post, November 14, accessed [June 4, 2020].

[19] Mualimin, 2020, *Facebook* post, March 25, accessed [June 7, 2020].

[20] The term *pahala* literally means divine reward or merit, while *jariyah* literally means flowing or running. In Islam, when someone dies, their good deeds come to an end, yet they could still gain divine reward if they have a righteous child who prays for them; or if a person donated for building a mosque, they can continue receiving rewards as long as the mosque is still used for praying.

[21] This understanding of the afterlife is based on *Hadith Riyad al-Salihin* (Book 1, Hadith 174): "If anyone calls others to follow right guidance, his reward will be equivalent to those who follow him (in righteousness) without their reward being diminished in any respect, and if anyone invites others to follow error, the sin, will be equivalent to that of the people who follow him (in sinfulness) without their sins being diminished in any respect," which is reinterpreted in the current context to address the uses of social media.

[22] Martin Slama (2017a) coined the expression *posting Islam* to refer to digital piety, that is, posting textual or

visual material with a religious theme on social media.

[23] There are also some Tablighis who forbid posting photos that contain images of themselves, people or animals (or anything with a soul) by narrating other Hadiths of al-Bukhari and Muslim, suggesting that creators or distributors of such content will be tormented in the afterlife.

[24] *Hijrah* literally means migration or emigration. This term refers to a specific event of the prophet Muhammad's migration (C.E. 622), from Mecca to Yathrib (Medina), together with his faithful Muslims, in order to escape persecution. In Indonesia, *hijrah* in the past two decades has been popularly used as a term to refer to a lay Muslim who has become faithful. For example, if a female Muslim formerly did not wear a hijab but then decided to do so, she and her friends would consider this performative shift as a *hijrah*.

[25] This *hijrah* story is similar to that of Derry Sulaiman, who used to be a guitarist in an Indonesian heavy metal band. After quitting, he became even more famous as a TV host of an Islamic program called NGOPI (having a coffee), which is an acronym for *Ngobrol Perkara Iman* (talking about faith).

[26] Khuruj Indonesia, 2019, *Facebook* post, April 2, accessed [September 16, 2020].

[27] *Ustat* refers to *usaha untuk taat*, or those attempting to be faithful and obey the religious rules.

[28] Other common stereotypes of Tablighi Jama'at voiced by opponent groups is that they are *ahli bid'ah* (experts on *bid'ah*) or theologically deviant.

[29] *Manhaj* refers to the methodology of receiving, analyzing, and applying knowledge (Islamic Terminology 2011).

[30] However, see also the news on online media about a convicted church bomber in Yogyakarta who was a former *santri* (student) in one of the boarding schools affiliated with Tablighi Jama'at (Ika Fitriana 2018).

[31] Sending Tablighi to preach in jails in some regions is a regular agenda of Tablighi Jama'at in Indonesia. In East Java, Tablighi Jama'at also regularly sends their preachers to give religious sermons at some institutions affiliated with the state.