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Diffusion of Islam in the United States: Comparative Personal Conversion Social Networks

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Abstract: Conversion is one of the ways in which religion diffuses in society. Different than other diffusions, such as adopting a new technology or a fad, religious adoption can be riskier since it entails a life changing transition thereby making it a complex contagion. This study investigates whether Islam diffuses through weak ties or strong ties. By comparing conversion cases in Michigan, where there is a larger Muslim community, and Kentucky, where there is a less tangible Muslim community, I argue Islam is more likely to diffuse through what I call recessive or dominant weak ties in Michigan, whereas it is more likely to diffuse through strong ties in Kentucky. I collected personal social networks of 18 individuals who converted to Islam living in Michigan and 12 living in Kentucky. I found the research participants through mosques located in several cities in Michigan, including Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, Flint, Detroit, Dearborn, and Canton, and two cities in Kentucky: Lexington and Louisville. Having investigated a set of egocentric conversion networks from both Michigan and Kentucky, I found that the existence of a Muslim community and how it is perceived by mainstream society is an ultimate factor in determining the strength of a tie to other Muslims. Thus, Islam is more likely to diffuse through weak ties where there is a Muslim community, but it is more likely to diffuse through strong ties where there is no such community.

Keywords: Islam, personal networks, diffusion, weak ties, strong ties, conversion

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Introduction

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the West[1], such as in the U.S., despite controversies surrounding it such as fundamentalism, violence, and incompatibility with modernity (see Table 1). The estimated number of Muslims in the United States is about 6 to 8 million (Esposito 2010, Khan 2002). Although most of this growth is attributed to migration, conversion also contributes to the spread of Islam in the West. Conversion is one of the ways in which religion diffuses in society. This study investigates how Islam diffuses in personal social networks in the American context by comparing 18 personal conversion networks of individuals living in Michigan to 12 personal networks of those living in Kentucky. I compare these two areas to investigate how Islam diffuses in personal social networks, which are embedded in a geographical area with a bigger and more established Muslim community, versus an area where there is an inchoate Muslim community. I argue that Islam is more likely to diffuse through what I call *recessive* and *dominant* weak social ties in Michigan, where there is a bigger Muslim community, but it is more likely to diffuse through strong ties in Kentucky, where there is a smaller and less established community.

The seminal research analyzing the relationship between social networks and religious conversion argue that developing affective bonds with the members of religious groups or cults is an essential element in conversion (Lofland 1966, Stark and Bainbridge 1980). In light of developments in the field of social networks, the affective bonds with the members of religious groups that these two studies theorize can be translated into what is known as strong social ties, which can be considered as close friends who have at least one person in common (Shi, Adamic and Strauss 2007). It is more expectable that adopting a new religion, which is a risky behavior, will require a presence of a strong tie to a member of that

1 In this study, the West or Western context mainly refer to Europe and the United States, although Canada, Australia and New Zealand can also be categorized as the West.

Table 1. Religious Congregation and Membership in the United States

Religious Body	Adherents 2000	Adherents 2010	Percent Decrease or Increase
American Baptist Churches in the USA	1,767,462	1,560,572	-12%
Assemblies of God	2,561,998	2,944,887	15%
Catholic Church	62,035,042	58,928,987	-5%
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ	1,439,253	1,453,160	1%
Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee)	974,198	1,109,992	14%
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints	4,224,026	6,144,582	45%
Churches of Christ	1,645,584	1,584,162	-4%
Episcopal Church	2,314,756	1,951,907	-16%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	5,113,418	4,181,219	-18%
Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod	2,521,062	2,270,921	-10%
Muslim Estimate	1,559,294	2,600,082	**67%**
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	3,141,566	2,451,980	-22%
Seventh-day Adventist Church	923,046	1,194,996	29%
Southern Baptist Convention	19,881,467	19,896,975	0%
United Church of Christ	1,698,918	1,284,296	-24%
United Methodist Church	10,350,629	9,948,221	-4%

Source: ASARB, Religious Congregation and Membership Study 2000-2010
Note: Some congregations are omitted from the table since their data from both time periods were not comparable (The omitted list can be provided on request).

religion to develop enough trust to adopt it. Consequently, individuals living in Michigan are expected to develop strong Muslim social ties prior to their conversion. This is more likely to occur because the Muslim community there has a longer historical presence and it is more integrated into mainstream society as compared to that of Kentucky.

This early research is limited in explaining the diffusion of religion from a social network perspective because it does not account for the risky aspect of adopting a religion and its impact on personal networks. Although diffusion of religion can have a positive impact on the composition of a personal network if an ego forms social ties to only those who are members of the same religion as her, it can often be riskier because it entails greater consequences for the ego. For instance, a member of a majority group adopting the religion of a minority group may result in a loss of friendship ties, which can be crucial in the verification of a newly built religious identity, or rejection by kinship ties, which can be a valuable source of social capital in a time of identity change. Also, individuals are embedded in personal social networks, which in turn are embedded in communities guided by a set of social norms. Conversion to another religion different than one's own is more likely to be associated with a betrayal of these norms. This is more likely to be the case when the individual is converting to Islam, which I argue is the religion of the ultimate other in the Western context. Accordingly, the status of a religion in society and the size of a community following this religion are important factors in its diffusion in social networks. Finally, this line of research also lacks making a distinction between the strength of social ties (Granovetter 1973), which could be either strong or weak. Weak ties, also known as bridges connecting egos to communities to which they do not belong, are also conduits through which religion diffuses in society.

The second wave of research investigating the diffusion of Christianity from a social network theoretical perspective evinces that religion does not always diffuse through strong ties. In applying social network theory to the spread of Christianity, Czachesz (2011) argues that ancient Christianity spread through weak ties since the Apostle Paul was moving tirelessly between early Christian communities located in Greece and Asia Minor (present day Turkey) and consequently was not able to form and maintain any strong ties with the members of these communities. Czachesz (2011) bases his evidence on the epistles written by Paul and other apostles and the New Testament which together emphasize the itinerant life style of these early Christian missionaries who are expected to form only weak ties because of their behavior. Czaches (2011) acknowledges that it is difficult to judge the reliability of these texts with regards to the extent to which they describe the actual practice of Jesus and his followers. Duling (2013), however, argues that characterizing Paul as a homeless itinerant person like Jesus is limited since he was an urban settler and community organizer supporting himself with hard labor. Duling (2013) further

claims that the meeting places such as the "craftworker house church," where Paul and his followers could have met suggest that these environments were multi-stratified in which one would expect clustering of different social strata. Thus, it was possible the members of the same social strata developed strong ties, which could have facilitated the diffusion of Christianity making it more successful in the free market of Greco-Roman religions.

Although these studies illuminate diffusion of Christianity in a social network, they have limitations because of their reliance on historical secondary data. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of religious diffusion using actual personal network data of those people who adopt a religion different than the religion into which they were born. Using personal network data collected from converts to Islam and their stories of their conversion processes, this study shows that religion diffuses in personal networks through both weak and strong ties, depending on the social context in which personal networks are embedded. I argue that Islam is more likely to diffuse through weak ties in a social context where there is a large Muslim community, but it is more likely to diffuse through strong ties where there is a smaller Muslim community. In the following section, I introduce the American historical social context, in which Islam diffuses, to better understand the diffusion process.

Historical Context

Although diffusion of religion in a personal network is a micro-level phenomenon, the factors explaining its diffusion via certain social ties are not disconnected from macro-level phenomena. Such macro-level phenomena are oftentimes rooted in historical context. The ascendance of Islam to a status of the religion of the other is a good example in point. Starting with the end of World War II to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Americans were mobilized around the opposition to communists such as Russians, Cubans, and other nations located in the Soviet Zone (Wallerstein 1993). During this period, which is known as the Cold War, the ultimate other in the American imaginary were these communists and socialists. American identity and its support for democracy around the globe were shaped by its ideological opposition to this ultimate other. I argue that Muslims replaced communists as the ultimate other when the Cold War came to an end. The horrific events of September 11 and the ensuing American political and militaristic interventions in the Middle East, as well as terrorism associated with radical Muslim groups, reinforced this status. It is quite interesting that suicide bombers, who are claimed to be associated with the Islamic State, detonated themselves in Belgium, killing 31 people while President Obama was making his historical visit to Cuba. This is one of the most recent episodes reinforcing the status of the Islam as the religion of the other in the American psyche.

I trace the origin of the perception of Islam as the religion of the other in the American context back to the Black Nationalism movement associated with Islam. Starting with the Moorish Science Temple in the 1930s and continuing with the Nation of Islam, especially during the reign of its charismatic leader Elijah Muhammad, Islam was used an instrument to fight racism (Jackson 2004) and to carve out a position in social space (Bourdieu 1998) for Blacks, who were excluded from it. During this historical process, Islam became associated with radicalism in the American psyche because of the radical and exclusionary teachings of the Nation of Islam. The status of Islam as the religion of the other did not change even after the dissolution of the Nation and the death of its charismatic leaders. Instead, it resurfaced as a fixated status as a result of the September 11 terrorist attacks, large-scale U.S. involvement in the Middle East, and violence associated with Islam. This series of events increased the visibility of Islam in the Western context while consolidating its status as the religion of the other. This state is more likely to impede the formation of ties between non-Muslims and Muslims. Accordingly, people living in social contexts where there is a large Muslim community, such as the one in Michigan, are less likely to develop strong Muslim social ties before their conversion.

Research Methods

I employ mixed methods to study the diffusion of Islam in personal social networks. I collected personal network data from 18 adults who are based in Michigan and 12 adults in Kentucky. I compare these two different states to account for the influence of social contexts in which conversion to Islam takes place. About 60 percent of the research participants are females, while 40 percent are males (Table 2). This gender gap matches research on conversion to Islam (McGinty 2006, Roald 2001, Soutar 2010, Sultan 1999, Van Nieuwkerk 2008), which suggests that conversion to Islam is more common among females than males. About 73.3 percent of the converts are white and 26.7 percent of them are black. Although recent estimates suggest that on average about 15 people per mosque convert to Islam per year (Bagby 2012), recruiting converts for a study is hard since they tend to keep their conversion

experience private (Wilson 2011). Often conversion conjures up negative connotations and those converting to new religions might be labeled as brainwashed (Delgado 1980, Levine 1980, Lofland 1966), as conversion to any religion is associated with conversion to cults or other marginal religious groups. This generalization of conversion impedes the research process, during which it becomes challenging to build rapport with the research subjects who are unwilling to become part of the study. Also, during fieldwork I encountered several converts who were initially unwilling to be interviewed. This group of converts had reported that they had been accused at times of being unpatriotic because they converted to Islam, which has negative connotations in the American consciousness, particularly since the events of September 11. To overcome these difficulties, I assured the participants about the confidentiality and anonymity of the research. Also, contacting the research participants through the local mosques proved to be helpful in building rapport.

Table 2. Demographics of Prior-to-Egocentric Conversion Social Networks by State

State	Sample Size	Gender		Percent Gender	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
Michigan	18	5	13	28%	72%
Kentucky	12	7	5	58%	42%
TOTAL	30	12	18	40%	60%

I used the islamicfinder.org website to locate the mosques in both research sites. I visited these mosques to recruit research participants. In Michigan, the imams of the mosques put me in contact with research participants directly and emailed a description of my study, which I provided to them, to their community email listservs. I also contacted two Muslim Student Associations on university campuses in Michigan to recruit participants. These were the two primary methods I used to collect data in Michigan. As for Kentucky, I recruited most of the research participants through a convert study group, about which I learned while visiting a mosque, but I was also able to find participants while visiting the mosques.

As a name generator, I asked the participants to "Rank people that you used to socialize with prior to becoming a Muslim starting with the ones you used to socialize with most frequently.[2]" Different than conventional egocentric social network research design (Marsden 1990), I let the boundary of the networks float more freely rather than limiting it to a set of specific alters . Participants account for each and every individual with whom they socialize. Limiting the boundaries of the networks to core discussion networks (Marsden 1987, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006), a set of alters with whom egos discuss important matters, or capping their size at six alters (Burt 1984) does not allow the researcher to accurately account for the weak and strong ties composing personal networks, thereby limiting the ability of the researcher to measure how religion diffuses in these networks. Similarly, it is important to make a distinction between the strong and weak ties in personal networks when assessing the impact of life transitional events on personal networks, the structure and composition of which may change as a result of adopting a religion belonging to the other.[3]

In his seminal work, Granovetter (1973) claimed that a diffusion of information and influence, social mobility and community organization do not always flow through strong interpersonal bonds. Having described the strength of a tie as a "combination of amount of time, the emotional intensity, and reciprocal services which characterize the tie (Granovetter 1973:1361)," Granovetter argues that information travels a greater social distance through weak ties than strong ties. Weak ties play the role of a bridge between two social groups disseminating information between them in the most efficient way. Granovetter's theoretical model essentially explains how information about jobs diffuses in a social network. This operationalization of weak ties needs further clarification since what constitute a weak tie can be elusive (Kadushin 2012). In addition to the criteria that Granovetter provides, it is also important to consider the frequency of interaction and how one defines their social ties with others such as relatives, close friends, acquaintances, etc. (Kadushin 2012). For instance, if an ego is talking to someone on Facebook, or other social media platform, with high frequency but they actually never meet in person, would this be a weak tie or a strong tie? This is a grey area suggesting that measuring a weak tie can be more difficult than generally acknowledged. Although there are relatively clearer guidelines about measuring strong ties by asking research participants to name people with whom they discuss important matters (Burt 1984, Marsden 1987, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears

2 The highest degree was 20 and only one participant listed 20 alters in their prior-to-conversion egocentric network.

3 With regards to change over time in personal networks, when whites convert to Islam their personal networks tend to become larger but fragmented into two sub-networks of Muslim and non-Muslims. As for blacks, their networks tend to shrinking almost always reduced to kinship and/or close friends (Erin, 2015).

2006), there are no such guidelines about measuring the presence of weak ties. Technically any social tie which is not a strong tie has potential to be a weak tie. By extension, social actors could have innumerable amounts of weak ties, which can be hard to detect and measure.

To develop a better understanding of a weak tie, I introduce a more nuanced definition of it. If a weak tie is only mentioned by the research participants while they account for their experience of adopting Islam, but it is not mentioned as a part of the name generating process, then it is a *recessive* weak tie which can include classmates, co-workers, or somebody met in a store. The primary role of recessive weak ties is that they act as a transitory bridge to the Muslim community and they are *switched on* when the convert develops an interest in Islam. They appear in the conversion stories of the research participants for a brief moment, usually taking the potential converts to the mosque. This role is important because it is one of the stages in the conversion process (Erin 2015). Recessive ties are different than dormant ties, which are defined as a "relationship between two individuals who have not communicated with each other for a long time, e.g., who have drifted apart because of job mobility, divergent interests, or other demands" (Levin, Walter and Murnighan 2011:923). Dormant ties can be strong or weak ties to which social actors resort for pragmatic purposes and efficiency since they serve as a source of knowledge-related benefits, social capital, and other useful benefits (Levin, Walter and Murnighan 2011). Dominant weak ties, on the other hand, are those ties, which are enumerated as a part of personal networks, but for the most part are not connected to other alters. While egos account for their dominant weak ties, they do not even remember the name of their recessive weak ties, referring to them as a co-worker or a classmate. In the following section, I visualize this low level of connectivity aspect of dominant weak ties to distinguish them from recessive weak ties.

Findings and Discussion

I find that the social context, in which personal networks are embedded, has a bearing on the type of social tie through which religion diffuses. If a personal network is embedded in a place where there is a larger Muslim community, the ego is more likely to have a social tie to other Muslims. About eight out of 18 research participants from Michigan (44% of the sample) mentioned having a social tie to another Muslim, while only three out of 12 people from Kentucky (25% of the sample) reported having social ties to Muslims before their conversion (Table 3). Contrary to prior research (Lofland 1966), this social tie is not an affective social bond initiated by the members of a religious group, nor are they developed by individuals who suffer from acute tensions (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Rather, they can be weak ties or strong ties. The Muslim ties in personal networks embedded in Michigan, where there is a larger and well established Muslim community, tend to be *dominant* and *recessive* weak Muslim ties, whereas the Muslim ties in personal networks embedded in Kentucky, where there is a smaller and less established Muslim community, are more likely to be strong ties. Despite the difference with regards to being connected to Muslims, there is no difference between the two groups in terms of their personal network compositions. Personal networks of both groups are overwhelmingly composed of non-Muslim social ties. While on average those living in Michigan have 0.7 Muslim ties in personal networks, those living in Kentucky have 0.3 Muslim ties on average. However, both groups differ in terms of the size and density of the networks. Those living in Michigan have larger personal networks (an average of 7.6), while those in Kentucky have smaller personal networks (an average of 4.9). In terms of the structure, the former group has more disconnected networks (average density of .53) whereas the latter has more connected ones (average density of .63).

The low level of connectivity with Muslims is explained by the status of Islam, which I argue is the religion of the new other in the American context. Muslims are supposed to be shunned from social circles and being connected to them has to be kept at a minimum. The ascendance of Muslims to the status of otherness and how they are perceived by the members of the majority group is best

Table 3. The Structure and Composition of Prior-to-Conversion Egocentric Social Networks by State

State	Average Degree	Average Density	Average Muslim Ties	Strong Muslim Ties	Dominant Weak Muslim Ties	Recessive Weak Muslim Ties
Michigan	7.6	.53	.7	0	8	2
Kentucky	4.9	.63	.3	3	0	0
TOTAL	6.5	.57	.4	3	8	2

illustrated by how the sister of Callie[4], who is a convert from Michigan, reacted to her connectivity with other Muslims. As she explains:

> One time I told her I was going to the Masjid [the mosque] and she asked me how I knew that nobody was a terrorist. She did ask me that. I took her to my halaqah [a study group] with all the other girls. I told her we were just like other girls; we are just Muslim and praying. And she kept thinking that it would be super serious, like we wouldn't laugh or be super serious. She was worried about me marrying a Muslim and being oppressed and not having a voice and things like that. I remember she was really shocked that Hawa [one of her Muslim friends from the study group] was going to be a doctor. Those were just her concerns.

The micro-level interactions taking place between Callie and her sister are shaped by macro-level social phenomena. Callie's sister's perception about her Muslim friends is aligned with the grand American discourse about Muslims, who are often times associated with terrorism, oppression, and other negative characteristics. Callie's sister expects her Muslim friends to have traditional gender roles and she is shocked when she learns they are pursuing modern education. Also, she makes sense of Callie's Muslim friends and the mosque using the grand discourse produced in the American media. She cautions Callie about developing any strong ties to Muslims, who are supposed to be avoided because they are the new other in the American context. Accordingly, Islam is more likely to diffuse through weak ties in personal networks embedded in a place with a large Muslim community, but if the Muslim community is absent, then Islam is more likely to diffuse through strong ties. The following section introduces how Islam diffuses through weak ties, which can be either recessive or dominant, and strong ties by bringing several personal networks into sharp focus.

The Diffusion of Islam through Weak Ties

Recessive Weak Ties

I argue that conversion to a religion is a type of diffusion. With regards to diffusion of Islam in Michigan, recessive ties are the first type of tie, through which this diffusion occurs. This type of a weak tie tends to be a Muslim co-worker or a high school classmate, to whom a potential convert divulges her intention to convert, but who never becomes a part of the personal network of the convert nor a social tie to the alters of the convert. The primary role of the recessive weak Muslim tie is to be a temporary bridge between the convert and the Muslim community. This role is played out in the form of taking the convert to a local mosque. Once the recessive weak tie takes the convert to the mosque, she completely disappears from the story explaining the conversion process. This is best illustrated in how Callie established her first contact with a local community in Michigan:

> I met a person (on the Internet), who was in the UK, playing the [dot] game. And he put me in touch with this guy in California. And then in June of 2011, I was OK, I am ready to go visit a Masjid [mosque] and I know that there is one in my area. And I am too shy to go by myself. He said 'okay,' I will find someone for you.' He posted something on this Islamic Forum online and later that same day, I got a call from Liana. And she said, 'I heard you are interested in going to the Masjid.' And later that same week, I met with her at her home.

Although Callie resides in a Michigan town, where there is a Muslim community and a mosque, she does not have any Muslim social ties to the community. She intends to visit the mosque in her area, but she is hesitating to visit because of her lack of Muslim ties. She makes her first visit to the mosque after her recessive Muslim weak tie puts her in contact with a member of the community. Her conversion occurs through a recessive weak Muslim tie. Similarly, when I interviewed Kristina, who is another convert from Michigan, she mentioned that she knew two other Muslims who were her recessive weak ties. However, neither of these two recessive weak ties are accounted for in her actual egocentric network (see Figure 1).

Despite this absence in the actual egocentric network, one of these recessive weak ties, who is Kristina's co-worker, eventually played the role of bridging by offering to take Kristina to one of the local mosques. She accounts for this role below:

> Kristina: In high school there was one Muslim girl in my grade. I was friends with her, but we weren't really close. But she just was friends with people I was friends with, so like I always kind of wondered about her, because I had a lot of Arab friends but they were Christian Arabs. I just thought Muslims were scary I guess because I never tried to learn anything about it. And I started working at this restaurant. And one of the girls was Muslim, but I didn't know because she didn't wear the hijab.[5] And in my head, everybody wears hijab. At that time I didn't know, so I didn't know she was Muslim. It was Ramadan, and she said something about it and I started talking to her about it and told her I was interested. And she offered to take me to the Masjid with her, so she took me for the first time, and I just started to talk to other people there.

4 All the names used in this research are pseudonyms.

5 Hijab is an Arabic word for a headscarf.

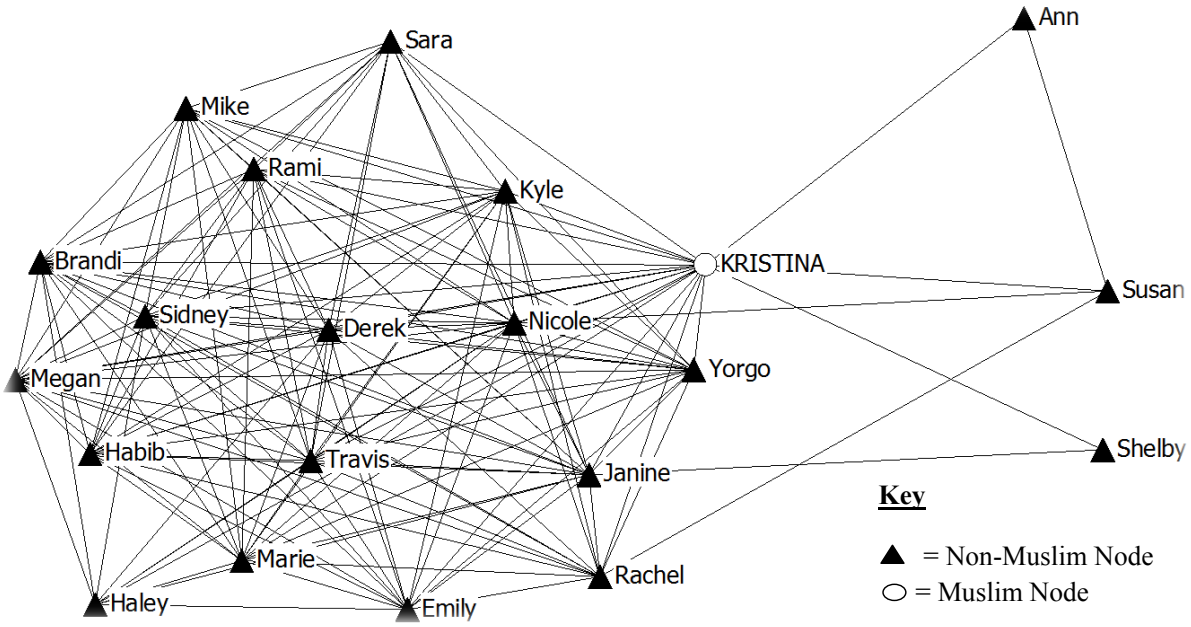

Figure 1. Recessive Weak Muslim Social Ties. Note: In all figures, clear circles are Muslim social ties, while dark triangles are non-Muslim ties. Also, Kristina mentions two Muslims ties in her conversion story but she does not consider them as part of her personal network.

> Şakin: Is the girl from the restaurant, in here [chart] anywhere?
>
> Kristina: No, because she just took me there. I was not really close with her. She doesn't really go, but she is like I will take you if you want. I didn't want to go by myself or anything.

Kristina's first recessive Muslim weak tie is a classmate whose presence and Muslim identity provides Kristina with a Muslim context to which she is exposed. This tie is a recessive weak tie because not only this friend not included in Kristina's personal network, but also her identity is unknown since Kristina does not mention her name. What makes this tie recessive is that the unknown Muslim friend is a member of a group Kristina describes as scary people. Her perception about the Muslim community, which is the ultimate other in the United States, is shaped by the discourse in the media which tends to associate the Islamic world with violence painting the entire Muslim world with a broad brush. Although Kristina developed an interest in Islam, she brushed it off because of this negative picture of Islam and the Islamic world in the American psyche. While this interest was developed further as a result of a class project and further research on Islam, at the same time Kristina was forming a recessive weak Muslim tie to a person who was a co-worker. This is a recessive weak tie because it is not accounted for in her personal social network and also it has an unknown identity. More importantly, she serves as a bridge to the Muslim community because she takes Kristina to the local mosque and thereafter, she entirely drops from the story. Furthermore, the strength of this recessive weak tie and other recessive weak ties does not change even after the ego converts to the religion of the recessive weak ties.

Dominant Weak Ties

Dominant weak ties, as opposed to recessive weak ties, are those ties which are accounted for in the egocentric social network but are not well connected to the rest of the network. With regards to the diffusion of Islam, I define a tie as a dominant weak tie based on the several criteria: (1) if a tie is not ranked in the top three alters (social ties), it is a dominant weak tie; (2) if the ego does not define a tie as a close friend, relative or, most importantly, as a marriage tie, it is a dominant weak tie. What I call dominant weak tie is similar to Granovetter's formulation of weak ties. I divide weak ties into two categories since they play different roles in the diffusion of religion. The opposite of weak ties are strong ties. In this research, I classify marriage partners, relatives, close friends and roommates as strong ties.

In Michigan, if a convert develops a Muslim tie, this tie tends to be a weak tie. The diffusion of Islam took place through 2 recessive weak ties and 8 dominant weak ties (Table 3). When a Muslim tie is present in a personal network, but not well connected to the rest of alters

composing the network, it is a dominant weak tie. Henry, for instance, who had converted to Islam in Michigan, had developed a dominant weak tie to a Muslim upon his visit to a local mosque. Henry's conversion to Islam is related to his weak tie to another Muslim, a tie formed when he decided to go to the local mosque to recruit more people to his activist group dedicated to the Palestinian cause. When I asked him why he went to the local mosque, he replied:

> Because it had a lot of Palestinians, and every Muslim should be concerned about Palestine. I didn't really know that as much then, and then I became friends with Hamid- because he was from Gaza. And there were other friends too, the anti-war movement, the war against Iraq- that was something that I was very much involved in. And so I would be at the masjid a couple times a month and I started to come early to see the prayer services and I got to know a lot of people, particularly Hamid and Adil. So one day, I was talking to Hamid in his office, and I told him that I was feeling alone, because I no longer felt at home in the Church. And I told him, "I know and care for more people in the masjid – (and have a closer connection, I guess that was another thing) than any of the churches in town". And I said, impulsively, "Do you think I could become Muslim?" And I had asked earlier, kind of kidding around, but Muslim friends of I would tell me "No, do not become Muslim; you need to remain Christian so you can help the Christians become more Christian." But I needed community and I missed the Church community. He smiled and he said "Yes."

It is seen from Figure 2 and the above dialogue that Henry's social ties to Hamid and Adil are weak ties since they function as a bridge to the Muslim community in the Detroit Metropolitan area of Michigan, where Henry resides. As it is shown in Figure 2, Hamid and Adil are not well connected to the rest of Henry's social network. His network constitutes a well-connected clique, which is his pro-Palestinian activist group, but his weak Muslim ties are not well connected to this subgroup. This subgroup fits better into the criteria of strong ties because of the high level of connection among them.

Similar to Henry, Jackson, whose network I present above, had two weak Muslim ties before converting to Islam. In his conversion story, Jackson mentioned that he knew other Muslims who are not part of his personal network. The two ties, Malik and Isam, are his dominant weak ties because they are part of his egocentric social network and they are people from his work (Figure 3). It is noticeable that both of them are not connected to each other, even though they are both Muslim ties. Jackson's conversion story revealed more information about the structure of his network. When I asked him how Malik and Isam reacted to his conversion he replied:

> Very happy. They gave me more books and CDs. You know, both of them are Muslims. Malik is Shia and Isam is Sunni, they both have their input and things like that. And they constantly bombard me with information.
>
> Şakin: How does that affect you that one is Sunni and one is Shia?
>
> Jackson: It doesn't affect me in the least bit. I got more information from Malik who is Shia. And he gave me one book, what

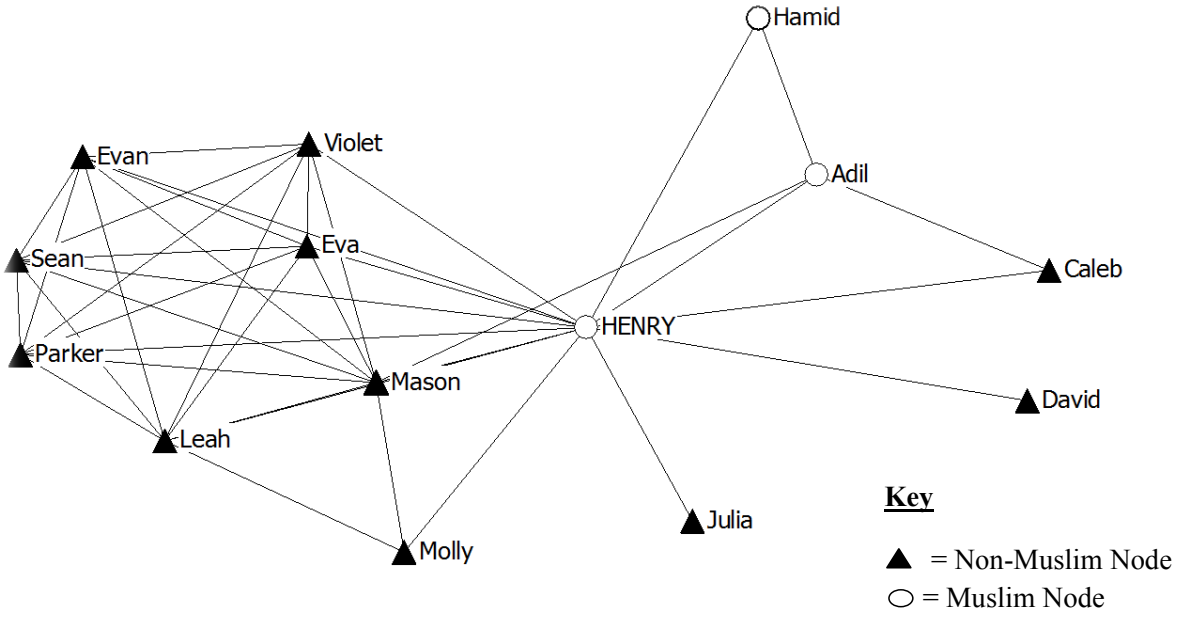

Figure 2. Dominant Weak Muslim Social Ties.

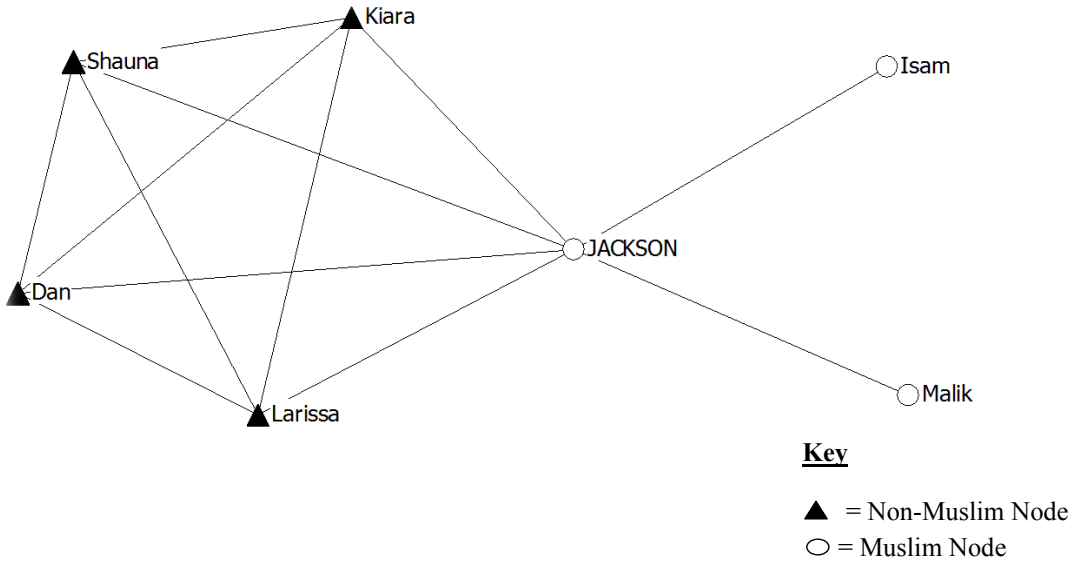

Figure 3. Dominant Weak Muslim Social Ties.

> first really sparked my interest, (I read the whole book) by Imam Chirri, I can't think of the name of the book. I think it is about Islam. And when I read that, it really broke it down, the difference between Islam and Christianity and Judaism things like that; what they believe. And the fact that one is Sunni has no bearing on me. It does not affect me in the least way, I just focus on the religious part; I don't get into that part.

Jackson's conversion case deserves further attention because of its uniqueness of involving both recessive and dominant weak Muslim ties. As he mentioned in the previous conversation, he learned about Islam from his recessive weak ties, which he described as Muslim acquaintances from all over the world without providing any further information about them. His dominant weak ties, on the other hand, are Malik and Isam, who are part of his personal network but they are neither connected to each nor to the rest of his network rendering them dominant weak ties. Since one of the ties is a Shia and the other is Sunni, one would expect Jackson to experience constraints since he becomes a member of a conflict prone triad. But he assumes the role of neutrality and avoids being caught up in a possible conflict by adopting an instrumental rational action of learning about the religion from both ties.

The Diffusion of Islam through Strong Ties

The diffusion of Islam, which is the religion of a minority group in the United States, tends to occur through strong ties in Kentucky, where the Muslim community is smaller and less established. Out of 12 research participants from Kentucky only three had ties to a Muslim (Table 3). All of these ties were strong ties which were either a spouse or childhood friend. I argue that the type of a social tie forged with a member of the minority group under such a circumstance is affected by the level of perception that the majority develops about the minority. If in a geographical area, there is a minority community which is smaller in numbers and less established, then the majority group is less likely to develop fully formed negative perceptions about the members of the minority. This lack of negative perception allows the members of the majority group to develop strong ties to that of the minority group.

With regards to strong and weak ties, my data indicate there is a stark difference between the strength of Muslim ties between my research groups. As shown above, people converting to Islam in Michigan, which has a high number of Muslim, are more likely to have weak ties to other Muslims, while those converting in Kentucky, which has fewer Muslims, are more likely to have strong Muslim ties before converting to Islam. Adam, who is one of the research participants from Kentucky, had two different Muslim social ties prior to converting to Islam as it is shown in the figure below (Figure 4). One of these ties is to Tony, who is also a convert to Islam, and the other one is to Azrin, who is a born Muslim. Adam's social tie to Tony is weak tie, which does not influence his conversion process, whereas the social tie to Azrin is a strong tie, which immensely influences his conversion. Adam described this impact as follows:

> So I guess about three years ago maybe four, I met Azrin four years ago and about three years ago we were kind of getting serious. We were hanging out all the time online and she wanted me just to look into Islam because you know it is important to her. I had been, I suppose I'd say I had been looking for, you know, some religion to fill my life and so I agreed to look into Islam. I never had before and so I got a translational Qur'an and I read that. That really interested me. It is a beautiful book and that really interested me. So I continued doing research just reading online about what it is like to be a Muslim. That continued until about a year ago and I visited the Mosque just here across the street. Met some guys there and decided I would revert.

Adam's social tie to Azrin is a strong tie because it meets the criteria of spending a lot of time and high frequency of interaction (Granovetter 1973). Adam reported that he spent a lot of time talking to Azrin online and that they had known each other for about four years. His interest in Islam had started as a result of a suggestion from his strong tie.

While having a strong Muslim tie influenced Adam's conversion to Islam, having a social tie to Tony, which is a weak tie to another Muslim did not affect his conversion. When I asked Adam if knowing Tony who was his friend since high school had any effect on his conversion to Islam, he said the following:

> Like with him, we went to high school together and we kind of lost touch because I moved out of Kentucky and he stayed here. When I moved back, he had already converted. So he was already a Muslim and we never became too close again but we hung out now and then. But we didn't really talk about Islam at all. He's really into health, like healthy eating and just being healthy in general. He was always talking to me about like improving my lifestyle but he never really pushed anything on me.

Adam's social tie Tony falls better into a weak typology, although this tie dates back to their high school years. His story does not reveal the frequency of interaction among the two of them; thus, it is hard to categorize this tie as a strong tie. Although Tony is a potential bridge (Granovetter 1973) to a Muslim community for Adam, evidence shows that he is not utilizing that bridge. Therefore, conversion in Kentucky seems to occur through strong ties.

Tiffany, who is another research participant from Kentucky had a strong Muslim tie, Malik, who was connected to all of her seven alters prior to her adoption of Islam (Figure 5). Tiffany had known Malik for a long time before she decided to become Muslim as is shown in the following:

> We went to [community college] together and we both transferred to UK [University of Kentucky]. We were going to live together, but his father said, his father is convert, he said if you guys are going to live together you need to get married. And that's when we decided to get married. We got married in 2010 and after two years, I converted.

Similar to other diffusion examples in Kentucky, Tiffany converts to Islam through a strong tie, whom she marries after living with him for two years. Their connection, however, dates back to the time when

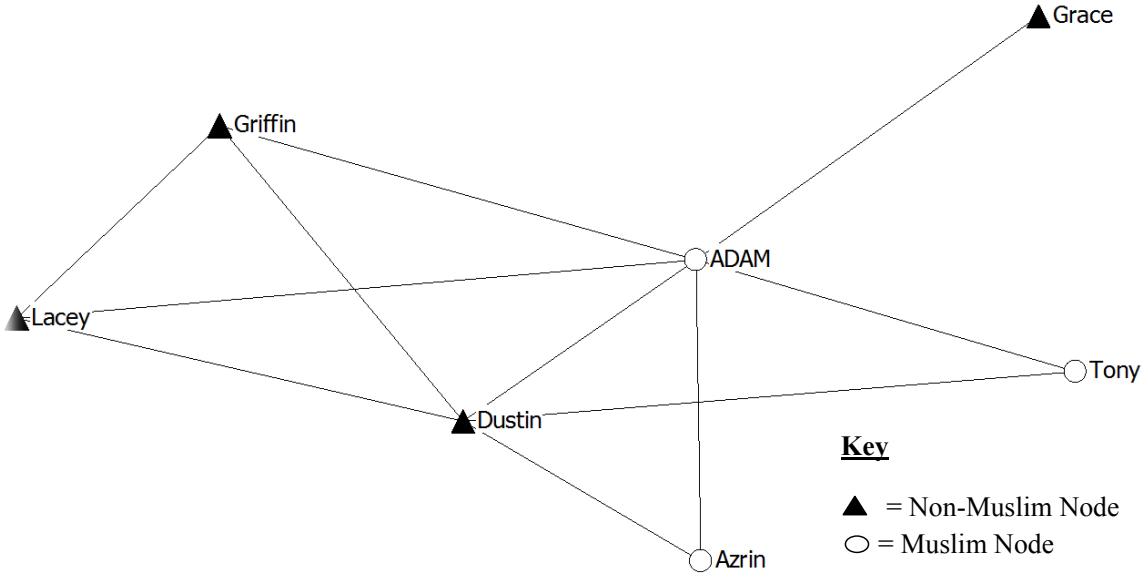

Figure 4. Strong Muslim Social Ties

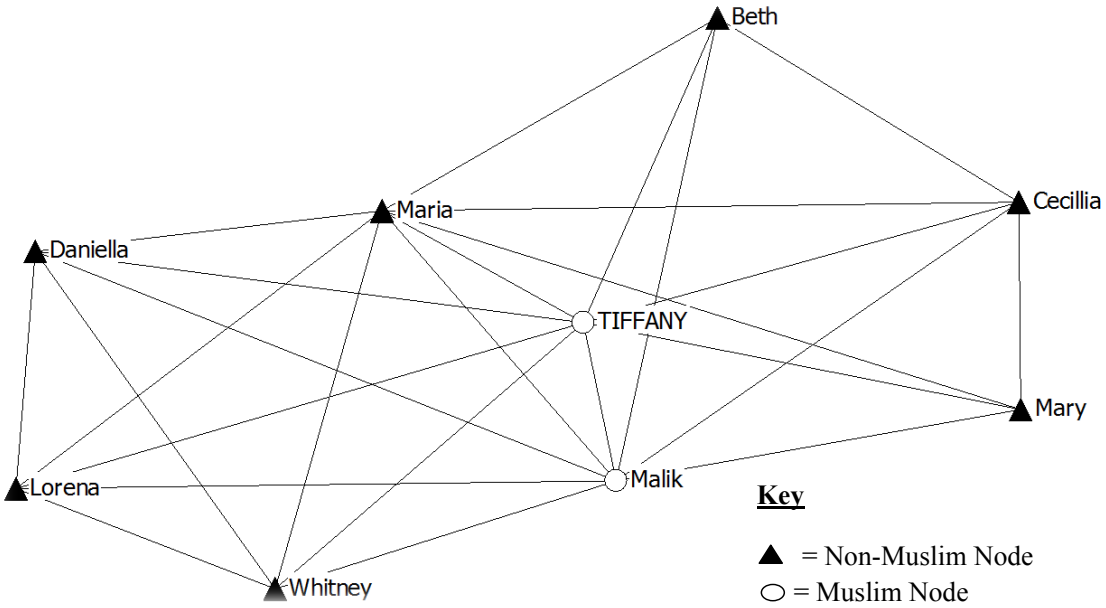

Figure 5. Diffusion of Islam through Strong Ties.

they went to college. More importantly, Malik, who is the Muslim tie, knows all of Tiffany's non-Muslim ties showing that her Muslim and non-Muslim alters are well connected.

The results of this research demonstrate that Islam diffuses through weak ties in Michigan, while it diffuses through strong ties in Kentucky. Why then do people living in Michigan adopt a risky behavior which is converting to Islam through weak ties, while those living in Kentucky adopt it through strong ties? I argue that the answer to this question is two-pronged. First, the status of a subgroup or a community in a society is detrimental to the kinds of social ties people form to this community. Although there is a long established large Muslim community in Michigan, it is being avoided by the members of mainstream society because of their perceptions about it. As I have shown elsewhere (Erin 2015), the Muslim community is the ultimate other, from which one keeps a great social distance. All ties that are formed to such a community are more likely to be weak ties and those who convert to the religion of this community are likely to convert through these weak ties. On the other hand, when such a community is absent or less visible, then a person is likely to convert through strong ties. Second, the availability of ties connecting the members of a mainstream society to the members of a subgroup in that society influences the process of adoption. Since there are less Muslims living in Kentucky and there is not as big of a Muslim community real or imagined, developing social ties to Muslims has low probability and adopting Islam, which is a risky behavior, will require more trust and effort which can be gained only from an association with a strong tie. This suggests why people who convert to Islam in Kentucky tend to convert through marriage ties or close friend ties. It cannot be a coincidence that all social ties to Muslims in Michigan tend to be weak ties, while those in Kentucky tend to be strong ties. I argue that members of a majority group are less likely to form opinions about members of a minority group if they do not interact frequently and thus they are less likely to keep a greater social distance from them. This explains why the members of a majority group develop weak ties to members of minority groups when their community is present and they develop strong ties when that community is absent.

Conclusions

The diffusion of religion does not always occur through strong affective bonds that a potential convert develops to the members of the religious community. Religion diffuses in social networks through both strong and weak social ties formed with members of the religious community. To investigate how religion diffuses in personal networks, I studied the personal networks of thirty converts to Islam, which is the fastest growing religion in the West despite its distorted presentation of being violent and incompatible with the modern way of life. Despite this negativity surrounding Islam in the West, people still convert to

Islam. Are people more likely to convert through their social Muslim ties or are there other factors explaining conversion? In order to answer these and similar questions, I compared conversion cases taking place in Michigan and Kentucky. I have chosen these two research sites to investigate how conversion occurs in a place where there is a larger well established Muslim community versus in a place that has a smaller, less established Muslim community.

The result of this research shows living in an area where there is a large Muslim population does not increase the likelihood of developing social ties to other Muslims. Accordingly, people living in Michigan, which has a larger and more established Muslim population than Kentucky, which has a smaller Muslim population, are not likely to convert to Islam. Residing in an area where there is a large Muslim community does not increase the likelihood of conversion. This is a surprising result because, at the outset of this study, I expected that people living in Michigan would have had more ties to other Muslims and therefore they would be more likely to convert to Islam. However, the presence or absence of a larger Muslim community affects the strength of Muslim social ties. Also, the results of this research indicate that the strength of social ties is important to how Islam diffuses in personal networks. This diffusion occurs through both weak and strong social ties depending on the presence of an Islamic community. If there is a larger Muslim community in a geographical area, then those who are residing there are more likely to develop weak Muslim ties. The members of mainstream society in such a place tend to have a strong perception about Muslims and Islam leading them to shun Muslims. This explains why Islam tends to spread through weak ties where there are more Muslims, whereas it spreads through strong ties where there are less Muslims.

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